

Alaska Historical Society
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Mary Smith Urges More Native Communication

Consider All Facets Of Legislation on Land Says Woman

January 8, 1968

A letter from one Alaskan Native to another

Subject: Land Claims Movement

Our battle for rightful recognition as a people worthy of consideration for a just and fair return for our lands in the forthcoming legislation is a fierce and strategically fought battle. The "land freeze" is a situation presently in existence, as we all know, because the Secretary of the Interior feels that it is necessary in order to protect our rights with respect to our aboriginal claim to land which the State is attempting to acquire under its State Land Selection Program.

Up to the inception and in the first stages of this "land freeze", two opposing positions were expressed to the Department of the Interior and the press in general. Namely, our position and the position of the administration of the State of Alaska.

Our position and goals were incorporated into a resolution, which was adopted at the State-wide Conference of the A.F.N. and subsequently sent to Senator Gruening for presentation in Washington, D. C. Prior to, and during this conference period the position of the State administration was that the "land freeze" was causing economic hardship on the State economy, and that the legal position of the native claims was questionable.

It further instituted a suit to lift the "land freeze". The

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State administration stated that we should press our claim on the Federal Government for compensation and not hinder the State's Land Selection Program. As we all know, both positions came to an impasse.

Now, because the State has not been able to break the "land freeze" through legal action, it has offered to not only work with us, but to economically assist us by paying the expense for convening our leaders in order to work out a mutually acceptable solution to our land question.

On the surface this would appear to be a very helpful and logical step for us both to take, but let us examine what seems to be happening. This strategy put forth by the State is a good one and hits us at a very vital spot, where we are the most vulnerable; and that is in the area of poverty, where we cannot afford to transport our elected native representatives back and forth to meetings to arbitrate on our behalf; hence, the Governor has established what is and should be properly called the "Governor's Task Force."

This is a body composed of officers of the A.F.N. and people appointed by the Governor. This group, we are told will decide exactly what legal position will be pressed in Washington, D. C. to end the land freeze and solve our land problems.

One cannot blame the Governor for attempting to push an end to the land freeze, however, we as native people must also realize that the State and Federal Government's demands for a whirlwind decision, with the governments being the centrifugal force and we hanging onto the perimeter of this fast moving maneuver, can be very dangerous for us, if we do not thoroughly contemplate this issue before us.

It seems to me that if the land freeze is deplorable enough, and this freeze being our weapon, then the Governor and his staff should be democratic enough to allow us our own elected body, in its entirety, to represent us on this issue; and with the State's offer at financing, we could then expedite release of the land freeze, thus having "our" say in court, and the State could have its big thaw.

Throughout our battle with the Federal Government over our lands, an expression has been heard over and over again, i.e. "Congress will not allow this," or "Congress will not go along with this." It is true that we are going to be affected by the decisions of Congress. However, if we are too timid to express ourselves to Congress, how are they to know what it is we wish.

Congress will and does express their decisions, and before they do this, hopefully, they will listen to our wishes. Let us not hamper ourselves by a lack of communication.

Let it be known to all, that our intent is not to victimize ourselves in an attempt to appease the powers that be. It is true that our original land claims legislation was rejected, but we have another chance at communication, so, let us be heard again.. We only want a fair and just settlement for this land of ours.

I note that the A.F.N. is currently taking a roll of $\frac{1}{4}$ degree of Native or more. Apparently, the A.F.N. feels that rules or guidelines set forth by the Federal Government in establishing a blood quantum is proper.

The Federal Government has set down the $\frac{1}{4}$ degree of blood quantum, so that they would not be responsible for any native person who is less than this degree. I ask you, what is the consequence of following suit and establishing this degree, when and if your grandchildren marry out of their race and their children then become ineligible to benefit from the heritage you leave them unless your estate is free from government authority and control.

You also request, by determining the $\frac{1}{4}$ degree quantum, that a person enrolling as a native would then be put to task to prove his degree of blood of both his parents to insure his or her eligibility. My feelings that "of the blood" is sufficient.

Again, the argument will be that Congress may frown on this because this creates too many natives, and I say "Good, then they will realize that there are a lot of us who deserve consideration for a better way of life, and a fair shake for having been exposed to racial prejudice, intolerance, and indifference

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by the society who now grapples with us over our lands. "

The Federal and State Governments have opened the doors to resolving the land freeze by offering a large amount of village land to the villages, and that funds from compensation could insure adequate sewage, water and health control facilities, which our villages sadly need, not to count adequate homes, and vocational training and education by our people.

Our needs are many. In other words, the government has offered to allow us to live on our own land and pay for our own sewage disposal, water, etc. instead of requesting the State and Federal Funds to alleviate this situation, as is done by the towns and cities of Alaska and the rest of the U.S. by tax dollars.

Mr. Robert Vaughan, Deputy Assistant Secretary of the Interior, submitted a draft proposal for our consideration. An important point is brought out in this proposal which is that 75% of unallocated off-shore revenues will be apportioned to cities, towns and villages in Alaska that contain twenty-five or more natives, and that the money apportioned to each city, town or village shall be paid to an organization of the natives approved by the Secretary of the Interior and shall be available for any purpose requested by the Native organization if the purpose is also approved by the commission provided for in.....this act.

I can only assume from reading this that we are to receive 75% of what is left after allocated funds have been removed, for the proposal states we would get 75% of unallocated funds. How much is 75% of what is left over?

It is also stated in this proposal that the Secretary of the Interior approve and any ventures would have to secure approval of some "commission." Apparently, the Secretary feels that there has to be some authority involved here. I can see and appreciate the danger of the formation of un-American organizations; but I feel that since we are a non-violent, peaceable and very patient people (We Tlingits are still waiting) that the Governments should give us as much consideration as they do the hippies and black power movements; not to mention those in the nation violently opposed to violence in Viet Nam. It is also apparent that the Ku Klux Klan and the American Nazi Party operates with a lot more freedom that we will be allowed to in having two overseers.

I will venture to say regarding this protection clause, that we should protect ourselves by employing qualified experts in the field of finance, (if we should ever receive any), to advise us; and I bravely add that these experts need not be of native origin unless they qualify; and also the law is here to protect us if there be infractions of the law.

I feel that before we accept wholeheartedly any proposal from either the State or Federal Governments, we should thoroughly consider every facet of this legislation. What do we actually want? A piece of land for every native of the blood in or out of the village? Adequate homes, education and vocational training.

Should we have fee simple land which would be owned legally by the native to pass onto his heirs; or do we want fee tail land which restricts heirship; or in trust by the Government land which would allow us to occupy these lands without true ownership individually?

My opinion herein is not to be construed entirely as criticism, but an expression of concern in an area so vital to us all. We need our leaders to shoulder this tremendous challenge, for without them we cannot capture a brighter tomorrow; and we must talk with our leaders and let them know what we want and what we think so they can truly represent us.

This crucial time should not be left entirely without communication from those of us who make up the body of the native population.

Sincerely yours,
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