



In November, 1964, the "Tundra Times" began a journalistic campaign to help the Pribilof people win their political independence from the federal government. Article after article appeared, blasting the government policies on the Islands, giving glaring and embarrassing exposure to official policies. In 1964, Thomas Snapp wrote:

Most people think slavery in the U.S. was abolished with the Civil War and the Emancipation Proclamation. Yet today in the Far North, in Alaska, slavery still exists in milder form perhaps than existed in the deep south, but slavery nonetheless. The Aleuts of the Pribilof Islands are today living in servitude to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.¹

This stunning accusation was followed by still other articles and letters in early 1965. One letter from Father Baranof, the Russian Orthodox priest on St. Paul, prior to 1950, insisted that the Aleut people on the Island were living in fear of federal government officials and were afraid to speak out against injustices for fear of losing their jobs. Father Baranof had left the Islands in 1950, and therefore had not seen the changes that had taken place since his time; nevertheless, his charges reinforced Mr. Snapp's accusation of slavery.

Other articles in the "Tundra Times" strengthened the case that the federal government had exploited and badly misused the Pribilof Aleuts. Howard Baltzo, the new program director of the Pribilof Program, was closely questioned by the newspaper and the interview was published in January 1965:

Q. Is it true that some people on St. George Island do not want to move to St. Paul?

A. Yes, the older people who have always lived there are reluctant to leave their homes.

Q. Is it true that you people are pressuring the people from St. George to move to St. Paul?

A. I think enticing is more the word. We would like for all the people on St. George to move to St. Paul for their own good and efficiency of the operation. But we have told them that no one will have to move who doesn't want to and they will be supplied and will be able to live there. But if they leave St. George and move to St. Paul they will have better facilities.

Q. Is it true that in 1959 it was announced by the Fish and Wildlife Service that all the Aleuts on the Pribilofs would be relocated?

A. This was something that was being discussed even before I joined the service in 1960. As to what was put out before then, I would not know.

Q. What do you think of these charges by Father Baranof?

A. Well, I have heard these kind of charges, but I don't think it would be proper for me to comment on a person's views, but I will say this, many of the things carried on during his reign have been changed.

Q. Isn't it possible that many of the conditions that existed during Olson's reign have been carried over and still have not been corrected and are still hanging on?

A. I am not aware of them. I do know things can't move too fast. And people who have lived under certain conditions don't give up without resistance. . . .²

After the publicity in the "Tundra Times," nothing would ever be the same again on the Pribilofs.

The Bartlett Hearings

Nine months after the articles on the Pribilofs had appeared *in* the Tundra Times," the senator from Alaska, Bob Bartlett, arrived on St.

Paul to conduct an investigation of the conditions of the Aleuts on the Islands for the Senate Committee on Commerce. He drew a large crowd of people to the meeting on the second floor of the St. Paul Rec Hall the afternoon of September 9th, 1965. People from St. George had also come to talk with the Senator and be sure that their views were represented. The Senator decided against sitting on the stage with his staff because it was too far away from the people whom he wanted to hear. Therefore, he arranged the staff at tables on the floor of the main hall. At 3:00 p.m. he called the meeting to order.

Iliodor Merculieff, the president of the St. Paul Community Council, was the first person to testify:

(A state of servitude) used to exist.. .up until 1950..., we were not paid fair compensation and we were allowed just very little food and shelter of course. In the old days they used to lay (the workers) off or if he asked for a vacation and stayed out for about six months when he came back he wouldn't get into his old house. . . .³

He was followed by Gabe Stepetin:

