

Commissioner Is Told Of Land Problems

May 16, 1966

Robert L. Bennett
Commissioner of
Indian Affairs
Washington, D.C.

Dear Mr. Bennett:

There is a matter of extreme urgency confronting Alaskan Natives today. It is an ancient problem of immense proportions and complexity—and its solution is vital to the further development of the people and resources of the entire state. This is the unsettled nature of title to Eskimo, Indian and Aleut lands.

You are undoubtedly very familiar with the situation in Alaska—having recently directed the activities of the BIA in the state. You wielded more authority over the total Alaskan Native than any other man during an important period in our development. Your insight into the clash of cultures and your attempt to aid us in this transition were admirable.

Now you have been awarded the position of Commissioner, with a command from the President to do all within your power to ameliorate the untenable conditions of American Indian and Eskimo poverty, substandard housing, and inadequate educational opportunity. In Alaska, we Natives feel that the single most important task before us, before you, your Department, Congress, and the State, is to achieve a settlement of our land claims. We were promised by the U.S. in 1884 that we "shall not be disturbed in the possession of any lands" used, occupied, or claimed by us, and that "title to such lands is reserved to future legislation by Congress."

The legislation has not been forthcoming and the disturbing of our lands has continued. We are seeking to withhold title settlement until Congress acts upon the issue.

However, there are scores of villages that are unaware of the procedures of making rights assertions—they are likely to lose their lands because of lack of knowledge. This expert assistance is supposed to be provided through your Realty branch, but only until three years ago was a Realty man sent to Fairbanks to assist Natives in filing for allotments and making claims to protect their lands. Since then, a Realty officer has been assigned to Bethel—with a jurisdiction ranging to Nome and beyond. This is undoubtedly too great a job for a single man. The entire Northwest is without adequate assistance and legal protection in regard to land.

Mr. O'dean Williamson has been a conscientious and prodigious Realty officer in Fairbanks for three years—and his job is about done in the Interior. We request that you do all in your power to appoint Mr. Williamson as Realty officer for the Northwest area to aid the village people in understanding their rights to land. Time and time again, the Native people have been shunted aside when occupation of land was in dispute.

We feel that Mr. Williamson's experience and understanding will be a mere beginning in bringing justice to the American principle of land ownership to a people and area neglected long enough. Your speedy action on this appointment will propel the resolving of an issue that becomes more complex as time is allowed to pass. We strongly urge you to give this matter your immediate attention.

Sincerely yours,

William L. Hensley
Univ. of Alaska

cc: E.L. Bartlett
Ernest Gruening
Ralph J. Rivers
Assoc. of Indian Affairs
Stewart Udall
Mr. Morken, BIA Area
Director
Tundra Times

Mothers-in-law are like seeds, You don't need them, but they come with the tomato.

from "Signature"