

Death leaves Native leadership void

by Vern Metcalfe
for the Tundra Times

JUNEAU — The passing of Robert R. Martin Sr. left yet another void in the ranks of the Native leadership.

He was a member of the Alaska Native Brotherhood for 59 years; a 45-year member of the Salvation Army; also active in the ranks of the Russian Orthodox Church; a long-time officer of the ANB, including a two-year stint as president of the Grand Camp; and a host of other activities during his lifespan of 73 years.

Bob was a good friend and a person I first met in Kake in the early '50s during my political career. In those bygone times we campaigned throughout the First Judicial Division and were elected at-large. During this time Bob and his wife Stella were operating a general store in Kake, as well as representing both regional airlines (Ellis, Ketchikan and Alaska Coastal, Juneau) and he was also the postmaster from 1945 to 1959.

All of this is covered in part in the obituary for Mr. Martin, but like so many such afterlife offerings, it merely touches on the high points of a person's time here. In the case of Robert Martin Sr. we have a person who spent his entire adult life assisting and aiding others in one manner or another. He was a deeply religious man as indicated in his church affiliations. But he also was a quiet, self-effacing individual, which is an attribute of a

good Christian gentleman, and I can attest to that fact.

His passing brought to mind something that I've joked about, with him as well as with others, and that is the fact that our fraternal, service and, in many instances, religious organizations are being populated in the main by what I call the "grey-haired set." In short, our youngsters are not joiners. This is evident at any meeting you might attend of any of the above, and frankly, I am at a loss for a solution.

Bob Martin was a foot soldier in the ranks of those seeking equality for the Alaska Native. His wife's uncle was Frank G. Johnson, who served four terms in the Territorial House and was a colleague of mine in the 1951 session. He also was in the forefront of the Tlingit and Haida land claims suit, serving as first vice president, with Andrew Hope serving as president. These two were the point men in the effort, but had countless others also aiding, particularly from the raising of funds for that nearly 30-year struggle.

It should be pointed here that this case was adjudicated by the U.S. Court of Claims with the settlement being found in favor of T&H circa 1964. The price paid by the U.S. government was \$7.5 million for the Southeast lands involved, a figure arrived at by the alleged value of the lands at the time of the purchase — \$7.2 million. The fact that T&H had

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established aboriginal rights made the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act possible in 1971 since it established the precedent needed — that the Alaska Native tribes had never signed any treaties with either the Imperial Russian government or the United States.

When Mr. Johnson died several years ago in Ketchikan I was asked to represent the Sealaska Corp. for whom I was then working, and Mr. Martin asked me to eulogize my former colleague — which I was proud to do. During the memorial service, I called attention to those attending to the fact that all Alaskans owed a debt of gratitude to leaders such as Mr. Johnson, Mr. Hope and other elders still with us at that time. And I said the torch was being passed to younger generations.

What I didn't say was that I wondered just who would reach for the torch and continue the struggle for justice and equality. At the memorial service and the funeral those in attendance were, in the main, well past 50 years of age. This same phenomenon is evident all too frequently at not only such services, but also at meetings or organizations of all stripe.

I might add here that I have been guilty of non-attendance at meetings of organizations which I belong to, but I long ago served my time and now suffer from meeting burnout.

It could be that the new generations feel that all the battles have been won or that they can have little impact for

change. Perhaps those of us who pursued more veterans' benefits; who fought the battles for organized, and unorganized, labor on the legislative scene (maximum hours, minimum wage, workingmen's compensation) did the job too well. And those elders, living and deceased, who fought the good fight may have also led to the complacency I've noted in recent years.

Suffice to say that my long ago developed theory of what I term the "pendulum syndrome" might soon be noted. Today one might call it "what goes around, comes around," but the plain facts are that there are always those who seek to reduce benefits or otherwise foul up existing programs. Those who now ignore or otherwise overlook the erosion will suddenly realize the need for unity and unified action to protect these hard won rights.

If you haven't been paying any attention, and Bob Martin most certainly did, you need look no further than the now concerted effort to destroy the benefits, such as they are, of ANCSA. Come to think of it, 1991 is just a tad over four years away.

Meanwhile, might I pay tribute to my friend Robert R. Martin Sr. The ranks are diminishing of this type of leader. I'm sure that others will come to the fore. No one will replace this kindly and gentle man. But someone should try.

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