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Home > News > Battle for Brotherhood: Alaskans remember the Peratroviches

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Battle for Brotherhood: Alaskans remember the Peratroviches

By Libby Sterling | CCW Staff Writer

JUNEAU - Monday, Feb. 16 is President's Day. Many people around the United States have the day off from work or school. But Alaskans are celebrating more than just George Washington's Birthday. Feb. 16 is also Elizabeth Peratrovich Day, honoring a woman who was instrumental in passing the Anti-Discrimination Act of 1945. The Act prescribed penalties for racial discrimination in Alaska long before the Civil Rights movement took place in the rest of the nation. Elizabeth and her husband, Roy, were part of a team of Native Alaskans who fought a long battle with the government for racial equality.

The Battle

In pre-1945 Juneau, it was not easy to function in society as a Native. They were official U.S. citizens, but they were not treated as such. Signs were posted in the windows of businesses saying "No Natives Allowed," or "We cater to white trade only." Schools, movie theaters and neighborhoods were segregated solely based on race. Even though Natives paid territory taxes just like everyone else, they were denied nearly all government services.

In 1941, a white woman named Henrietta Newton who was visiting Juneau attempted to go to a beauty salon for a perm. She had called ahead and made an appointment, but when she arrived, she was turned away. The owner of the salon said, "I'm sorry, we don't cater to Indian trade." Newton had been mistaken to be Native. She left the shop angrily and brought her testimony the Alaska Native Brotherhood and Alaska Native Sisterhood. Such began the fight for equality.

Roy Peratrovich was the ANB Grand President at the time, and Elizabeth was the ANS Grand Vice-President. They wrote a letter to Gov. Ernest Gruening, who also was troubled by the discrimination that was taking place in his state. After all, Juneau wasn't the only town in Alaska facing this battle. The governor had been receiving discrimination complaints from places even as far away as Nome.

Meanwhile, Elizabeth got together a group of women to lobby Senator Frank Whaley of Nome. They met him in his office and expressed to him what it felt like to be discriminated against. There was nearly nowhere in town that they were welcome. The Senator was surprised that beautiful young women like these were denied access to local venues. This was the beginning stage of Elizabeth's strategy.

ANB and ANS Grand Presidents and members began traveling around the state. They raised awareness of the current fight, took note of other discrimination that was occurring, started new ANB and ANS camps and enlisted supporters



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for their cause.

Once it was brought to the floor, the anti-discrimination bill was violently opposed by several representatives. A number of witnesses testified, including senators and church leaders. Finally, Elizabeth rose to give her address. She spoke quietly and steadily.

"I would not have expected that I, who am barely out of savagery, would have to remind gentlemen with five thousand years of recorded civilization behind them of our Bill of Rights," she said. "When my husband and I came to Juneau and sought a home in a nice neighborhood where our children could play happily with our neighbors' children, we found such a house and had 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 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 who they are with. Third, the great superman who believes in the superiority of the white race."

She continued to say that the discrimination suffered by herself and her friends had "forced the finest of our race to associate with white trash."

At the close of her testimony, the gallery and senate floor burst into applause. The Senate passed the bill 11 to 5. It was the first bill of its kind to be passed in any state or territory since the Civil War.

After this, Roy and Elizabeth celebrated at the Baranof Hotel. They danced the night away in a place that they had never previously been welcome.

Gov. Gruening recalled, "Had it not been for that beautiful Tlingit woman, Elizabeth Peratrovich, being on hand every day in the hallways, it would have never passed."

The first Elizabeth Peratrovich Day was observed on Feb. 16, 1989. This recognized day is one of many ways that the work of Elizabeth is currently being remembered.

A Son's Remembrance

Roy Peratrovich Jr., the son of Elizabeth and Roy Sr., is an artist and engineer and has designed and created a number of monuments in their honor. One of these is "The Brotherhood Bridge" in Juneau that brings cars on Glacier Highway over the Mendenhall River. It features bronze plaques symbolizing the Raven and Eagle clans standing firmly on a rock. This is representative of his father (of the Eagle Clan) and mother (of the Raven Clan) standing firm in their efforts for brotherhood.

"I was around 11 years old when the law was passed," Roy Jr. said. "As a young boy, luckily, I had a good childhood. My parents shielded us from some of the problems they were witnessing."

In June of 2008, Roy Jr. unveiled a monument to his parents in Peratrovich Park in Anchorage. He described it as "a futuristic totem pole" standing 10 feet tall. It tells the story of Raven stealing the sun and bringing light to the world. It features a life size bronze raven atop a smoke trail made of stainless steel. At the base of the monument is polished black granite tile, symbolic of the house of the chief from which Raven stole the sun. In Raven's beak is the sun, made from polished, clear quartz. The placement of the monument is such that at sunrise and sunset, the sunlight hits the quartz and causes it to glitter.

"The idea was that when people are walking by, they would see Peratrovich Park and they wouldn't be wondering who those Russians are," Roy Jr. said. He wanted people to be attracted to the monument and be able to read the story of what his parents did, which is engraved on the base of the monument. The weight of the structure is nearly 350 lbs, and it was built to withstand 150 mph winds.

"It's pretty skookum," Roy Jr. said. "It should last for a while."

Roy Jr. also has a bust of Elizabeth on display in the foyer of the Capitol.

Remembering the Rest

A film in remembrance of the Alaskan civil rights story will be previewed at the Cantor Film Center in New York on Feb. 17 and will be aired on PBS later this year. "For the Rights of All: Ending Jim Crow in Alaska" is a feature documentary written and produced by Jeffrey Silverman. Much of the film was shot in Juneau.

Nancy Barnes, who works at the Capitol, had a small role in the film. She said she was present when the original bill was signed, so to be part of the reenactment was very emotional.

"It was like being transported back in time," Barnes said. "It's a story that needs to be told, not only in Alaska, but

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Barnes wishes that there be equal recognition for Roy Sr. as well as for Elizabeth.

"He was right there with her," Barnes said.

Sen. Albert Kookesh of Angoon echoed these sentiments. He and Roy Sr. were good friends.

"I really think, in my heart of hearts, that Roy Peratrovich deserves the recognition as much as anybody," Kookesh said.

He also gave credit to all of the people at ANB and ANS who worked just as hard as the PERATROVICHES to get the anti-discrimination bill passed.

Roy said of his wife, "She was the manager. She saw the possibilities. She never once stepped out in front ... (but) made it look as if I made my own way."

"We're leaving out a lot of people who deserve the recognition," Kookesh said. "This was a fight that continued for years. It didn't just happen. I don't want anybody to think I'm putting Elizabeth down. I'm pushing Roy up. I just want people to remember that other people carried that torch. If Elizabeth Peratrovich were alive and I brought that statement to her, she would completely agree with me."

There will be a celebration from 4-8 p.m. on Feb. 16 at the ANB Hall in Juneau. There will be performances by students from local schools, award presentations, Native dance groups, and refreshments.

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