

AFN MOVES TOWARD UNITY



A NEW AFN IS BORN — Alaska Federation of Natives, unincorporated, is dissolved by the 1972 Convention in Anchorage overriding former President Don Wright's protests. State Sen.

Willie Hensley, D-Kotzebue, takes over the reins of the new AFN, Inc. to be structured on the 12 region concept.

Photo by JACQUELINE GLASGOW

Steps to Be Reviewed By Regional Corporations

By JACQUELINE GLASGOW
Staff Writer

The Alaska Native people have had a long struggle toward a "fair and just settlement" on lands they have owned for thousands of years. In their fight with the Congress of the United States, they did something unprecedented in their histories. They united.

Last week in Anchorage, October 26-28, the organization into which they formed, the Alaska Federation of Natives, met in convention to restructure itself in order to enter what newly-elected chairman John Borbridge called "a renaissance, if you will, as the Native people take another step forward."

The step was not taken easily and politics at the convention resembled more the French Revolution than the Renaissance. Bringing a suit against members of the board of directors of AFN, Inc., Don Wright revived such terms as "loyalists" and "usurpers" to define his supporters and dissenters and fought to retain control of the organization.

In late September, Wright was displaced as president and chairman of both the old AFN and the more recent AFN, Inc. which had been generally understood would supercede the unincorporated statewide association which had its birth back in

1966.

Transition from one organization to another has been expected to proceed smoothly until Wright's ouster. Between that time and the October convention set by the board of AFN, Inc., Wright has insisted that the official convention would be held in Wildwood, Dec. 15-18.

The Anchorage convention resolved early into a credentials fight, as to who would be represented and what the voting structure would be.

It was decided that voting would proceed by the rules of the old association until such time as it was resolved by the body present that the association should or should NOT be dissolved.

Hanging over the convention was a cloud of financial difficulties, \$600,000 to \$700,000 debts incurred by AFN in lobbying for the Land Claims Settlement and in the operations of

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the organization to the present time.

Charlie Edwardsen, Jr., representing what he called the "minority view" of the Arctic Slope people, addressed the body on the question of voting and credentials.

He called for a halt to the squabble over "who I am and who you are not." Speaking of the Native people, Edwardsen said, "We took a long shot and it was the price of every dignified person and every sole person here what the long shot is."

"I think we have a definite

obligation to AFN: Here again that this is our soil. Here again, that this is our land."

"Some are at home. The majority will always be at home." Edwardsen spoke of AFN as "our marriage to this land that we commenced in 1966. I must say to my brethren and to my sisters, this is still your land. No corporation in America has ever gotten 40 million acres of land. I feel that we are going to have to protect ourselves and resolve our monetary differences. If we can borrow \$700,000 and have

gotten 40 million acres, we're not too shabby!"

Edwardsen, because of his minority position, refused to vote the 22 votes awarded Arctic Slope. He asked for and received a half-vote only.

The question of who the convention was representing became central to the issues. Aside from Arctic Slope Regional Corporation, there was also no official representation from Cook Inlet Regional Corporation although delegates attended from Cook Inlet Native Association, the non-profit group.

During the first part of the convention, voting was permitted for the following delegations: Tlingit-Haida, AVCP, Kodiak, Bristol Bay, Kenai, Copper River, Alaska Peninsula (no longer in existence), Arctic Slope, Unalakleet, Tanana Chiefs, Aleut League, Cordova, Tyonek, Eklutna, Washington Chapter AFN, Upper Kuskokwim, Cook Inlet, Nome, and Kotzebue.

Wright entreated the membership not to dissolve the old organization until there was a positive commitment by the twelve regional corporations to assume the debts.

"The most important thing in my mind is to see unity among the Native people, but only if they honor their debts and pay their bills."

In a sudden move to forestall action by the convention, Wright attempted to recess the convention Friday and reconvene it at Wildwood on Dec. 15.

As he walked from the room, Tanana Chiefs' president John Sackett called for a point of order on whether Wright had the power to recess the convention.

Vice-president Phillip Guy took the chair in the absence of Wright and called for a ruling from parliamentarian John Hope.

Hope ruled that the chairman did NOT have the authority to recess a convention and that it could proceed in his absence.

