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Hensley:

# "Tribe plus spirit equals strength"

*ANCSA: An unsacred trust...a series of articles by Paula Schiller exploring threats to Alaska Native lands based on speeches and discussions recorded at the 1980 AFN convention. Paula Schiller produces "Chinook", a program on Native Affairs for KUAC-FM in Fairbanks. The program can be heard on many stations throughout the state.*

## Part One: "An uneasy resting place."

A tale of whales, geese, caribou, fish and native subsistence is told in the scrimshaw

frieze border of the Howard Rock Ballroom in the Anchorage Sheraton Hotel where this year's convention of the Alaska Federation of Natives was called to order. It was like an old home week of land claims veterans. Anyone looking for the cutting edge of a political movement came several years too late. Its leaders say the AFN is in a period of transition.

This fourteenth annual gathering of the clans was a time for healing old wounds and mending last year's rifts. It was entirely ap-

propriate then, that Willie Hensley was chosen to deliver the keynote address. Rather than turning to some outside lecturer or politician, this convention sought to hear from one of its own.

Hensley is credited with founding the AFN in 1966 when Alaska's Natives needed a unified voice and political muscle to fight the land claims battle in Washington, D.C.

After thanking early leaders like Emil Notti and the people of Tyonek who supported

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# ● Willie Hensley

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AFN in its first year, Hensley said he sees a great deal of confusion about what their efforts created.

"I think there are a great many of our own people who do not understand why we fought so hard for the land," Hensley said. He told those who may have forgotten and those too young to remember that, "We fought for the land because it represents the spirit of our people. It represents your tribes. It represents your ancestors, and it represents that intimate knowledge of that land your people grew up on for ten thousand years." Hensley said they did not fight for "capital", "money", or "business".

"When we fought for the land, we really were fighting for survival – not economic survival or political survival, but survival as a people with an identity and with a culture," Hensley said. Yet the act which emerged from land claims negotiations is a highly political document weighted heavily toward an economic system which, Hensley says, is out of tune with Indian, Eskimo, and Aleut life-ways.

ANCSA is shaped that way because, as Hensley explained, "The battleground we fought on was political." Unlike the American Indians who fought on their own turf, Hensley said, "We fought with very few troops,

on alien soil, in congress, in the legislature, in the press, on television and on the podiums. We did not control that battleground." Hensley said it was very important for the young people to know that, "We fought with broken bows and broken lances." He also wanted them to know that they fought very hard and did the best they could.

"Even though we came up with an imperfect instrument," Hensley said, "that doesn't mean we shouldn't understand it or be taken in by it." It is not like any of the previous treaties. It does not contain the safeguards

*... "the starting point for dealing with the future has to be a look inward."*

of federal trust status. Native land in Alaska can be taken away without the consent of congress, the president, or the people. "Unfortunately," Hensley said, "our tribal soul has an uneasy resting place." He said, "The land which is our spiritual home, now rests in a corporation, a soulless entity that is designed for commercial purposes."

In a conversation during a break in convention business, Hensley added the warning that, "Until we understand that 100 shares of stock represents our tribal soul, then there is substantial danger that it will be

gone if we use it only as a piece of paper or a commercial item."

According to Hensley, the goal of land claims never was commerce. It was survival of the people, with their tribal souls intact. He sees corporate activity as a weapon for survival – not as an end in itself – and in his address, Hensley said, "If we think that our corporations exist just for corporate purposes, then we have a problem."

He suggests that the corporations ought to act more like tribal governments. He explained that under a traditional Indian settlement, congress dealt with a tribal government that was primarily responsible for the well-being of the people.

Hensley said that meant the, "complete well-being from the standpoint of continuation of the people, their language, and their culture." Business was incidental, he said, "You don't have to accept a corporation as a commercial vehicle, it can be a base to work from to help people."

Hensley's idea runs somewhat counter to the opinion that the corporation's only duty is to make profits and pay dividends. However, he cites NANA as an example of how a corporation has responded to cultural and spiritual needs.

Within NANA, the villages

have merged with the regional corporation and the board has been expanded to include the village leaders. Hensley says it acts like a tribal council. As he describes it, "We've made our annual meeting like a cultural event. It's a kind of renewal." They meet for a couple of days and they discuss things of importance to the people. "So," Hensley said, "you don't have to run a corporation like General Motors." Hensley also takes a lesson from financially stricken Bering Straits. He said that area is an example of what it would be like if two of the three legs a corporation stands on are gone. When money goes, political power disappears soon after and Hensley said, "When there's a political and economic power vacuum, the people have no choice but to look inward to their spirit, to their language, to their selves, for their direction." Hensley says this is not so bad if your corporation's goal is survival as a people. You can do that without economics or politics. "But if your goal is money or dividends," said Hensley, "then that could be, in effect, helping destroy who you are as a people."

Despite the problems, Hensley's conclusion was hopeful. "We have all the elements of successful survival. We still have land, we have capital, and we have fairly experienced politicians."

"Now," Hensley said, "We have to develop a dynamic program in each

area that involves the re-direction of spirit, language and culture and involves educational systems not as destructive to the identity and spirit of our children. "Too often native leadership has dealt only with economics," and Hensley says, "You can't deal with one segment of life if you're dealing with tribal groups."

Hensley said the problems are no longer in government or "outside somewhere." "To me, the real threat to our survival is inside all of us as individuals and as tribes," Hensley said. "We have almost lost the will-power to re-assert our tribal identity and reconstitute our languages which are the expression of our spirit. We need to rebuild our societies."

Hensley told the convention that, "The starting point for dealing with the future has to be a look inward." In an interview he said, "First, you understand who you are as a people and where you're going in a whole variety of arenas." He listed identity, language, culture, economics, politics and education. "You have to have very clear ideas in all those areas to know where to properly apply your energy, whether it's corporate energy, mental energy or political energy."

The slogan of the 1980 convention is "Tribe, Spirit, Strength." Willie Hensley used the first two words over and over. To find the third of his message you have to set up an equation: Tribe plus spirit equal strength.