

Native writer says Natives had laws long ago

Editor's Note: The following testimony before a congressional committee in 1969 by William Oquilluk indicates Natives had law and order before the coming of the white man.

By WILLIAM OQUILLUK

My name is William Oquilluk. I was born in Point Hope, Alaska, in 1896. I

was from Marys Igloo, but have recently moved to Nome for reasons of health. I am grateful to be here at this hearing before your committee. I would like to thank Mr. Jerome Trigg, President of the Arctic Native Brotherhood.

Our ancestors have been in this land for many, many years. For many, many

generations before the coming of the white man, the Eskimo was born in Alaska, so we have always been citizens of Alaska, and now we are happy to be citizens of the United States. My people were members of the Kowaruk nation of Eskimos. A very long time ago, there were often wars in our area caused by raids from

the south Norton Sound Indians and raids by the Siberian Eskimo. But also a long time ago, our ancestors established a rule, and the Seward Peninsula was divided into sections of tribal hunting grounds. Groups could hunt in another group's area, but first they had to get permission from the group who had the

right to hunt in that place. In this way, harmony existed until the white man came into the Seward Peninsula. Caribou would sometimes stray to another range, leaving no caribou in one group's area. But after the meeting of all the Eskimos, any time anyone wanted some caribou meat he only had to ask if he could kill a caribou on their range. Whoever came and asked permission was allowed to kill whatever he needed, and the people were glad to help him. But those people who hunted in another group's area without permission were rule-breakers and outlaws.

For many centuries, our ancestors also had a rule about fishing sites. Generation and generation of Eskimos would put his nets at the same place just as his ancestors did. Today, many generations still have the same fishing sites as their ancestors. This is the same way for other villages, too. They all have their own fishing sites in the summer months. Villages have their squirrel-hunting grounds as well as caribou hunting area. Each village would have a special place to go for their caribou fawn in the spring. I wanted to them. Up to this day, people still have reindeer meat because of their good work. The Eskimos remember these three men and hope to work with some more men like them. We Eskimos and our white brothers must work together to help each other.

Now, our white brothers are giving us a chance to claim our own fatherland. This is a chance to start a new life for our younger generation.

Today, too many young people are going away from their homeland, even though they would like to come back if there were anything here for them. If only the government will give us tell all this to you to show you that the Eskimos had their own rules and their own government long before the white people came to Alaska.

Between 1891 and 1902, Dr. Sheldon Jackson, the first superintendent of education in Alaska, with funds from private individuals and from Congress, established reindeer herds in the coastal areas from the Seward Peninsula to Kodiak. Captain M. A. Healey suggested the idea of reindeer herds to Dr. Jackson. The captain and Dr. Jackson, together with Walter C. Shield, brought the reindeer to the Eskimo and taught him how to herd what we want from our native land, our young people would have something to hope for and would have reason to come back home again. Alaska has everything they want and need. If only we can make the land useful to them. With

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the money and land, our people can make a new start. They can live off the land like their ancestors did, but they also can start their own businesses. The Eskimo could find a good market for reindeer meat all over. Also, there will be fish for markets both in winter and summer. We must look into the future before it is too late. There are so many things that can be done, especially in education, to give the native new hope. We don't want to have to come to the white people on our hands and knees any more. But if we have our land again to work and build with, our younger generation will have a chance to stand up for us.