

"I may not agree with a word you say but I will defend unto death your right to say it." — Voltaire

Tundra Times



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Editorial—

Those Who Stood Up and Be Counted

"One thing I have noted with some regret is the interest that has been lost in the people who fought hard and, at times, painfully to bring the claims issue to a head. They took the unpopular stand and did so without praise and with a great deal of courage."

Dean Williamson, who formerly lived and worked in Fairbanks and who is now living in Everett, Washington, voiced the above statement. The statement may strike the chord of nostalgia among those men who battled for the recognition of the native land claims situation in Alaska but who would not come out and say they wanted praise for their efforts. Without the thankless job they undertook, however, we doubt that the progress toward solution attained so far would have been possible even though the resolution of the claims has not yet been affected. That progress toward solving the complex land matter has been made is without question.

It was not an easy thing to dare to disturb the slumber of the 100 year old stalemate that had been stamped with an attitude of "Let the sleeping dog lie." It was a fearsome giant that no one seemed to dare to awaken. It meant serious conflicts because the main ingredient of the problem was land—the lifegiving element even the prehistoric men treasured as a precious possession necessary for their survival.

Those native men who dared to revive the need for land solution in Alaska met with opposition often generously infused with derision. Profanity was not an uncommon occurrence they have had to meet. They were challenged to fight for the land to see who would get it. Stinging epithets were many times encountered. The men held on tenaciously and in the long run sometimes gained the help of those who opposed them more thoroughly. They stood resolute and withstood heavy pressures. They fought to see the times when the nation at last recognized that the native people of Alaska had the moral right and the legal right to fight for their lands.

"If you were to list the names it would take more paper than I have," continued Williamson, "but some of the people I no longer hear about are of course yourself, Andrew Isaac of Tanacross, Peter John of Minto, Andrew Demoski of Nulato, Benedict Jones of Koyukuk, Ralph Perdue of Fairbanks and Sam Taalak of Barrow. The list could go on and on but the point is—the movement and issues really began in the north with the leaders of the north."

The list could go on and on indeed.

"I hope that when you write the history of the claims," Dean Williamson concluded, "You include those who had the raw courage to stand up and be counted when it wasn't a popular thing to do."

Minto Children Learn Culture

One of the most unique children's classes held anywhere is taught at Minto. After the adults met to sing and dance native Athabascan songs during that Fourth of July celebration this past weekend, Dance Leader Evelyn Alexander gathered the children of the village together.

Most of the children were four to eight years of age, while some were as young as two. As the older villagers sang and maintained the beat, the youngsters grouped into a circle and imitated the dancing of their elders. The young Athabascans then

filed into a single line and received individual coaching from Mrs. Alexander. They observed as she illustrated the porcupine, squirrel, and duck dances.

Later, they again grouped in to learn some of the ancient songs from their elders. In the way that parents have passed on

these songs and dances for generations, these parents were also teaching their children the ways of their people. This example is one of many which illustrates the determination of the native peoples of Alaska to keep alive the distinctive traditions of their cultures.

NCAI Writes to Nixon

National Congress of American Indians
1346 Connecticut Avenue, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20036
July 3, 1969

The President
The White House
Washington, D.C.

Dear Mr. President:

The Indian people have a vital stake in the affairs of the Federal government. Perhaps, moreso than any other group in the population, their lives are dominated by Federal laws and Federal policies. The effectiveness of many of these policies depends on strong, sympathetic leadership from the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, a leadership which has rarely been provided. Thus, most Federal Indian policies have failed.

In September, 1968, your Indian policy was announced in an impressive statement delivered to NCAI at Omaha, Nebraska, which was well-received by the Indian people, and received wide distribution during the remainder of your campaign for President.

A pre-requisite to the implementation of that policy is the immediate appointment of a Commissioner of Indian Affairs, who will accomplish the promised revamping of the Bureau of Indian Affairs with a thorough understanding of the point of view of the Indians whose lives will be affected by the policies he implements. Only an Indian can reflect that necessary empathy.