Back in the 1930s, up to 1950, the conditions on the Islands were very poor compared to other people of the U.S.. We weren't allowed to speak for ourselves. Everything we did we had to get authorization through the management of the Island.... On food it had been said that the government has provided us free food. I can say this, the government has provided us with shelter and medical care, but the food I don't consider, I never considered, free. I considered that compensation for the labor we did for the federal government. . . . Some of the sealers, due to this inadequate food, didn't have sometimes strength enough. They used to get tired and when they made a complaint they were threatened that they would be expelled from the Island— Then in 1950 there was a commission that came up here to study the Islands. From that time on the conditions on the Islands have been improving, and it has improved considerably since 1960, after Mr. Baltzo and Mr. Euneau came here, and it is still improving.⁴

Elary Gromoff next spoke briefly and then his son, Rev. Smile Giomoff, a deacon of the Russian Orthodox Church, and a community leader like his father, gave his testimony about how true democracy could be brought to the Pribilof Islands:

Senator Bartlett: Do you like the provisions relating to the right which it gives the residents of St. Paul to own their own land and their own homes?

Rev. Smile Gromoff: I think that is the time I will really feel free, when I can own my own home and land.

Sen. Bartlett: You don't feel free now?

Rev. Gromoff: Not exactly— If I left my home and went out to visit and if I came back or didn't pay for my rent, I would lose my house. If it was my own home I would go out and come back and it would still be there or I could rent it to somebody...In the past we didn't actually own anything, outside of what we had in the house, like what we wear. If we owned the land I think it would mean you are a landowner.

Sen. Bartlett: This would give you a feeling of security?

Rev. Gromoff: Yes, that is what I am trying to say.

Sen. Bartlett: What other things in your opinion should the government do to bring true democracy, a true American form of government, to these Islands?

Rev. Gromoff: The Government is planning to phase out in five years, five or ten years, and give all the responsibility to the people of the Islands...,of taking care of the whole island, like the store, running everything for ourselves. The municipalities, like any other city.⁵

The year after the Bartlett hearings on St. Paul, Iliodor Mercurieff and Terenty Philemonoff, representing the Community Council, went to Washington D.C. to testify again before Bartlett's committee. The Bartlett Bill that passed was called the Fur Seal Act of 1966. It implemented the 1957 Interim Convention on Conservation of North Pacific Fur Seals, but it also made a number of changes in the life of the Pribilof people. Most importantly, it provided for the establishment of a townsite, and the ultimate transfer of the St. Paul township to the community. In addition, it provided for the calculation of the civil service retirement benefits which would take into account work done before 1950, substantially increasing the annuities of many of the retired people on the Islands. With one act, Congress had not only guaranteed the Pribiloff people their future political independence, but had also legitimized their past work for the federal government.

The Bartlett Act had an immediate impact on the Islands. The transfer of some of the community services was begun and in 1966, the community finally opened its own tavern on St. Paul. They also equipped a St. Paul maintenance and repair shop, and accepted more responsibility for police activities and fire protection. The community had already assumed the full responsibility for the canteen and for the first time, fresh produce became available on the Islands. In the past, the only fresh fruit the children ever received was from the Fouke Fur Company on the Fourth of July, and from the Fisheries after the Christmas Eve performance at the Rec Hall. Now fresh produce came on the weekly plane and gradually the chickens that many families had kept as a source of fresh eggs disappeared.

I The following year a team of researchers from the University of Alaska came to the Pribilof Islands to make a study of St. Paul's economy in preparation for self-government. The researchers estimated that the average household income on the Island was approximately \$9,830, while the expenditure for the average household was \$1,000 less.⁶ This suggested that there were both an income base and a saving potential in the community to make it self-sufficient if the local leadership would take the responsibility for self-government. The report concluded:

The future of St. Paul rests with the people of the community, regardless of what determinations are made by others or what development plans may be prepared. It will be up to the local people to decide whether or not to incorporate as a municipality, and without a positive vote, the townsite-related provisions of the Fur Seal Act will not apply. Likewise, the carrying out of the development programs, the broadening of the economic base, and the other potentials that exist are all dependent on support by the local population— of municipal government, then St. Paul has the potential for emerging as a vital community. In the long run, however, the future of the Pribilofs rests to a large degree on the attitudes of the young people. How they see their future will determine the future of St. Paul.⁷

