

Governing Alaska

Campaign for Statehood

The Canned Salmon Lobbyist

Because he had once been a commissioner, people often referred to him as "Judge" Arnold. Because of his work for the canned salmon industry, his opponents dubbed him "Fish" Arnold. To his friends he was "Bill."

By any name, Winton C. Arnold was perhaps the most influential lobbyist in Alaska in the 1940s and 1950s. Arnold represented the canned salmon industry in Juneau during those years, and was a strong voice at Congressional hearings and in Juneau.

John Butrovich, a long time territorial and state senator from Fairbanks, once told a reporter that Arnold was exceptionally capable. "You couldn't be that good and not be smart," Butrovich said. "He was the best I saw, in my time, and I was there for 30 years. And I'm looking at it from the other side."

Butrovich opposed Arnold's work to continue the advantages of the canned salmon industry - including big tax breaks - in Alaska. Many said Arnold stopped any tax reform legislation for a decade in the territorial Legislature. He became the most effective and articulate opponent of Alaska statehood.

Arnold typically did not say he opposed statehood. He made a habit, though, of pointing out obstacles, such as transportation problems, and the need to settle Alaska Native land claims. He also said Alaska could not afford to become a state because of the additional burdens that it would place on its citizens.

Since less than 1% of Alaska had been surveyed, it would take thousands of years for Alaska to acquire its land if a traditional land grant system was used with the granting of statehood, he said at one hearing.

Alaska territorial delegate E.L. "Bob" Bartlett described Arnold as an opponent of every progressive proposal for Alaska and "a smooth operator--intelligent and with a pleasing personality." He hosted private lunches for senators, and made elaborate presentations to show the economic damage that statehood would cause Alaska.

Mary Lee Council, Bartlett's administrative assistant, said that by explaining the problems with statehood bills before Congress in an attempt to stop statehood, Arnold's complaints forced Congress to resolve those issues. In that way, Arnold's stalling tactics improved the chances that the state would have the resources it needed for survival. The provisions eventually adopted by Congress gave the new state more than five times as much land as had been proposed in some of the early proposals.

Information Courtesy of the Alaska Humanities Forum