

BIA Commissioner Breaks Important Trail

One of the most satisfying informal sessions we had last week was a talk with Commissioner of Indian Affairs Morris Thompson over lunch here in Fairbanks. The conversation was relaxed, surprisingly so because the man had just finished his first five months or so as head of one of the most turbulent departments in the United States government system. Outside of some wisps of gray hair that have appeared on his head, Morris Thompson looked surprisingly relaxed, both in manner and in his easy conversation.

Morris is an Athabascan Indian who was born at the village of Tanana some 75 miles southwest of Fairbanks at the confluence of the Tanana and Yukon Rivers. He is the first Alaskan and youngest commissioner, at the age of 34 years, the department has ever had in its rather long history.

His bits of conversation seem to point to the fact that he is meeting the challenge well and there is a suggestive air that he has enjoyed the work to a pretty good degree: "The appointments I have made in different regions down below seem to be working out well. The militancy has quieted down. On the whole, the work is doing well. I get very good cooperation from the Interior Department even from the Hill itself. We also had good meetings in Anchorage with the regional corporation representatives."

Commissioner Thompson's work seem to be starting out better than a lot of us expected. He has, of course, a lot of work to do ahead of him. His initial approach toward his difficult job seems to have paved the way quite well for continuing efforts to achieve important improvements in the services that will be rendered in the future for the good of the U.S. Natives by the Bureau of Indian Affairs. There will, of course, be some continuing sore spots within the broad expanse of the BIA area but in the person of Morris Thompson, we may have a man who will meet them courageously and more than halfway.

There is no getting around it. Commissioner Thompson has a sensitive and difficult job. He is also a man any Indian, Aleut or Eskimo anywhere in the United States can call a Native. Thompson has a very important position — a man we can approach, no matter who we are, as one of us. He needs to cooperate with us and we need to cooperate with him. It is very possible that if we work in this manner, we can make mileage the extent of which we may well be surprised. This is worth trying. Let's do it.