

'The Reverend Doctor' has served Natives

by Vern Metcalfe
for the Tundra Times

"The Reverend Doctor" is the way I address my friend Walter Soboleff when we meet here in Juneau, which is my way of kidding this good man — one who has been in the forefront of many an organization dedicated to the welfare of all Alaskans.

If you meet the gentleman in question you will never guess that he will be 80 years old come 1988 or that he has given even an inch to the aging process that inflicts most of us.

I first met the then pastor of the Memorial Presbyterian Church here in Juneau under odd circumstance.

We were playing baseball in Fireman's Park in 1946 — now the site of the U.S. Courthouse and Federal Building — when an errant foul ball off my trusty Louisville Slugger punctured a stained glass window in his church.

He came over to see about all of this. I noted that we would take up a collection, but it turned out it was insured.

Some Coast Guardsmen felt sorry for both the edifice and myself and constructed a metal screen to protect the windows. I was long on foul balls, you see.

From that time forward Walter and I became friends, and he has served as my mentor on many matters per-

taining to the Tlingit Indian culture and customs.

It was only when I read a story relating to his life and times that I had any idea of just how rugged it was growing up in an era when the Tlingits were attempting assimilation to the white man's culture.

Suffice to say that Walter knows first hand about all of this, having been born in Killisnoo.

He went through elementary school there through the fifth grade when his father's death dictated a move to Sitka, his mother's home town.

He was to hold a variety of jobs while attending school; spent seven years attending Sheldon Jackson School — then a grade and high school; spent five years following graduation working around Sitka, in one case working as a fireman at the mill in Sitka for \$3 a week; and then met a Presbyterian minister who thought Walter was cut out for the ministry.

This offered a way to higher education, something few Alaska Natives had an opportunity at during that time — the Great Depression of the 30s — and he then landed a four-year scholarship at Dubuque University in Iowa, which was followed by a similar stipend for his three years of graduate work in the seminary.

He would return to Sitka during the summer months to work as a seine

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fisherman and a "skiffman" in an era before the skiffs were powered. One used oars in those days.

Walter got married to an SJS classmate, Genevieve Ross Soboleff, who he had first met in 1927. That marriage in 1937 lasted for 48 years before she passed way from an extended illness in 1986.

Mrs. Soboleff was a Haida, and like her husband was possessed of a rare wit and great charm and is fondly remembered for her many activities which were rarely if ever the subject of any publicity, just a lot of thanks from the beneficiaries.

If I were to list all of the things that Walter has done over the years we could take up the entire issue. Suffice to say that he served seven terms as president of the Grand Camp of the Alaska Native Brotherhood; has been a board member of the Sealaska Corp. since 1980 when he was elected as an independent candidate; served many years as a chaplain for the Alaska National Guard, retiring only when he was judged "overage in grade" and has been a member of the Juneau Lions Club for nearly 40 years.

Walter now resides in Tenakee and only recently has assumed the chairmanship of Kootznoowoo Inc., following the tragic death of Ivan Gamble. There is little doubt that he will serve ably and well, as he has in every other role he has played over the

years.

The 75th anniversary of the Alaska Native Brotherhood this year will see many of those past presidents of the Grand Camp honored, and Walter Soboleff should be at the head of that class.

Knowing him as well as I do, he will be reluctant to gain the spotlight, but once there he will impart some wisdom to all of those in attendance.

His sermon at the funeral of Ivan Gamble was a classic, and not one sound was heard as he preached. In all of the years I've known the man, I had never seen or heard him so impassioned. And I'm sure that those others in attendance would most certainly agree.

Oh yes, about that broken window. I told Walter some years later not to think I had anything against Presbyterians. I had also once done a similar number on a Catholic Church back in Wenatchee, Wash., at the age of nine. The resident priest forgave me since while the other kids cut and ran, I stayed to the course.

It also helped that the window was insured.

Another person, incidentally, who has stayed the course is Walter Soboleff, and I'm sure glad that he has. A truly gentle man, a soft-spoken individual who doesn't have to raise his voice to be heard, and one man I'm glad to have as a friend.

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