

Justice Conference

Testimonials Get Bitter at Minto

By MARGIE BAUMAN

MINTO — Bizarre stories of justice in the Alaskan bush rumbled from the floor; bitter testimonials from the recipients of this system of justice.

Outside, the mosquitoes buzzed between the trees, near the banks of the Tanana River, having had a good sampling already of administrators, lawyers and residents of rural Alaska packed into this Athabascan village to examine the state of bush justice.

It was a far cry from the first conference on bush justice, nearly four years ago, which began with a cocktail party at the luxurious Mt. Alyeska Ski Lodge in Girdwood, southeast of Anchorage, Alaska.

But it was in the spirit of one of the resolutions passed by the First Conference on Bush Justice that this second Conference began:

"The locus of decision-making in the administration of justice in the village Alaska must move closer to the village. To achieve this result there must be greater Native participation at all levels in the administration of justice."

The Second Conference on Bush Justice attracted in addition to the administrators of the law a cross-section of Alaska's Native people, from Pt. Lay on the Arctic Slope to Napakiak to Bethel and Dillingham and Eagle.

By the time the four-day conference concluded in Minto June 12, the participants had come to seven major conclusions:

1. that police protection for village people is inferior and in need of improvement.

2. that the importance of fish and game protection to village people is underestimated by state authorities and fish and game laws are unequally applied.

3. that village people do not generally understand the state



AMONG THE PARTICIPANTS in the Minto conference on bush justice was District Judge Nora Guinn of Bethel.

— Photo by MARGIE BAUMAN

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justice system and the state justice system does not generally understand the village people.

4. that village people do not want their children or elderly removed from the village by the schools, courts or police or other agencies.

5. that participation of village people in virtually all agencies of the justice system is severely lacking.

6. that village life should be governed by village law and custom as much as possible.

7. that progress in the improvement of the bush justice system since December, 1970 has been much too slow.

While the conference commended the Alaska Supreme Court for its sensitivity to problems of village people and the state legislature for establishing the Department of Community and Regional Affairs, and commended the establishment of legal offices in Dillingham, Nome and Bethel, it found "there has been virtually nothing else of substance done to carry out the recommendations of the first bush justice conference."

The conference also named an interim monitoring committee with five members: State Rep. Phillip Guy, D-Kwethluk; Nick Gregory of Egegik, a board member of the Bristol Bay Native Corp.; Vice President Gordon Jackson of the Human Resources program of the Alaska Federation of Natives Inc.; Brenda Itta of Barrow and Mitch Demientieff of Nenana.

Its jobs are to secure funding for a permanent committee fairly representing all rural regions of Alaska, for the purposes of improving bush justice.

The conference has urged that within the next year three conferences similar to the Minto conference be held in remote villages to deal specifically with the problems in the villages in which the conferences are held.

Among the local problems outlined by the Minto meeting were those of families whose children were forced to leave home to attend school and the non-functioning community water and sewer system.

The conference raised in all a number of issues unresolved by the first conference on bush justice.

"What we are seeing here is a struggling effort to find a way to enforce justice in rural Alaska," said Mitch Demientieff of Nenana, urging "a spirit of cooperation between the traditional councils and the forces of administration of justice in Alaska today."

Demientieff and others representing villages from the Arctic Slope to Southwestern Alaska

made it clear that the recipients of the bush justice system want an active role in determining the fate of their people.

As President Roger Lang of the Alaska Federation of Natives Inc. put it, "the realization of self-government has come to bush Alaska."

Moderating the initial panel discussion, on police systems in Alaska, Lang summarized by raising three points:

- do police officers work with village councils and should they?

- the problems of funding proper law enforcement in the villages.

- the lack of continuity between village police and state troopers.

Law enforcement officials, including panel member Charles Reed, project director of the village police training program were questioned anew on standards and tests used in selection of state troopers. Only two of the state's 188 troopers are Natives.

The village police, who work long hours often with little or no pay, are greatly needed, "but we have no money," said James Willie, a village policeman from Napakiak, in the Bethel area. "I think some people think police work is an easy job but it is not easy," he said.

Although his village has a population of under 300, Willie has to deal also with a number of travelers through the Napakiak area.

"The village of Napakiak is a travel way," said State Rep. Phillip Guy, D-Kwethluk, whose legislative district includes Napakiak.

"People from Bethel and downriver have to travel through his area . . . and there is a need for the village policeman to serve not only his village but travelers through the area," he said. Guy referred specifically to problems with travelers who had been drinking.

"In the territorial days, the village councils handled drinking problems . . . and they did it well," said Jonathan Solomon of Fort Yukon. "It worked out for our people for 100 years. We've tried it your way. Now you try it ours."

Solomon was especially irritated, however, by the absence of those who would administer justice to the bush from the communities they serve.

"They say, 'We will be the law. We will be just.' And where are they? One hundred fifty miles away," he said.

Also under fire were practices of foster care and education which are destructive to the Na-

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tive family unit.

"Under state law, all children who reach school age must go to school . . . and the fine threads of the family structure are broken . . . at 13 . . . the children must go away to school," said Brenda Itta of Barrow.

In addition to the social problems created for the students and their families when the students return home, the system "robs our men in the villages of their manhood and the women are deprived of their God-given right of motherhood," Itta said. "Yet everytime we start lobbying for funds for education at home, it's one big hassle," she said.