



Photo by Bill Hess

Markle Pete stands alongside the pipeline which he helped construct. Pressure to develop the Prudhoe Bay oil fields and to build the pipeline hurried up the land claims settlement, which some AHTNA residents proclaim good and others bad.

ANRC goes to Ahtna Region

by Bill Hess
Tundra Times

All of the eight villages within the AHTNA region can be reached by road, and from the road, the Trans-Alaska Pipeline is not an uncommon sight.

During testimony given last week to the Alaska Native Review Commission, it became evident that these two factors have greatly influenced the feelings that villagers within Alaska's smallest regional corporation hold for the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act.

Unlike the Southwest Alaskan villages of Emmonak and Tununak, the first communities to which Canadian Judge Thomas Berger took the ANRC, criticism of ANCSA in the AHTNA region, while strong, was tempered with many positive statements.

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'Act wonderful but future seems hopeless'

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that happened to us," said Henry Bell of Chitina in one of the first testimonies given in the village of Cooper Center. Bell cited job opportunities, development and Native title to land as the major reasons behind his statement.

Yet Bell echoed the fears of the villagers in Southwest Alaska, who had had virtually nothing good to say about ANCSA. He brought up the question of 1991, when Alaska Natives can sell their shares to anyone and when land held by the regional and village corporations will become subject to taxation. He said he did not know what that would mean for Alaska Natives.

He also contemplated the Children born after the Act's passage on Dec. 18, 1971. They can not hold shares or land under the act, unless they inherit them or purchase them after 1991. "When these little ones grow up," Bell asked, "what will they do? What will they benefit?"

"I think land claims is a wonderful thing," he added shortly after, "but looking to the future, it seems just hopeless to us!"

Bells comment's were made part of the public record the ANRC is compiling as Berger takes it to a projected 30 to 40 Alaska Native Villages and communities across Alaska. The ANRC was formed last summer by the Inuit Circumpolar Conference and was charged with conducting an independent study to find out how Alaska Natives feel ANCSA has affected them both good and bad.

Roy Ewan, the elected president of AHTNA and a resident of Gulkana, praised the Native leaders who had worked to stop encroachment on Native land by lobbying for the passage of ANCSA.

"They did a tremendous job under tremendous pressure," Ewan said. Ewan, who was involved in the land claims process, said that once a bill began working its way through Congress, there was little that could be done to stop it. He said that the leaders had had to work for the best compromises they could of faced the prospect of losing everything.

"The main point was to stop encroachment of non-Natives on our land and to try to be compensated for lands we had lost over the years," Ewan said. In the AHTNA region, that encroachment had been more severe than in remote villages accessible only by plane or boat.

Ewan explained how homesteaders had been moving in and taking over the best land; even land with camps set up on it. Although the Native people had been there first and had been using the land all along for subsistence purposes, Ewan noted, they did not hold the legal title so important to Western government and thus lost property their families owned and used for generations.



Danielle Boston sits on her father Don's lap as judge Berger conducts hearings in Gulkana. Directly behind Danielle is Roy Ewan, president of AHTNA.

ned and used for generations. ANCSA, said Ewan, gave Native title, and put a stop to the encroachment.

"I really feel the compensation we received was not enough," Ewan said of the nearly \$1 billion which the government turned over to the 13 regional and more than 200 village corporations as payment, at what one speaker pointed out was about \$3 an acre, for lands lost.

Ewan and others had wanted a two percent royalty to be paid to Alaska Natives from the profits of all oil and gas, minerals, and other natural resources which would ever be taken from the lands. This would have left Alaska Natives with a real interest in all the lands of Alaska and with Prudhoe Bay would have paid revenues "of millions a day. We tried hard," said Ewan.

"The Native land claims was influenced by other interest groups," he added. "Environmentalists, the State of Alaska... people we had no control of. They put things in the bill we didn't want. That's politics!"

Prudhoe Bay and the pipeline often are blamed for the woes many Alaska Native attributes to ANCSA, but Ewan argued that "oil pressure" may actually have worked in favor of Natives.

