

One of the first

By Naats'keek

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It was 1944. I was seven years old and living in Juneau with my father, mother and younger brother. In those days there were three educational systems for the youth of Southeast Alaska: the Territorial schools for the non-Natives, the B.I.A. schools for the Natives and the private Christian schools.

Because the schools were segregated, because the Natives wanted their children to have the best education possible, because Natives were supposed to be regarded as citizens, Natives believed the schools should be integrated. The ongoing battle to win this fight was led by the Alaska Native Brotherhood and Sisterhood for many years. The two individuals, I remember, who were in the middle of this were Roy Peratrovich and his wife, Elizabeth.

My father took a job with a construction company and moved us from Yakutat to Juneau in 1944. I don't remember much about the political battles which took place in those days, being only seven. I read about them now and hear people talk about their experiences. But there is one incident I remember - - one which

changed my life and probably many Native youth thereafter. And it involved this one special individual.

We lived on 9th street in a brown house my father rented near the Juneau-Douglas bridge. Moving to Juneau was a new experience for me and my four year old brother, but we got acquainted with the neighborhood in a hurry. Frank See and his wife, Bessie, and their children lived a couple of houses from us. We became close friends. Across the street and up a ways lived Shirley Allstead. She was a beautiful, half Native girl. I remember my parents being very proud when she won the crown as Fourth of July queen later in the summer.

The summer was a great one for me. I remember playing with my friends, getting into mischief, getting grounded and spankings for more serious misconducts. But the summer went by much differently than I remembered because of the many activities we were involved in. I remember going to baseball games in the park where the Federal Building now stands, to a soap box derby on the Fourth of July, and to the movie "Bambi" when it was first released. Those were fun days - - it seemed when one looks back to his earlier years, one always remembers the

good times rather than the bad. I always seem to remember the sunny days - - those sunny days when we enjoyed picnics and outings which were never really designed to remember - - never the sad, rainy days when we had to stay inside and be bored. I'm sure there were many of those days; but you know, I can't remember days like that.

There was one day I remember. Roy and Elizabeth Peratrovich came to see my parents. My father wasn't home from work, yet, but they made an appointment with my mother to come visit us later in the evening. Roy and my father got along well; I guess more so because they both had great senses of humor and were able to tell jokes and stories to one another and not feel threatened.

When they arrived, Roy got right down to business. "John," he said to my father, "as you know the A.N.B. and the A.N.S. has been trying to get the B.I.A. and Territorial schools integrated. It has been a hard battle, but I think we can win. What we are trying to do is get some parents to register their children in the territorial schools this year. We are asking if you would be willing to do this with your child?"

Without hesitation my parents accepted the challenge. And so instead of my mother

taking me to the "Indian" school, near where the ANB Hall is now, she walked me up 9th street, up a steep hill, passed the Governor's Mansion, and to the huge school behind the Territorial Building.

I was going into the second grade that year. It was strange because I didn't see any of my friends on the first day of school. Frank See had a daughter about my age. Her name was Spunky. She and I became very good friends. In fact, she was probably my first love and if I had stayed around for high school, we probably would have gone steady. Anyway, I looked for her but couldn't find her anywhere. I found out later, I was one of three Indian students who showed up for school that day.

My teacher was nice to me. She did what she could to help me feel comfortable. Still I kept pretty much to myself. That was until recess.

We went outside to play and the teacher was trying to get me to play tag with the other kids. I didn't feel like playing tag so I sat by myself. The teacher tried to get me to play on the swings, and on the see-saw, but I didn't want to do either of those things. I just wanted to sit by myself. If Spunky showed up, I'd play with her without hesitation.

"Hi," the high voice said. I looked up. There was this girl

who had red hair in pigtails. She had these few freckles and eyes as blue as the sky. She looked down at me and smiled. She had no front teeth, but the smile was friendly. "My name is Amy. Wanna play some jumping jacks?" she asked.

Instantly the ice melted. We played jumping jacks until the bell rang. We were regular partners in jumping jacks after that. The next day we played on the swings and see-sawed, and played tag. It wasn't long before the other kids were in there playing with us.

Today, I wonder about Amy and what she is doing.

I can say with much pride, I was one of the first to be accepted into the public schools when much prejudice was felt in every part of Alaska. But Amy, you were the first to accept someone you recognized wasn't very much different from you by a long shot. Your attitude made a great difference, and set the tone for what was to come later. I thank you, along with a host of other people like you, who made it much easier for people like me during some very difficult times.

Editor's note: Naats'keek is Bert Adams, Sr. of Yakutat.

Elizabeth Peratrovich Day is February 18.