

Other Voices—

Writer: Natives Can Spend Money Wisely

A lot of people are doing quite a bit of worrying lately about what may happen to Alaska's Natives when the federal government awards them a cash settlement for their ancestral lands. The self-righteous worriers make all sorts of gloomy predictions on what the Natives will do with their new windfall, if and when they get it. They say the Natives will fluff it off on a year-long drinking spree, or will spend it on foolish things like Cadillacs and caviar, and will fall prey to all kinds of swaps and swindles.

Such predictions could come true, of course, but we don't believe they will. The Natives of Alaska have more common sense than most white men will admit. It's true, there are quite a few irresponsible Natives in our midst—the kind who stagger in and out of the bars in our cities and villages—but they are in the minority. Most of the Natives are reliable, reasonable and responsible.

No one knows for sure yet just what type of financial settlement the government may grant the Natives, but most of the bills currently under Congressional study specify group payments, rather than individual payments. If Congress has its way, and it probably will, Alaska's Natives will receive village land grants, specified hunting privileges, and tribal money payments. Under such a plan, it would be impossible for an individual to get his hands on enough cash to go on a wild spending spree. The monies, as we understand the proposed claims settlement, will be administered by tribal or village councils. No individual payments of any consequence will be made. The councils will be more or less free to spend their grants on housing, sanitation systems, community centers, health improvements, food, recreational activities, and other civic projects.

The Natives will probably spend their money wisely because they know it will be the last they'll ever get from the federal government.

On several occasions we've watched Native councils operate. This is why we have no fears the money will be wasted. They represent simple democracy at its best. If you don't believe it, fly out to Tanana, or Nenana, or Barrow and sit in on one of the meetings. You'll be welcome. The entire village gets in on the act. The elders speak first, then the young men and women say what's on their minds, and finally everybody talks, often all at once. But the majority view always prevails.

The village meetings are often held on Saturday, or Sunday, and they sometimes last all day and well into the night. There is no rush or urgency. The Natives seem to enjoy getting together. They are a communal people, by nature, so they feel right at home in the meetings. The women seem to get a special enjoyment from the gatherings; they bring along their sewing kits, their children, tasty meat sandwiches, and jugs of hot coffee. There are no rules of order to follow. The chief, or council president, casually announces the topic of discussion, then the people take over. The meetings, in many respects, are reminiscent of the old town-hall get-togethers of old. Every person gets a chance to speak and every person (usually over the age of 16) gets a vote.

Alaska's village councils are effective governing bodies. They are provincial, but they are progressive. They do what they have to do, in their own way. They are often penniless, yet they provide workable local government.

We feel confident the Native councils will spend their land claims money for the good of all their people. They've done wonders, for centuries, with nothing. With something, they may turn the bush into the showcase of Alaska.

—OT HAMPTON, *Jessen's Daily*

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(Editor's Note: Mr. Hampton's editorial comment on Alaska natives' ability to handle their own money matters is highly encouraging to date. We agree with it heartily. We would also like to add that some progressive villages in remote areas are literally pulling themselves up by their own bootstraps and are steadily solving their housing problems without asking assistance from the U.S. Government or the State of Alaska.

The men of the villages in question are good at getting jobs and have proven the ability to stay on the job. They bring the money they earn to their homes and use it to buy lumber, insulation and other needed materials. They also use the money to supplement their hunting economy and the combination and infusion has worked to their advantage. Given fair employment opportunities, the native people are proving they can solve some festering problems in their own way and to their own satisfaction.)