

Rock wrote simple, eloquent editorials

by Steve Werle

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NOATAK — We all depend on the news media to keep us informed of events that affect our lives.

The late Howard Rock, an Inupiat Eskimo, was a journalist whose first "editorial," a letter to the U.S. secretary of the Interior, helped alter the course of history.

OPINION

Rock was born in Point Hope in 1911. According to Lael Morgan's biography of Rock, *Art and Eskimo Power*, a village shaman predicted even before Rock's birth that he would be a great man.

Nevertheless, young Rock was a sickly baby and grew up as an "odd-ball" boy with little desire to hunt. Rock did well in school, though, and at age 15 he went to White Mountain, a boarding school near Nome, to further his education. There he excelled in academics and also developed his artistic abilities.

During his second year at White Mountain, Rock and several classmates banded together to expose unethical staff members. For young Rock, it was an important exercise in "Eskimo Power."

After White Mountain, Rock apprenticed with an artist in Oregon, attended the University of Washington School of Art for three years and then served a stint in the service during World War II, taking him as far away as Africa.

After his discharge, Rock made a lot of money carving ivory souvenirs and doing other kinds of artwork. Unfortunately, though, excesses of fast life and alcohol abuse took their toll and by 1961, at the age of 49, Rock's life had deteriorated until he felt he had no future. He had no money and was reduced to working odd jobs.

When a friend said he would pay Rock's way back to Point Hope, he took the offer. Rock felt that the honorable thing to do would be to return to the village of his birth — and then walk out onto thin ice to die.

After he returned to Point Hope, though, Rock's pride in himself and in his people gradually returned. He renewed his interest in painting.

Physically, Point Hope had changed little since Rock was a child, but a cloud of apprehension hung over the village. The U.S. Atomic Energy Commission was planning to detonate a series of atomic blasts in the late 1950s and early 1960s to test the peacetime use of nuclear explosives, according to a December 1989 magazine article titled "Project Chariot" authored by University of Alaska Fairbanks research associate Dan O'Neill.

Rock was appalled to learn that, although the test site was only 30 miles from Point Hope, no consideration was given to the people living there, even though for nearly two years the people of Point Hope had been trying to voice their concerns.

Because he was well educated, Rock elected to draft a formal letter of protest to the U.S. secretary of Interior. Rock felt that there was little chance of winning a fight against the giant Atomic Energy Commission, but perhaps remembering his coup as a schoolboy at White Mountain, he agreed to try.

Rock spent more than a week working on that letter. His efforts, combined with those of others, compelled

the federal government to abandon its nuclear scheme.

As he became involved in Native issues after the Project Chariot victory, Rock discovered that Natives all over Alaska faced problems similar to those in his village, although not as obvious or as immediately threatening as a potential atomic bomb nearby. One problem, obvious to Rock, was the lack of communication and networking among scattered Native groups.

In November 1961, Native leaders statewide held a meeting in Barrow to discuss Native issues. At the convention, dubbed *Inupiat Paitot*, Rock met Tom Snapp, then a reporter for the *Fairbanks Daily News-Miner*.

At that time, Snapp was one of the few newspaper people in Alaska "who seemed to care about Native problems," according to Rock's biography.

At the convention, Snapp and Rock were asked to check into the possibility of starting a newspaper. Rock wrote a letter to Massachusetts resident Henry Forbes, a retired physician and one of the wealthiest members of the Association on American Indian Affairs, asking for financial support. Forbes agreed to back a Native newspaper, but only if Rock would agree to run it as editor.

The problem, though, was that Rock had no experience in journalism, which is why Snapp agreed to train Rock in all phases of journalism "for one year and a day," according to "Portraits of Leadership," a biographical documentary on Rock.

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Rock did have the gift of writing complex issues in a manner that people could understand, but he needed help to operate a successful newspaper business.

In October 1962, the *Tundra Times* was born in Fairbanks as the unified voice of the Native people of Alaska. Rock poured himself into the *Tundra Times*. He sacrificed his art, which might have given him fortune and fame, for the cause of his people. Rock's editorials reached far from Alaska to the nation's capital, where they helped gain support for Alaska Native issues.

Ultimately, the *Tundra Times* was instrumental in helping to establish the Alaska Federation of Natives in 1966 and in passing the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act of 1971, which continues to uphold Native land rights in the 1990s.

Rock edited the *Tundra Times* until his death from cancer in 1976. The *Tundra Times* continues to publish today as Alaska's oldest statewide newspaper, though its base of operation moved to Anchorage after Rock's death.

The simple but eloquent editorials of Rock have affected the lives of everyone in Alaska and perhaps everyone in the world.

Steve Werle lives in Noatak, where he wrote this piece in a journalism class offered by satellite from Chukchi Campus, a division in Kotzebue of the University of Alaska Fairbanks. Chukchi News and Information Service is a writing project of Chukchi Campus.