

Alaska's Native People Dominated the Land

(EDITOR'S NOTE: This is adopted from the distinguished editorial series in the Anchorage Daily News on Justice for the Natives.)

Hundreds of years ago the Eskimo, Indian and Aleut were in every way the dominant peoples of Alaska.

Enjoying a flourishing culture and a noble history, these Natives used and occupied virtually all of what is now the state of Alaska.

Then over 200 years ago the Russians came. First to the Aleutian Chain and later to South-eastern Alaska.

With them came disease, decimating the Aleut peoples, and the gun.

They and the American whites after them invaded and destroyed age-old hunting and fishing grounds. They introduced ideas alien to our cultures, and they subjected Native families to stresses and strains beyond bearing.

As the Federal Field Committee Report points out, because it was believed "best," efforts were made to deny the Native his culture, extinguish his language, and sever him from his past.

Why? In the confident assumption that the Native was inferior and that this was the only way he could move forward.

Well-motivated or not, this policy imposed by the federal government and sanctioned by Alaskan citizens, has led to the deplorable conditions so apparent today.

The situation today:

—Native life expectancy - 34.3 years.

—Native infant mortality - 2½ time white Alaskans

—Unemployment - 50 per cent of labor force

—Per capita income - ¼ of white Alaskans

—Prices - Highest in Alaska

—Welfare - 80 per cent of ADC

—Educational Opportunities - Drastically limited.

Science and medicine tell us that what has happened to the Native could have happened to any white. The Native faces problems today not because he is Native, but because he is human.

His problems are compounded because the state of Alaska now wants his land, and wants to profit from it.

And the state, because of oil discoveries, mineral discoveries, timber, fish, etc., will profit from lands which in the past it was content to leave for the use of the Natives.

So through the Alaska Federation of Natives, all the Native peoples are asking Congress for fair treatment. Natives today seek some part of their now taken lands, and through the land, the dignity and the self-respect which Native heritage demands and the United States Constitution guarantees.

Natives present their treatment as a test of America's conscience at a time when most whites in Alaska will share in an unprecedented economic boom brought on by the discovery of vast wealth in traditional Native lands.

Natives today seek justice.

And this lies not merely in the vindication of his legal rights. Justice is the recognition that for too long Congress, Americans and Alaskans have denied the Natives a chance to share as Americans in the progress of our state and nation.