

Best TT Banquet

No one recalls when there was a Tundra Times Banquet like this one, except maybe 14 years ago in a basement in Fairbanks. This year, as in 1965, Alfred Grant of Tanana was Master of Ceremonies. 200 people attended that first dinner when Senator E.L. "Bob" Bartlett said, "This is the most amazing collection of politicians that's ever been assembled under one roof at once." Rock had said of Grant, "His agile mind never stopped for a moment and what emanated from his mouth was echoed in the crowd with uninhibited laughter."

The 1979 Tundra Times Banquet was held in the Howard Rock Ballroom at the Sheraton Anchorage Hotel on Calista Square. The ballroom had been sold to it's capacity of 1,069 persons for days before the beginning of the AFN Convention. The full house heard Father Paul of Nikolski deliver the invocation. Alfred's "agile mind" has become keener with the years. Alfred Grant quickly discovered the collective funnybone of the huge crowd and stroke it relentlessly and without mercy. The only one who could match wits with him was the Hon. George Sullivan, Mayor of Anchorage. George reminded Alfred of their first meeting, strictly in the line of duty, when His Honor was Deputy U.S. Marshall at Nenana.

Frank Degnan of Unalakleet was warmly welcomed with a standing ovation by over a thousand of his friends. AFN President Morris Thompson was so taken by Frank's keynote speech that both he and his chair fell off the dais at the head table. It was an occasion of many changing, exciting moods. In a serious moment, the "Howard Rock Award," the highest recognition extended by the Tundra Times, was presented to representatives of Mayor Eben Hopson. Calista Corporation President Oscar Kawagley greeted his 117 year-old Grandmother Matilda Oscar in Yupik before he formally dedicated the Ballroom to the memory of Howard Rock. He spoke eloquently of the achievements of "The Rock" and the wish of Calista to honor him by giving his name to the largest, grandest ballroom in the State of Alaska.

Six-hundred seats in the front of the room had been reserved for people from Native villages. Guests came from all over Alaska, and from at least five other states and the District of Columbia, and from Canada and Greenland. 1,100 people sang Happy Birthday to St. Paul Aleut Larry Mergulieff. The auction is a memorable part of the evening. Performers from the Tuma Theatre, sponsored to attend by Sohio, entertained the crowd at the end of the banquet with a thoroughly professional and multi-cultural presentation centered around universal Native lore about Raven.

Hundreds more joined the celebration for the dance. Berchman Esmailka, of Nulato, played the fiddle and William Peter, of Kaltag, played guitar to begin the Tundra Times Ball. Two Steps, poikas and jigs later gave way to the superb rock music of the Nenana, Unlimited Band, back for a repeat performance which exceeded expectations. The Ball was to last until 5:00 a.m., but wound down a few minutes early when the huge hotel's entire supply of refreshment was wiped out completely by 4:30 a.m.

It was a great gathering of the tribes for a lot of fun, including a number of tribes from the non-Native community. Many people worked to make the banquet more than a success. Banquet Chairperson Bea Halkett, joined by Mabel Generous, Toni Jones and Eva Mergulieff worked with a responsive and helpful Sheraton and Calista management to handle arrangements. The record of the Tundra Times Banquet being the largest sit-down dinner in the state's history was broken for the fourth consecutive year. It was a pleasurable, grand evening. Some of us think it was the best Tundra Times Banquet ever held.