

## Debate on the Anti-Discrimination Legislation

Excerpted from  
A Recollection of Civil Rights Leader

**Elizabeth Peratrovich**

1911-1958

At

[http://www.alaskool.org/projects/native\\_gov/recollections/peratrovich/Elizabeth\\_1.htm](http://www.alaskool.org/projects/native_gov/recollections/peratrovich/Elizabeth_1.htm)

Fortunately, the anti-discrimination bill fared better. On a cold and bleak February afternoon in 1945, the legislative gallery was packed to the rafters. Juneau citizens turned out in force. According to Cecelia Kunz, who was present that day, the gallery doors were both open, even the hall was full of people. The ones in the back stood on chairs. There were quite a few Natives, especially men, ANB, ANS, and other Indian spectators. Seated among them was Elizabeth Peratrovich, a determined 34-year old ANS Grand President. Stylishly dressed in the fashion of the 1940s, her hair neatly coiffured, she waited patiently, her hands busily knitting as she listened.

The anti-discrimination bill was introduced by Edward Anderson, the Swedish-born former Mayor of Nome. The bill passed the House with little debate by a vote of 19 to 5. When it came up in the Senate, a two-hour discussion followed where it was violently opposed by Allen Shattuck. "Far from being brought closer together, which will result from this bill," he said, "the races should be kept further apart. Who are these people, barely out of savagery, who want to associate with us whites with 5,000 years of recorded civilization behind us?" Senator Frank Whaley, a bush pilot and gold miner from Fairbanks, also opposed the bill. Declaring that he had an amendment to propose to the measure, Whaley read a lengthy prepared address to the assembly. He labeled the measure "a lawyer's dream and a natural in creating hard feelings between whites and natives." Whaley said he did not want to sit next to an Eskimo in a theater, they smelled. Declaring their opposition to the law, unless amended, Senators Tolber Scott and Grenold Collins also spoke their feelings. Senator Scott declared, "Mixed breeds are the source of trouble, it is they only who wish to associate with the whites. It would have been better had the Eskimos put up signs 'No whites allowed.' This issue is simply an effort to create political capital for some legislators. Certainly white women have done their part in keeping the races distinct, if white men had done as well there would be no racial feeling in Alaska.

Senator Collens spoke in support of Senator Scott, "The Eskimos are not an inferior race, but they are an individual race. The pure Eskimos are proud of their origin and are aware that harm comes to them from mixing with whites. It is the mixed breed who is not accepted by either race who causes the trouble. I believe in racial pride and do not think this bill will do other than arouse bitterness. Why we should prohibit the sale of liquor to these Natives, that's the real root of our trouble. Mrs. Kunz recalls one Senator getting so upset he jumped up knocking his chair over and stomped out. The crowd booed his actions.

Senator O.D. Cochran declared himself "personally assailed" by Senator Whaley's remarks and raised his voice in favor of the bill citing instances of discrimination which

came from his own knowledge. Senator Walker also held firm in favor of the bill, Senator Joe Green was chairman of the hearing.

Elizabeth Peratrovich listened quietly as witnesses called for separation of the white and Native races in Alaska. She heard a church leader sermonize that it would take thirty to one hundred years before Alaska Natives would reach the equality of the white man.

Senator N.R. Walker asked Roy Peratrovich, as ANB Grand President, to stand and, following questions that established his education, background and right to speak for the Indians, he was then invited to express his views on the bill. Mr. Peratrovich pointed out that the Governor, in his report to the Secretary of the Interior, as well as in his message to the legislature, recognized the existence of discrimination. He quoted the plank adopted by the Democratic Party at its Fairbanks convention, which favored action on the Natives' behalf. A "plank" is stated principles that make up a platform or program of a political party. He read the names of the committee who helped frame that plank and pointed out that among them were members of the present Senate body. "Only Indians can know how it feels to be discriminated against," Peratrovich said. "Either you are for discrimination or you are against it accordingly as you vote on this bill," he added.

