

# SE Alaska Natives win the right to vote

by Judson L. Brown  
for the *Tundra Times*

Tlingit widow Lillie Joe drew her almost 5 feet height as upright as her 90 years would allow. Her floor-length black dress and black button shoes indicated this was an important occasion and worthy of her Sunday best attire.

Spry, alert of mind and of indomitable spirit, she moved forward in the voting line and stood before the presiding election judge, ready for this momentous and wonderful event about to occur in Haines, Territory of Alaska.

It was 1924, and this event would occur simultaneously in many other Southeast Alaskan towns and villages. But it was especially important to me personally, for my mother was to serve as Lillie Joe's interpreter when she was interrogated by the election judge.

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It has been fabled from ages past by the ancestors of our Native People, the Tlingit, that when the cause is right and the end result is to elevate and educate, fate will bend circumstances and events so that the correct results will be achieved and our People rewarded. Story after story in our long history enshrines this belief.

Thus, however surprised the election judge and others may have been at what was about to take place, our People were not, for the cause was just, and success, in our minds, was guaranteed.

At this time the population of Haines was predominantly Native. Although the scourges of the imported diseases of small pox, influenza and tuberculosis had taken a heavy toll of nearly three-fourths of our Native population, we were still in the majority. Nonetheless, we were denied the most cherished of civil rights and liberties — the right of franchise, the right to vote.

We were forced from the territorial and city voting places by arbitrary rules, regulations and manipulations of those in power. The judicial system in the Territory of Alaska was archaic. Representatives of the people to the Territorial House and Senate were elected through a screening primary in the spring and finally a general election in the fall. Rules of election were set by this Territorial Legislature and interpreted by the territorial attorney general.

The stumbling block placed before us was to be a literacy test. It was necessary to be able to write one's name in the register, and those in power had stipulated that Native People must be able to read the Preamble to the Constitution and understand its meaning. At that time, few of our People could read or write or even speak English.

This day in 1924 had been long in coming, long in preparation. In 1912 our People had created the Alaska Native Brotherhood and its auxiliary, the Alaska Native Sisterhood for the express purpose of fighting for Native rights, and the organizations were at their best form during this period. (It has always been a small matter of

pride to me that the ANB and I were born in the same year.)

Every Native male in Haines belonged to the ANB. Membership to the organization began in one's teens in a wonderful and inspiring ceremony wherein the initiate took the place of a departed relative. Therefore, the roll was always full.

I witnessed and participated in almost all of the crusading events of the ANB during this important period. As far back as I could remember my father was either the president of Haines' local ANB camp, or working in some other motivating capacity in our steady march to achieve equal rights and liberties for our People.

It was unthinkable *not* to become a member of the ANB, for its activities gave one hope that one day we would secure the wonderful sense of equality and liberty originally guaranteed every citizen of the United States.

Now the great day of enfranchisement was about to come, for our attorney had found a loophole in the requirement to voting. One had to read and understand the Preamble to the Constitution, yes, but no mention was made of what *language* one had to use in reading the Preamble.

The Alaska Native Brotherhood, mandated by its membership, would use this loophole to mount yet another crusade to bring us into the voting booths by peaceful means.

A printing press had been obtained by the ANB and sample ballots were printed and distributed to the villages, together with full information on the talents and qualifications of all candidates. At the same time, the pros and cons of all issues before the voters were fully discussed in our press.

For the time being, clan barriers were abolished, forbidden, and all clan social and ceremonial activities banned. Any event that took money and effort away from the decided and stated goal of the ANB was discouraged and eventually effectively outlawed. While clan and tribal functions were later brought back into practice, any dividing or diversionary action during this emergency was prohibited.

Our People loved the involved and protocol-correct events celebrated previously, but did not chafe or worry about their absence, committed to what had to be done and fully involved in the crucial task before us.

My mother, Mary Brown, and others fluent in both the Tlingit and English languages, took on tasks as teachers and interpreters. Since part of the literacy test required that all voters write their names on the voting register, the teachers began at ground zero — teaching the alphabet. Our People in their 60s to 90s shared the enthusiasm of children entering school for the first time.

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The long evenings went quickly as they struggled with the letters, learning finally to put them together to spell their names, practicing writing the names over and over. All were drilled in committing the Preamble to memory, in the Tlingit tongue.

As the women taught, the men of the villages took on the extra janitorial tasks necessitated by prolonged use of

the schoolrooms. Gas lights were in use then, and they had to be cleaned and fueled before and after each evening session.

