

# TT History - Claims Struggle...

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To defend this heritage an unprecedented meeting of Eskimo leaders from 20 villages was held in the fall of 1961. It was called "Inupiat Paitot"—The People's Heritage.

Until this time there had been little communication between Native communities and even less between Natives and whites. Major Alaskan newspapers seldom carried news of Indians and Eskimos and showed little concern for the problem of Native people.

As a result of Inupiat Paitot, it was decided the Native people must have a voice of their own—a newspaper. To found it, Eskimo leaders chose Rock, then a well-known artist who was fluent in English but had no writing experience, and Tom Snapp, the only white journalist in the state who had been interested enough to cover the meeting.

Funding for the enterprise was to be investigated by the late LaVerne Madigan, then director of the Association on American Indian Affairs, who helped organized Inupiat Paitot.

At the outset the project seemed impossible. Either it failed to fit foundation specifications or philanthropists required elaborate proposals that would have cost several thousand dollars to prepare.

Finally, in desperation, Miss Madigan volunteered the names of her five richest board members and turned up a winner. Dr. Henry S. Forbes of Milton, Mass., headed the list. He was a retired physician, a descendant of Ralph Waldo Emerson and well ahead of his time in concern for aboriginal rights.

Rock wrote him a formal, rather stilted letter and the answer—long in coming—was a question:

"What do you need a newspaper for and what are the issues?"

Rock left the reply to Snapp who had a ready answer. The reporter had been trying to cover Native news for the Fairbanks News-Miner but they'd limited him mainly to editing quaint little local-interest columns from the villages.

"It was frustrating. Personal columns! I wanted to cover the issues—education, hunting and fishing rights."

"I did a series on Project Chariot and they (the AEC) tried to stop it. I'd gone through all the Associated Press copy and found the AEC reports didn't match with what the scientists said. The scientists were upset. They'd found radiation in the food chain and the AEC had tried to cover this up. They were talking in terms of moving mountains and doing mining and they said it was no more dangerous than the luminous dial on a watch!"

After reading Snapp's 85 page reply, Forbes pledged to back the paper with \$35,000 in its first year. His only requirement

was that it start at once with Rock as editor and Snapp assisting.

## AN UNLIKELY TEAM

It seemed an unlikely team and Snapp was a reluctant member. He'd come to Fairbanks in 1959 on vacation from the University of Missouri where he was about to start his second year's work on a Master's in journalism. He'd already been talked into postponing his schooling once, when the News-Miner couldn't find a replacement for him, and he wasn't anxious to postpone again.

"His bags were packed and he was even mailing boxes back to Missouri," Rock still recalls with a shudder. "I was just desperate and I begged him to stay."

Howard Rock had absolutely no grounding in journalism and he'd been long absent from his native state. Although raised in the traditional Eskimo fashion, he'd left Alaska at an early age to pursue a career in art. He studied under Max Siemes, a Belgian artist, worked his way through three years at the University of Washington and became a successful painter and designer of jewelry in Seattle.

In 1961 he returned to Point Hope for a vacation and family reunion.

"After the excitement of the whaling season that was climaxed by the whaling celebration, I began to hear some of the problems and fears my folks were having," he recalls. "One subject that came up most often was the impending nuclear blast. They talked about radioactive fallout, a contamination of food animals and probable genetic effects it might have. These subjects were altogether foreign to me. And my ignorance appalled me when the folks said more than once, 'You came at a most opportune time. It must be the answer to our prayers.'"

Rock set out to educate himself and found Tom Snapp a major source of information. The artist had suggested a native newspaper to his village council but it was Snapp (who turned out to be his roommate at Inupiat Paitot) who really made the idea jell.

Rock didn't know how or what to write and he didn't have the vaguest idea how to go about setting up a newspaper. In the end he got Snapp to unpack his suitcases and stay another year.

## PARAKEET

### IN THE DISHWASHER

"To start a paper is a tremendous job," observes Snapp who now publishes All-Alaska Weekly, the liveliest general issue paper in the state. "Mine took five or six months but the Tundra Times had just two weeks."

Fortunately Snapp's sister had gone on vacation leaving him in charge of her trailer. The two men set up shop there, working round-the-clock three days straight, catching a night's sleep, then working three more straight days and nights.

"One problem was the parakeet," Snapp recalls with a smile. "I was supposed to take care of it and Howard just couldn't stand to see it caged up. He used to let it out and it was always flying headfirst into our dishwasher."

"Of course we had to eat our meals right there...and the backshop kept complaining because we had peanut butter and jelly on our copy."

It was the midst of the political season and Snapp and Rock ran themselves thin collecting political ads.

"We stuck together just like that," Snapp brandishes crossed fingers. "That's what we did that whole year almost. That was the

deal. He got a journalism education in that year he'd have had to go (to school) two or three years to get."

"We talked about what he knew. He was very proud of his Eskimo culture and he started telling me all these fantastic things like you go to the supermarket now and they have all these plastic bags they wrap everything in. Well, he said, 'We've had that for centuries.' What it was, was oogrük (giant seal) gut. They cleaned them out and made pokes out of them. And all that frozen food... They've been having frozen food like that for centuries."

"I started encouraging him and he started writing about all these things. He wrote for months about Arctic survival and his traditions and it ought to be reprinted. Some fantastic stuff."

"He had a natural bent for writing. It wouldn't have worked with just an ordinary person. He had an art background and an appreciation for humanity. He also had a rich heritage. He could appreciate both cultures and he believed you could mesh the two."

## "INUPIAT OQAQTUT" WON'T GO OVER THE PHONE

One of the biggest hassles was finding a name for the publication. At first they picked "Inupiat Oqaqtut," Eskimo for "The People Speak."

