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Haa Kusteeyí, Our Culture

TLINGIT LIFE STORIES

Edited by Nora Marks Dauenhauer
and Richard Dauenhauer

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Cover art by Jo Ann George.

diséigu aa uhaan,
ka haa eetéex kei kana.en aa
kagéi yís
haa léelk'w háas kaadéi

*written for those who are now alive
and for those who are yet unborn
in memory of those
who have gone before us*

Haa at.óowu haa kusteeyíx sitee.

Our at.óow are our life.

— Emma Marks (interview)

*Do not surrender your honor to another people
or your dignity to a strange nation.*

— Baruch 4:3

Then fight for it.

— Peter Simpson

*Tell it the way Grandpa told it,
tell it the way Grandma told it,
so we can believe it.*

*Tell it with honor and dignity
so we will be honored and dignified
by the whole world.*

— Tom Porter (Akwesasne Mohawk)

to the planners of the Native
American Writers Conference,
Saranac Lake, N.Y., September 1990

California. The penal clause in the Alaska bill is somewhat mild, the usual law providing for a maximum between \$100 and \$500, or imprisonment up to six months, or abatement of the public place as a public nuisance.

The Alaskan bill provided for not more than thirty days imprisonment or \$250 fine, or both. When floor debate on the measure began, Roy and Elizabeth were in attendance daily. The procedures of the legislature at that time were such that citizens could address the assembly directly and testify during the sessions; the public could speak from the gallery during the debates, and Roy and Elizabeth Peratrovich waited for the opportunity to present their views. Roy went first, but it was Elizabeth's final oratorical duel with Senator Allen Shattuck that won the day. The full transcript of the day's debate is reproduced here from the official Senate Record. It begins with a personal attack on the Peratrovichs' birth and a racial attack against Native people in their own ancestral land.

Senator Tolber Scott: Mixed breeds are the source of trouble. It is only they who wish to associate with the whites. It would have been better if the Eskimos had put up signs "No Whites Allowed." This issue is simply an effort to create political capital for some legislators. Certainly white women have done their part in keeping the races distinct. If white men had done as well, there would be no racial feeling in Alaska.

Senator Grenold Collins: I'd like to speak in support of Senator Scott. The Eskimos of St. Lawrence Island have not suffered from the White Man's evil, and they are well off. Eskimos are not an inferior race, but they are an individual race. The pure Eskimos are proud of their origin and are aware that harm comes to them from mixing with whites. It is the mixed breed who is not accepted by either race who causes trouble. I believe in racial pride and do not think this bill will do other than arouse bitterness. Why, we should prohibit the sale of liquor to these Natives—that's the real root of our troubles.

Senator Frank Whaley: I am also against the Equal Rights Bill. I personally would prefer not to have to sit next to these Natives in a theater. Why, they smell bad. As a bush pilot, I believe from my experiences that this legislation is a lawyer's dream and a "natural" in creating hard feelings between whites and Natives. However, I will vote for this bill if we amend it by striking Section II which reads: "Any person who shall violate or aid or incite such violation shall be

deemed guilty of a misdemeanor punishable by imprisonment in jail for not more than one month or fined not more than \$50 or both."

Senator O. D. Cochran: I am personally assailed by Senator Whaley's remarks. I stand in support of the Equal Rights Bill. Discrimination does exist. In Nome, an Eskimo woman was forcibly removed from a theater when she dared to sit in the "white section." And I have a list of similar occurrences based solely on my own experiences that would occupy the full afternoon to relate.

Senator Walker: I too would like to state my support for the legislation. I know of no instance where a Native died of a broken heart, but I do know of situations where discrimination has forced Indian women into lives "worse than death."

Roy Peratrovich: I would like to remind the legislature that the Honorable Ernest Gruening, in his report to the Secretary of the Interior, as well as his message to the legislature, has recognized the existence of discrimination. Even the plank adopted by the Democratic Party at its Fairbanks convention favors the Equal Rights Bill. In fact, members of that committee are present in this Senate body.

Senator Allen Shattuck: Mr. Peratrovich, as I mentioned to you before, this bill will aggravate, rather than allay the little feeling that now exists. Our native cultures have ten centuries of white civilization to encompass in a few decades. I believe that considerable progress has already been made, particularly in the last fifty years, but still much progress needs to be made.

Roy Peratrovich: Only an Indian can know how it feels to be discriminated against. Either you are for discrimination or you are against it, accordingly as you vote on this Bill.

Senator Shattuck: This legislation is wrong. Rather than being brought together, the races should be kept further apart. Who are these people, barely out of savagery, who want to associate with us whites, with 5,000 years of recorded civilization behind us?

Elizabeth Peratrovich: I would not have expected that I, who am barely out of savagery, would have to remind the gentlemen with 5,000 years of recorded civilization behind them of our Bill of Rights. When my husband and I came to Juneau and sought a home in a nice neighborhood where our children could play happily with our neighbor's children, we found such a house and arranged to lease it. When the owners learned that we were Indians, they said no. Would we be compelled to live in the slums?

"There was an awesome silence in the hall" the newspaper, quoting Roy, later reported.

Senator Shattuck: Will this law eliminate discrimination?

Elizabeth Peratrovich: Do your laws against larceny, rape and murder prevent those crimes? No law will eliminate crimes, but at least you, as legislators, can assert to the world that you recognize the evil of the present situation and speak of your intent to help us overcome discrimination. There are three kinds of persons who practice discrimination: First, the politician who wants to maintain an inferior minority group so that he can always promise them something; second, the "Mr. and Mrs. Jones" who aren't quite sure of their social position, and who are nice to you on one occasion and can't see you on others, depending on whom they are with; and third, the great superman, who believes in the superiority of the white race. This super race attitude is wrong and forces our fine Native people to be associated with less than desirable circumstances.

[Applause from the gallery and from the Senate floor.]

Presiding Senator, Joe Green: Thank you, Mrs. Peratrovich. You may be seated.

Senator Walker: I move to close debate.

To the shock and dismay of some, the delight of others, Roy and Elizabeth celebrated that night by dancing in the ballroom of the Baranof Hotel. The "No Natives" sign had already disappeared.

The next afternoon's newspaper reported that Elizabeth Peratrovich "Climaxed the hearing with a biting condemnation of the 'super race' attitude. It was the neatest performance of any witness to yet appear before this session, and there were a few red senatorial ears as she regally left the chamber." Governor Gruening added that her plea could not have been more effective. Years afterward, he stated that without Mrs. Peratrovich's eloquent testimony the measure would not have passed. The Senate voted eleven to five in favor of the Bill on February 8, and Governor Gruening signed it into law on February 16, 1945.

Just as Elizabeth Peratrovich predicted, racial discrimination has not been totally eliminated. There have been only two cases tried under the Equal Rights Law, both by blacks who were denied equal accommodations. The proprietors were both found guilty of violating the anti-discrimination laws. Though discrimination cannot be eliminated in the minds of people (the commandment to love one another is not enforceable), discrimination can be controlled and punished as unac-



February 16, 1945: Governor Ernest Gruening signs the Anti-Discrimination Act passed on February 8 by the 1945 Territorial Legislature. Left to right: Sen. O. D. Cochran, D-Nome; Mrs. Elizabeth Peratrovich, ANS Grand Campaigner for civil rights for Alaska Native people; Gov. Ernest Gruening; Rep. Edward Anderson, D-Nome; Sen. Norman Walker, D-Ketchikan; Mr. Roy Peratrovich, ANB Grand Camp President. Photo courtesy Alaska State Library, Alaska Territorial Governors Collection, PCA 274-1-2.