

Will History Repeat Itself?

In the late 1940s the responsible press in Alaska and elsewhere including the New York Times and the Saturday Evening Post printed articles that the people of the Pribilof Islands were being held in slavery by the United States Government. The Convention of the Alaska Native Brotherhood in 1948 meeting at Sitka passed resolution No. 36 entitled, "Abolition of Slavery in the Pribilof Islands." The ANB appealed directly to the President of the United States for an investigation.

In 1949 the Secretary of Interior designated a survey group to make a factual study of the living conditions and human problems of the natives in the Pribilof Islands. It included Dr. Mark A. Dauber, Executive Secretary of the Home Missions Council of North America, Inc., who served as chairman; L. T. Oldroyd, Director of Extension, University of Alaska; Albert M. May, Director of the Fish and Wildlife Service; Lawrence N. Stevens, Assistant to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs; Clarence Olson, Manager of the Pribilof Islands, Fish and Wildlife Service; and Clarence Rhode, Regional Director for Alaska, Fish and Wildlife Service.

After a week's study, the survey group reported, "The group can find absolutely no basis for the charge that the native Aleuts of the Pribilof Islands are held in 'slavery,' 'bondage' or 'peonage.' Because of the difficulty of securing free transportation from the islands, there is a mistaken impression that the natives are not free to come and go as they please."

In another part of the report, "First we would like to comment on the several major criticisms that have been made by individuals, also by interested agencies and that have appeared from time to time in the daily press. While many of these charges were doubtless true at the time they were made they are not true today.

"The Charge of 'virtual slavery.' There is no valid basis for that statement. While there are certain restrictions that are inevitable in this kind of community where the economy is dependent upon sealing, which is an industry under government administration, the natives are free to do what they desire so far as their general living is concerned."

After the survey commission made its report, many elements of the irresponsible press made attacks on the ANB, the New York Times, Saturday Evening Post, and other publications for printing the charges in the first place.

In November 19, 1949, the ANB in convention at Klawock passed a resolution that the survey group's report had been a whitewash.

"While the survey committee found favorably to the government thereon, the principle involved is so abhorrent to our way of thinking that many abuses of personal liberty and autocratic classification of workers and censorship of the mail of the occupants thereon, that we must continue to pray that the law and the local government be changed by substituting a democratic form of government," the ANB resolution read.

"It also appears that the survey committee was composed of the very persons whose administration is under question in addition to two outsiders and such a committee does not persuade us and should not persuade others that its survey was either impartial, unbiased or thorough especially since we have recent personal witnesses who, after learning the contents of the survey, reiterate the charges that caused this body to demand changes both in the law and in the policy of administration."

In past few months and more particularly in the past two weeks, from statements both of government officials and the Pribilovians themselves it appears that the responsible press and the ANB were right in the late 1940s—and the 1949 commission was a "whitewash." We would like to take this opportunity to vindicate and commend the New York Times, the Saturday Evening Post, and those newspapers which were responsible in their coverage of the Pribilofs.

Today as well as yesterday, both the government and the irresponsible press are adept at casting off blame. And—as we all know—history has a way of repeating itself. —T.A.S.