

A convention is a convention is a convention but. . .

by Donna Behrend

It was a convention like most other conventions I've attended. Lots of people doing lots of things in lots of places. But the 38th annual National Congress of American Indians convention held October 12 through 16 was extra-special in one respect. It was held in Anchorage, Alaska—a city many of us had not had the good fortune to visit until NCAI.

It appeared that the location of this year's convention was a drawing card, for nearly 1,200 native Americans and native Alaskans crowded the meeting room. Nearly 50 representatives from Warm Springs attended the convention. NCAI had not been held in Anchorage since 1969.

Long lines of delegates crowded the lobby of the Sheraton Hotel waiting to register on the first day of the convention. Though most had pre-registered, they were still required to wait through the middle of "Your name please, tribal affiliation etc., etc."

Because of the delay with registration, NCAI vice president Delfin Lovato couldn't call the meeting to order until well after the scheduled 9 a.m. convention opening. Once the large crowd was settled, the officers were introduced, the colors were presented by the National Guard and the invocation was given.

The major theme address was delivered by Byron Mallott, chairman of Sealaska Corporation. This year's theme was "Spirit-Sovereignty-Survival," a theme which Mallott praised for its timeliness. "It is a theme that courses through the thinking, the very fiber of every native American any time he or she pauses to consider the future," stated Mallott.

Mallott urged the conventioners to let the 1981 NCAI convention to be a time of reflection. "...consider our collective futures, ...take the words spirit-sovereignty-survival and transform them into a vision—a vision that cloaks us in the mantle of the Indian spirit, a vision of sovereignty that shapes and transforms our destinies, a vision of survival that takes our spirit and our sovereignty and shapes a world in which we survive as Indian people; a world to which we contribute our racial and cultural beauty, our philosophy and our religion, our dance and our oneness with the natural environment—a world in which racial and cultural diversity is celebrated and honored rather than ridiculed and destroyed."

Mallott went on to summarize the struggles of Alaska natives. He explained the 1971 Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act and the status of the Alaska natives at that time. "The average level of education was 8th grade. Children from the 203 villages were still being sent many miles, some thousands, away from home to attend high school, and even grade school in some instances because their village lacked these facilities. Most lacked running water, sewer, electricity, health



DINNER WITH THE SECRETARY—Warm Springs delegates and visitors to Anchorage during NCAI dined with Assistant Secretary of the Interior of the Bureau of Indian Affairs Ken Smith. Pictured here is Smith (fourth from right) with tribal members who dressed in regalia for the occasion. Nearly 50 people attended the dinner held at Captain Cook's Hotel.

Spilyay Tymoo photo by Behrend

centers and adequate transportation systems."

Continuing, Mallott said, "Alaska natives had the highest unemployment and underemployment figures in the state. Up to 2/3 of Alaska's 60,000 natives were still engaged in subsistence, living off the land." Life expectancy and infant mortality among Alaska natives were significantly higher than the national average, said Mallott. Services rendered to the Alaskan people was greatly hampered, said Mallott, "not only by inadequate funding and poor or non-existent program delivery, but also by misconception and lack of understanding of the real needs and aspirations of the very people to be served."

Mallott stressed the importance of careful cultural, racial and financial planning to ensure the future for all natives—both Alaskan and American and that any changes must come from within and be originated by natives themselves. "...We must re-educate ourselves to lead. Leadership is the most difficult responsibility for an individual to accept for it requires both personal sacrifice and the making of judgements that are often displeasing to many. Not to accept this responsibility, however, will be acquiring to the forces of economic, environmental and cultural destruction."

Mallott concluded his comments with a statement made by late-senator Robert Kennedy, who Mallott felt understood that "two separate spirits could fly the same wind."

Kennedy said, "Our future may lie beyond our vision. But it is the impulse of America that neither fate nor nature nor the irresistible tides of history, but the work of our own hands matched to reason and principle, that will determine destiny."

Thus ended the morning session of the first day of the convention. Following adjournment, the hotel restaurant was flooded with convention-goers. It was tough to get a seat but even tougher to pay the bill. Most breakfasts

and lunches ranged from \$7 to \$10—just a bit higher than our local Deschutes Crossing or the Deli!

The afternoon session consisted of business reports including the executive director's message, treasurer's and committee reports.

Day Two:

Among the several speakers on the second day of the convention was Ken Smith, Assistant Secretary of Indian Affairs. It was obvious that all tribes across the nation were, and still are, concerned about the apparent lack of communication between the tribes and federal government and the proposed budget cuts. Smith, looking very much the busy man he is, and quite dapper, dealt very well with those concerns.