As the session continued, Borbridge rose to say, "It is we the people who have the right to determine where this convention will go."

Shortly after Wright's departure, the assembled body passed the final resolution of the old AFN, a resolution to dissolve its existence. The resolution passed by a vote of 420, YES; 33, NO; 23½, absent; and 19, abstaining.

AFN, Inc. President Willie Hensley has consistently maintained that he did not view the two organizations as conflicting or separate ones and that, in fact, their operations have overlapped for some time.

The formation of AFN, Inc. was accomplished under the auspices of the board of the earlier organization, Don Wright presiding, to coincide with the structure of the Land Claims Settlement as set by Congress.

"We are not kicking you into a structure which has been set without your participation," said Borbridge on the following day. "It will be an organization of the people."

Hensley said, "There is nothing in the land claims act which requires a statewide organization. If there is such a thing, it has to be by the common consent of the regions."

In the matter of financial obligations of the regions for debts incurred by AFN (which was awarded no monies under the Act) "common consent" will be a crucial matter.

"I think," said Hensley, "every Native person, every village, and every regional corporation that stands to benefit under the act has a moral obligation to pay this debt."

Referring to the \$700,000 total, Hensley believes there is a good chance at least \$400,000 will be awarded by the U.S. Court of Claims. "That leaves a \$300,000 bill for six years of operation. That is not a very substantial debt when you consider the benefits derived."

It has been held by many observers that the structure devised by Congress effectively promotes fragmentation, divisiveness, and regionalism, rather than unity.

Will all twelve regional corporations eventually rejoin the central entity now known as AFN, Inc.? "Joining is, after all," said one delegate, "the choice of the individual organization."

Roy Huhndorf of Cook Inlet commented: "I feel people always have a means to form themselves into a group."

"There are now in Alaska two sources of power available to the Native people," added AFN attorney Ken Bass. "The first is the power of the regional corporations created by the settlement act, enormous power and money. The second source is the Alaska Native people that have been here thousands of years. When both work together,

that power is insurmountable."

One by one, representatives of the people rose up to support the structuring of the new AFN, Inc. along the lines of the twelve region concept. They agreed to take back the proposal drawn up by the board to each region for further definition and refining before final acceptance.

The body present also passed a resolution calling on "each Alaska Native Land Claims Settlement Act corporation to implement the authority granted them by the 1973 Supplemental Appropriations Bill and loan to AFN, Inc., a population proportioned share of the estimated \$750,000 indebtedness incurred by AFN in obtaining passage of the Land Claims Bill."

It was further resolved "that this matter be given the highest possible urgency by every regional corporation."

It was a possibility that the larger and more powerful groups could have overridden the interests of the smaller regions had they chosen to do so. At several points of the convention, unity was in serious danger. Concessions had to be made and compromises effected.

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Tanana Chiefs' John Sackett withdrew an important amendment to the proposed resolution on per capita payment when it threatened the prevailing feeling of the convention.

Tlingit-Haida, second only to Calista area in population, admitted they felt reluctance to accept a per capita payment but finally weighed "what we might lose, compared to what we might gain. If the difference is to be measured in the gain of a healthy organization, we are willing to pay the difference."

As the convention drew to an end, Borbridge told the delegates, "We have reached the point we have been striving for, an organization with the direct involvement of the people."

Borbridge then offered his resignation as Chairman of the Board of AFN, Inc., a gesture against charges that the convention had been "a play for power on the part of a few people." He added that he hoped his resignation would

clear the air and "remove any implication that this movement was for anything but the people."

Frank Degnan of Unalakleet spoke about these people. "You know how many of us there are?" he asked. "65,000. You are the smartest people in the world, bar none. When we started, they told us, you won't get over 10 million acres."

"The only cockeyed thing wrong with this deal is 'fair and just settlement.' Congressmen tell you this: Flip a coin. Heads, I win. Tails, you lose. That's a white man for you."

Not only did they tell the Native people they would not get over 10 million acres, Borbridge said "It is largely anticipated by the people about the state that we were not capable of coming together and resolving our difficulties. We were not supposed to be able to talk, but in fact, we ARE."

"I have been here seventy-one years," said Frank Degnan, "I