According to established legislative custom during the debate on the bill, an opportunity was offered to anyone present to voice their views. Elizabeth Peratrovich, Grand President for ANS, rose in the gallery and said she would like to be heard. She came to the floor, crossed it and sat next to the Senate President on his raised platform. Elizabeth was a beautiful woman with the ability to maintain her composure in even the most heated debate. As she stood before the all-male, predominately white legislators, the packed gallery was tense with expectation. Clearly, the passage of this bill would spell profound social change in Alaska.

"I would not have expected," Elizabeth said in a quiet steady voice, "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 or Rights. 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?" Her intelligence was obvious, her composure faultless. After giving a potent, neatly worded picture of discrimination against the Indians and other Native people, Mrs. Peratrovich said, "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." Discrimination suffered by herself and her friends, President Peratrovich told the assembled body, "has forced the finest of our race to associate with white trash." There was an awesome silence in the packed hall, you could hear a pin drop.

Asked by Senator Shattuck if she thought the proposed bill would eliminate discrimination, Elizabeth Peratrovich queried in rebuttal, "Do your laws against larceny and even murder prevent those crimes? No law will eliminate crimes but at least you as legislators can assert to the world that you recognize the evil of the present situation and speak your intent to help us overcome discrimination."

When she finished, there was a wild burst of applause from the gallery and senate floor alike. There was tears, crying. Her plea could not have been more effective. Opposition that had appeared to speak with a strong voice was forced to a defensive whisper at the close of that senate hearing by a five foot five inch Tlingit woman. The Senate passed the bill 11 to 5 on February 8, 1945. A new era in Alaska's racial relations had begun.

## TERRITORY OF ALASKA

Juneau, Alaska

### CHAPTER 2

#### AN ACT

To provide for full and equal accommodations, facilities and privileges to all citizens in places of public accommodation within the jurisdiction of the Territory of Alaska; to provide penalties to violations.

Be it enacted by the Legislature of the Territory of Alaska:

Section 1: All citizens within the jurisdiction of the Territory of Alaska shall be entitled to the full and equal enjoyment of accommodations, advantages, facilities and privileges of public inns, restaurants, eating houses, hotels, soda fountains, soft drink parlors, taverns, roadhouses, barber shops, beauty parlors, bathrooms, resthouses, theaters, skating rinks, cafes, ice cream parlors, transportation companies, and all other conveyances and amusements, subject only to the conditions and limitations established by law and applicable alike to all citizens.

Section 2: Any person who shall violate or aid or incite a violation of said full and equal enjoyment; or any person who shall display any printed or written sign indicating a discrimination on racial grounds of said full and equal enjoyment, for each day for which said sign is displayed shall be deemed guilty of a misdemeanor and upon conviction thereof shall be punished by imprisonment in jail for not more than thirty (30) days or fined no more than two hundred fifty (\$250.00) dollars, or both. Approved February 16, 1945

TERRITORY OF ALASKA

OFFICE OF THE AUDITOR

Juneau, Alaska

CHAPTER 21

AN ACT

To amend Section 20-I-4, Alaska Compiled Laws Annotated 1949, prescribing penalties for discrimination in providing full and equal accommodations, faculties and privileges to all citizens in places of accommodation within the jurisdiction of the Territory of Alaska.

Be it enacted by the Legislature of the Territory of Alaska:

Section 1: That Section 20-1-4, Alaska Compiled Laws Annotated 1949, is hereby amended to read as follows:

Sec. 20-1-4 Violation as misdemeanor: Punishment. Any person who shall violate or aid or incite a violation of said full and equal enjoyment, or any person who shall display and printed or written sign indicating a discrimination on racial grounds of said full and equal enjoyment, shall be deemed guilty of a misdemeanor and upon conviction thereof shall be punished by imprisonment in jail for not more than thirty (30) days or fined not more than \$250.00 or both. Approved March 2, 1949.

Of Elizabeth Peratrovich, the *DAILY ALASKA EMPIRE* wrote, "It was the neatest performance of any witness yet to appear before this session and there were a few red senatorial ears as she regally left the chambers."

That evening, Mr. and Mrs. Roy Peratrovich could be seen at the Baranoff Hotel, dancing all night long. Dancing amongst people they did not personally know, dancing in an accommodation where the day before they were not welcome. They celebrated. They were happy. They belonged.