"If the oil companies weren't pressing Congress, maybe we would have had a smaller settlement," Ewan said, explaining that a number of bills with much smaller land settlements had been proposed. Because pressure was so great to get the oil pumping from Prudhoe Bay and traveling down the pipelines Ewan said Native leaders had been able to deal from a position of increased strength.

for giving his people experience in running a corporation, and in helping create the jobs which

many of them had during pipeline construction, and which a number of shareholders still hold.

AHTNA has its own construction company, a contract to maintain 55 miles of pipeline crossing corporation land, and a joint venture in catering to all the 11 pump stations of the pipeline.

Millie Buck, who lives in Glennallen and is enrolled in the village corporation of Chitina, the only AHTNA village not to merge with the regional corporation, had few good feelings toward ANCSA.

"I don't feel it was a fair settlement," she said, speculating that when it included the 1991 provision, Congress must have known of the dangers faced by Alaska Natives when their lands become alienable and taxable.

"I wonder if the land will still be mine after 1991," Buck worried. "I wonder if we can even walk across it after 1991... Look around, you see people squatting on it, camping on it, just like before land claims!"

Buck had harsh criticism for the U.S. Bureau of Land Management, which she said had the responsibility for looking after Native lands. Instead, Buck argued, the BLM had taken them to court in an expensive battle over three acres of land.

"The people who are supposed to be protecting us are taking us to court, making us spend money. That, to me is not really a settlement," she argued. Buck also charged that the land left to shareholders is gradually being chipped away. "Non-Natives want an easement here, and easement there," Buck complained. "It isn't that hard to get. They do get it. Here we sit back, and wonder where the lands we fought for are. I feel all of that is so unfair!"

Buck also complained about "tougher rules and regulations"

governing subsistence hunting and fishing, and about fish and game regulations which prohibit the sharing of fish caught in the Chitina fishery. "Sharing is our way," she noted.

Many who testified contended that while in the 1960's, prejudice against Natives seemed minimal and life was good for students in school, ANCSA had created animosity toward them from non-Natives, and had made education and employment more difficult.

Buck agreed, "We're told, 'why don't those bunch of Indians go out and do what we do, those rich Indians.' It's not true. We have to work hard, maybe harder than most, to buy something like (a new car)."

Buck called for improved education for Native children, equal to that received by non-Natives.

"In order to have that, the state is going to have to recognize us as a people, which they now do not," Buck said, calling for a united effort of the federal government and the state to improve Native education.

Edna Charlie, a Tlingit who has been living in the AHTNA region for eight years, also brought up the prejudice many non-Natives seem to feel for Natives because they incorrectly believe them to be rich as a result of ANCSA.

Charlie argued that many non-Natives have been among the greatest beneficiaries of ANCSA. A ripple effect has created jobs not only for attorneys and consultants, but for retailers, airlines, construction workers, oil companies, and even for newspapers, radio and television, Charlie said.

"Land claims has provided them with a lot of news," Charlie explained.

Walya Hobson, a great-grandmother and the daughter of Douglas Billum, who in his

life was a well-respected chief of the Lower Tonsina - Chitina area, echoed the statements of many elders when she said modern encroachment on their lifestyles has been to severe.

Hobson recalled when people were able to move freely about in their home regions in search of game, fish, and berries. No more. "We used to go everywhere," she said. "Then white people came and put up stakes for mining. Then they tear up good land."

She recalled her father saving early whites in the north from starvation and frozen death.

Among the less than desirable things brought into Native land in return, Hobson said, was prostitution. "Boy, we never heard of this! We never heard of a girl making money out of their bodies!" Hobson said.

Hobson lamented about regulations which prevent Natives from taking moose, caribou and sheep except during limited times, and about scarcities which have made other animals, such as ground squirrels nearly impossible to find.

Yet, she complained, waste of these wild resources continues. Hobson recalled stopping at a gravel pit to build a fire and cook some lunch. A group of non-Natives was camped there. Hobson left, but returned two days later.