After a few hectic weeks in office, Smith realized the need to formulate a consultation policy. A task force was assigned to draft such a policy. Smith stated, "I soon found out that, 1) I had to make some immediate decisions that couldn't wait for a task force to grind out a process, and 2) there were complications in the consultation concept that I learned about after I started functioning as Assistant Secretary."

Continuing, Smith said, "Today I want to reassure you that I firmly believe in the principle that Indian leaders should participate, and have a voice in the planning of policies and programs that affect your communities and your lives. I intend, to the best of my ability, to implement that principle in my role as Assistant Secretary."

Smith said his department will, in the future, work much more closely with agency Superintendents and Area Directors. "How else can we better communicate with you in the field than through the line officers who work with you and with us. We will make the communications role of the superintendents and Area Directors a factor in their performance evaluations."

Smith continued, stating, "It would be clearly inconsistent with my strong belief in self-

determination and the importance of good tribal governments to fail to recognize the value and necessity of an effective consultation process. We want you to be involved in the making of decisions that affect you. We need your recommendations and your suggestions. Bureaucrats don't know all the answers."

Of the 1982 budget, Smith said, "it's tough." He said the BIA fared better than most in the first reduction, but then the President asked for an additional 12% reduction. "...We took an additional 12% from each of our major appropriations: program operations, construction and irrigation and road construction. As a consequence, we couldn't ease the cut in program operations by taking most of it in construction."

He continued, saying, "We had to make hard decisions quickly and we had to make these budget revisions without the opportunity for any consultation. We tried to protect those activities which we consider basic to our mission. These included our elementary and secondary schools, law enforcement, general assistance for needy people, payments for dependent and abused children, trust and natural resource programs, and the basic maintenance and operation of facilities and roads. We know that we had to cut some very popular programs—Johnson O'Malley, for instance. JOM, as you know, is a supplemental program for Indian students in public schools. It is very useful, but not absolutely essential," he said.

Furthering his comments, Smith said, "By cutting supplemental kinds of programs, we were able to hold the reduction in the education formula budget to two percent below 1981 levels. They are not cosmetic, they are essential."

Smith further explained the proposed budget trimming. The entire federal government is anticipating further cuts in 1983 and 1984 to achieve the President's goal of a balanced

budget and the end of the present extreme inflation. "In anticipating of these future reductions we are considering closing or consolidating several Area Offices by the end of fiscal year 1982. Because of the lengthy lead time and cost of implementing such changes, no savings could be expected to be achieved until 1983. We also anticipate that we can effect future savings through the closure of some of the off-reservation boarding schools. We will be discussing these expected changes with you to obtain your views."

These federal cutbacks, said Smith, "lead to one very obvious conclusion: Indian tribes 'must become more self-sufficient and less dependent on the federal government...the budget cuts may break us of a harmful addiction to easy-come, easy-go federal money and push us into taking some of the necessary steps for achieving real economic development.'"

Past reservation economic development programs have failed, said Smith. "These failures have sometimes left tribes worse off than they would have been if they had never received the federal assistance. I cannot repeat too often that the key ingredient—the absolute essential—for solid economic development on a reservation is a strong, stable, competent tribal government."

Smith also told of some of the future financial intentions of the Department of the Interior. Smith said the department was requesting \$5 million to assist small tribes which do not have an adequate government. In addition to that, the BIA is also requesting \$10 million for seed money grants to assist Indian enterprises to "realize opportunities for development of Indian resources. These grants will be more strictly managed and enforced than any previous BIA grants for economic development. We anticipate requiring that at least 75% of the project funding be non-federal."

Concluding his remarks, Smith stated, "I think we will help you to more efficiently use available funds through improved coordination of programs from all the federal agencies. As you know, I am heading up a Cabinet Council working group that will be reviewing an Indian policy for the Reagan Administration. This gives me the opportunity to work closely with leaders from the other agencies. I believe there is much that we can do together to eliminate waste and increase productivity of programs for the Indian community....I look forward to working with you to help Indian tribes achieve increased self-determination, economic independence, and direction of their own affairs."

Following the numerous speeches, the crowd once again broke for lunch—the same long waiting lines and the same high prices.

During the afternoon session, Jose Morales spoke about the world Council of Indigenous Peoples organization of which he is president. Morales spoke with the aid of

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