

Knowledge of Native Elders
ANS 401
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Summary by Richard Cline

Notes of November 10, 1988

Alaska Lands Claim Settlement Act

The issues surrounding the ALCSA are difficult and complicated because there is always a change. In 1991 the Native peoples will have the option to sell or keep their stock. The stock promises "good" money, but if it is sold, the people stand to lose the land. Albert stated that he will hold onto his stock.

When Alaska became a State, Native leaders decided to do something about the Lands issue. They went to Washington, D.C. to address the U.S. Congress. The Native peoples were given 44 million acres of land and 9 million dollars. Thirteen Native Corporations were established. The Native people accepted the offer.

Acceptance of the ALCSA has not entirely relieved the Lands issue, and, in the future may pose more questions than it solved. As part of the leadership travelling to Washington, D.C., Alaska House Representative William Hensley addressed future concerns to the Congress saying that controversy surrounds "...future of Eskimo society in relation to Arctic development subject to effect changes of ancient lands." "We do not believe that the simple planting of a flag on soil secures land for any country at no cost to it."

In 1971, corporate stock was given to everyone eligible for membership in one of the 13 Native corporations. Babies born after 1971 were not eligible and were, in effect, left out. This problem was discussed with the U.S. Congress and reversed - now everyone born after 1971 has acquired stock too. Unfortunately, many Native people do not know much about the Act. Albert warned that if Native people do not study the Act, the land will be lost. The question regarding eligibility was resolved only because some people realized what was happening. Occasionally, Indians from the "lower 48" are invited to Treaty Conferences in Alaska to discuss the Lands issue. They always advise us to hold on to the land, and never sell-out for money. "The important thing is the land."

Taking Care of the Land

Albert stated that Native people fight against subsistence abuse to care for the land. In 1938 he went to Bristol Bay to work

in a fish cannery. There was so much fish, anyone who wanted had plenty, and the fish boats were full. But in 1944-45 the fish were gone. "What happened?" It turned out that the Japanese and Koreans were fishing on the high-seas with mile-long nets made to catch everything. Consequently, the U.S. Government extended the off-shore limit to 200 miles. Three or four years later the fish came back, recapturing their previous numbers. Albert pointed out that this "shortage" of fish was entirely man-made. Long ago nature took care of fish and everything else, but now technology threatens to destroy nature's delicate balance.

The Alaskan Native people have always lived close to nature. But the cash-economy threatens to destroy our ways. To trap well, a man has to spend 3 months in the bush. But this is not possible if you are employed and depend on a paycheck to live. But the life of a trapper is hard and not many people want to do it.

Life and Death

Long ago there were no caskets for the dead, but now they are constructed out of spruce boards. The clan of the deceased usually hire two men from another clan to build the casket. Two men from another clan are hired to make the cross. Thirdly, two more men are hired to dig the grave. After the funeral, the clan of the deceased prepare the pot latch. The hired men are invited to sit on the floor in front of the food, spread-out on a calico. Everyone present is invited to eat. After eating, a second calico is spread on the floor and the deceased's belongings are brought out. In addition to these things, the guests have brought new things, particularly clothes, to add to the pile. The calico wraps all these items together and on top is placed the deceased man's snowshoes and rifle. All the clan member's put money on the bundle; anywhere from \$5 to \$20 is given - occasionally there are sums of up to \$200. The hired workers are paid first; any money remaining is evenly distributed until it is gone. After this the belongings are passed out (except the rifle which stays with the clan). The immediate survivors do not want to see things that once belonged to the deceased laying around after the funeral, so those items not picked-up after the pot latch, are burned.