

Roy Peratrovich: Gruening Civil Rights Fight Recalled

Description

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http://www.alaskool.org/projects/ancsa/articles/ADN/Gruening_Rights_Fight.htm

by Donn Liston, Daily News Staff Writer

Anchorage Daily News, June 28, 1974

Long before civil rights confrontations of the last decade, **Ernest Gruening** fought for equality among people.

And with the death of Alaska's "grandfather figure" Wednesday, Native people are remembering what he did to ensure their human rights at a time when they were threatened.

"I remember in 1941, when I moved back to Juneau to serve my second term with the **Alaska Native Brotherhood (ANB)**," explained **Roy Peratrovich**, superintendent for the Anchorage area Bureau of Indian Affairs, "I was shocked to see signs in store windows saying, 'No Natives Allowed,' or even 'No Natives or Dogs Allowed.' "

Peratrovich says he traveled to other parts of the state and saw more of the same. The ANB appealed the discrimination to Gov. Gruening, who helped them all the way.

"He was the mastermind behind the scenes," Peratrovich said. "All during the fight, he never wavered."

Gruening and representatives of the ANB met with proprietors of businesses where the signs were displayed while the problem worsened. An Eskimo girl in Nome dared to sit in the white section of the theater and was thrown out, emphasizing the need for action.

Peratrovich, who was grand president of the ANB, and his wife, now deceased, sat down with Gruening to work out a strategy. **Anthony Dimond**, Alaska's representative to the U.S. House, supplied sample bills and information to help frame legislation.

The bill was introduced into the state legislature in 1943 and defeated after a bitter floor fight. Peratrovich says an Anchorage legislator taught him his first lessons in "double-cross politics" when he promised to support the bill and changed over at the last minute. The bill was defeated with a tie vote.

The law finally was enacted in 1945 after three *Alaska Native Brotherhood* members were elected to the legislature.

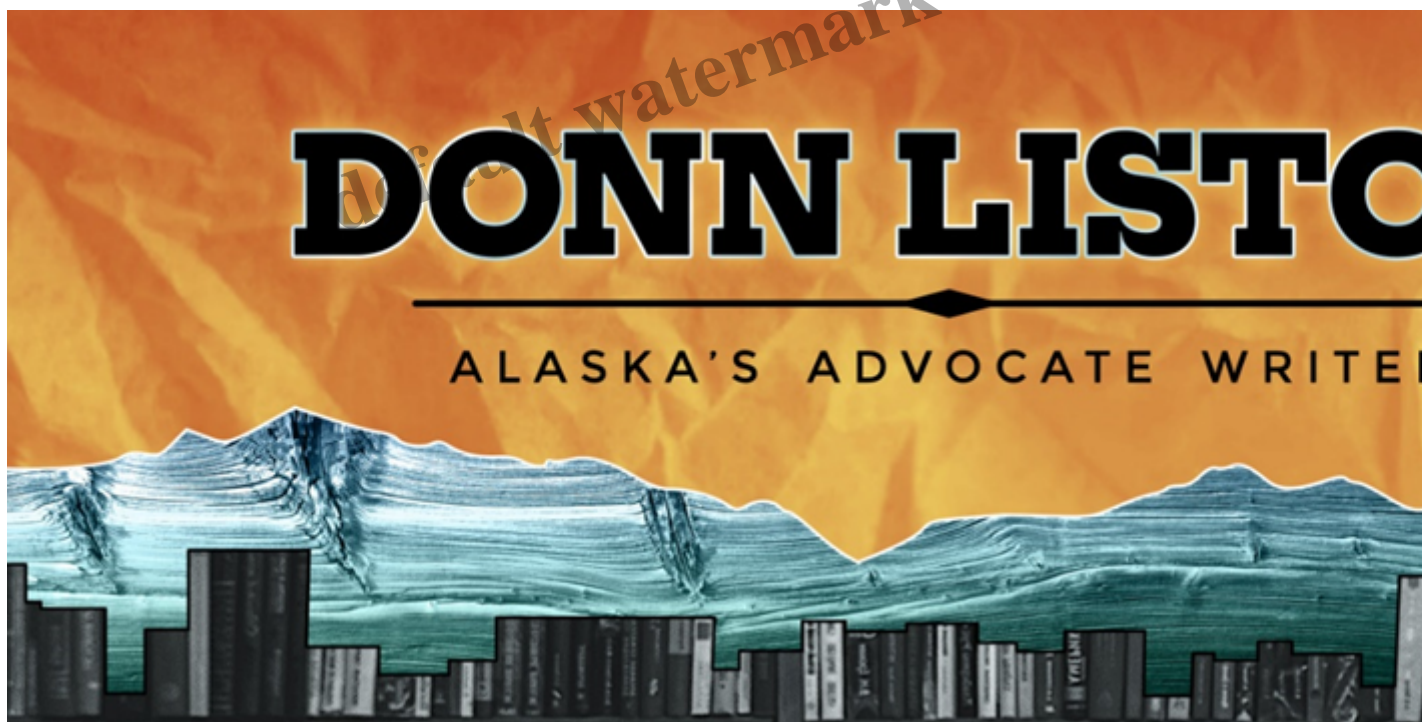
During that final fight, a church representative testified that it would take 30 to 100 years before an Indian could associate with whites if the measure passed, according to Peratrovich. When the final vote came, however, equal rights became a law in Alaska.

"I understand that bill is still the best in the United States," Peratrovich said. "It was 20 years ahead of its time."

Since the passage of the law, only one complaint has been filed, and that was won by a black.

Not only the Indian people but all minorities owe a great debt to Ernest Gruening," Peratrovich said. "It was tough to be an Indian back then. I'm glad times have changed."

For more about Roy Peratrovich: <https://donnliston.net/1974/06/coping-with-bureaucracy-reprint-from/>



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Date Created

June 28, 1974

Author

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