

Something to remember ~

1995 marks 50th anniversary of Peratrovich milestone

by Henry Kaiser

Editor's Note: Henry Kaiser, an Athabascan Indian, wrote this article in commemoration of Elizabeth Peratrovich's induction to the Alaska Women's Hall of Fame in 1990. This year marks the 50th anniversary of the passage of the Alaska civil rights bill long championed by Peratrovich.

March of 1990, forty-five years after stepping to the front of Alaska's Territorial Legislature and testifying to ensure passage of a civil rights anti-discrimination bill, Elizabeth Peratrovich (1911-58) was formally inducted into the Alaska Women's Hall of Fame.

Elizabeth Peratrovich was selected because of her civil rights activism during the 1940s when she was Grand President of the Alaska Native Sisterhood (ANS), and her husband, Roy, was Grand President of the Alaska Native Brotherhood (ANB).

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 Alaskan 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. Mr. Peratrovich was hired as a file clerk in the Territorial Treasurer's office.

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

A friend who was willing to fight Native discrimination was found in President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's appointed ter-

ritorial 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

agery, who want to associate with us whites with 5,000 years of recorded civilization behind us?"

Another opponent was Senator Frank Whaley, a bush pilot and miner from Fairbanks. Whaley said, "I don't want to sit next to Eskimos in a theater, they smelled."

As was tradition, any observer

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supported the bill changed their minds and voted against it.

Then on a cold and inclement February afternoon of 1945, the gallery of the Alaska Territorial Legislature in Juneau was packed with many 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.

Gruening reported, "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 Senator Allen Shattuck." Shattuck was a business man and powerful member of the "Juneau establishment."

Shattuck said that this bill would not bring the races closer together but would keep them further apart. He countered, "Who are these people, barely out of sav-

in the legislative hall was invited to speak and Elizabeth Peratrovich requested permission to testify.

As she 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 expectations.

"I would not have expected," Elizabeth 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 ply happily with our neighbor's children we found such a house and arranged to lease it.

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

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

The debate heated as Elizabeth 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 that 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 who they are with; and third, the great superman who believes in the superiority of the white race." Elizabeth concluded, "discrimination has forced the finest of our race to associate with white trash."

Then there was an awesome silence for a moment, recalled Elizabeth's husband Roy, Grand President of the ANB, and one who for several years did much

research and lobbying in the background to bring about this historic moment.

Governor Gruening recorded in his book that Elizabeth Peratrovich's testimony could not have been more effective, when she finished, there was an outburst of applause from the gallery. The anti-discrimination bill passed the Senate by a vote of 11 to 5.

The Juneau Empire tossed another "bouquet of flowers" to Elizabeth 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 Governor Gruening, insured that Alaskan 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 this act called for a fine of \$250, 30 days in jail, or both.