However, despite the willingness of local leaders, the encouragement from Senator Bartlett, and the favorable report from the University of Alaska, there were still people working for the Fisheries who felt that this movement towards self-government had moved too fast. Mr. Tracy, the storekeeper on St. Paul, wrote Mr. Baltzo in Seattle to say that

"the St. Paul Community is nowhere near capable enough to consider operation of Company House, laundry or other operations."⁸ Despite Mr. Tracy's anxiety, self-government was an increasing reality on the Pribilofs. In 1968, the people of St. George, weary from asking the government to put in an airstrip, built a strip themselves and therefore opened the Island to chartered air flights. The following year on St. Paul the people took over the hotel in the summer and the management and maintenance of the Rec Hall. Each step moved the people closer to the incorporation of St. Paul as a city in the State of Alaska.

The Incorporation of the City of St. Paul

In 1970 a task force met on St. Paul to prepare for the incorporation of the village. Twenty-two representatives from federal, state, and private agencies participated. The resolution to accept a charter to incorporate was passed and on June 29th, 1971, the village of St. Paul became a fourth class Alaskan city. Thereafter, the City assumed all of the responsibilities in providing public services to its residents; the City also had to set public utility rates, levy sales taxes, and make contracts. The only thing the City could not do was operate the local school and levy a property tax. Taking on the responsibilities of running their town was the realization of a dream that many people on St. Paul had been working towards for a quarter of a century.

The citizens of this new city elected Gabe Stepetin as their first City Mayor, Alex Melovidov as assistant mayor, and Steve Hapoff as city magistrate. Full-time jobs were created to run the affairs of the City. The mayor was assisted by a clerk, Hedy Lestenkof. Soon it became apparent that the City had taken over so many activities from the Fisheries that they needed a city manager as well as the mayor and clerk. Victor Mercurief became the first city manager, followed by Agafon Krukoff, Jr. a year later. When Gabe Stepetin finally retired from public life, Victor Mercurief was elected to replace him as mayor of the City of St. Paul.

Interwoven with the rapid advancement towards self-government was counterpoint of economic and social improvements. By 1966, there were two movie houses on St. Paul, four refreshment stands, and one intermittent barber shop. Private cars began to appear on the Island after the men who had helped to build the Loran Coast Guard Station in

the early 1960's sold their cars to the people who, for the first time, had the wages to afford them. And in 1967, the Loran Station and Weather Bureau began to train the first Pribilof people for a few jobs at both posts, opening up new possibilities of future employment on the Island.

Full-time employment had become an increasing problem after full civil service wages had been introduced. The full-time federal jobs had been cut in half and many men who had worked all their lives found themselves suddenly with only temporary work. Therefore, one goal of the Community Council in the 1960's was to have a harbor built on St. Paul so that there would be an alternative source of income. The Army Corps of Engineers made a study to determine whether it was feasible to build a harbor on St. Paul; their study concluded that a harbor in Village Cove on St. Paul would cost approximately \$4 million. There were questions raised about whether the harbor and the ships would disturb the fur seals; there were also questions raised about whether the expense would be worth the effort of building such a harbor. The decision was that it was probably not economically viable, despite the fact that the Pribilof people had paid for the cost of the harbor many times over the profits they had made for the federal government.

In January of 1969, Iliodor Mercurieff, who had been a leader on both St. Paul and St. George, died. His death was a significant loss to the community just as it was gaining its full independence. His passing marked the transition between the first generation of leaders who had led the community for twenty years and the second generation who was just beginning to emerge.

