

Book Review

By WALLY OLSON

Frontier Politics: Alaska's James Wickersham by Evangeline Atwood

Binford and Mort, Portland Ore. 1979 420 pp. \$14.95

Alaska is a hotbed of political strategy - industrial development versus the conservationists, they want to relocate the capital, Washington bureaucrats are trying to run Alaska like a foreign colony, the Natives are working on a land claims, and there are disputed elections. Although these may sound like last week's headlines, the dates are 1900 to 1939.

One of the key figures in all of these issues was the colorful Judge James Wickersham. This fine biography by Evangeline Atwood traces not only the life of the Judge, but carefully weaves in the issues and problems of the day. For many years, Wickersham held political sway over much of what occurred in Alaska. And as a result, there were many who supported him, and almost an equal number who hated him intensely. Some called him a man without principle as he moved from Republican to Democrat and then back, he argued in favor of unions and supported big business, and as he promoted a candidate and then turned on him in anger. On top of all this, there were many other controversial happenings, a fist-fight on the floor of Congress, an illicit love affair made public, and accusations of payoffs and political favors.

Even though Mrs. Atwood sums up the historical scene very well in each chapter, the reader almost has to have some background to Alaskan history to get the full impact of Wickerham's activity. As a biography, the author has to focus on the individual, but this also means that other matters have to be handled briefly. So, if a person were to try and read just this one book on Alaskan history, they would miss a lot. On the other hand, this text fills in many of the details and personal insights lacking in the regular historical summaries.

Evangeline Atwood writes in a very concise, clear style which makes for easy reading. In addition, each chapter is just long enough to cover each phase of his life and the reader can pick the book up and set it down easily and still keep the chain of thought. Now that Alaska is maturing, there promises to be several more biographies of leading political figures. But for Alaskans who want to get beyond the superficial summaries, and enjoy reading about the real life, rough-and-tumble past, this volume should stand as one of the finest examples.

It is just off the press and this reviewer recommends it highly for some good summer reading.