

Land Claims Outline...

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tween the United States government and the aboriginal inhabitants of this country.

Soon after I joined the staff of the Tundra Times in 1968, editor Howard Rock gave me assignments which kept me scrambling all over Alaska to cover a variety of issues. One such issue surfaced in every town and village. Non-Natives are encroaching upon our land, Natives were saying.

What was our land? We had no title, no deeds, only brief pronouncements in the treaty with Russia which ceded Alaska to the U. S. Aboriginal inhabitants "shall be protected" in the use of their lands, it said. What legal basis did Alaska Natives have for claiming ownership? We had Indian title.

Yes, in the last century, there was a flurry of treaty signing with the American Indians of the continental United States. And as fast as they were signed, they were violated. When Indians protested or fought back, this government invoked genocide as a solution to their complaints.

But America's manifest destiny was deflated by the time settlers reached Alaska. This country was not pressed to exploit our resources, and who the hell wants to live in Alaska anyway, so we weren't forced into treaties. But two oil companies made significant discoveries in Alaska in 1968.

One announcement read, "BP Oil Corporation announces that its first well in its Prudhoe Bay acreage in Alaska, Put River No. 1, has discovered oil in porous sandstone below 8,000 feet . . . BP regards the information obtained so far from its first well as 'encouraging.'"

Encouraging! * That is like saying the American people regarded the closing of World War II to be an interesting event. So, Alaska not only had gold. It possessed a wealth more genuinely appreciated by exploiters in this age. It had oil.

Another rush was anticipated, but Alaska Natives had aboriginal claims blanketing the state. Here we were, 60 thousand (pre-enrollment) Natives sitting on 375 million acres of American soil, and there was no treaty.

The United States government could not send an emissary from the Great Father to sign a hurried treaty and rush us on a long march to the Aleutians.

We could not be massacred as insurrectionists because of a spirited speech from one of our leaders. The American people have been shedding tears of guilt for nearly 100 years because of this government's Indian diplomacy, or lack thereof, during the last century. Somebody had goofed.

There was no treaty with Alaska's Eskimos, Indians, and Aleuts. And we, Natives, were laying claim to our land.

It was the Age of Enlightenment in this country's dealings with its aboriginal inhabitants. In Alaska, a genuine Indian "problem" surfaced which could not be resolved in the traditional manner.

The Alaska Native claims were sitting squarely upon the most obvious blemish on the American dream of equal justice under law. While authors Vine Deloria, Jr. and Dee Brown were admirably documenting the shameful events comprising America's Indian Experience, here was the biggest land battle of the century, and the government could not dispatch a bloodthirsty general to lead a cavalry assault.

It was poetic justice. The country wept for its sins against Indian people, and up jumps a

huge Indian land fight Indians had the best chance of winning.

This may aptly describe the merits, and the fairest solution, of claims filed by Alaska Natives. But, in order to understand what events were actually significant, and why they occurred, one must appreciate the full force of each of the basic ingredients that blended together to create a settlement.

Unfortunately, at the time, there were those who would perpetuate the traditional means of resolving Indian issues. For example, I recall the comment of Rep. John Saylor (Republican of Pennsylvania) during hearings before the U.S. House Interior Affairs Committee.

My staff, he said, has researched this country's land transactions with Indian tribes. We have found that we paid Indians an average of 50 cents per acre and I suggest that to pay Alaska Natives more than that amount may be unfair to other tribes with whom we have already settled.

Choosing the classic game of chess because of its recent international attention, try to imagine the Alaska Native population as an individual player challenging a half-dozen grand masters simultaneously, and not being able to afford losing any of the games. Even an analysis of events after the fact is a difficult undertaking for this writer.

First, and omnipresent, was the problem of organizing a number of distinct ethnic groups for a (not entirely singular) purpose. Add state and local politics, regional politics, national politics, and "the" international political situation. Throw in this government's policies toward conservation and national recreation areas, not entirely ignoring those who wish to change them.

Consider energy: the demand for it as well as the means employed in locating and transporting energy resources. Ponder the existence of a national conscience, as it sits in troubled balance with a sad history of land acquisition.

And top everything off with the whims of powerful men in the different branches of government, taking into account the resourcefulness of lesser officials in jealously guarded fiefdoms.

Matters were not entirely in favor of the Alaska Natives at the onset of the land claims battle. Native organization came about because of the loss of traditional Natives lands and the threat of further land loss.

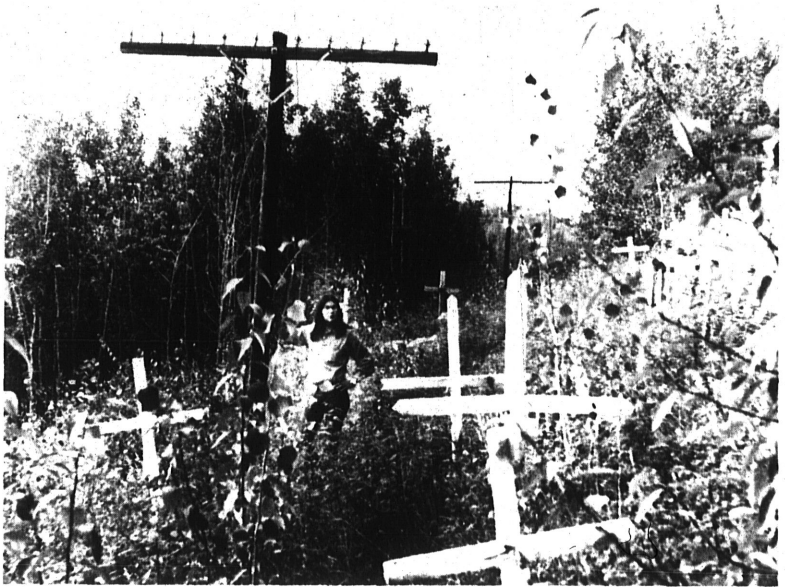
The story of what has happened to land claims filed by the Tanacross villagers is the most blatant example of the greed of a young state and of the anguish caused by federal "protection" of Native rights.