For five months we have awaited with interest and concern your decision, or that of the Secretary of the Interior, as to the appointment of a Commissioner of Indian Affairs. For five months we have waited in vain, as one qualified Indian applicant after another has been interviewed, some perfunctorily, and then rejected. Commissioner Bennett has been gone since May 31, 1969, and still no nomination has been made.

We are given to understand that at least one, perhaps more, of those interviewed for the position have been rejected solely because of objection on purely partisan grounds from members of Congress, who themselves have demonstrated little knowledge of, and no interest in, Indian Affairs.

Administering the Federal Indian program is, and must be, a non-partisan matter. The Commissionership affects too many lives to have qualified persons rejected because of political affiliation. We do not think that partisan credentials are any qualification at all.

The inaction and reluctance of your Administration to appoint a Commissioner has created great unrest within the Indian community, both in terms of those who are desperately waiting for the approval of new programs or legislation, and for the community in general. Suspensions have been generated that the parade of rejected Indian applicants is a show in prelude to the appointment of a non-Indian Commissioner, which the Indian community would universally regard as a big step backwards.

The longer your Administration fails to act on this matter, the more difficult will be the task for the incoming Commissioner to maintain any continuity with the favorable programs and policies of Commissioner Bennett, who has the support of the Indian people. As you have pointed out, needless vacillation in Federal programming has been one of its biggest faults.

We cannot and will not accept the premise that there are no Indians qualified for this job. We are pleased to indicate, after consultation and discussion with Indian leaders from all areas, that we deem qualified and have no objection to the appointment of Alonzo Spang as Commissioner.

We suggest for the consideration of your Administration the name of Rev. Wendell Chino, NCAI's very able National President, as another highly qualified Indian who would make an exceptional Commissioner, and has recently indicated his availability.

We believe, in addition, that among those who have been interviewed there are others who are well-qualified to hold this office. We would hope that whoever is nominated would appear before NCAI and other Indian groups, prior to his confirmation, and make known his program in an open discussion with the Indian people.

We firmly believe that further delay is unwarranted, and will be disastrous to the implementation of any kind of a meaningful program.

We thank you for this opportunity to express our concern.

Respectfully,
John Belindo
Executive Director, NCAI

Letters to the Editor

Beaver Village
Affairs Committee
Beaver, Alaska 99724

Dear Sirs:

In the past the native people of the Interior have had no voice in the affairs which concerned them, rather they tended to accept the decisions made by the non-native in Washington and other positions of authority.

This old way cannot continue. We need a voice that has a possibility of being heard. We need to be allowed to make some of the decisions which affect our lives and affairs in order to stand as men and women of a proud race and tradition in a rapidly changing world.

It is our opinion that such a voice is being heard in the form of the native leadership of the native Federations and Councils.

Unfortunately, these leaders have had to stand alone for us to the outside with little or no interest, help, or support from the people who they stand for—the small villager.

Let this paper stand as our support of the native leadership and organizations as they talk for us. Let them help us gain back our pride! Let them help us make the changes necessary to be men and women in this changing world!

Sincerely,
Paul Williams
Committee Secretary

Kotzebue, Alaska
July 5, 1969

Dear Editor:

I would like the following, which is an excerpt from a letter I wrote to Senator Mike Gravel, to be included in your Letter to the Editor Column:

I just returned from a week-long visit to Sitka and the BIA School there. I was shown through part of the school, including one of the boys' dormitories by a former graduate of the school who wasn't very happy with what he had to remember about his four years there. And what he showed me was very upsetting.

Usually 6-8 boys housed in each room where there was only one desk and no door (in fact, the "rooms" are only wooden partitions—and there aren't even partitions on the third floor. Entirely inadequate bathrooms.

The dorm building completely constructed of wood with only two fire exits (the wood, said at one time to be so old and dry that the building would be totally consumed by fire in only a few minutes.)

And admission on the part of a member of the dorm staff that although the third floor had been condemned by the fire commissioner, it was again going to be used this year by former Chilocco students who have been excluded from that school (and I wonder why a fire commissioner would only condemn the third floor of a building as a fire trap and not all of it?)

Sincerely,
Frank Keim

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