Educational Independence

In 1960, the first school board on St. Paul was organized, just prior to the State assumption of the educational responsibilities from the Fisheries. Mary Bourdukofsky was elected head of the school board for the first three years. George Rukovishnikoff became the head for the next term, and Alexander Melovidov succeeded him for the next nine years. The most consistent issue through the five terms was the question of the adequacy of the school house that had been built in 1930. By the 1960's it had become a fire trap, despite the fact that the children loved it. Finally in 1972, Alex Melovidov was able to persuade the State fire marshals to come to St. Paul to investigate the school; it was

immediately condemned and the next year the construction of a new school was started.

When the educational system in Alaska was decentralized in the mid-70's, the Pribilofs demanded to be an independent school district with their own superintendent. New elections were held to pick a board, and Agafon Krukoff, Jr. was elected the president of the board. This Board of Education for the Pribilof School District has the responsibilities of hiring and firing the school staff and determining how the school budget will be spent. The control of the education of the children was finally in the hands of their parents for the first time in the history of the Islands.

The Conservationists vs. the Pribilof Fur Seed Harvest

After having successfully fought the federal government for their economic and political freedom, the Pribilof people were not prepared for an attack on their independence from an entirely different direction. The conservation movement, which became popular in the United States in the 1960's, began to focus increasingly on what was considered inhumane fur seal harvest on the Pribilof Islands. Some of the conservation groups, through hearings before various Congressional committees, exerted pressure on the federal government to stop the Pribilof harvest. None of the groups had constructive suggestions about the future of the Pribilof sealer. One suggestion was made to transform all of the Aleuts into game wardens on the Pribilofs, but it is doubtful that the Pribilofs could have absorbed several hundred game wardens; other conservationists suggested that the Pribilof Aleuts all be transferred to the Mainland!

For thousands of years the Aleuts' way of life had been based on the hunting of the sea mammals. With remarkable insensitivity the conservationists threatened to destroy the basis of their ancient cultural heritage as well as their only livelihood. The conservationists' concern for the fur seals was considerably stronger than their concern for the Aleuts who were completely dependent on the seals.

The people of St. Paul and St. George counter-acted the conservationist arguments through letters, in person, and in Congressional testimony. The Community Council stated their case in a letter included

among the conservationist arguments during the Congressional Hearings on Marine Mammals:

The Aleut residents of St. Paul and St. George are employed in the annual harvest and in skinning and curing. These two communities represent the largest aggregation of our people in the world. The (proposed) legislation would require our people to disperse. It takes away our livelihood and gives us nothing practical in return.... The Aleut Community urges you not to support this very bad legislation.

(Signed)
Jason Bourdukofsky
President of the
Aleut Community Council

Gabriel Stepetin
Vice-president

However, the conservationists were persistent in their attacks on the fur seal harvest, and representatives from the Pribilofs had to travel to Washington D.C. on a regular basis to defend the economic rights of the Aleut people to harvest the fur seals. On one trip, Mike Zacharof delivered a speech in Aleut to a stunned Washington audience: Larry Mercurieff translated for those who were not bilingual:

There are many groups that say we must stop the seal harvest. They say that the seals are hurt and such hurt is inhumane. It is good that they care for animals, because we do too, but we cannot support the stopping of the harvest. Our people have lived for ten thousand years on the islands of the Aleutian Chain. We have gained much wisdom about life throughout these years. This wisdom tells us that we must care for the animals because they are part of what helps us survive. Our people lived in balance with nature. Now modern times have changed this balance. Outsiders came to our land and changed it, we did not do it. Our wisdom tells that since there has been this change, man must control it if the seals are to survive. We support the managed seal harvest because it fits our philosophy about life. Our philosophy is that, if we can survive as people depending on seals, and at the same time make sure that the seals we depend on are ensured survival, this is the best solution. If the seal harvest is stopped, we will

lose our employment and on top of that, we do not know what will happen to the seals if man's controls are let up. . . . To stop the managed harvest would also mean taking away the only source of income our people have. A Humane Society President says the solution would be to take the Aleut people "away from this artificial cold, cold environment" and place them on the mainland. We do not consider the Pribilofs as being artificial or cold; this is our home, born of our peoples blood and spirit. . . .