"I walked down to the creek," she recalled. "Here lay a moose head, rotten. Here lay the four legs, scattered. Here lay the liver, covered with maggots. Indians love the liver, and the kidneys, but here was waste!"

Hobson was not pleased with the fish and game rangers, strangers who come in to enforce regulations made by someone else. "They just walk around there all the time, writing on pads," she said. "I don't know what they are doing. Sometime, I'd like to

look at their pads. I'm a good reader, too!"

Even during moose season, regulations make it hard for subsistence hunters to take their food, Hobson said, referring to a state law forbidding the taking of a bull moose with less than a 36-inch antler spread. "By the time we measure the horns, the moose gets away!" Hobson said.

"Now we can't kill the moose; we just have to go out and look at the moose!"

"We don't hate white people," Hobson added, "only we don't like the way white people rule us too much. And they make us scared to do anything!"

Perhaps the angriest testimony came from Hobson's granddaughter, Evelyn Pete. Pete is the mother of six children, none of whom qualify for benefits under ANCSA. Her eldest son, 20-year-old Louis Williams, told how, with Athabaskan, Inupiat, American Indian and White ancestry, his Alaska Native blood quantum was one-sixteenth short of qualifying him for ANCSA.

Yet, Williams contended, he was raised as a Native, and just last year took his first caribou.

Pete's younger children are by Native fathers and would qualify by blood, if they had not been born after the 1971 deadline.

"I'm not going to lose this land," Pete testified. "There's people like me, who feel like me. The children born after 1971, they're still Indian, still Eskimo, still, Aleut!"

Pete decried ANCSA as being illegal, said that she had never accepted it, and would not have signed up but her mother did it for her. She decried the leadership which accepted ANCSA as not being truly representative of the Native people, a point which Clarence McCartney backed her up on.

"Why don't they ask the Elders?" McCartney asked. "Why wasn't there a full council? Do they think they can get away with this?"

"The good thing about the land claims settlement act was that it established the boundaries of our land," Pete said. Citing what is known as the disclaimer to control of Native property and fish and game rights in the Alaska constitution, Pete argued that AHTNA land was not limited to the "checkerboard" conveyances within the boundaries, but to all the land.

"Since we use all the land within our boundaries, this means the state can own no land," she contended.

Lucille Brenwick, a robust Elder in her 70's and a member of the AHTNA board of directors, said many of the fears surrounding 1991 are unfounded.

"There is nothing to fear in 1991," Brenwick said. "You are not going to lose a thing. The land will still be yours if you don't sell it!"

Brenwick also disagreed with those who spoke of going back to the old days as a real option. She spoke of living with her mother as a small girl after her father died, sleeping on spruce boughs and often in the winter months having only the hares which her mother could snare for meat.

While Brenwick later said she would like to see the young people learn the knowledge of survival in the wilderness as well as their cultural traditions such as the potlatch, she was not willing to blame ANCSA for their lack of knowledge.

"The reason we are losing a lot is because the young people don't want to go out," Brenwick said. "How many young people want to trap?" Brenwick urged that the young shareholders be impressed with

the fact that just because 1991 arrived, they did not have to sell their shares.

She also emphasized that anyone who does sell their shares, is no longer a member of AHTNA at all, they have sold their birthright.

While there was little mention of the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934 tribal governments which have generated so much interest in many Alaskan Villages, Ken Johns, the director of the Cooper Center Council, urged fellow shareholders to consider the role that traditional governments can play in keeping the lands in Native hands and the traditional culture alive.

