

Challenges continue for Native Alaska

Ed. Note: The following is a speech made by TUNDRA TIMES publisher, Thomas Richards, Jr., in Chevak last month when he visited there as a guest at their annual meeting. Because of its topicality on continuing Native concerns and issues, it is printed below.

On behalf of the TUNDRA TIMES, I thank you sincerely for the invitation to be with you today. When I am in Anchorage, the new home of our Native Newspaper, I am often discouraged by business challenges and problems of publishing the newspaper. Then, at times like these, when I am pleased to accept an invitation to be in your village, and to be with the people the TUNDRA TIMES serves, I enjoy my job very much. With me on this visit to Chevak is my friend, Andy Klamser, a professional photographer who works magic with his cameras. The results of Andy's work here will be seen in the TUNDRA TIMES, but you may also see his photographs in national or international publications, such as LIFE Magazine, TIME or NEWS-WEEK, who also use his pictures. I think that Andy's work here will show our readers the beauty of your community, your people, and your land. He has only been in Alaska a short while, but he has learned respect for the Native way of life.

We are here to learn something of the way you live, the things you are proud of about your people and your land, and to learn about the issues and problems which you face in your lives. We hope to pass this information along to our readers in other villages and regions of the Alaska Native world. In each part of Alaska, every Native village is having to deal with tremendous outside pressures. It is not an easy time to be an Alaska Native, because we face great pressures on our lives, and at the same time we are forced to make serious decisions which will affect the lives of the generations of Eskimos, Indians and Aleuts who will live on this land after us.

This is a time of great change, more than any time before in the history of our people. Our corporations are working hard to establish themselves in the business world. Difficult decisions are to be made by village and regional corpora-

tions. They must try to make a profit for their shareholders, but they must also be careful of the kinds of businesses and development they become involved in. Some businesses may improve the lives of their members, and others may make the people's lives more difficult. Many things are being asked of the people you choose as your leaders.

Besides business decision of village and regional corporations, they are also asked to make important decisions about matters which affect every part of your lives. Not long ago, we had very few organizations which dealt with Native issues and problems. Perhaps there may have been just the traditional village council and one Native association for your area. All of that has changed very rapidly.

There is still the village council and Native association. But there are also village corporations and regional corporations and perhaps Indian Reorganization Act corporations. Then there are also regional health corporations, school districts and boards, electrical authorities and associations, school parent committees, CETA and manpower corporations, regional and local fish and game boards, local governments organized under state law, organizations that deal with alcoholism and other social problems, community service organizations, housing authorities and resource management councils. There are other organizations which might be added to this list, but this might be enough to give an idea of how complex our lives have become.

Sometimes, it seems that

we have too many organizations, corporations, associations, councils and committees. There are certainly more than we can keep up with at the TUNDRA TIMES with our small staff. Your leaders are kept very busy with these organizations and their meetings. Our people are also being kept very busy being self-determined and self-governed.

To complicate things even more are the growing outside pressures on Native people and their corporations and on their lands and their ways of life. There are pressures from big international companies to rapidly develop our lands and natural resources, but not enough time is being given to Native villages to decide which types of development would be good for the people. Right now, national laws and policies are being made 5,000 miles from here which will decide how our lands will be used and how our people may live. People in high places are talking about "subsistence lifestyles" of Natives who have never seen your country, or spent much time with you to learn how you live and how you want to live. Environmentalist organizations spend a lot of time and energy and money to ask for laws and policies to protect the land and wildlife. Too often, they forget that people live here. They forget that you have lived here in peace and harmony for thousands of years. And they forget that Native people know this country, our country, better than anyone in the world, and that Natives are the true conservationists.

It is so strange that our people are sometimes made to feel guilty about the

way we live. People in far-away places sometimes talk about "the Native problem" or "the Native situation". It is not fair that these changes and pressures are forced upon Native villages without giving Native people the TIME and freedom to decide, at our own schedule how these changes may be dealt with. The political process is also becoming more frustrating.

We are still the majority of the population in our lands and villages, but we are becoming more and more of a minority in the State of Alaska, and a very small part of the population of the U.S.

What can be done about these outside pressures which want to change your way of life overnight?

This is a situation you have to think very seriously about. My friends have suggested some ideas which may be useful:

1. Each time somebody asks you to make a serious decision which affects your life, and your children's lives, insist on TIME for thought and upon the right to good information upon which to make your decision. Be careful in dealing with anyone who tries to force you to make a quick decision about an important issue in your lives.

2. Look around Alaska at other villages to see how they are dealing with these pressures. The TUNDRA TIMES has an important responsibility to allow people in villages to learn how other villages are handling important issues and problems. Communication is very important. Let us know about your activities and decisions, because it may help Natives in other

parts of Alaska to more easily solve the same kinds of questions.

3. Each time we must make a serious decision about the future of the people, we ought to think about the way our ancestors lived, and about the way we live now, and about the opportunities for future generations of Natives to enjoy, as much as possible a good life in a good land.

4. Choose your leaders wisely from your people who are aware of these pressures and challenges because of their contact and exposure to the outside world. These leaders should be knowledgeable of outside pressures and educated to the world of business, but also should have wisdom to seek the advice of elders.

My friend and teacher, Howard Rock, the founder of the TUNDRA TIMES, gave some advice which I often think about. Howard knew he was seriously ill, and had a short time to live, when he spoke these words to a group of young Native people in 1975. He said, "One thing that I believe could be important and I'm quite sure is vital, is your own background. This is one thing that no one can take away from you - the culture of your people... Your people

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in the past have sprung to meet life in Alaska with ways or tools to meet one of the most formidable environments this old earth has had to offer. The will to survive - what a great story that is, and has been, under the circumstances. It is something you just can't help but be proud of. Your folks in the old days have done some amazing things to meet deadly obstacles, dangers, life and death situations and met them very well indeed. These facts were passed down to us and when they are studied a bit, they can give you a new awakening and spirit, strength to meet difficult situations that might come your way. Believe me, there will be some that will strain your very soul. If troublesome obstacles come upon you, think of the achievements of your ancestors. They established cultures that very well met the unkind situations. They won over them and left ample room for fun, arts, and for big shares of light-heartedness."

Howard's words are wisely spoken. One of the most beautiful things about Native peoples is that they make decisions about important issues by thinking very hard about the culture and heritage left us by our ancestors, and about what the decision will mean to your grandchildren. That is how Natives have survived to enjoy life on this land. And that is how you will let your way of life survive for your people who will

come after you.

The TUNDRA TIMES has many names in the languages of our people. It also has a Yupik name (Upit Kanlautciat) which I am told means "The way Eskimos Talk." In other words, I am done with what I have to say, and will spend the next few days listening to what you have to say. Thank you very much for the invitation to be with you in your country.