

# They're Finally Listening to Us

"I don't know what happened — but all at once we were surrounded by Natives."

It might have been General Custer talking, but actually it was an Alaskan politician.

The scattered voices of individual Native leaders have been welded together, by necessity and a growing awareness of over-all Native voting power, into a force politicians have to reckon with.

"They are finally listening to us," one Native said.

But it isn't just that politicians in Alaska, and in fact all over the country, are just beginning to recognize Native problems — it is that they are beginning to recognize Native power.

If the Natives can say: "They are finally listening to us," Alaska state officials can also say: "They are finally talking."

Of course some individual Natives have for many years been working toward equal education opportunities; better housing conditions; equal opportunity — but it is only recently that these leaders have been able to speak with real authority.

This authority comes from the growing sophistication of the village Native. These people have wanted the things their leaders were asking for — but they didn't know how to go about helping the very people who were speaking for them.

Now they not only know how to help their leaders — they are also helping themselves. They are beginning to realize that if they want the best part of two ways of life; that of the village and that of modern civilization — things are going to have to change.

Rural development is a phrase that hasn't meant much in Alaska up to now but today the village people are getting wise in the way of triplicate forms and federal grants.

They want better education for their young; they want to live in the village, but in nicer houses with cheaper electricity and modern plumbing. They want to have an economic base in their village so they can make a living where they call home and provide a future for their children in the village.

This wanting is making itself known in the large number of Native organizations forming and recently, in the Statewide Native Organization.

Perhaps the most encouraging sign of Alaskan Natives' awareness of their own citizenship is the questioning of the paternalistic system they have lived under for years.

It is hard for a man to question whether or not it might be better for him to pay his own way; make his own mistakes or succeed on his own initiative.

The fact that Alaskan Natives are beginning to ask this question is all part of their awareness of themselves as individual citizens as a group power.