



United States  
of America

# Congressional Record

PROCEEDINGS AND DEBATES OF THE 112<sup>th</sup> CONGRESS, SECOND SESSION

Vol. 158

WASHINGTON, FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 21, 2012

No. 129

## Senate

### REMEMBERING RICHARD FRANK

Ms. MURKOWSKI. Mr. President, the front page of this morning's Fairbanks Daily News-Miner carries the sad news that Richard Frank, an Athabascan elder, died at age 85.

Richard Frank is an individual of great significance in the history of post-statehood Alaska. He was among the first Alaska Native leaders to recognize the risk that development of the modern State of Alaska posed to the subsistence lifestyle of traditional villages like his home village of Minto in Interior Alaska. He was among the first Native leaders to organize his people in opposition to State land selections that would prejudice the eventual settlement of the aboriginal land claims of Alaska Natives. And his leadership, recognized throughout the State, is one of the reasons that the Native peoples of Alaska won their battle for land claims with passage of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act of 1971.

Richard Frank was born on August 27, 1927, in Old Minto. He was educated at the village school. Some historians say that the village school provided an education up to the third grade. Others say it was the fourth. What is undisputed is that Richard Frank possessed a sense of adventure and wisdom far beyond his formal education. Growing up around the fishing and trapping camps of the Yukon River he gained an appreciation of the interdependence between the land and the Native way of life. But some would say it was his experience in the Army Air Corps during World War II that best prepared him for the leadership role he would occupy in the 1960s.

Richard's wartime experience is chronicled in Fern Chardonnet's book, "Alaska at War, 1941-1945." She relates that World War II presented an extraordinary opportunity for Alaska Natives. Many, for the first time, received the same pay and benefits as White workers, and a chance to acquire new skills and to build genuine self esteem. Richard Frank was a case in point. Upon enlisting he was encouraged to pursue specialized training as an aircraft mechanic. At first he said, "No," but his commanding officer had confidence in Richard and he agreed to pursue the training. Richard relates that the passing score in training was 2.5 and he completed the course with a 3.9. He went on to service P-47 fighters in the South Pacific.

Richard regarded himself as lucky. Service in the military showed young men from the village that there was another option. After the war Richard worked as a mechanic for Wien Alaska Airlines and Boeing, though his heart remained in village Alaska.

The son of a traditional village chief, he found his calling in the early 1960s as the battle for Alaska's lands was beginning. The Alaska Statehood Act gave the State of Alaska the right to select lands but left resolution of Alaska Native land claims for another day.

One of the areas where State land selections first conflicted with Native hunting, fishing, and trapping activities was in the Minto Lakes region of Interior Alaska. The State wanted to establish a recreation area in 1961 near the Athabascan village of Minto and to construct a road so that the region would be more easily accessible to Fairbanks residents and visiting sportsmen. In addition, State officials believed that the area held potential for future development of oil and other resources.

Learning of these plans of the State, Minto filed a protest with the U.S. Interior Department. The people of Minto had filed blanket

claims to the area in the 1930s, and Richard's father, then Traditional Chief, delineated this area as belonging to the Minto people in 1951. Minto asked the Federal agency to protect their rights to the region by turning down the State's application for the land. Minto's attorney was none other than the late Senator Ted Stevens who took up their cause pro bono.

In response to the protest, a meeting of sportsmen, biologists, conservationists, and State officials was held in 1963 to discuss the proposed road and recreation area.

Richard argued that State development in the region would ruin the subsistence way of life of the Natives and urged that the recreation area be established elsewhere, where new hunting pressure would not threaten the traditional economy. He said, "A village is at stake. Ask yourself this question, is a recreation area worth the future of a village?"

He also took his cause to the Alaska Conservation Society in Anchorage. He told the conservation society members that without the use of the lakes, Minto's people would go hungry. Lael Morgan, in her landmark book, "The Life and Times of Howard Rock," relates Richard's pleas for support. He said, "Nothing is so sorrowful for a hunter, empty handed, to be greeted by hungry children."

A 1985 history of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act characterized Minto's protest as a precursor of events to come. During the years that followed, many other Native communities would protest actions that threatened their lands. In 1966, Secretary of the Interior Stewart Udall gave the land claims movement teeth by initiating a freeze on the transfer of lands to the State which were protested by the Native people.

As a well respected Native leader and elder, Richard went on to play significant roles in the Tanana Chiefs Conference and the Fairbanks Native Association. He served on the Governor's Veterans Advisory Committee and founded the Alaska Native Veterans Association. It is also appropriate to acknowledge Richard's role as the patriarch of one of the truly great Fairbanks families. Richard's wife of 57 years, Anna, became the first Native American woman ordained as a priest in the Episcopal Church in 1983. Richard was the father of four and was blessed with grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

As a significant figure in Alaska's history, Richard was generous to collectors of oral history. One of those oral histories was done for the Alaska Trappers Association, which notes, "Richard freely shares insight into the Native view of the world. He takes great pride in their dedication to family. He speaks often of the lessons he learned from his elders."

Alaska has truly lost a significant figure. If it is any condolence, Richard's life experiences were rich, he accomplished a great deal for his Native people, and he supported a truly wonderful family. Thanks to modern technology, his stories and life experiences will live on for eternity.

On behalf of the Senate I extend condolences to Reverend Anna, Richard's family, and the Athabascan people of Interior Alaska who are preparing to honor and celebrate Richard's life next week with a Memorial Potlatch.