



Indian Affairs - Office of Public Affairs

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For Immediate Release: May 15, 1972

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A Bureau of Indian Affairs Task Force" in Sacramento, Calif. processed more than 5,000 applications for Eskimo, Indian, and Aleut homesteads in Alaska in an eight week period ending April 21, approximately 20 times the number of homestead applications the Bureau handled in the previous 66 years.

The Bureau of Indian Affairs processed applications and certified to, the Department of the Interior's Bureau of Land Management that the applicants are Alaska Natives. The Sacramento Project Office became the clearing house for a massive shuffling of forms, U. S. Geological quadrangle sheets, and hand drawn maps in response to a plea for help from the Bureau's Anchorage Office.

Commissioner of Indian Affairs Louis R. Bruce, commenting on the project, said "This is an example of how dedicated Federal employees pitched in to help Alaska Natives who wish to continue to live as their ancestors have for centuries."

The avalanche of paperwork was precipitated by the repeal of the Native Allotment Act of 1906. The 1906 Act allowed Alaska Eskimos, Indians, and Aleuts -- of mixed or full-blood up to 160 acres of land in as many as four separate parcels that they had been using and occupying for subsistence in traditional Native manner.

The 1906 Native Allotment Act was repealed by the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act which was signed by President Nixon December 18, 1971. No Natives could file allotment applications after that date. The applications had to be recorded in the proper land office of the Bureau of Land Management of the Department of the Interior so that lands claimed by the Natives could be noted on land office records and withdrawn from other entry or claim.

Why four separate parcels? Well, unlike the homesteaders in the mid-west and the west in the 19th Century, the average Alaska Native doesn't spend all of his time farming a single 160-acre plot.

Instead, he may spend part of the year in his village, part of the year fishing; part in another location picking berries; part of the year hunting and perhaps another part trapping in order to make his living. He needs a home base for himself and his family near each of these activities.

From time immemorial most of the Native population has been living this way, and since the white man came they have lived this way on public domain land.

The Native Allotment Act provided a way for the Alaska Native to obtain title to his land. But by 1969, only 212 I had been able to perfect their claims.

In the late 1960's, it became obvious that the Congress intended to repeal the Native Allotment Act and replace it with the Land Claims Settlement Act. This would allow Native corporations to acquire large blocks of land, but would limit individuals to acquiring only their primary place of residence.

Other benefits were available for the individual under the Native Allotment Act that were not available

under the Land Claims Settlement Act. In some instances this included the right to the subsurface, as well as the surface of the land.

The BIA knew that there were thousands of Alaska Natives living on public domain who had not taken the opportunity to file the necessary papers to protect their subsistence lands. Most of them didn't know that once the Land Claims Bill was passed, they would lose these lands.

So, working with the Office of Economic Opportunity and other agencies, in 1969 the BIA began a village-to-campsite campaign throughout Alaska. Representatives of the OEO's Community Action program personally visited thousands of Alaska Natives. They brought the forms necessary for recording land applications and helped the Native fill them out.

Their problem was complicated by the fact that most of the land in Alaska has not been surveyed. So, in place of the usual legal subdivision description of Natives' lands, these workers used hand drawn maps or tracings of quadrangle maps and located the property in question with an "X ".

For more than two years, they continued this search and assist mission. By the time the Land Claims Settlement Act was approved, they had helped more than 8,000 Alaska Natives prepare applications.

In Anchorage, the BIA Agency Office faced other problems.

The Realty Branch, with a staff of four, had the task of processing and filing the land applications. At the rate the work was proceeding, this office might have been able to finish the job in the early 1980's -- assuming it didn't do anything else. However, with the enactment of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act, December 18, 1971, immediate action became necessary.

An appeal was made to superiors in Washington for help. The problem was presented to the Office of the Secretary of the Interior, Roger C. B. Morton.

The first solution considered was hiring additional help for the Anchorage BIA Agency or detailing BIA personnel from other offices to this Agency. But it was difficult to get enough volunteers to go to Alaska. In addition, the cost of transportation and per diem for BIA stateside personnel to Anchorage would have been prohibitive.

It was decided to bring the mountain of paperwork to the Bureau people in the lower States. Washington arranged with the BIA's Sacramento Area Realty Officer to make space available in the BIA Sacramento office.

BIA Alaska Realty personnel moved to Sacramento late last February. With them they brought their applications and hand drawn map. The Washington Office took care of the details of transferring qualified technicians from BIA offices in Arizona, New Mexico, Oregon, Montana, Minnesota, Washington, and Oklahoma to Sacramento on temporary detail. Arrangements for office space, supplies, transportation, and housing for the task force were made by the Sacramento office.

This crew, averaging about 25 persons working at anyone time, was busy transferring the information obtained in the field onto quadrangle maps of Alaska, marked as carefully as possible, and completing the forms to be filed with the Bureau of Land Management.

Last month, the Sacramento project was completed. The Alaska Natives that have valid allotment

applications and comply with the 1906 Native Allotment Act will be able to continue to live as their ancestors have for centuries, fishing, hunting, picking berries and trapping on land they can -- legally -- call their own.

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