

Le Eskimaux—

Hensley Tells Frenchmen About Native Land Claims

"America will lose an opportunity to right old wrongs, and for once, to allow the first American a fair deal, if there is no settlement or a poor settlement of the native land claims issue," according to William L. Hensley.

Such were the words heard by the Eskimos from all over the world as one of Alaska's Eskimos and state legislators spoke at a conference held in Paris, France Nov. 24-27.

The Democrat from Kotzebue told the delegates that he was addressing them as an Eskimo—as an Alaska Native—to inform them of the present controversy in Alaska relating to the claims of the Eskimo, Indian, and Aleut people to land that they have occupied for centuries.

A meeting on "the Arctic Development and the Future of the Eskimo Societies" the conference called together specialists from various fields with representatives of the Eskimo populations from the United States, USSR, Canada, and Denmark to discuss economic, cultural, administrative, and technical problems affecting Eskimos.

Hensley presented the major problem now confronting the Alaskan Eskimo—settlement of the native land claims issue.

"Our position is to go for what we feel is within reason—but not to buckle when pressure is brought to bear before we reach Capitol Hill," he said.

Noting that the Eskimos still have hope in the American political system, Hensley added, "We know the history of our country in dealing with the American Indian and want to see a final chapter not written in blood or injustice.

If the final chapter relates a just settlement of the issue, the natives will "be able to live longer and more decently without having to stoop in indignity because of a degrading welfare system" and young natives will

be able to "seek education and new places."

If the words tell of no settlement or of a poor one, relations between natives and whites might be marred for years, the Alaskan Eskimo said.

"It may bring defeatism to the people and will prevent us from becoming an integral part of Alaska's social and economic development. Our present political influence will diminish and the effort to develop our communities will falter."

A just settlement as proposed by the Alaska Federation of Natives calls for formal legal title to 40 million acres of land, \$500 million as compensation, and 2 per cent of the proceeds from the lease or sale of federal lands in Alaska.

In other proposals now before Congress, the acreage allotment is less and the 2 per cent royalty is omitted.

To give the audience some perspective on the problem and on the natives' stand, Hensley explained the background of the issue.

His account began with the year 1741 when Alaska was first sighted by the Russians. From that time until 1867 when the land was sold to the United States, the Russians were attracted to the area largely because of the fur seal and the sea otter and did not penetrate the inner regions.

Then without consultation with the natives, the Russian government sold Alaska in 1867 to the United States for \$7.2 million. At that time there were about 35,000 natives and only about 400 white people in the territory, Hensley noted.

The protection of native rights to lands actually in their use or occupation, he continued, was provided for by the Organic Act of 1884.

Then, when Alaska became a state in 1959, the speaker added,

its constitution stated that the State and its people disclaim all right or title to any property which is claimed by a native.

However, the matter was not settled here.

Conflicts arose when Congress authorized the new state to select 103 million acres from the land mass of Alaska—land that was being used and occupied by the village.

To serve as a statewide vehicle through which the natives could work for a settlement, the Alaska Federation of Natives was formed and 30 per cent of the voting public—the natives—became a unified force.

The Federation's first course of action, Hensley explained, was to work for a halt to the disposition of land to the State until Congress could make a determination regarding native claims.

Such a halt—known as the "land freeze"—was soon instituted by the Secretary of the Interior thus withdrawing all Alaskan lands from disposal until Congress acted.

However, the speaker noted, if Congress takes no action, the "freeze will be lifted at the end of 1970."

The natives have gone this route rather than going through the courts, Hensley explained, because a court settlement would be "a costly and lengthy route to go and would result in no land grants and small money amounts."

Under the Statehood Act, Congress retained absolute jurisdiction over the disposition of the Native land claims issue. Thus, only Congress can confirm—or extinguish—our ownership," he said.

And, in making its decision, Hensley concluded, the legislative body will shape the future of Eskimo generations to come and the relationship of these generations to the white man.