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First Inuit Circumpolar Conference PT. 1

June 13-17, 1977

Moses Wassillie, moderator

Barrow, Alaska

Series: Potlatch series

Mo Wassillie said Barrow is the most northern settlement in the United States and is a center for business and government for northern Alaska. Over 200 people in Greenland, Canada and other countries came to participate in the first Circumpolar Conference. Forty-eight delegates from each of the major countries met in conference for a week to explore the possibilities of forming an international group that would be able to unite all Inuit in the circumpolar region. A twelve member interim committee was established to adopt a charter for the organization. The members of the committee from Alaska were Charles Edwardson, Jr., Billy Neakok from Barrow, Willie Hensley from Kotzebue, and Oscar Kawagley from Bethel. Eben Hopson, chairman, gave a background what some of the other groups were doing in relation to self-determination and what some of his hopes are.

Eben Hopson said he has been looking forward to this day. They live under four of the five flags of the arctic region. It is agreed that they have certain aboriginal legal rights as indigenous people of the arctic. It is important that their governments agree about the status of these rights if they are to be respected. To secure this agreement they must organize to negotiate for it. The status of their rights as Inupiat is the core of any successful protection for their mutual arctic environmental security. Their language contains the memory of four thousand years of human survival through the conservation and good management of their arctic wealth. Theirs is the language of the very environment that challenges the environmental safety of existing technology. Their language contains the intricate knowledge of the ice that exists in no other language. Without their involvement there can be no safe arctic resource development. They have the right and duty to negotiate with their government the terms by which they can safely share their subsurface wealth. He hopes with the conference that they can organize to begin these negotiations. Arctic resource development has placed pressure on them to organize now to meet their responsibilities to the land. He is pleased to have the Sami delegation with them. The Sami have developed a relationship with their government which they seek in the Inupiat community. Hopson said they must elevate their claims to the status of an international level to obtain equal justice across the arctic. Their strength must lie in home rule government. The defense of the world's arctic environmental security must rest upon the strength of home rule government. He said they are here during their whaling festival and will be entertained by dancers from across the arctic. He welcomed them home to Barrow.

Moses Wassillie said Frank Steadman spoke at the convention. He said when Alexander the Great had conquered the known world they the Eskimos had conquered the unknown world.

They were in Canada, Siberia, the Aleutian Chain and Greenland. They are under the English, Danish and Japanese government. He wanted to thank everyone.

The Greenlandic Inuit delegation sing a poem about their homeland

Moe Wassillie said a committee for original people's entitlement in Canada's Northwest Territory have filed a lawsuit to try to stop oil and gas development in the Beaufort Sea. Nelson Green read a letter by Sam Raddi. Sam Raddi wrote that during this week their Inuvialuit land right negotiators will be meeting with the minister of Indian and Northern Affairs for their first round of negotiations for their land right proposals. The Inuvialuit are facing the massive development of a gas pipeline to be built along the Mackenzie Valley. They have taken a position for a land rights agreement before any decision on the pipeline be made. Their proposal is considered fair and reasonable by everyone. He has been skeptical about his government's ability to settle Native land rights fairly. They hope to help other Inuvialuit to the east of them in securing land rights. He also talked about offshore drilling in the Beaufort Sea. The Inuvialuit are the first Inuit to face offshore drilling in their coastal waters and other Inuit will face drilling in their future. Since 1974 they have pressed their government to develop rational policies and safe drilling practices for their arctic waters. They have been unsuccessful up to this point. They are pursuing legal action against this development in arctic waters. He said they have lived there thousands of years and will live there in the future after the oil and gas are gone.

Song by Charlie Panganeak.

Eben Hopson talked about setting up a uniform arctic policy. He said they are lacking a policy which they may refer to as an arctic policy in the future. They now know that the president of the United States endorses such policies. Different forms of government operate in the north but the problems they deal with are identical.

Carl Christian Olsen talked about the failure of governments to protect local Inuit populations. They are taking for granted the use of the arctic environment. The environment is identical to their ways of living and culture. Any disturbance of the environment is a disturbance of their way of living.

A member of the Greenland delegation reads his poem.

Moses Wassillie said four delegates from each group were elected to the interim committee for the purpose of constructing a charter. One of the Canadian delegates speaks. He said he sees the Inuit groups as one without nationality. He announces the chosen delegates from Alaska (Charles Edwardsen, Jr., Billy Neakok and Oscar Kawagley), Canada (Bill Edmunds, Nelson Green, Jose Kusugak, and Charlie Watt) and Greenland (Carl Christian Olsen, Moses Olsen, Ove Rosing Olsen and Robert Petersen).

Eben Hopson and Willie Hensley read some of the resolutions that the convention adopted pertaining to the land rights for the Inuit in Greenland, Canadian Inuit rights and Inuit education. Eben Hopson said they call upon the government of Denmark to recognize the claims of the Greenlandic Inuit to all the surface and subsurface estates of Greenland. He said that the Inuit

Circumpolar Conference supports the Inuit of Canada in seeking their rightful role in any present or future discussions or revisions of the constitution of Canada. Willie Hensley said that the interim committee seriously consider the creation of an Inuit ... Committee for International Inuit Education, Culture and History as a part of the permanent Inuit organization. This committee should be responsible for developing and implementing the Inuit philosophy of education into the educational system, to explore the possibility of an Inuit university, to establish Inuit student and teacher exchange, to establish exchange of educational, cultural and media materials, to explore the possibility of a Inuit common written system, to establish an exchange of artists and cultural workers, to establish Inuit cultural history, to create contact among religious groups in Inuit homelands, to establish an Inuit Olympics. He said be it further acknowledged that the Inuit language is the official language of all future meetings of this conference.