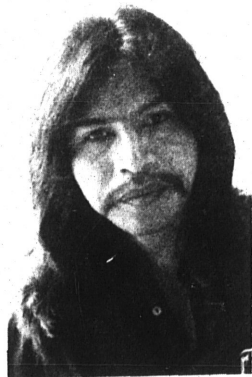


Canadian Land Claims Leader Tells TT Of Growing Movement



JAMES WAH-SHEE

By MARGIE BAUMAN
KTVF/KFRB

From the fight for Indian control of a village school to the movement to establish land rights of Native peoples north of the

60th parallel, it has been a rough road for James Wah-shee.

The visiting Athabaskan Indian leader, president of the Federation of Natives North of 60 acknowledges that the fight of Native peoples against the government, gas and oil interests is going to be a bit rougher than gaining control of a school-house, but in essence, it's all the same.

Native peoples in Canada are pushing for a land claims settlement, such as the one Alaska Natives began fighting for in the 1960s — pushing for the right to control their own destiny.

And beyond that, Wah-shee talks of circum-polar unity for all Native peoples north of the 60th parallel, stretching across much of the top of the world. Greenland Eskimos, already approached on the idea and Scandinavian peoples too have greeted the idea with enthusiasm. "If all goes well, we hope to

(Continued on page 6)

have an international circum-polar conference of Native people in November," Wah-shee said.

"There is no question that the Canadian group has a lot to learn from the experiences of the Alaska Federation of Natives," said Wah-shee Monday in Fairbanks, after meeting informally with AFN Inc. The Canadian group will extend a formal invitation to the AFN Inc. to join them and Willie Hensley, president of the state wide Alaska group, said his board would take the matter under serious consideration.

In attendance with Wah-shee at the Fairbanks meeting were John Itsi, chief of Fort McPherson, NWT and vice president in the Indian Brotherhood; Don Easton, newly appointed special assistant to Wah-shee; Ray

Jackson, first deputy chief of the Yukon Native Brotherhood at Whitehorse, YT.; John Owens, executive director of the Yukon Non-Status Indians at Whitehorse; and Jose Kusugak of the Inuit Tapirisat, headquartered in Ottawa.

This is the first time AFN Inc. and the Canadians have met to exchange ideas. The Alaskans were at the founding meeting of the federation at Whitehorse, YT. last September, but the members of the AFN Inc. board must be polled on whether they wish to join the Federation.

"At present, the Native people in Northern Canada do not have legal ownership as such, (to the land) mainly because the whole question has not been dealt with," Wah-shee said.

"We are organizing ourselves so we can prepare our people

in formulating a land claims that would suit them best. Before we can do this, we would like to work right from the beginning with the villages, with the village councils, so that they are the ones that are formulating the land claims and the organization represents the interests of the village councils.

"Their job will be to plan and come out with a strategy on the type of land claims settlement the village people want, but before you get to that stage, a lot of information has to flow into the village councils, so they will know what's happening right from the very beginning," he said.

"Then the village councils will realize the problems of achieving and implementing the land claims, which is a whole educational process in itself," Wah-shee noted. "You have to

rely on a lot of resources from the territorial governments and federal governments and other agencies who have the necessary resources available."

Long before the idea of a land claims settlement came about, there was no question in the minds of Native people in Northern Canada that they own the land; "no question about that at all," Wah-shee said. But now, he acknowledges, regional organizations of Native peoples within Canada have to organize themselves within the Federation of Natives North of 60. "The Federation's role in the land claims has to be identified and the federation has to acquire the resources to give support to member organizations," Wah-shee said.

Membership includes the Indian Brotherhood of the Northwest Territories, Metis and Non-Status Association of the Northwest Territories, the Yukon Native Brotherhood, Yukon Association of Non-Status Indians, Committee for Original People's Entitlement, Inuit Tapirisat of Canada, and the Northern Quebec Inuit Association. Native peoples in Labrador are organizing and will then officially join the Federation, Wah-shee said.

Totally, the group will then represent some 60,000 Indians and Eskimos in Canada.

The Federation is seeking a proposed budget of \$265,800 from the Canadian government in the form of what is known there as Core funding to finance operations and pay seven staff members.

The Alaska Federation of Natives had no such aid from their state or federal government in lobbying for a land claims settlement.

But in other areas, there is quite a similarity. "The approach and the circumstances are quite similar," Wah-shee said. "Both groups are dealing with the oil companies, trying to acquire land rights. Both are faced with the prospect of having a gas and oil pipeline built. Alaska natives strongly opposed the oil pipeline until such time as the land claims was achieved and our position is similar.

"Our position right now is that there will be no pipeline until we have a land claim. Once we have a land claim, the question will be put forth to our people, whether they want a pipeline at all," he said.

"But Wah-shee also noted that Canadian Natives are interested in working with the oil companies, to get them "to train our people on a managerial level."

"This is something we discussed among ourselves; we

rely on a lot of resources from the territorial governments and federal governments and other agencies who have the necessary resources available."

It is, indeed, a long row to hoe; but then, three years ago, the battle for the village school house looked the same way. That's how Wah-shee first got involved in the move for the Canadian claims.

Working with the chiefs and band councils in his home town Fort Rae, 170 miles west of Yellowknife, Wah-shee's job was providing information requested by chiefs of the band councils. They wanted to control a school being built by federal authorities.

"The position taken by the chiefs and band councils was that we don't want your school to be built in our community if we cannot control it. If we can control it and operate it as we wish, then you can go ahead and build it," Wah-shee recalled.

"To the surprise of the Indian people, the authorities accepted that position. Funds were made available and a school board was formed of all Indian people," Wah-shee said. "They now hire and fire teachers and formulate a curriculum for the Native students. They hire their own people to teach the

Native language, history, etcetera," he said. "This was the first time, to our knowledge, that Indian people were given the opportunity to control a school . . . and the student residence as well."

The year before that, Wah-shee was involved with a group called Company of Young Canadians. "We were volunteering our services for social action," he explained. As part of that group he traveled to four or five communities, talking with the chiefs about the possibility of forming a Native organization to deal with similar problems in a number of communities.

Six months afterwards, the chiefs got together and formed the organization now known as the Indian Brotherhood of the Northwest Territories. Initially, Wah-shee didn't get involved in it, but after a year he became its vice president. Now he serves as president of the organization.

In addition he leads a federation of peoples stretching arms across the imaginary boundary lines drawn by late-comers to the North Country from Alaska to Canada to Greenland to the Lapp people in Norway, Finland and Sweden.

Where the federation will go from here, nobody really can say yet, but the proposed circum-polar conference at Copenhagen this November could be one of the deciding factors.