

Tlingit and Haida celebrate 50th anniversary

The Tlingit and Haida Indians used and occupied their traditional grounds in the Southeastern Panhandle without restrictions until the Organic Act of 1884 caused gradual loss of rights to their fishing area, hunting and gathering grounds, and timber lands. Indian leaders, determined not to lose what had been theirs from time immemorial, banded together to bring their aboriginal rights to the U.S. Government's attention. First they needed training.

The Alaska Native Brotherhood was organized in 1912 to train the Tlingit and Haida leadership that was needed to cope with the critical problems that confronted them. They developed organizational know-how, greater fluency in the English language, and a greater understanding of government and the legal system. ANB produced leaders that would eventually get the government to recognize the Tlingit-Haida rights.

Peter Simpson, one of ANB's founding fathers, was the first to suggest the idea of pursuing the claims of the Tlingits and Haidas. William L. Paul would be the tool to make this idea a reality. Paul, a Tlingit from Wrangell, was the first Native to practice law in Alaska in 1918. He joined the ANB, and he and his brother Louis would have a strong impact on the political direction of the organization. The year was 1925 when Simpson whispered into Paul's ear, "William, the land is yours, why don't you fight for it?"

For four years, Paul studied the history of Indian legal claims with the advice and encouragement of James Wichersham, former federal judge and Alaska's non-voting delegate to Congress. In 1929, Paul invited Wichersham to address the ANB convention. Wichersham later wrote in a diary: "I spoke to the Brotherhood convention tonight for two hours on

the project of requesting congress to pass an Act authorizing the Tlingit and Haida Indians of Alaska to bring suit against the U.S. in the Court of Claims to recover the value of their lands, hunting grounds, fishing rights taken by the United States Government."

The convention adopted a resolution authorizing the ANB to so proceed.

It took six years of effort; then, in 1935 the Congress passed the Jurisdictional Act which gave the Tlingit and Haida people the right to prosecute their claims in a federal court. They had seven years to bring suit. Nothing was done until the late '30s.

In 1939 ANB held a convention in Sitka and passed a resolution providing for the formation of a "Tlingit and Haida Central Council" for the purpose of pursuing the legal claims of the Tlingit and Haida people. The structure of the Central Council was similar to that of the ANB.



William L. Paul, Sr. with John Borbridge, Jr. during a 1969 AFN Board meeting in Anchorage.

The first Central Council convention was held in 1941. Andrew J. Hope, Sr., was elected president, an office he was to serve for nearly twenty-five years. The organization got an extension for the filing deadline. Attorney I.S. "Lefty" Weissbrodt was selected and was

soon deeply involved in an extraordinarily complex suit. In 1957 he filed a petition in the Court of Claims stating that the Tlingit and Haida Indians did have original ownership of all the land and waters in Southeast

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Alaska claimed by them. He won on October 7, 1959.

The United States was directed to make fair payment for lands withdrawn to create the Tongass National Forest, the Annette Island Indian Reservation, and the Glacier Bay National Monument.

In 1968, the U.S. Court of Claims awarded \$7,546,153.80 to the Tlingit and Haida Indians of Alaska. The fund was

deposited in the U.S. Treasury pending the Central Council's development of a plan for the use of the funds. It was voted overwhelmingly not to appeal the decision, but to use the interest generated by the principal to operate programs to benefit all Tlingits and Haidas and to protect and advance their rights in the emerging 1971 land claims legislation.

In 1970, President Nixon changed the government's relationship toward the Indian people.

Through this administration, federal offices throughout the country responded to Nixon by establishing "Indian desks" and "Indian Involvement" programs. The BIA responded by developing Indian involvement programs which soon had a significant impact on the future of the Central Council.

Congress soon approved the Central Council's "Six-Point Plan" for the use of the judge-

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ment fund. The Six-Point Plan provided for programs in the areas of education and skills training, industrial and commercial development, housing assistance, and financing. The money also supported the lobbying effort on behalf of the Tlingits and Haidas and AFN's proposed land claims legislation.

In 1971, the Central Council subcontracted with the BIA to administer its Southeast Agency, which served the social, employment, and educational needs of Native Americans residing in Southeast Alaska. The first such contract in Alaska, it was one of the largest negotiated with an Indian tribe. The Council also worked with the Alaska State Housing Authority to subsidize

