

Outline of Claims History--

Author Evaluates Caliber of Native Leaders

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SETTLEMENT - PART SEVEN

(EDITOR'S NOTE: Due to unavoidable delays, Thomas Richards, Jr.'s series on land claims settlement were delayed.)

OLONGAPO CITY, R.P. — Washington's watering holes lock up at 2:00 A.M. Among the best places to satisfy an appetite generated after a night's entertainment are the restaurants of Chinatown. At one such establishment on "H" Street, the food is good but the lighting is grotesque.

Here late one spring evening in 1971, in light turning faces the color of men searching DEW Line radar scopes, Don Wright and I discussed the hardships he endured as president of AFN.

Wright explained some of many defensive tactics which he employed in an attempt to maintain a grip upon the AFN. They included a multitude of job offers spread among those from whom he required assistance.

Wright was an unorthodox leader who further perplexed his observers. He was capable of eloquent statements on behalf of the Native position before Vice-President Agnew, and at the same time capable of alienating the chairman of the House Interior Committee — an unfortunate occurrence which required Congressman Begich to increase his exhaustive pace in order to keep the land claims bill alive during the summer of 1971.

He energetically roamed Capitol Hill and the nation to lobby for the settlement, but

apparently failed to keep the AFN board of directors informed of his actions. Reportedly, Wright offered to forego his salary and live on an expense account, but insisted upon traveling first class and dining in expensive restaurants.

Wright billed himself as a crusader for the rights of Alaska Natives living in modest villages, but spent funds from their organizations to finance an expensive lifestyle totally alien to theirs. When I began this series, I intended on devoting a good portion of it toward commentary on Wright.

But, his constituents evidently became disenchanted with his brand of leadership and caused his replacement. That, in itself, may be sufficient commentary, and there are other leaders deserving of recognition.

For some, it is a profession. To others, it is a duty unavoidably requiring hardships and personal sacrifice. One thing for certain, as the current controversy shows, it is impossible for an Alaska Native to call it quits once he is designated as a leader.

As thankless as the job may seem now, it was much less attractive prior to the settlement, and early in the land battle, Alaska Native leaders could be expected to derive little satisfaction for their labors.

It is a difficult thing to "type" the leaders who emerged to guide the Alaska Native land claims effort. They are as diverse as are the regions of Alaska. However, Native affairs are no more immune to politics than any other field when stakes are high, and two groups general-

ly opposed each other within the Alaska Federation of Natives.

Emil Notti, first president and president emeritus of the AFN is a trained electronics engineer. He has scuttled the years of training required for his profession in order to better serve his people. I count Emil, an Athabaskan, to be among the most sincere and humble men I have ever met. He saw the claims as a possible solution to the severe problems of poverty, disease, and education that have plagued Alaska Natives.

Notti also realized that the injustice present during this country's dealings with American Indians need not be repeated with Alaska Natives. Working closely with him were Native leaders John Borbridge, Willie Hensley, Eben Hopson, Al Ketzler and Flore Lekanof.

Donald R. Wright succeeded Notti as AFN president in 1970. Wright, born in Nenana, was a former construction contractor in Fairbanks and Anchorage. The true solution to the problems of Alaska Natives, thought Wright, would be found in the economic and political power amassed by Natives after the settlement. In his thinking, settlement proceeds would turn Natives into instant corporation executives. Concurring in this approach were Fred Bismark, Harry Carter, Ray Christensen, and George Miller. Rather than planning strategy for the fight on Capitol Hill, Wright often battled Notti over restrictions on the use of the claims land and money. He was a powerhouse in Alaska, and remained a powerhouse when he arrived in Washington.

In Washington, Wright repeatedly forced the issue. Fortunately, the machinery had been well oiled by friends of the Natives in Washington, and the Congress acted favorably.

There were independents among the Native leaders who acted not out of basic philosophies, but largely out of regional interests on nearly every issue. Cecil Barnes, Alice Brown, Frank Degnan, Charles Edwardson, Jr., and Joe Upickson can be counted among these. Of these, Charlie "Etook" Edwardson, from Barrow, is the youngest and the most experienced in the Native claims issue. Edwardson began to explore prospects for congressional action in 1966.

He often chastised Native leaders for being too cautious and too modest in their demands. His contacts in Washington and throughout the country continue to amaze me. When traveling anywhere with Charlie, he never failed to discover a good friend in the most obscure places. When the State of Alaska conducted its billion dollar lease sale in September 1969, Edwardson led a group of young Natives in protest outside of Anchorage's Sidney Lawrence Auditorium, carrying placards which read, "two billion dollar Native land robbery" and "bad deal at Tom Kelly's Trading Post."

The leaders are all colorful individuals. Among them, they probably have only two things in common. Once you have met a Native leader, you are never to forget him. And, without their timely leadership, there would have been no settlement at all or, at the very least, a belated attempt to do justice to Native land rights on terms grossly unfair to the Native people.