

Extraordinary Meeting

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ANCHORAGE, Dec. 16--Its a convention different from all previous Alaska Federation of Native conventions. In place of speeches from dignitaries, small groups of native people sit in corners to pour over a 48-page document which will prove the framework of their lives during the years to come.

For this the reconvening of the sixth annual convention of

the Alaska Federation of Natives, the best attended in that organization's history is different from the others. After long years a bill has been passed by the House and Senate.

Nobody at the convention, despite its billing as a time for decision, believes the AFN will reject the settlement. While there are provisions many do not like they will try to alter them through court action and admini-

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strative means.

The bill is on the desk of the President. His signature will make it law. Like a guidebook to the convention, the 48-page bill and report of the House-Senate Conference Committee is the focus this week in the brightly lit student union building of Alaska Methodist University.

Delegates convene in two sides of the full floor cafeteria.

"The congress of the United States has acted on a bill that will make history not only in Alaska but in the world," Don Wright opened the convention.

Symbolically, the convention began with the pledge of allegiance to the flag.

"Some of us individuals may have thoughts on the fairness of this legislation" he told the more than 400 native representatives present for the opening. "Some of us are not satisfied," Wright said, "but we have to recognize we are American citizens, citizens of the state of Alaska, as well as products of our heritage."

"The wording in the statutes," he said, as he held up a copy of the bill, is very complex and difficult." With that he gave the convention its mandate: to study the bill, ask questions, and obtain answers from their leaders, lawyers and staff and bring back the bill and its provisions to their home villages.

Unlike other AFN conventions, this one has been organized by regions. Already, by Thursday afternoon, over 400 people had signed in. Over 500 were expected by the week end and when weather in Southeast Alaska was expected to clear and people would be getting off for the week end.

Delegates came from most villages and from AFN organizations in parts of the lower 48. One man, from Portland, Oregon, explained that the small Portland Alaska Native Association had heard about the convention Wednesday afternoon and

had two delegates on a night flight to Anchorage.

Most village representatives seem to think Alaska Natives can live with the settlement provisions. "40 million acres of land can be an infinite amount with proper planning," commented Larry Petersen of Fort Yukon. "The question is what the villages can do with it."

For this all important convention, delegates organized into regional grouping. At once villages began to clarify their regional associations. As regions they will caucus to discuss the bill.

Through Thursday afternoon, officials of the Department of the Interior answered questions on how the bill will be implemented. On Friday AFN Washington counsel will explain the bill point by point, section by section.

Saturday morning 65,000 copies of the Tundra Times special land rights edition will be available for distribution to every Alaska native with copies of the entire bill and committee report enclosed.

"Our village doesn't know what to make of the bill yet," explained representative Walter Townsend of Yakutat. "So we sent some representatives up here."

Here in Anchorage caucussing in the student union, being ferried around by special AFN buses, are the people who must explain the bill and clarify its complex provisions to their fellow villagers. Some details of the bill, they foresee, will be changed by court action.

One government official expected court action against a provision in the bill which counts pending native allotments against the 40 million acre land settlement.

Other provisions, leaders, expect, can be changed by pressure on the Secretary of Interior, who is given broad authority in interpreting the bill.