

## **Governing Alaska The Constitutional Convention**

### **Envisioning the future**

Fifty-five delegates gathered in Fairbanks on November. 8, 1955 to begin drafting a constitution for a state that didn't exist.

The decision to hold a convention had not been an easy one. Pro-statehood forces believed in the early 1950s that a convention might delay the victory they wanted. They changed their minds when Congress failed to act.

The Territorial Legislature approved the plan to have Alaskans draft a model constitution for the proposed state. Delegates ran for seats at the convention. The 55 delegates matched the size of the group that drafted the United States Constitution in 1787.

Anchorage, Juneau and Fairbanks sent 31 delegates, leaving 24 to represent other communities from Kotzebue to Ketchikan. The mix included 20 business people, along with 13 lawyers and miners, fishermen, professionals and homemakers. There was one homesteader, Yule Kilcher of Homer, and one Alaska Native, Frank Peratrovich, a Tlinglit merchant from Klawock.



***Constitutional Convention***  
*Gov. Bill Egan presides*

In his opening day remarks to the convention, at the University of Alaska campus in Fairbanks, former Territorial Gov. Ernest Gruening stressed the historic nature of the gathering. "To me perhaps its greatest importance arises from the fact that it is the first occasion which is wholly of, for, and most important, by the people of Alaska," he said. "If there has been one important ingredient missing in our eighty-eight years as a district, as a territory, it is that little preposition 'by.' Many things have been done for us; even more things have been done to us, but very little have we been permitted to do by us."

Congressional delegate E.L. "Bob" Bartlett said the blame for the constant "boom and bust" cycle in Alaska "is due in no small measure to the hard, cold fact that mineral development was solely for the purpose of exploitation with no concern for permanent and legitimate growth." He said a similar misguided approach had governed another key Alaska industry - "The decline of Alaska's once-great fisheries is traceable in great degree to this same attitude with its concept of ruthless plundering of a great natural resource without regard to the welfare of the mass of average citizens who make their living from the sea."

The convention and the statehood debate of the 1950s had the spirit of a moral crusade, focused on a single goal.

As the convention delegates prepared to settle into their work at the university, they heard from the president of the student body, Ken Carson. He expressed the hope of young Alaskans that "now is the proper time for Alaska to become a state and for us to govern ourselves. Today we are students, but tomorrow we hope to be citizens of the state of Alaska and with this thought in mind we sincerely welcome you, you who will build a solid foundation upon which a state government must stand."

Nearly all of the delegates made their support for statehood clear when they ran for convention seats. Forty-seven wanted statehood immediately, while seven favored it with some qualifications. Delegate Peter Reader, a gold miner from Nome, was the one and only opponent.

The delegates chose William A. Egan as convention president. Egan was a territorial senator, former Speaker of the House and former mayor of Valdez. He was well-liked and was able to bring people together through consensus. Never a pretentious man, he arrived in Fairbanks for the convention by hitching a ride on a truck from Valdez.

During their discussions, the delegates carefully examined every aspect of how to construct an ideal government for Alaska

The delegates met from November until early February, crafting a 14,400-word document described as "more distinctly appropriate to its time and place than any other state constitution."

It gave the vote to 19-year-olds at a time when the standard age was 21, delayed action on Native land claims, called for a strong governor and declared that resources were to be managed and developed for the benefit of all people.

The delegates signed the constitution at a ceremony witnessed by about 1,000 people in the university gym on February 5, 1956. In spring the territory's voters approved the constitution by better than a two-to-one margin..

It became the law of the land three years later when Alaska, the 49th state, entered the Union.

*Information Courtesy of the Alaska Humanities Forum*