

We all need to continually fight racism

by Vern Metcalfe

for the Tundra Times

SITKA — The conclusion of the 75th anniversary convention of the Alaska Native Brotherhood saw Friday the 13th anything but an unlucky day for the organization. The Sealaska Corp. donated \$500,000 to the ANB to be invested with the interest on the grant used to support their efforts.

The convention ran from Nov. 9 to 14 and was concluded with a Grand Ball which saw the Sisterhood in floor-length white gowns, the Brotherhood in tuxedos and about 30 new members being sworn in along with the re-swearing of those in attendance.

This particular dance also had the unusual distinction of having the re-elected president, Richard Stitt, being the guitarist in the Sargent-Stitt band. His wife, Teresa, and daughter plus son-in-law are the singing team as well.

"The purpose of this organization shall be to assist and encourage the Native in his advancement among the cultivated races of the world, to oppose, to discourage, and to overcome the narrow injustices of race prejudice, to commemorate the fine qualities of the Native races of North America, to preserve their history, lore, art and virtues, to cultivate the morality, education, commerce and

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civil government of Alaska, to improve the individual and municipal health and laboring conditions, and to create a true respect in Natives and other persons with whom they deal for the letter and spirit of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution and laws of the United States." — Grand Camp Constitution, Article 1, ANB.

Somewhere the author of the above is lost in antiquity, but the words probably originated with Peter Simpson who dreamed of such a world when he founded the ANB in 1912. The problem is, after 75 years we are still attempting to live up to the eloquence of that article, meaning that those of the majority have yet to truly get the word as stated above.

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long been known to those who are willing to face up to the situation of race relations here in Alaska. During the 46 years I've spent in Alaska a number of landmark legislative actions have taken place but, as more than one political type has noted, "you can't legislate morality."

We have the Anti-Discrimination Act of 1945 which supposedly outlawed segregation. To a degree it did this, but more than one Native couple has discovered that the apartment they telephoned about had been suddenly rented when they showed on the scene. A truly beautiful woman I met in Sitka told of leaving this part of Alaska some 15 years before simply because, at age 20, she couldn't stand the social prejudice she encountered.

During a survey I conducted for Sealaska early in 1984 I was startled to discover that one young lady I interviewed in Juneau had experienced all of this (and more), although she was reddish haired and freckle faced.

"My male classmates were nice to me if we met while they were alone. If they were in a group they didn't know me," she related. Her great-grandfather happened to be one of the founders of our not always so fair city.

I have no solution to all of this and am not sure we can overcome the problem which has, in my 46-year experience, become more subtle. The Tundra Times is, of course, largely read by those already convinced. The daily newspapers in Alaska with one exception (the Ketchikan Daily News) hardly address the accomplishments of their Native readers.

The tragedy of this is that we all have to live together. We have commonality.

The point here? We have a long way to go. The elders who remember Peter Simpson and his teachings are rapidly departing this vale of tears. Fortunately I was able to tape some of their recollections of that great man during my stay in this colorful and beautifully situated community. They will be heard later this year and next on Alaska Public Radio. Stay tuned.