Indian Affairs - Office of Public Affairs

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The selection of Commissioner of Indian Affairs Morris Thompson as one of America's ten outstanding young men was described today as "symbolic of the achievements and progress of all American Indians," by Secretary of the Interior Rogers C. B. Morton.

"One of the reasons Morrie was given this honor was because he overcame the odds against a poor Athabascan Indian from the fish camps of the Yukon River. Today there are thousands of Indians overcoming similar odds and moving towards greatness in various fields," Morton said.

Announcement of the selection of Thompson by the U. S. Junior Chamber of Commerce was made January 12. The brief citation for him said that he "overcame great odds to distinguish himself as one of the Nation's most effective spokesmen for his people, the American Indian." It also noted that he is the youngest Commissioner of Indian Affairs in the 140 year history of the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

Thompson, 35, was the first Alaskan Native to be Director of the Bureau of Indian Affairs in that state. He was appointed to that position in 1971 after serving as a special assistant for Indian Affairs to former Interior Secretary Walter J. Hickel. He was sworn in as Commissioner of Indian Affairs December 3, 1973.

"The Indian community has taken substantial strides toward self-determination under Commissioner Thompson's leadership," Morton said.

He noted that two very important pieces of legislation had been enacted: The Indian Financing Act and the Indian Self Determination and Education Assistance Act. He also pointed out that most of the major positions in the Bureau have been filled with Indians, that the number of Indian college students has surged upward and that a backlog of Indian rights issues is being systematically unjammed.

"There are still many problems to be solved," Morton said, "but the Indian community is moving faster than ever toward the solutions. Morris Thompson can take a lot of credit for this progress. He is certainly deserving of this honor given him by the U.S. Junior Chamber. I am sure he sees it as a tribute to all American Indians and a recognition of their hopes for further progress."