

# They chose to stay out...

"I guess you know that an Indian values his burial grounds," spoke John Smith, a Metlakatla elder and former Mayor of Alaska's only recognized Indian reservation. "We don't only value our burial grounds, we value the island, and we know what we have been getting out of it."

Smith recalled the time leading up to the Alaska Native Land Claims Settlement Act of 1971. Natives and non-Natives alike were advising him and other members of the city council, which is a tribal and not a state chartered government, to get involved with ANCSA. He was told big oil money was going to be coming out of Prudhoe Bay, and the people of Metlakatla would be foolish to turn away from the settlement and the big bucks coming with it.

"I thought, if we gave this island away, like they say, and get all these dollars coming from Prudhoe Bay, how long is that going to last?" Smith and other members of the village council engaged in many heated arguments before they finally opted to remain a reservation and not join ANCSA.

Today, entire 93,000 acres of Metlakatla Island (compared to 23,000 acres for most Southeast villages, is held in trust for the tribe by the Department of the Interior. Tribal members hold exclusively fishing rights to 3,000 feet off shore. They do not even need a limited entry permit for commercial salmon fishing.

The Native Village of Tyonek has been the center of a statewide controversy because of its efforts to enforce a tribal ordinance forbidding non-members to live in the community without council permission. Such powers are undisputed in Metlakatla. Members receive residence permits allowing them and their spouses to permanently reside on tribal land. They can sell the improvements only to tribal members. Non-members receive work permits allowing them to live in the community only for the duration of a specific job.

The council runs a cannery, cold storage and other business enterprises, and has been able to turn consistent profits. As citizens of the U.S. and Alaska, village members are also able to benefit through state and federally funded projects.

Yet, villagers do voice frustrations over ANCSA. Although the old village of Metlakatla was located in Canada until the latter 19th century, they note that their forefathers hunted, trapped, and fished all up and down the Southeast coast. These rights have been lost with no compensation, villagers say.

