

Thanksgiving means hope

The following editorial was written by TUNDRA TIMES founder Howard Rock, and published in the November 24, 1967 issue of the paper. Since that time, of course, land claims has been passed. There have been both positive and negative impacts. Certainly, however, the Native people have become an economic and political force in this state that is widely recognized and can't be ignored. The election earlier this month, where the subsistence repeal initiative was soundly defeated, and the gubernatorial candidate backed by the big majority of Alaska Natives was elected, clearly illustrates this. Big challenges remain. 1991 looms on the horizon, with its potential to separate Natives from both their corporations and their land. Oil exploration is about to take place in the paths followed by the migrating whales upon which so many Alaskans depend. Some corporations struggle to keep afloat. Yet, these challenges seem to be being faced, and answers sought. So it is with the same kind of hope for the future which Howard Rock wrote about almost two decades ago that this Thanksgiving can be celebrated.

Thanksgiving is usually thought of as a time when people look back and count their blessings. But the first Thanksgiving celebrations were by people who had few obvious blessings.

Several of the Pilgrims died in the first winter in Massachusetts, and the first harvest at the colony was poor. Virginia's first Thanksgiving celebration was declared to celebrate the arrival of colonists at a town-site; the community failed within the next three years.

The first Thanksgivings were not for achievements, but for the promises of the future. Many of the colonists had faced discrimination in England because of their religion; they had hopes of building a new life in a new land.

Today the Alaska Native people have hopes of building a new life in an old land. As at the first Thanksgivings, much of that new life is still promise. But, in many fields, there are signs of change.

After 100 years, some action is being taken on the land claims issue. Much remains to be done to achieve an acceptable solution, but the claims proposals have moved to the point where the Native people can take actions to promote their interests.

The recent NORTH Commission meeting in Washington offers promise. In addition to the technical matters of creating transportation to the Arctic, the subject of training Alaskans to fill the new jobs was discussed.

It is this combination of creating jobs and training Native people to fill them that offers a promise of a new life. New industries will not help if the workers are imported from the Lower 48; job training is useless unless there are jobs available. The consideration of both subjects at the same meeting offers hope for the future.

Too many of the Native college students are unable to graduate. Yet there are the pathfinders — young people like Willie Hensley and John Sackett — who have shown the way, and there are many studies being made to help others follow.

The path of the future will not be easy. There will be setbacks, such as the failure of the Bethel model

cities application.

But the Alaska Native people are learning to help their own future, through their right to vote. Last year, they elected seven of their own people, and several strong allies, to the Alaska Legislature. This growing political awareness is one of the strongest hopes for the future of the Native people.

Many of the most promising programs are still in the beginning, conference stage. Much remains to be done before the full benefits reach the Native people. But the programs are beginning — and the Native people are learning how to influence them.

It was such hope for the future — and for the ability to influence it — that was the original spirit of Thanksgiving.