

CHIEF ISAAC FIGHTS FOR LAND

Embattled Old Chief Andrew Isaac Tries to Hold Tanacross Lands

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The Tanacross Village natives are again angered and bewildered concerning the status of land on which they filed a claim for a reservation in 1950.

In a letter addressed to Interior Secretary Walter Hickel, Tanacross Chief Andrew Isaac and other members of the

Tanacross Village expressed concern over land patented to the State in the Tanacross area.

"What happened to the Claim we sent in to the Bureau of Land Management, November 30, 1950? Why was it not recognized?" they asked.

The Tanacross natives are angered over land patented to the State on which an old village site, burial grounds, trapping camps, fishing

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sites, and hunting areas historically used by natives of Tanacross are located.

"We are placing no blame on anyone personally, but we cannot help but feel there have been freezes and regulations by regulations passed to protect us and we are being slowly squeezed to death," the letter continued.

"Is it because all these rules are being made, but no one has ever come out and talked to us to see what we think or how we feel about what is going on. We are not a chess game, we are human beings and right now are a very

upset and disturbed people," the Tanacross letter stated.

"Our people in the cities feel



CHIEF ANDREW ISAAC

money and what it can buy is important, we feel our land and what it has grown has fed, clothed,

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Chief Isaac Fights . . .

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and helped us to survive, and is still doing so. Do you wonder why we are fighting to keep it?

"We would like some answers to the questions we have asked you, we believe you are really interested in our problems, but so far no one has told us just why we are being overlooked and our problems are growing instead of disappearing as we were told," the letter concluded.

The Tanacross Claim has a long history of inattention and intra-agency conflicts. The original petition by the Village of Tanacross for hearings on establishing a reservation was filed on November 30, 1950 with the Bureau of Land Management.

The document was not stamped by the BLM as received until November 16, 1961 by the Fairbanks Office. One BLM employee theorized that the petition may have floated from agency to agency until it arrived at the Fairbanks office some ten years later.

The land to which the Tanacross Village claimed ancestral rights was described in the 1950 document as "beginning at Tanacross, thence in a northeasterly direction to Mt. Fairplay thence north to the confluence of West Fork and Dennison Creek, thence in a northwesterly direction to elevation marker 6715, thence in a southeasterly direction to where Sears Creek empties into the Johnson River, thence to the point of beginning, Tanacross."

The BLM said that the petition was refused after it was received. On February 24, 1962, the Bureau of Indian Affairs filed an appeal on behalf of the Village of Tanacross. At that time, the petition and the appeal were sent to the Secretary of the Interior.

In 1964, Chief Andrew Isaac and the Village of Tanacross filed for a blanket claim to prevent the State from selling vacant lots within the Tanacross township and to reassert their claim on the area described in the original petition.

To date, there have been no hearings to resolve the status of the land, nor has there been any action by the Interior Department to consider the 1950 petition.

On May 24, 1965, the Tundra Times reported that the Tanacross Indians were angered at State plans to sell ancestral lands at the New York World's Fair. Center of the controversy was George Lake, located 60 miles from Tok in the claim area.

When it was discovered that title to the George Lake land was clouded by the Indian claim, then State Division of Lands Director Roscoe Bell said he was surprised at the uncertainty of the title.

The June 7, 1965, issue of the Times revealed a controversy and dissension within the State Lands Division. State Lease and Sales Manager Richard D. Mueller was allegedly fired for revealing the Indian claim.

Mueller labeled Lands Director

Bell's statements of ignorance of the Indian title as "false." Mueller stated that he was urged to repress the knowledge by his superiors so that the sale of the "wilderness estates" at George Lake could continue.

When he refused, Mueller said he was forced to resign. On August 23, 1965, the Times reported Mueller as stating that he had filed for an appeal with the State Personnel Board and that it had been refused.

The land sale was finally called off by the State after the matter had received extensive publicity in newspapers.

Most recent developments in the situation include a letter from Interior Secretary Walter J. Hickel in reply to concern voiced by Chief Isaac.

The Tanacross Chief inquired about certain locations within the claim area which had been classified as "open to entry" by the State. Isaac indicated that it was his understanding the State would only have tentative approval pending the outcome of his blanket claim.

Hickel replied in stating that the land was "patented to the State." He explained that this was his findings after checking with the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the BLM.

The Interior Secretary was reported as making no determination on the 1950 petition, and even of having no knowledge of the original claim.

It may be questionable as to whether the original claim was ever sent to the Secretary. In the Tundra Times research of the matter, two stamped identical petitions, both dated November 30, 1950 and received in 1962 by the Fairbanks Office, were seen.

One of these was marked "copy." Another was signed in ink by David Paul, who was President of the Tanacross Village Council at the time.

This document had no indication of being marked as a copy. The signature of David Paul and the November 30, 1950 date were lettered in blue ink. If the final determination is yet to be made by the Secretary, the petition which gives every sign of being an original, may well belong in Washington.

The people of Tanacross, led by Chief Andrew Isaac, will soon begin waiting out their twentieth year for a reply if action is not taken soon. They continue to fight a legal battle for a land which they called their own even before European Man knew it existed.

Soon, a generation of his people will have passed into manhood and Chief Andrew Isaac may continue to wonder why his voice and his people is being ignored.

He still may say, "We are not chess game, we are human beings and right now a very upset and disturbed people."