

Reader Greatly Concerned by Alcoholism Effects on Natives

Dear Editor:

During the past year I have read many issues of the Tundra Times. I am concerned with your campaign of being the voice of the native people of Alaska and feel that it is about time someone act as the whole voice of our native people. In your editorial of October 7th, 1966, you state that "we have also realized that an unbiased presentation of issues that directly concern the natives is needed. In presenting these things that most effect natives, we will make every effort to be truthful and objective."

In every issue of your paper you describe stories of natives who feel that they have been mistreated or natives who feel that they have been taken advantage of. Yet somehow you seemed to have skipped over one of the most important issues facing the natives today. This concerns alcoholism.

During the past year I have traveled extensively throughout Alaska from Ketchikan to Kotzebue, from Bethel to Fort Yukon and in many villages in between. Every place I have gone I have seen at least one, if not six or seven natives, sickeningly drunk in the evenings and during the days. No doubt white man has influenced our native people in many ways, both to their good and to their harm. Introducing alcohol to our native villages has caused great disaster in many ways. It has created individual, family, and village problems, greatly deteriorating the social order of our native people and their physical and mental health. Doctors in all of the U.S. Public Health Service Field Hospitals will readily point out that the most serious health problem today confronting the natives is alcoholism. Whereas, only ten years ago tuberculosis was of major concern amongst our villages. Today this problem has diminished greatly because of the natives willing to work with the doctors and nurses and willing to take necessary action. But today we see that the potentiality of alcoholism spreading through our natives and killing them can be more disastrous than tub-

erculosis ever was. Now is the time to do something.

Unfortunately very little seems to be taking place to control this dreadful disease. Our government officials seem to want to keep their hands completely off the issue, and our native group seem to talk about it only under "hush" conditions. However, I do know that in the years past, as well as presently, our missionary groups throughout this state have done much to curtail drinking in the villages in which they have the confidence of the people. Also in certain areas the natives have voted for their particular area to be dry, but this has had very little effect in helping the people. In retrospect, taking the area of Bethel, Alaska, we see that by the natives voting for a dry environment this has done more harm than when the area could legally sell liquor.

As recently as the week end of October 14-15, meetings were held in the City of Anchorage to discuss alcoholic problems throughout the state. Much concern was expressed on how to take care of a person once they become an alcoholic. More government appropriations are available for the medical needs of these people and the hospitalization of alcoholics. This to me is attacking the problem from the wrong angle. The key to the control of alcoholism in the State of Alaska among our native people seems to me to come under the phrase; "An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure." In other words to prevent the easy flow of alcohol in the villages and to prevent the ability of our people from obtaining, so easily, alcoholic beverages.

I can hear the people screaming now "Un-constitutional," "Un-constitutional," you cannot tell somebody that they can buy or what they can buy or what they cannot buy. But, when we look into the problem a little deeper we see that we have caused the problem ourselves by giving to people money and checks that were meant for other purposes. This brings us into the realm of our Welfare State. I have seen through my own eyes many of our natives who are

on welfare buying large quantities of alcohol through welfare monies. I have seen this in Kotzebue, in Bethel, in Juneau, in Fairbanks and many smaller villages. This money is given to our welfare recipients in hopes of helping them to provide for their children, for themselves, to buy food, to buy clothing, to buy material for shelter. But in reality we see large quantities of the welfare checks spent on booze.

Again, in many issues of your paper, you describe where newspaper coverage and public opinion made government circles start to jump in an effort to do something to help in various problems such as the problems of foster homes for our high school students who cannot go to some schools, or help BIA officials and our native children going to the University of Alaska or the problems existing in the establishment of ASCAP - the Alaska State Community Action program. If you are really concerned with the problems among our native people and if ASCAP really cares to have a challenging problem that, once solved, will greatly benefit the State of Alaska and especially it's native people, then I challenge you to look into the problem of alcoholism.

In the Tundra Times of September 23, 1966 much was said about the students being humiliated by BIA officials at the University of Alaska. It seems that many of them could not see why officials could not "Give" them more money for books and clothing. I wonder how many of their parents drink 25% or more of their check? I wonder also how much money these students themselves spend on beer and alcohol, and cigarettes? How often have the native people been misrepresented themselves by allowing some of the members to regularly be seen drunk on the streets of Juneau, Anchorage, Fairbanks and Ketchikan as seen by our tourists and white Alaskans. It has turned my stomach quite often seeing many good-looking Alaskan girls indescribably drunk on the city streets of Anchorage or on planes going throughout the State of

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Alaska, many of high school and college age. I wonder often where they get the money for their long bouts with the bottle. Now that I presented the problem I wish to offer a possible solution. I am presenting this problem to you the Tundra Times and to ASCAP.

If you are people who really want to do something for the native people of Alaska, you will quickly tackle this problem. This partial solution would be the advocacy of giving welfare recipients commodities in place of a check or welfare in kind rather than in money. This would be similar to the programs conducted in Arkansas, Mississippi, Tennessee and Oklahoma just to name a few states. People would receive food, clothing and building materials for shelter. This would help in giving employment to many people who would be willing to handle these materials, plus it would help the enterprises such as the wood mills in Noorvik, Ambler and Minto to flourish, rather than give direct money that is used for drinking and gambling in the villages by the people who can least afford it. This program would introduce to needy people the things that they basically need. It would greatly enhance the health of children and adults and eliminate many social problems due to drinking.

This ounce of prevention would be worth more than a pound of cure that is needed by our medical profession to cure an alcoholic. It would prevent many accidental deaths by drowning and other accidents due to drinking. I shudder to think of the great damage that is caused by welfare checks which people use to obtain alcoholic beverages. When I see that in one week a local liquor store in Kotzebue can deposit \$8,700, a lot of this coming from welfare recipients I wonder what good we are doing. I wonder how much food and clothing is really going for the purpose

it was established.

By a welfare program that would get food, clothing and shelter rather than outright money we would also curtail the spread of many diseases that are spread and contracted in an alcoholic environment. This does not mean venereal diseases alone. Many hospital emergencies would be eliminated such as broken arms and legs and bleeding heads from falls, plus malnutrition of children and adults.

One of the first steps to be taken in the solving of any problem is the open discussion and the obtaining of many view points. I hope that the Tundra Times will be going to a good many of the villages to express their opinions on alcoholism and on the real value of welfare checks. I hope you will motivate them to think of solving this problem and perhaps through the ASCAP organization you might see that the native people of Alaska are mature enough and intelligent enough to solve one of their most critical problems.

Yours very truly,
Terry Martin
3124 Richmond Avenue
Apt. 10A
Anchorage, Alaska 99501