After several months, all was ready, and volunteers began to make known their desire to be the first to step into the voting line. In our village there was a group of widows, all in the 80 years old and upward bracket, all anxious and able to stand up to any harassment. They were cool of temper and eager of spirit and volunteered to be the first in line to attempt enrollment and voting. How to choose?

It was brought to the attention of the men who would make the selection that this group was more than worthy of their consideration, through the recollection of an event in our history.

During the migration of our People to Chilkat and Chilkoot areas we traversed down the Stikine River, only to encounter a formidable barrier — a glacier blocking our progress. The Stikine disappeared *under* the glacier. We could not risk all of our party, so it was agreed that we would divide into two groups, irrespective of clan or family, and this was done.

One party would take the longer, probably less risky route over the glacier to where the river emerged. The other would enter the icy tunnel, following the river through the glacier to the sunlight once more. If all went well, the two parties would rejoin where the river emerged. If not, well, half the people would be left to survive, continue to the next settlement and carry on.

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Runners were sent ahead to scout the route over the glacier, and the first half of the party set off after them. The remaining half of our people prepared for the trip through the river tunnel. To help ensure the passage of this group under the glacier, two elderly women volunteered to go first, drifting along on the river surface, noting any unseen obstructions or falls. This was the way of our People. It was not unusual for the elderly to sacrifice for the greater good of the whole, for they considered the survival of the clan of the utmost importance. They would never jeopardize the safety of a trek or the success of a hunt because of their own frailties; they considered themselves expendable.

Farewell songs were sung and two elderly volunteers set off on their uncertain journey, floating away under the icy overhang. The rest of the people waited, accepting whatever was to come. Time passed slowly, but then runners were seen coming from over the glacier.

Good news! The two elderly women had passed successfully through the tunnel of ice, encountering no obstructions, reporting that it was quite dark in some places, but otherwise an uneventful and somewhat pleasant experience. The remaining half of the People drifted through the tunnel and were reunited with those who had trekked over the glacier. After a brief but happy celebration, all continued on their way.

The recollection of this bit of history made a very convincing argument; the group of elderly widows would be the

first in the voting line. Widow Lillie Joe would be volunteer No. 1 and the others were to make the attempt in order, whether or not they were permitted to vote. My widowed grandmother, Susie Brown, was in the group.

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Election day arrived, and the group, soberly dressed in Sunday best, proceeded to the voting place. My mother, acting as interpreter, moved forward with Lillie Joe as she briskly stepped up and signed the register, to the complete surprise of the election judges. The other widows beamed with quiet pride.

With my mother beside her, Lillie Joe stepped forward to receive her ballot. She was challenged immediately.

"Can you read and understand the Preamble to the Constitution?" the presiding election judge asked.

"Yes," she replied in Tlingit through her interpreter.

The judge quickly adjusted to the interpreter situation. He must have been warned of this possibility. "Then read!" he commanded.

With head held upright, the little old Tlingit widow recited without hesitation, the entire Preamble.

The judge handed her a ballot. All others who came to vote that day were passed by the judges, and forever thereafter.

My teen-age mind conjured up some sort of Fourth of July type of celebration at the end of the day's balloting. What candidate won was of secondary importance. That our people had actually participated in one of democracy's great privileges and duties was the event of note, an event I thought worthy of fireworks, speeches, cheers.

Instead, our People gathered in several homes, an elder, a widow, always at the core of the gatherings. Matter of factly they discussed the many obstacles to be overcome — admission of Native children to public schools, equal access and accommodation in public places. These and many other goals lay ahead. In turn, we all shook hands with the widows. I shook my gathermother's hand and thanked her for her leadership, her example. Her reply was cryptic and prophetic: "Seed, seed." A beginning. A start that would grow to include other struggles, successes that would benefit yet future generations.

Those in power never fully understood how much our People loved the prose and meaning of "We the People. . . a more perfect union. . . life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. . ." You see, *Tlingit* means *We the People*.

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*This excerpt is the first draft of a book by Judson L. Brown on the history of the Tlingit, Haida and Tsimshian Indians of Alaska.*

*He was born March 14, 1912, in Haines. He is a lifetime member of the Alaska Native Brotherhood, Tlingit and Haida Indian Tribes of Alaska, which this year is celebrating its Diamond Jubilee. He is currently a member of the Sealaska Corp. Board of Directors.*