

Governing Alaska Campaign for Statehood

Selling Statehood

In his 1946 State of the Union address President Harry S. Truman said that statehood should be granted as soon as the government knew where the people of Alaska stood on the issue. He had an answer soon enough.

In an advisory vote that fall, Alaskans voted 9,630 to 6,822 in favor of joining the union. George Sundborg, a journalist who had made a pro-statehood study, said the size of the negative vote was due to the "sourpuss branch of the sourdough family."

Many Alaskans looked for more support from the Truman administration and Congress after the vote, but resistance remained. Bartlett introduced one of many statehood bills in 1947. In one hearing, the head of Alaska Airlines testified about pressure by the salmon industry to keep quiet, or else he would lose their business.



AK Governor Mike Stepovich and Congressional Advocates for Statehood

The debate in 1947 framed the arguments that would continue for more than a decade. Supporters said statehood was a matter of justice for Americans who lived in Alaska and were denied their rights, and were ruled by an absentee government and absentee industries. Opponents said Alaska could not afford statehood and should remain a territory until economic conditions changed. The pro-statehood forces responded that conditions would never change until Alaska gained control over its own destiny, which could only happen with admission to the union.

In 1949, the legislature approved creation of the Alaska Statehood Committee, an 11-member group headed by Anchorage Times Publisher Bob Atwood. The Committee pushed the statehood effort through education and lobbying. The campaign failed to make much national headway for three years though, because of the Korean War.

Following the war, Sen. Hugh Butler of Nebraska, a statehood opponent, announced that his committee would hold hearings in Alaska. He said he didn't want to hear from

"just a few aspiring politicians who want to be senators and representatives, but from the "little people" of Alaska.

A group of supporters that formed with the name "Little Men For Statehood" turned out in support of statehood at Butler's 1953 hearings. Signs popped up in Anchorage store windows that said, "I'm a Little Man Who Wants Statehood." Women agreed. Margaret Rutledge of Anchorage told a story of how she had been on her way to the inauguration of President Dwight D. Eisenhower when she was reminded of the second-class status of Alaskans. At the Seattle airport she had to go through immigration procedures, which she said was humiliating. Before ending her testimony in tears, Rutledge told the senators that a "degrading influence had robbed me of the thing I value most--my birthright as an American."

The statehood movement developed strong support in the mid and late 1950s among average Alaskans, who signed onto grassroots organizations such as "Operation Statehood" and the "John Q. Citizen" campaign.

National politics entered into the picture because Republicans feared that Alaska would send Democrats to Congress, which could tip the scales of power. The Republican Eisenhower administration supported statehood for Hawaii, which was expected to be favorable to the GOP, but delayed on admitting Alaska.

Information Courtesy of the Alaska Humanities Forum