

# Conclusion of "Alaska Native Land Claims"



Thomas Richards, Jr. Photograph

*Editor's Note: This is the thirtieth and final installment in a series of excerpts from Alaska Native Land Claims by Robert D. Arnold, Janet Archibald, Margie Bauman, Nancy Yaw Davis, Robert A. Frederick, Paul Gaskin, John Havelock, Gary Holthaus, Chris McNeil, Thomas Richards, Jr., Howard Rock and Rosita Worl. The book was published by the Alaska Native Foundation.*

Howard Rock can be found just about any day in his crowded little office on Second Avenue in Fairbanks. He is surrounded there by a wall of plaques honoring his work, and a book case crammed full of books on many Alaskan subjects. His desk is piled high with the day's mail and newspapers from all over the state and the nation.

Rock has been in many discussions on land claims over more than a dozen years and he often speaks about how he loves the land itself. "The land claims act was a defensive action by the Native people . . . when the land they had been living on traditionally was endangered," he said on one cold autumn night in '74. He is more mellow than he used to be, but about the land itself he is still very strong.

"The land claims fight became very emotional and very deep because the land is always very beautiful and wonderful . . . and then when it was in danger of being taken away, tempers sprang up, including over at the Tundra Times. Of course I wrote editorials which were rather harsh at times," Rock said, "but we felt it was a very necessary thing."

The Tundra Times was heading into a 13th year of publication. Though its editor had suffered a serious illness, the newspaper was still giving Alaska's Native leadership and others a verbal slap when he felt the occasion called for it.

The newspaper had never been able to afford a big celebration on its own, but the fund-raising dinner for it in 1974 capped all previous ones. Over 1,200 people packed the ballroom of a fashionable Anchorage hotel for the event. It was the largest dinner crowd gathering in the history of Alaska.

One high point of the evening to be sure, has been Rock's disclosure that the Tundra Times was at last operating in the black.

The success of the banquet itself was a sign of change. Looking back on it and on the last few years, Rock says he has noticed a favorable change in the attitude of the business community toward his newspaper and other Native businesses since the land claims act passed. "Businesses are looking at us with a different viewpoint."

At the same time, Rock said, there was little change in his village at Point Hope as a result of the land claims act. And he was finding that to be a stockholder in a Native corporation was

"kind of a nebulous thing to a lot of Native people, including," he said, "to myself."

Although the act is complicated and business corporations are new, Rock is optimistic about the ability of Alaska Natives to meet its challenges. When he spoke to the conference of Alaska Native Youth in 1975 he showed this. He told the young people that a "good future for our people" is in their hands. "This is a big assignment, believe me," he said. "What you might have to meet will take every brain tissue, sinew, sense of humor, to make it a reality for the good of your people." And, he asked, "what . . . might help you to do it?"

One thing that I believe that could be important and I'm quite sure it is vital, is your own background. This is one thing that no one can take away from you—the culture of your own people . . .

Your people in the past have sprung to meet life in Alaska with ways or tools to meet one of the most formidable environments this old earth has had to offer.

The will to survive—what a great story that is, and has been, under the circumstances. It is something you can't help but be proud of. Your folks in the old days . . . have done some amazing things to meet deadly obstacles, dangers, life and death situations and met them very well indeed. These facts were passed down to us and when they are studied a bit, they can give you a new awakening and spirit, strength to meet difficult situations that might come your way. Believe me, there will be some that will strain your very soul.

If troublesome obstacles come upon you, think of the achievements of your ancestors. They established cultures that very well met the unkind situations. They won over them and left ample room for fun, arts, and for big shares of lightheartedness.

Some people think that this was not possible under the circumstances our forebears had to live. But they did it through deadly trial and error processes. Who can downgrade such achievements? I for one will never do so.

Looking back and to the future, Rock again showed confidence. "Our ancestors have done amazing things," he said. "They have left us with ways of meeting difficult situations."