Chief Andrew Isaac, tribal leader of the United Crow Band of Athabaskan Indians, battled the state, the Bureau of Land Management, and the Interior Department over the nearly 500,000 acres occupied by his people near Tanacross.

The Tanacross claim has been ignored by the federal government since it was originally filed in 1917. When the claims were reassessed in 1950, the Interior Department again declined to take action.

The state began to select lands and, over Native objections, selections encompass a Tanacross graveyard. The state even offered tracts of Tanacross land at Lake George for sale as vacation resorts during the New York world's fair.

Migration to urban areas for education and employment opportunities has so decimated



UNUSUAL GRAVE MARKER — A mystery cemetery intrudes upon the quiet hillside. power pole in the midst of the Nenana native —Photo by JACQUELINE GLASGOW

Power Pole on Burial Grounds...

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Robert Jenks, land consultant for Tanana Chiefs, believes this is the route of the old telegraph line that was to have crossed the Bering Straits to Siberia.

Early attempts at a trans-Atlantic cable had been unsuccessful and engineers believed a cable under a shorter stretch of water might be feasible. After much of the line was built toward Siberia, a technological break-through occurred, the trans-Atlantic cable was completed, and the Bering Straits plan abandoned.

It is probable that the line was subsequently converted to government use and turned over to the railroad some years later.

According to older Natives now living in Nenana, the cemetery was formerly located directly across the river on the opposite bank of the townsite. Bodies were carried across by boat and buried close to shore.

When the railroad was built, it was relocated further uphill and track laid along the shoreline.

"I think it's terrible that the railroad ever moved the graves," said one of the older men of the village. "Some of them they just blasted out of the hill."

The present cemetery can be reached from Nenana by crossing a modern highway bridge, turning right along a short gravel road and climbing a steep hill.

It can also be reached by walking along the wooden railroad trestle over the river, past the spot where a marker and a little house announce that President Warren G. Harding in 1920 drove the golden spike that completed the Alaska Railroad. And again climbing an impossibly steep cliff.

When one hears the full story of the Native cemetery at Nenana, one might well ask: Into whose heart did President Harding drive the golden spike? In all likelihood, it may have penetrated ancient Indian bones.

Because many of the oldest

graves were unmarked, it was not uncommon for work crews through the years to uncover human remains.

Alaska Railroad's general manager, Walker S. Johnston, is investigating the history of the power line and removal of the original cemetery, which as yet he can find no documentation in their files.

When notified of the conflict over the pole, Johnston indicated that this was the first knowledge he had of the problem.

"We'd be happy to look into it," he said, "and even if it isn't our pole, do whatever we can about it. For some reason," he added, "it's hard to convince people that the railroad is part of the community."

New to Alaska this year, Johnston has had 36 years experience with the railroads in the states and said he is not unfamiliar with problems of this nature.

"We have had dealings with the Winnebago, Crow, and Cheyenne along our railroad."

"Here's a social problem," he said. "Just count me in. We'll work on it."

Mitch Demientieff is not concerned about which was there first, the power line or the railroad. The Indian burial ground was there long before either of them.

The village is an old, old site. Former chief and longtime council member Paul George, uncle to the present chief, re-

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Moose and Hunters...

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Stolz told the challengers. "I've got a license. I paid twelve bucks for it, and I'm entitled to hunt anywhere in the state of Alaska."

He said he doubted if all of the challengers had such a license.

Threats were made against the plane, but Stolz ignored them and spent the night in the village. The next morning, his plane had been cut loose and damaged.

A trooper was called in from Fairbanks and the next night, Stolz stationed a man in the plane with a gun to guard it.

Although he stated he was not on a hunt on that trip, Stolz maintains that he has every right to hunt the area in question, and that natives do not in fact practice subsistence hunting because "40 per cent of them are too lazy to hunt anyway."

The moose, according to Stolz are heavy in the remote areas and often "die of old age," because they are not hunted.

Tanana Chief President John Sackett absolutely contradicts Stolz, and sees the incident as typical of "the clash between a cash-oriented, pleasure-hunting society and a people who still live within a food-hunting, subsistence society."

"Until all people are capable of living on a cash economy, you are going to have these kind of clashes," said Sackett.

"In past history," he added, "there had been a general misuse of hunting in that area."

It is illegal to shoot moose from a moving aircraft, but within the law to spot them from the air, land, shut off the engine, and shoot.

Sackett said white hunters have so abused regulations that the Tanana Chiefs and native leader, Ralph Perdue, have petitioned both the Department of Fish and Game and Governor Egan to place a protection agent in Galena.

Jack Allen of the F & G Protection agency said his department did not have the funds to station a man at Galena and was trying to cover the area out of McGrath.

"We do know some things that are going on down there," said Allen, "but we don't have the manpower to stop them."

Allen said a comparable situation exists in Minto, and Minto natives are attempting to shut off access to Minto Flats, a source of both duck and moose that is heavily hunted by non-natives.

Sackett has just returned from a series of Washington, D.C. talks on the question of interim regulations which would protect subsistence rights of native people in the period prior to final land claims selections.

These regulations are in the process of being formulated by native leaders and Assistant Secretary of the Interior Harrison Loesch.

Until that time, it remains a gray area for Fish and Game enforcement and a sore spot in relationships between native and non-native hunters.