...Do these people know what would happen to us if the seal harvest is stopped or greatly cut down? Is the seal going to be extinct if we do not stop the harvest? Because if we cut the harvest, it will hurt an honest-to-goodness rare and endangered species—the Aleut people.¹⁰

Despite all the defenses the Pribilof people could summon, the harvest on St. George was stopped in 1974 for an indefinite period of time. The people were not even allowed to kill seals for meat, which is still an important part of their diet. The Fur Seal Convention permitted American Natives to kill seals in the traditional manner from boats, but the Pribilof Aleuts had never hunted seals in the water. Consequently, the St. George people had to fly to St. Paul to get their seal meat and try to get it back to St. George before it spoiled. It was inconvenient, inefficient, and intolerable. Finally, in 1975, to dramatize the absurdness of the regulation, several St. George men demonstrated what it was like to harpoon seals from a large boat. After several hours of trying to hit the swift animals, they finally killed one seal—a female. The "Tundra Times" covered the story and the government finally allowed a limited annual take of 350 seals on St. George. The St. George people have stated consistently that 350 seals is very inadequate for a village of 150 people. To date, only 350 seals are allowed to be harvested for subsistence purposes.

After the U.S. Government took over the management of the fur seal herd at the beginning of the 20th century, the number of seals grew from 200,000 to 1,500,000. It is, today, the largest and best managed wildlife herd in the world. However, if the harvest is discontinued, as the conservationists demand, the spectre of pelagic sealing would reappear, bringing the possibility of the destruction of the fur seal herd that occurred at the end of the last century. Without a sense of the past history of the fur seal herd, the conservationists continue to insist that

the harvest be discontinued. The outcome of their demands will partially determine the economic future of the Pribilof Islands. At least there is an Aleut on the International Fur Seal Commission, Mike Zacharof, who will guarantee that the Aleuts' voice will be heard when the future of the fur seal harvest is discussed.

Despite the valiant efforts of village leaders, the federal government plans to withdraw completely from the Pribilofs by 1986 or sooner. This action, partially due to U.S. fiscal policies and to the fact that protectionist groups have made the fur seal harvest program "uncomfortable" to support in the halls of Congress, will be the single most important factor to affect Pribilof Aleuts since World War II. No matter what the timing of the federal withdrawal is, the people of the Pribilofs are facing a complete turnover of their way of life in much less than one generation. Once again, Aleuts will be called upon to utilize their resourcefulness to the maximum. What the people do within this critical period may very well determine if their villages live or die, and it will be determined within the next five years.

The Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act

The Aleut "hell" is a place where there is no land. To people who are descendants of an amphibious culture, land has a special importance. It is a refuge to rest on in the midst of a stormy sea. It is both ironic and sad that from the Russian invasion until 1971 the Aleuts had no legal rights of their own land and were forced to live in a legal version of their landless hell. Their claim to their islands was recognized by neither the Russians nor the Americans, and therefore was abused by both. People were moved from their traditional homes in the interests of private profits, the convenience of governments, or the exigencies of war. The Aleuts would never be truly free until the land that had belonged to their ancestors was restored to them.

The United States Government did not make a land treaty with any of the Alaskan natives, as they had done with the Indian tribes in the continental United States. When Alaska became a state in 1958, most of its land was, in fact, owned by the federal government; consequently, the State insisted on the right to acquire 103 million acres of federal land, disclaiming any title or right to natives' land. Since the right or title to land was not defined, the Tlingit and Haida tribes went to court

immediately to sue for their land that had been taken away in the past. In 1959, they won the right to be compensated for their lost land, but the form of the compensation was left unspecified. At the same time, other Alaskan native groups, including the Pribilof people, were fighting their individual battles for their land. Finally, in 1967, the Alaska Federation of Natives (AFN) was organized to unite all of the Alaskan natives in their common fight for a federal settlement to their claims. Flore Lekanof and Iliodor Philemonof from St. George were both active in the AFN's united effort on behalf of all the Alaskan natives. Not all native groups agreed with the AFN, but its organization was an important step in the solidification of the demands of the people for their land.

