

Inaction and the Hungry Claws

The shabby treatment given Alaska Eskimos and Indians by the Interior Department's Bureau of Indian Affairs and Bureau of Land Management and the State of Alaska's Division of Lands is typified in the case of the Village of Tanacross. For decades the Tanacross natives have been filing all kinds of petitions and claims and assertions and yet the land they claim is slowly but surely being appropriated by others.

The government agencies are very quick to act to procure lands for oil companies or private non-native interests but their inaction on behalf of the native is notorious.

The Village of Tanacross, for instance, on November 30, 1950 filed a petition with the Bureau of Indian Affairs claiming the land around it and asking for a hearing by the Secretary of Interior that the land be reserved and set aside. The BIA, an agency charged with helping the native in the protection of his rights, then proceeded to "sit" on the petition in Juneau for eleven years. It was not until November of 1961 that the BIA filed the claim with the Bureau of Land Management in Fairbanks.

During this decade there was absolutely nothing placed on the BLM status records to show that the Tanacross claim had been made.

Shortly after the claim was filed the BLM Land Office in Fairbanks dismissed the claim saying there was no existing law on the books under which the claim could be recorded. Tanacross immediately appealed the case to the Director of the Bureau of Land Management in Washington, D.C. where the claim has "sat" ever since.

In the meantime, in 1963, during the long period of indecision, the BLM gave tentative approval to state selections around the village of Tanacross and within the area claimed. And the state has begun to dispose of its tentatively approved selected areas.

Secretary of Interior Walter J. Hickel has recently written Chief Andrew Isaac of Tanacross that the BLM is not aware that any native has claimed the land in question although there are numerous documents on file with the BLM in Fairbanks to that effect and there should be an appeal in the BLM Washington office in a pigeon hole gathering dust since 1962.

The former Director of the State Division of Lands Roscoe Bell at an Alaska Science Conference after statehood guffawed the charge that two sections of the Statehood Act were contradictory and would bring problems to the state. One section gave the state the right to select 102,550,000 acres within 25 years from vacant, unappropriated and unreserved land at the time of the selection. The other section reiterated that all lands held and occupied by Indians would be held by the U.S. and not disposed of under the act. It appears to us that there has been compliance to the first section, a noticeable noncompliance to the second section.

How else can one explain that the Interior Department has been sitting on the Tanacross appeal for nine years while the state filches the land the village claims? How else can one explain why the Interior Department will only employ one BIA realty officer to assist half the native population of Alaska with their land claims? How else can you explain that about 52 native villages making land claims in the late 40's and early 50's were promised hearings but never received them and their land claims were never recorded but instead given the "deep six?"

Is there little wonder that the native people are confused, bewildered and disgusted? Even with petitions and blanket land claims, native rights assertions, freezes and a super-freeze, and with land claims settlement bills pending in Congress, the state moves its hungry claws in close to snatch away Tanacross land.