

Strong Regional Movement--

Sackett Sees Movements Based on Money, Politics

By LAEL MORGAN

FAIRBANKS—A strong statewide native association will not emerge from the federal land claims settlement according to

the prediction of John Sackett, newly elected president of the Tanana Chiefs (TC).

"At this point I don't see a great movement on a statewide basis. I do, however, see a very strong movement on a regional basis. A movement based on two factors: one, the influence of money and, two, the influence of politics," he said.

"I can see the regional corporations, especially the larger ones, becoming a very powerful factor in the state. The fact that the land claims settlement ended up in a business concept, corporate structure, etc. . . precludes any desire by the associations to develop on a statewide basis and probably they shouldn't.

"The settlement is based on corporate structure and in order to exist and become part of the state in the future, they're going to have to act in a business-like manner and get what they want through those methods."

One of the first regions to get

down to business in a big way will be his own Tanana Chiefs.

When the settlement becomes a reality two years hence, TC will end up with roughly .06 percent of all the land in the United States and \$180,000,000 in cash for about 9,000 Athabaskan Indians.

The land claims act allowed no funds for advance planning so TC negotiated a loan of up to \$247,000 at eight per cent interest from Alaska State Bank and proceeded on their own.

"By March 18 we had to make our in-lieu selections of lands. These were approximately 650 townships not around villages," Sackett explained.

"We had to have money for a land consultant and a land division to determine within that short period of time just exactly what land we needed, otherwise any areas including the mountain peaks would have been given to us by the Secretary of

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Interior."

They worked around the clock, hiring Robert Jenks, a former director of the Fairbanks Bureau of Land Management office, to guide them.

With that problem in hand, they've dispatched a 12 man team to travel to all their villages to explain the settlement and find out how the people want to use it.

"Right now I'm working on a management training program to work with selected village people who will eventually be involved with village corporations. We're going to give them an intensive training program in bookkeeping and accounting and we're doing the same with regional corporation personnel so when the time comes, we'll be ready.

"I think eight percent is very low interest to pay for a two year head start." With such a start, the Athabascans may soon find themselves in the first ranks of powerful regions. And Sackett would seem an excellent choice to lead the march.

He was born in Cut-off, 16 miles north of Huslia, and raised in country so spongy his family often had to nest in their food cache until the river subsided.

They lived by subsistence hunting and fishing and Sackett recalls the land provided well. When he was seven they moved to higher ground in Huslia with the rest of the Cut-off people and built a school.

His father died when he was eight but his mother was a strong woman and determined young Sackett would be able to make his way well in the outside world.

In 1959 he was admitted to Sheldon Jackson where he washed dishes, waited tables, worked his way to a good job in the student store and finally graduated as valedictorian of his class.

That same year he also won the state American Legion Oratorical Contest and a trip to Seattle and Moscow, Idaho.

He recalls the trip as a wonderful experience, "although I'd never, never go back to Moscow, Idaho." It left him with a desire to see more of the south '48 and so he enrolled at the University of Ohio (at the suggestion of a teacher who'd been there).

Because of a lack of money he stayed outside only a year but he managed to travel to the east coast and see a lot of the country.

He enrolled at the University of Alaska just at the beginning of the native movement; became active first in the Fairbanks Native Association and then Tanana Chiefs. At the age of 21 he was elected to a three year term as

president of the Chiefs.

At first he worried that his youth might be a handicap.

"In the Athabascan culture you respect age. As a younger person all you do is listen. But I feel older people at that time realized additional input might be needed, even from a younger person, to cope with the problems, and on this basis I felt I was accepted."

He also filed for legislature at the age of 21.

"I was in college with no money at all. I had to travel and write and depend on other people. I had no money for any media advertisements. . ."

But he got elected on the Republican ticket and was appointed to the powerful House Finance Committee.

Since the native vote is generally Democratic, Sackett is sometimes called upon to defend his party standing. He will — if pushed — describe himself as a capitalist and notes that his parents were also Republicans.

"I never regretted it in any way. I think my being in the Republican party assisted in some small way to teach them a few of the things they weren't initially interested in."

But legislature wasn't compatible with his college schedule.

"I'd enrolled for my last semester when they called a special session of legislature for the Fairbanks flood and I had to drop out. Then my mother was ill and I stayed with her until she died. By then I wasn't very interested in school."

He did a lot of traveling—New York, Europe, Mexico, California. Then he bowed out of politics, settled a year in Galena where he ran a successful lodge and store.

This winter he came to Anchorage to finish off his final semester of college.

For a while he toyed with the idea of another legislative term, turned down a \$27,000 a year job then finally decided to go with the Tanana Chiefs, despite the two year term and the fact there was no guarantee of a salary.

"I felt a need, probably more within myself, to try and make some contribution. The fact was we didn't have anyone specifically in the business field who might be interested, so I came back to the University and got my degree in business administration and plan to give it at least two years."

(It will be a gain for the Tanana Chiefs and a loss for the Tundra Times as we suspect Mr. Sackett won't have much time to write for us in the two years ahead and we've been enjoying his articles.)