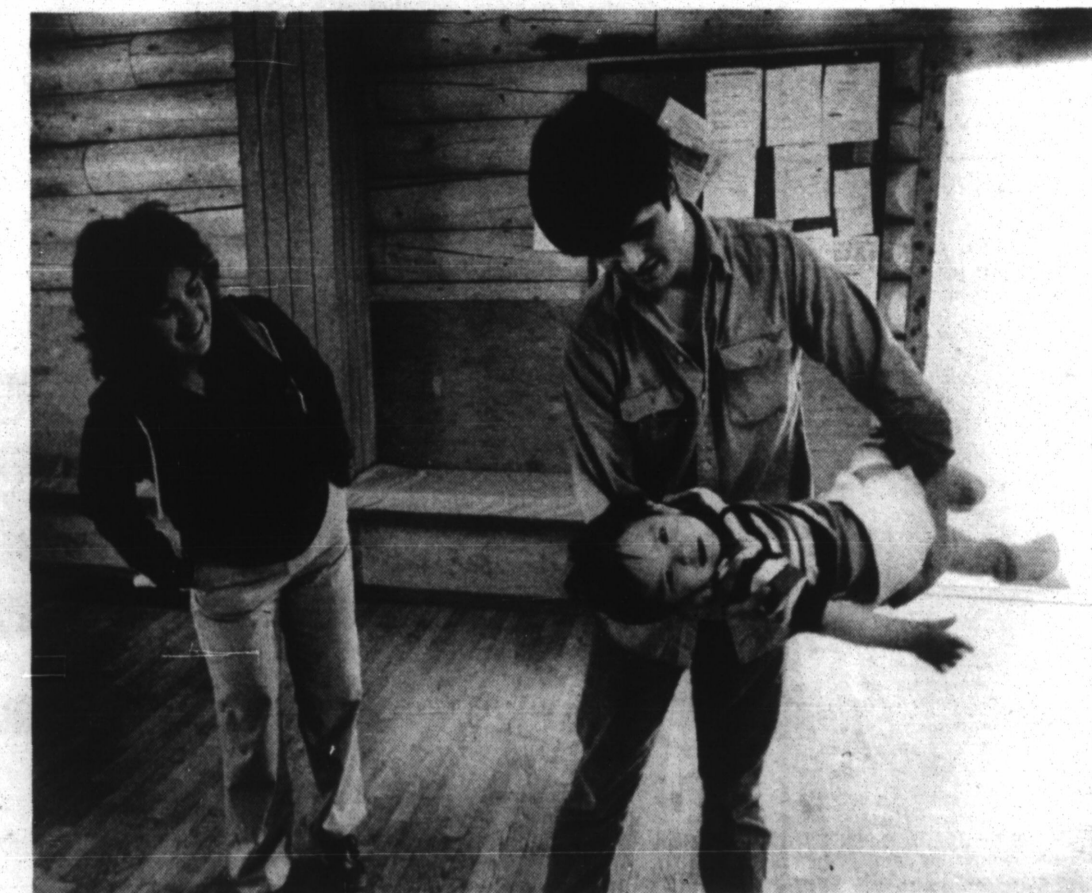
"Land claims was one of the great things that happened in the history of Alaska," John said. Yet he stressed the limitations of the corporations.

"Regional corporations are business, and I think we should treat them as businesses," John said. "Our traditional values should be kept separate from business." Johns suggested that the traditional governments of the region be looked at as possible entities to establish strong relationships with both the state and federal governments to keep cultural values alive and to protect Native land.

Donna George, a young woman testifying in Gulkana, complained to Berger that there have been many meetings with government agencies and the Alaskan Federation of Natives with few results.

"We hear the same old thing. We're going to try to help you, to do this, but what's ever accomplished? Nothing, it seems like!"

She pleaded with Berger not to let the work of the ANRC follow a similar pattern. "I don't want to see all the testimony back in the files," George said. "Something has got to be done for us Native people!"



Evelyn Pete watches as her eldest son Louis, who missed benefits under ANCSA because was one-sixteenth too low, swings her youngest son, Matt Frankson, who missed benefits because he was born after December 18, 1971.

Editor's note: Last week, Judge Thomas Berger took the Alaska Native Review Commission to hear testimony in the AHTNA region. In addition to the overview story here, the Tundra Times will take a closer look in both words and pictures at some of the people and issues which make up the AHTNA region.

Photos by Bill Hess