

Alaska Historical Society

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# Sen. Lowell Thomas, Jr. Breaks with Gov. Keith Miller

State Sen. Lowell Thomas, Jr. this week broke with Governor Keith H. Miller on the grounds of Miller's stand against the native land claims as proposed by the Alaska Federation of Natives.

Both men are Republicans.

Sen. Thomas told the Anchorage Daily News that the state should put its money behind an early settlement of the native land claims and suggested that

\$100 million of state money would be a reasonable contribution toward the settlement.

Thomas also denied Rep. Tom Fink's contention that the reason the state legislature passed a

measure a year and a half ago calling for the state to contribute \$50 million toward the native land claims was passed in the event the land freeze was lifted.

"A majority voted for it because we thought the Natives had it coming, that it was the right thing to do," declared Sen. Thomas.

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# Breaks with Governor

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"I'm very much concerned," he added, "that Congress won't act unless Alaska shows a little bit of interest."

"If there were any other group of 60,000 Alaskans clamoring for something they'd darn well be heard, but because they are Natives we try to brush them off."

Gov. Miller's administration had taken a hard line position against the AFN bill, widening the breach that already existed, about two weeks ago.

"I think the state government should do whatever it can to encourage Congress to enact a bill. The state can't do this by simply throwing its hands into the air and saying this is a federal problem," stated Thomas.

"I disagree," he continued, "with those who say the legislature—and I was there at the time—passed the bill only to remove the freeze. That's a cold-hearted, cynical attitude."

"I believe a majority of the legislators voted as they did because they wanted to encourage this long overdue settlement to hasten the day of justice for a large minority of Alaskans."

Sen. Thomas said he thought that the legislature should enact another law offering to share in the monetary settlement from a percentage of annual royalties, up to a maximum of at least \$50 million, "but I think we ought to double it. I think we ought to go up to \$100 million."

Thomas offered calculation that if the Prudhoe Bay oil field alone produces 2 million barrels per day between 1975 and 1990, the State of Alaska could realize \$3.5 billion in royalties even if the state royalty share stays at 12½ per cent.

He said the state contribution toward the claims would be something less than 3 per cent of the money coming to the state.

"I would imagine," Sen. Thomas said, "that by the turn of the next century Alaskans

will look back and feel that such a state contribution as this was a pretty good bargain for settling this tremendous question."

"I would predict that it would be as great a bargain as the purchase of Alaska from Russia for \$7.2 million."

Gov. Miller has been saying that he has no authority to agree to royalty sharing as proposed by the AFN. Sen. Thomas said the legislature in 1968 made it very clear that the state could do so.

Thomas quoted the Declaration of Intent of the act:

"... It is considered in the best interest of the state to make a reasonable contribution... by providing that certain royalties and shares of the proceeds derived from state lands be made available to Native groups in Alaska as compensation for relinquishment of part of their claims based on aboriginal use and occupancy..."

The law was passed when Walter J. Hickel was governor of the state and Keith Miller was Secretary of State.

The Anchorage Daily News article bylined by Stephen Brent, staff writer, added that "another section of the law (Chapter 177 of the Session Laws of 1968) directed the governor to create a seven-man Alaska Native Commission composed of at least four Natives to study, report, and expedite land claims."

"He was to appoint such a commission in April unless the federal government created a body substantially like it in the governor's judgment. And the chapter states that if Congress has not enacted land claims legislation by April 15, 1969, the commission is to become operable immediately."

Gov. Miller's spokesman has now said the Department of Law has advised the governor that the section became void when the Department of the Interior failed to lift the freeze.