In 1968, oil was discovered on the North Slope of Alaska; the largest pool of oil ever found in the North or South Americas. The discovery of oil intensified the need to settle the land question in Alaska because no oil could be drilled until the ownership of the land was clear. When there are fortunes to be made, people find a renewed interest in settling their differences.

At the same time as vast oceans of oil under the North Slope were discovered, the political scene in Washington D.C. shifted. Senator Bob Bartlett, who had led the Pribilof peoples' fight on many issues, died, leaving Alaskan natives without his support when they needed him the most. On the same day as Senator Bartlett's death, the outgoing Secretary of the Interior, Stewart Udall, imposed a complete land freeze on the State of Alaska until the land claims issue was settled. The U.S. could no longer ignore the natives' land claims and would have to negotiate a settlement before any more land transactions took place in Alaska.

During the 92nd Congress in 1971, three different land claim bills were submitted in Congress, all of which fell short of what Alaska natives felt was their due for the land they had lost. Then in April, President Richard Nixon proposed a settlement that was more generous than anything the House or the Senate had considered. This proposal was accepted by Congress, and signed by the President on December 18, 1971 as the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act. This new law was destined to have an enormous impact on the economic, political, and social structure of the Alaskan natives. Forty million acres of land were to be distributed to the natives, 22 million acres on the basis of population distribution, 18 million acres on the basis of how much

land each native group had lost in the past Alaskan natives would also be paid \$962,500,000 over an eleven year period through twelve regional corporations. The regional corporations were required to distribute 55% of the money they received from the federal government; 10% would be given directly to the individual native members of the corporation and 45% would go to village corporations. Therefore, the Alaskan natives had to organize both village and regional corporations that would be the vehicles for distributing the land and the money that they had been awarded.

The regional corporation for the Aleuts, including the ones living on the Pribilofs, was organized in 1972 and called the Aleut Corporation. The Aleut League, a non-profit organization which worked with the Aleut Corporation, was organized at the same time. In July of 1973, the local corporation for the village of St. Paul, the Tanadgusix (Our Land) Corporation, held its first meeting. The people of St. George established the Tanaq Corporation. The people of St. Paul elected a Board of Directors for their corporation and Agafon Krukoff, Jr. became the first president. A year later, Mike Zacharpf was elected President; and Victor Mercurief became the land planner for the Corporation. Eventually, Larry Mercurieff returned to St. Paul to become their business manager.

The Tanadgusix Corporation is the largest single group in the Aleut Corporation, with 549 out of the 3,300 stockholders.¹¹ As a result of their comparatively large population, the Tanadgusix Corporation was entitled to select 138,240 acres of land for its shareholders. It selected essentially all of the land on St. Paul except for the fur seal rookeries; it also selected land on Umnak and Unalaska Islands and on the Alaskan Peninsula. The land that had been selected by the Tanadgusix Corporation on Umnak Island is within a few miles of Anangula Island, where the archeological excavations of Professor Laughlin have unearthed the villages of ancient Aleuts more than 7,000 years old. The sea mammals still swim past this corner of the Bering Sea and the rich marine environment that has encouraged continuous settlement of the Island for over 7,000 years still exists. Therefore, Umnak Island is a fitting place to begin a new investment in the future of the Pribilof people, within sight of their ancient beginnings.

The leaders of the Pribilof Corporations now have the responsibility of determining how the land and financial resources of the Corpora-

tions will be distributed and used. It is a time of major transition for the Pribilof people. They have won their struggle for political and economic freedom. Now they are faced with the challenges that have grown out of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act. And these new challenges will stretch many years into the future of the Pribilof people.