

Tom Richards, Jr.'s Column--

Gov. Wallace Was Early Supporter of Land Claims

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THOMAS RICHARDS, JR.

OLONGAPO CITY — Alabama Governor George Wallace, in the summer of 1971, told the Alaska Federation of Natives that he was in agreement with the settlement terms sought by the AFN for the Native land claims. He additionally said that he would encourage the members of the Alabama congressional delegation to support legislation sought by the AFN.

The Wallace letter was one of

the earliest replies to mailings sent by the AFN to governors of the states in which support was solicited for the Native position. The Alabama Governor's offer to assist Alaska Natives in fighting for a just settlement is one of several sources of support which was not widely publicized.

Another little known fact about the history of the claims settlement has its setting in the first serious attempt to unify Natives on a statewide basis to press for a settlement. When

the AFN was initially organized, at a time when few people recognized its potential and shared its objectives, State Senator Willie Hensley of Kotzebue bought a ten thousand dollar life insurance policy on himself and named the Alaska Federation of Natives as the beneficiary.

Other gestures of support, also made by people who weren't concerned about receiving recognition, should perhaps be brought to light at this time. Dr. James H. McAlear, associate professor of biology at Catholic University, is a nationally recognized expert in the field of electron microscopy. He is married to the former Anna Riley, an Eskimo born in Unalakleet. During the summer of 1971, Dr. McAlear sold a family heirloom, an original sculpture by James western artist Charles Russell, to rent office space in a building across Washington's Dupont Circle from the offices of the National Congress of American Indians. Anna volunteered her services as a full-time secretary.

The offer of Washington office space for the Alaska Federation of Natives was extended to Don Wright on behalf of the Alaska Natives living in Washington. Although Wright refused the offer in favor of renting a suite on Capitol Hill, and although the McAlears had serious misgivings about AFN concepts such as the establishment of corporations to handle proceeds, they continued to assist the lobbying effort by performing many unpleasant by necessary tasks.

Mrs. Rita Gravel, wife of Senator Mike Gravel, quietly sat at a typewriter to join members of the Alaskans on the Potomac in "working parties" where huge volumes of mailings were produced for the AFN lobbying program during the hot and humid summer days of 1971. Members of the Senator's staff, notably Bea Ortel, Tom and Gil Smythe, and Ray Paddock, did not hesitate to help out.

There was a non-partisan response to urgent demands for the less attractive requirements to support the lobby. Adeline Katongan and Jack and Marjory Quisenberry in Senator Stevens office and Frank Peterson in Congressman Begich's office didn't have to be prompted when the need for manpower arose.

Wien Consolidated Airlines, one of the state's largest employers of Alaska Natives, did not try to extract any public relations value when it agreed to send Captain Billy English and my father to Washington to meet with members of the Congress and demonstrate that Alaska Natives are a competent people.

Support extended by some people often went unnoticed even by the AFN itself. Gwen Owl, Editor of the "Cherokee One Feather" of Cherokee, North Carolina, penned an incisive rebuttal in that tribal newspaper to an editorial in Field and Stream Magazine last year which condemned the land settlement and urged the Congress to repeal the act.