

## ***Alaska Natives Commission Report~***

# **The Undoing of a People: *Dependency and Self-Destruction***

*The following is the sixth part of a series the Tundra Times will be featuring on the Alaska Native Commissions Final Report. Excerpts from the report will appear periodically over the next several months.*

If two centuries of physical, spiritual and cultural death were seeds of self-destruction, those seeds burst fourth in the 1960's when the pressure just to keep physically alive was eased by the programs of President Johnson's War on Poverty.

By the time of statehood, Alaska Natives were seen in general as an extremely disadvantaged people. The economic position of Alaskan Natives had fallen further and further behind nationwide averages, reflecting a stagnant economic position of Alaska Natives compared to the rise in the U.S. standard of living.<sup>1</sup>

In a physical sense, the federal War on Poverty - designed to close the gap nationwide between economic classes - brought benefits

to Alaska Natives. But, finally able to catch their collective breath after generations of pursuit, Alaska Natives found themselves a culturally and spiritually crippled people. Rather than feeling comfort in government-built homes and contentment in government-funded food supplies, Alaska Natives felt, instead, emptiness and an overwhelming sense of loss. The statistics show that when the levels of public expenditures over the past 30 years are placed side-by-side with the data on individual, family and societal well-being, the social and psychological condition of Native people has varied inversely with the growth of government programs intended to help them.

It was during the period when

antipoverty programs were being introduced throughout Alaska that Natives began to turn to alcohol in alarming numbers. Sadly, the result would be a new cycle of trauma and death - but this time self-inflicted. By the early 1970's alcohol was identified as being a leading cause of death among Alaska Natives. The Alaska Native suicide rate, which did not significantly differ from nationwide averages through the 1950's, began to take a dramatic turn upwards.<sup>2</sup> Other indicators of serious social and behavioral health breakdown - e.g. assault, murder, sexual crimes including those against children, avoidable accidents, and psychological depression - began to multiply throughout the 1960's and 1970's. As with

Natives suicides, these anti-social behaviors and conditions were, by and large, directly related to the use and abuse of alcohol.

These trends continued into and throughout the decade of the 1980's. Dramatic rises in social pathologies marched along in lock step with massive infusions of the state's oil wealth into rural programs, services and capital projects. A successful mid-1970's lawsuit (*Tobeluk v. Lind*) - requiring construction of high schools in even the tiniest and remotest of

Native villages - brought the children home from the boarding schools. And, yet, hundreds of millions of dollars and thousands of lives later, the social and psychological condition had spiraled ever downward to a situation characterized by the Alaska Federation of Natives as a crisis.<sup>24</sup> The "Native industry" that has evolved to encompass all aspects of life within the Alaska Native community had failed; things had not improved, they had only gotten worse.