

Outline of Claims History--

Author Lauds Congressman Begich for Claims Work

By THOMAS RICHARDS, JR.
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OLONGAPO CITY, R.P. — Although the groundwork had been completed prior to 1970, the most critical period during the settlement of the Alaska Native land claims came during the summer and fall of 1971.

With the exception of the proposal of a two per cent mineral royalty in perpetuity, the settlement enacted by the Congress at the end of 1971 was nearly identical to that which the Alaska Federation of Natives originally sought.

The success of the Washing-

ton lobbying effort during 1971 can be attributed to three factors:

(1) The appearance of effective Alaskan representation in the U.S. House of Representatives.

(2) The success of the National Council on Indian Opportunity in winning support from the Nixon Administration for the Alaska Native position on settlement legislation, and

(3) The ability of the Alaska Federation of Natives and other Alaska Native interests to remain apprised of factors affecting the progress of legislation.

Even before he became a lame-duck congressman, Howard Pollock incurred the ire of former House Interior Committee Chairman Wayne Aspinall because of infrequent attendance at committee meetings and his inattention to committee business unrelated to Alaskan affairs.

He angered the ranking Republican on the committee, John Saylor of Pennsylvania, such that Saylor vowed during one meeting never to allow a settlement of Alaska Native claims.

When he arrived as a freshman congressman after his 1970 victory, Nick Begich immediately sought to improve Alaska's position on the House Interior Committee and the critically important Indian Affairs Subcommittee.

He won the confidence of senior members by attending all committee meetings and by showing interest in matters which were important to his colleagues, although they had little effect on Alaska.

He earned respect also while compiling the best voting attendance record of any legislator ever sent to Washington by Alaskan voters, by making over ninety-nine per cent of the roll calls.

From the beginning, Begich made it plain that his primary goal for his first term in the Congress was the passage of legislation to fairly resolve the Native claims.

"I don't want to leave any-

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thing to chance," he told the Tundra Times shortly after arriving in Washington.

During our first meeting in his new office, this reporter asked Nick Begich about his sincerity in supporting settlement goals sought by Alaska Natives.

He immediately produced a book of census figures on Alaska and a town-by-town listing of election results for his congressional race.

He quickly demonstrated that his election was decided by the Alaskan Native vote.

"I know who elected me and I am not going to let them down," he stated.

Begich's strategy for getting favorable legislation out of the House had two basic ingredients. First, he worked exhaustively within committees and subsequently within the full House to obtain the respect and support of his colleagues.

Secondly, he was aware that important points sought by Native interests would become sensitive issues within the committee. Begich worked intensively and often privately, sometimes twenty hours daily, to further these points.

But, publicly, he allowed others to make important points and argue sensitive issues. Inevitably, an impasse would develop. Begich was free to resolve these deadlocks and prevent the legislation from becoming killed.

His strategy paid off. The bill was reported out of com-

mittee and Begich became the first freshman ever to be appointed by the veteran chairman Aspinall to a free conference committee.

By my count, the land settlement died in the House three times during 1971 and Begich revived it. I doubt that anyone else would have been able to do the same.

Congressman Nick Begich quickly earned my respect by virtue of his dedication, his overwhelming responsiveness, and genuine concern for his constituents. These qualities especially distinguished him among public servants. Additionally, I greatly admire the respect he has held for the responsibilities of the press to the public.

There are times when every public servant I have known has been too busy to talk to this reporter. This was never the case with Nick Begich. He always took the time to discuss an issue or a question, even if it meant that, during the course of an interview, we would rush through hall ways and in and out of elevators in order for him to answer a roll call.

He once surprised me at the conclusion of one telephone interview by informing me that he ate his dinner during our conversation. Many generations of Alaskans will benefit from a job well done by Congressman Begich.

NEXT WEEK: Another Alaskan's contribution.