

# Resurgence in tribalism of prime importance

By Bill Hess

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Along with preservation of the subsistence lifestyle, William "Spud" Williams believes that a growing sense of tribalism is one of the biggest events happening in Native Alaska today.

Late last month, Williams was re-elected to serve as president of the Tanana Chiefs Conference when delegates from 43 villages gathered in Fairbanks for what proved to be a very lively convention.

"Tribalism is all the things that go into the continuation of IRA (Indian Reorganization Act) tribal identities," Williams says. "Tribalism is getting stronger all the time. Native people are getting involved!"

Williams says the practice of tribalism has been around for ages, but because it was recently called into question, it has been receiving renewed attention among Native people. Last year, Gov. Jay Hammond questioned the U.S. Department of the Interior on the formation of new IRA government charters for Interior villages by the federal government.

Williams says the governor has since clarified his position, and has recognized the right of tribal IRA governments to exist. What the state government wants to have clarified now, says Williams, is just what authority the IRA governments have, and how they fit into the overall state picture.

Williams does not see this questioning attitude as a threat to the IRA governments. "I see no effects," he explains, "other than a strengthening of self-identity. The governments are

something that have always been there," he explains. "They can't be done away with!"

Williams said the question was brought up in the state government because Alaska is a new state and is not used to the idea of tribal government, separate from state control.

"I don't see it so much as a threat as a defining, a clarification of responsibilities and roles," Williams says of the state's questioning. "Natives actually hold three citizenships; they are U.S. citizens, Alaska citizens, and also tribal citizens. This is something allowed for in the U.S. Constitution. The tribal citizenship is between the tribal and federal governments. . . both have their expressed jurisdiction. It is a special status!"

Williams says the relationship between the federal government and the tribal governments is no different than that between national and tribal governments in the Lower 48. There, many tribes operate their own police and judicial systems, and manage their own game and fish resources.

In Alaska, Williams claims it is often hard to say just what lands are under the jurisdiction of tribal governments. "Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act is a very strange type of land claims settlement," he explains. "It established corporations, not tribes and put land in corporate hands."

Williams contends the control of subsistence resources by tribal governments is something that can't happen in Alaska now, as it would put



William "Spud" Williams

subsistence on a racial basis, and totally split the state. The current state law makes no reference to race in setting up guidelines which give subsistence users first rights to game and fish during times of shortages. It is a position backed up by the Alaska Federation of Natives and supported by the Tanana Chiefs Conference.

Too many Alaskans confuse subsistence with game man-

agement, and that is one reason there is so much controversy over the issue, Williams claims.

"Subsistence is a way of life!" he explains. "It is more than just king salmon, moose, caribou and bear! It is a total lifestyle. . . Subsistence is living by nature's rules and nature's clock. This is subsistence to a person living in the village!"

The elders are an important part of that lifestyle. Many of them have been left with a feeling of confusion since the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act. Their feelings came to the surface during the convention, as elderly delegates participated in a panel discussion. They proposed that elders of the Interior gather together later this year to discuss the issues affecting them.

Many felt that as things are now, they would die without ever having received any benefit from ANCSA. Like Hannah Soloman, they expressed the idea that money from the claims act should be coming to them now, to help them enjoy life and, "maybe get a new set of dentures or take a trip to visit a loved one."

ANCSA has proven confusing in other ways. At the convention David Salmon of Chalkyitsit complained, "They forced me into one little square where I live now. I can't fish without a license. I can't trap, hunt a moose!"

Williams says a lack of understanding of just what ANCSA has created confusion not only for the elders, but for many others as well. "On the community level, the elders are still a very important part of the tribal structure," he says. "Some of the corporations are using elders in advanced capacities, using their wisdom. NANA is perhaps the best, Doyon is intermediate, and some are way down the line, out there with General Motors."