

## **Governing Alaska The Constitutional Convention**

### **Higher Education for Delegates**

The idea of escaping the normal political arena and using a university campus to draft a state constitution was the idea of attorney Tom Stewart of Juneau. He thought that the University of Alaska in Fairbanks would be the ideal setting to plan Alaska's future government. Stewart, a legislator who helped draft the bill authorizing the constitutional convention, won the support of his fellow legislators.

As historian and constitutional convention delegate Victor Fischer has written, Juneau had the meeting rooms and housing, "but it also had the unsavory reputation that often goes with legislative politics: special interest lobbying, heavy drinking and the like."

The decision turned out to be a good one, as the convention that met during the winter of 1955-56 remained remarkably free of partisan politics and back-room dealing. Delegates said that the powerful canned salmon industry never took the convention all that seriously. The campus setting contributed to a spirit of camaraderie and helped build consensus.

"Delegates were viewed as a group of idealists working for a great cause and dealing with issues that generated, with few exceptions, no pressures from those lobbies and special interests that regularly pursue their interests at legislative sessions," Fischer wrote.

Democrats outnumbered Republicans in the gathering, but elections to the convention were conducted on a nonpartisan basis and most delegates, put "the good of Alaska" ahead of everything else. The delegates wanted to prove to Congress and the rest of the country that Alaska was mature enough to govern itself. It was important that the convention took place before statehood, and that it was held in the university setting, so that people were free to be creative and philosophical in designing the new state government.

Another unifying factor was the Fairbanks weather. On opening day the temperature was 16 below zero and the low that winter was 53 below. Just before midnight one evening, Egan had to interrupt a heated floor debate and call for immediate action of a different sort. "The Chair would like to announce that the temperature is now about forty below and if the delegates have their cars out there, they probably should start them in order that they will start."

Fischer said that after the delegates warmed up their cars and returned to the hall, "tempers had appreciably cooled." In their last few weeks the delegates worked late into the night, always striving for working toward compromise on the issues that divided them.

*Information Courtesy of the Alaska Humanities Forum*