

Governing Alaska

Native Citizenship and Land Issues

Natives and the Land

In July 1915, Judge James Wickersham traveled to Fairbanks to dedicate a new cornerstone for the future institution known as the Alaska Agricultural College and School of Mines. It later became the University of Alaska.



Meeting of Tanana Chiefs

The next day he took part in another historic ceremony, gathering with six of the Tanana chiefs to talk about Native lands. Wickersham warned the tribal leaders that with the coming of the Alaska Railroad, there would be more white men coming to settle in Alaska. "White men are coming out and taking up the land," Wickersham said. "They are staking homesteads, cultivating the land, raising potatoes and all kinds of crops."

Speaking through a translator, the Athabaskan chiefs asked that the government "not let the white people come near us. Let us live our own lives in the customs we know."

Wickersham said that nothing would stop the white people from coming and that the Indians should seek 160-acre allotments or reservations, to hold onto some of the land.

"We don't want to go on a reservation, but wish to stay perfectly free just as we are now and go about just the same as now," Chief Ivan said. Wickersham described again what he saw as the advantages of reservations, and said they were not "prisons." The chiefs didn't buy it. "I tell you we are people on the go and I believe that if we were put in one place, we would just dies off like rabbits," Chief Alexander of Tolovana said. The tribal leaders said again that they wanted to be left alone and "to live here all the time."

Information Courtesy of the Alaska Humanities Forum