

History of Native Organizations

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Today there are two dozen Native organizations united in the Alaska Federation of Natives. Most of these organizations were established during the 1960s. However, the history of Native organization in Alaska begins as long ago as 1912, when the Alaska Native Brotherhood was established in southeastern Alaska.

The Alaska Native Brotherhood (ANB) began as a fraternal society of Tlingit and Haida Indians. It had its origins in the social groups that were affiliated with local churches.

Gradually the Alaska Native Brotherhood became a powerful political organization with local chapters—or "camps"—in virtually every community of southeastern Alaska. Many substantial political victories were won by the organization for the southeastern Indians, such as the early recognition of voting rights and the desegregation of schools.

Not only did the ANB become directly involved in issues of importance to the Natives, it exercised considerable influence over a sizeable proportion of the electorate in the First Judicial District. Thus, politicians regularly sought the Indians' views on issues of importance to them.

Constitutionally the Alaska Native Brotherhood was not limited to a membership of Tlingit and Haida Indians. Indeed, at times it actively sought to become a truly state-wide organization. But the ANB was never very successful in establishing camps outside of southeastern Alaska, despite its efforts.

Camps were begun at Anchorage, Fairbanks, Nome, Bristol Bay, and the Pribilof Islands, but they either died for lack of support or became independent organizations. The only camp outside of southeast Alaska that had an active life was at Copper Center.

It is not certain why the ANB never got a secure foothold outside of southeast Alaska. It

is perhaps because the organization was closely identified with the Tlingit and Haida Indians, and was thought to best suit conditions in the southeast.

It was not until the early 1960s that a Native organization movement began to emerge in Alaska outside of the southeast. The first signs of this movement appeared in 1961, when Eskimos of northwest Alaska and the arctic slope joined in an organization known as Inupiat Paitot.

This organization was supported by the American Association of Indian Affairs, which became active in Alaska Native affairs at that time.

The AIAA also provided money to start the TUNDRA TIMES, and this newspaper dates back to the founding of the Inupiat Paitot. (Howard Rock, editor, was executive secretary of the organization.)

Six months after this beginning, several village representatives gathered in Tanana and created an organization of Athabaskan Indians. This organization, known as the Dena Nena Henash and Tanana Chiefs Conference, drew upon the aboriginal tradition of interior Indian chiefs meeting to discuss matters of common interest.

The Tanana Chiefs Conference covers the largest land area of all the regional Native organizations, some 165,000 sq. miles.

Also in 1962 a similar organization of villages was established in southwest Alaska—the Association of Alaska Village Council Presidents (AVCP). This organization represents the largest number of individual Natives, about 15,000, and has the largest number of votes in the AFN.

Two local, predominantly urban associations followed the founding of the Tanana Chiefs Conference and the AVCP: the Fairbanks Native Association in 1963 and the Cook Inlet Native Association in 1964. (Both of these organizations were formed with the help of the late Nick Gray, who was one of the strongest Native supporters of organizational strength and unity.) In 1964 the Yukon Flats Native association came into existence.

In 1964, two regional associations were formed to replace the now defunct Inupiat Paitot: the Northwest Alaska Native Association organized approximately a dozen villages on Kotzebue Sound and the Kobuk and Noatak rivers, and the Arctic Slope Association brought together Eskimo villages of the far north.

In 1966 and 1967 other regional groups organized in the Aleutian Island, the Alaska Peninsula, Bristol Bay, Kodiak Island and the Seward Peninsula. At the present time there are 24 Native organizations, some representing dozens of villages, some representing urban Natives, and some representing only a single village.

The organizations born during the 1960's were closely connected with the emergence of the land crisis of the same period. Both the state and the federal government began to make threatening encroachments on Native land.

Early in the 1960s the federal government withdrew a large amount of land for the purpose of testing an atomic bomb underground near Cape Thompson.

Had this plan (code-named Project Chariot) been carried out the food source of many Eskimos of northwest Alaska may have been endangered by radio-

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active contamination.

At approximately the same time, the federal government also began planning a dam on the Yukon River near Rampart. Although this project, too, was ultimately abandoned, it threatened to flood the Yukon flats, a territory used by some 2,000 Athabascan Indians as a source of food.

It was the activities of the state government, however, that posed the biggest threat to Native land rights. By the Statehood Act of 1958, the state was authorized to select over 100 acres of land from the public domain.

It began to select lands of mineral potential, most of which included lands traditionally used for subsistence purposes by Natives. The result was spate of protests to state land selections and blanket claims to wide areas of historic Native use.

The Native organizations did not initiate the land claims process. The earliest claims that challenged state selections were filed in late 1961 and early 1962 for the individual villages of Northway, Minto, Tanacross and Lake Aleknagik by the BIA. Other individual villages followed suit, such as Nenana and Stevens Village in 1963.

However, the Native organizations transformed the land claims from random and scattered protests against governmental incursions into a forceful, coordinated political movement that has pressured the federal government to meet the Natives'

demands.

Thus, it was the massive claims filed by regional organizations throughout the state in 1965 and 1966 that finally forced the federal government to impose a "land freeze" to prevent state selections prior to determination of Native land rights.

Some of the regional organizations had been in existence for years before they filed their claims. The AVCP, for example, organized in 1962 but did not file a claim until 1966.

But other organizations, such as the Northwest Alaska Native Association and the Arctic Slope Native Association, came into existence in 1965 and 1966 for the primary purpose of filing a land claim.

The Native organizations are therefore responsible for the Native land claims as a political movement. But all of these organizations have interests and concerns beyond the land issue which were either inborn or gradually acquired.

Education, housing, employment, community development, sanitation, local government and other problems of village Alaska are now typically items of business at regional association meetings. With passage of a Native land claims settlement act by Congress, the regional associations will have for the first time real economic and other resources to deal with these problems.

In the future, Native politics will turn around the regional associations.

Regardless, the Alaska Federation of Natives has reached a crossroad and one that will change the shape of Alaska for many decades to come. Already—the emphasis on regional development, on political amalgamation, on economic enterprise, is sharper—more real.

“When you think about it,” remarked one native delegate, “last week natives in Alaska owned 500,000 acres of land. Next week they will own 40 million. That’s a big step.”