

Peratrovich led Alaska civil rights

by Henry S. Kaiser Jr.
for the Tundra Times

On Saturday, 45 years after she stepped to the front of Alaska's Territorial Legislature and testified to ensure passage of a civil rights anti-discrimination bill, Elizabeth Peratrovich (1911-1958) will be formally inducted into the Alaska Women's Hall of Fame.

This annual event, sponsored each March by the Alaska's Women's Commission as part of Women's History Month, honors women who have made outstanding contributions to Alaska.

Elizabeth Peratrovich was selected because of her civil rights activism during the 1940s when she was grand president of the Alaska Native Sisterhood and her husband Roy was grand president of the Alaska Native Brotherhood.

Before the passage of this anti-discrimination law, signs in many Alaskan businesses, restaurants, bars, hotels and other public accommodations warned, "No Natives Allowed" or "We Cater to Whites Only."

Elizabeth and Roy Peratrovich were living in Klawock, a coastal village near Ketchikan, when they became leaders of the ANS and ANB. They discussed their situation and what they could do to help improve the conditions of Alaska Natives.

It was decided that to become seriously involved and effective in the politics of the day that they must move to Juneau, the territorial capital. Roy Peratrovich was hired as a file clerk in the territorial treasurer's office.

Upon arriving in Juneau, they saw and experienced blatant Native discrimination and segregation in areas of housing, as well as public facilities and accommodations.

A friend who was willing to fight

against it.

Two years later, on a cold and inclement February afternoon of 1945, the gallery of the Alaska Territorial Legislature in Juneau was packed with spectators, including Elizabeth Peratrovich.

Ernest Gruening in his autobiography *Many Battles* gave Elizabeth Peratrovich most of the credit for the passage of the bill that fateful day.

"I (had) put as much feeling as I knew how into the appeal for this legislation and was cheered by the presence in the joint assemblage of the newly elected Native legislators, Frank Peratrovich of Klawock, Elizabeth's brother-in-law, and Andrew Hope from Sitka.

"(The bill had) passed the House with little debate by a vote 9 to 5, but when it came to the Senate it was violently opposed by Sen. Allen Shattuck."

Shattuck was a businessman and powerful member of the "Juneau establishment."

Shattuck said that the bill would not bring the races closer together, but would keep them further apart.

"Who are these people, barely out of savagery, who want to associate with us whites with 5,000 years of recorded civilization behind us?"

Another opponent was Sen. Frank Whaley, a Bush pilot and miner from Fairbanks.

"I don't want to sit next to Eskimos in a theater; they smell," he said.

As was tradition, any observer in the hall was invited to speak, and the daughter of a Presbyterian lay minister announced she would like to be heard.

As Elizabeth Peratrovich walked confidently to the front of the Legislature and sat next to the Senate president, the hall took on an aura that was intent with curious and unknown expectation.



arranged to lease it.

"When the owners learned that we were Indians they said, 'No.' Would we be compelled to live in the slums?"

Shattuck shot back, "Will this law eliminate discrimination?"

The debate heated as Peratrovich countered, "Do your laws against larceny, rape and murder prevent those crimes?"

The *Juneau Empire* reported, "the once strong voice of opposition was quickly whittled to a defensive whisper. The 5' 5" Indian woman stole the show."

Peratrovich felt a surge of energy as she realized she was beginning to win the debate, and she continued, "There are three kinds of persons who practice discrimination: First, the politician who wants to maintain an inferior minority group so that he can always promise something; second, the Mr. and Mrs. Jones who aren't quite sure of their social position and who are nice to you on one occasion and can't see you on others, depending on whom they are with; and third, the great Superman who believes in the superiority of the white race."

She concluded: "Discrimination has forced the finest of our race to associate with white trash."

There was an awesome silence, recalled Elizabeth's husband, who for several years did much research and lobbying in the background to bring about this historic moment.

Gruening recorded in his book that Peratrovich's testimony could not have been more effective. Shortly after she

finished there was an outburst of applause from the gallery. The anti-discrimination bill passed the Senate by a vote of 11 to five.

The *Juneau Empire* gave another "bouquet of flowers" to Peratrovich when it concluded: "It was the neatest performance of any witness to yet appear before this session, and there were a few red senatorial ears as she regally left the chambers."

The act, when signed by Gruening, ensured that Alaska Natives and other minorities would receive full and equal accommodations in all businesses in the territory — hotels, cafes, saloons, theaters and any other public facility.

Violations under the act called for a fine of \$250, 30 days in jail or both. A new era in race relations in Alaska had arrived.

Ten years after Elizabeth Peratrovich stepped to the front of Alaska's Territorial Legislature, a black seamstress, Rosa Lee Parks, stepped to the front of a bus in Montgomery, Ala., and refused to surrender her seat to a white passenger. She was promptly arrested for violating a city law which required that all blacks sit in the back of buses.

This was the beginning of a civil rights movement led by Martin Luther King Jr., which eventually resulted in the U.S. Civil Rights Act of 1964, the most thorough and strongest civil rights law ever enacted. It requires that all public facilities and businesses serve the general public regardless of their color, race, religion or national origin.

***The Alaska Women's Commission,
the Anchorage Women's Commission
and the Office of Equal Employment
Opportunity are sponsoring a recep-
tion to induct Elizabeth Peratrovich in-
to The Alaska Women's Hall of Fame.
Saturday, 4:30 to 6:30 p.m.
The Egan Convention Center***

Native discrimination was found in President Roosevelt's appointed territorial governor, Ernest Gruening. Elizabeth and Roy found this most important and influential member of "the establishment" a staunch ally and supporter of their civil rights effort.

During the 1943 session of the Territorial Legislature, the first anti-discrimination bill failed. Several legislators who said they supported the bill changed their minds and voted

"I would not have expected," Peratrovich began in a quiet but determined and steady voice, "that I who am barely out of savagery, would have to remind gentlemen with 5,000 years of recorded civilization behind them of our bill of rights."

"When my husband and I came to Juneau and sought a home in a nice neighborhood where our children could play happily with our neighbors' children, we found such a house and