"But what if we got a non-Eskimo for a secretary?" someone asked. "She would have the darndest time trying to put that over the phone."

Finally they settled on Tundra Times and flanked it with explanations in Alaska's four major native languages:

Unanguq Tunuktauq — The Aleuts Speak

Den Nena Henash — Our Land Speaks (Athabaskan)

Ut kah nek — Informing and Reporting (Tlingit)

Inupiat Paitot — People's Heritage

The first issue hit the street Oct. 1, 1962, with the banner: Interior Secretary Udall Visits Alaska — Historic Rights and Claims Settlement Is Number One Problem, Declares Official.

There was also an editorial explanation of Tundra Times' intent.

"Long before today there has been a great need for a newspaper for the northern Natives of Alaska. Since civilization has swept into their lives in tide-like earnestness, it has left the Eskimos, Indians and Aleuts in a bewildering state of indecision and insecurity between the seeming need for assimilation and, especially in Eskimo areas, the desire to retain some of the cultural and traditional way of life."

It promised unbiased presentation of Native issues and added the paper would support no political party.

"With this humble beginning we hope, not for any distinction, but to serve with dedication the truthful presentations of Native problems, issues and interests."

Snapp's former associates at the News-Miner took one look and sent word they'd give the paper six weeks.

## FILES IN THE ICE BOX

The Association on American Indian Affairs wasn't much more encouraged. When their representative arrived in Fairbanks to inspect the new Tundra Times headquarters, he found its staff struggling to settle a small office on the main street.

"We couldn't afford file cabinets or anything like that but the place came with an ice box and stove that didn't work," Snapp recalls. "We kept our papers in there and when the AIAA man wanted a tour of the plant that's about all we had to show him."



— Photo by Jimmy Bedford

**HOWARD ROCK**  
Editor and Publisher, Tundra Times

They also had more than the usual share of problems to report.

"Starting a Native paper at this time was very rough because there was distrust against us," Rock explains. "It took a lot of nerve, really. We had things thrown through the door at night and I was threatened with beatings and things like that, but somehow we just kept right on going."

"We got all kinds of trouble along the way," Snapp adds. "One thing, the utility company asked for a much larger deposit because none of the incorporators had a credit reference. Once when I placed a long distance call that cost more than \$100 the operator called back and told us we had to come down and pay the bill at once... in the middle of the night!"

"Then there was the cost of printing. Outside I'd paid \$3,000 for printing 32 times a year. Here, for 24 issues, they wanted \$23,000."

"We were stepping on some awfully big toes."

The Atomic Energy Commission had called off plans for a major blast at Cape Thompson before the Tundra Times began publication but in April of 1963 it filed a new application for land withdrawal. The Tundra Times bannered the news and the project subsequently died.

The paper also reported findings of scientists on Russian atomic testing. Fallout had settled on the Alaskan tundra and been absorbed by caribou that grazed there. Eskimos who lived exclusively on this game were found to have a higher radiation count than any people in the United States. AEC began to monitor their exposure and the Tundra Times monitored the AEC.

Rock and Snapp also began actively pushing for settlement of native land claims.

"You see the federal Bureau of Land Management had never plotted Native claims on their records so people would check and find no claims," Snapp explains. "All those claims the Natives had been filing for years were with the Bureau of Indian Affairs down in Juneau or in the archives in Washington, D.C."

In 1962 five oil companies filed leases between the Native villages of Nenana and Minto and private businessmen followed suit. The state got word of oil activity and started making ten-

tative selection under the federal Statehood Act and no one paid any attention to Native claims which had accumulated over the years.

"We didn't know who you could trust to get an attorney," Snapp shakes his head. "You couldn't tell who was your friend. We finally got Ted Stevens (now a U.S. Senator) who said we should file a protest. It would probably be dismissed locally but we could appeal."

The problem was that the Natives had filed a number of conflicting claims on maps too crude for legal use, so Snapp and Rock bought huge, detailed maps and traveled to the villages to straighten out the contradictions.

"As soon as our first Native suit was filed, there were two more, even bigger. That's when the first freeze came against the state," Snapp reports.

"Then Udall came to the Tundra Times banquet and announced the deep freeze," Rock adds with pride. "The Natives had filed suits all over the state."

The paper also campaigned for abolition of "semi-serfitude" for the people of the Pribilof Islands.

"In those days the Bureau of Commercial Fisheries controlled the Pribilofs. It was kind of a company store arrangement, where hunters were paid in kind for their seal skins. They had to barter with the government," Rock says.

"The Tundra Times did so well on that series the Bureau of Fisheries threatened to expose us as Communists," Snapp recalls.

Tundra Times reporting was so lively other newspapers in the state became interested in covering Native news. Soon a number of white reporters were plugging away on the issues of subsistence hunting rights, education, equal opportunity and a decent standard of living for Natives.

## PRECARIOUS EXISTENCE

Tundra Times' existence has remained precarious, however. Despite generous financing by Dr. Forbes (until his death in 1968) the overhead has remained high and circulation low.

Reading comes hard to many Alaskan Natives and so does the \$10 Tundra Times subscription fee, so often one copy of the paper serves an entire village. The bulk of the subscribers are Native leaders, government agen-

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# Land...

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If the land is a place where your family has traditionally lived, write the village corporation of Haines or Sealaska Corporation, 127 Franklin Street, Juneau 99801 to learn there is some way you may obtain the land through the corporations.

The Bureau of Indian Affairs has estimated that only about 64 Natives will be effected by this provision of the Act.

If Natives from other regions have questions they might write their own regional corporation to learn what land is being selected.