

Transcript Summary

UAF Oral History Call No: 2024-01-02 PT. 2

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Narrator: Willie Hensley

Interviewer: N/A

Others Present: N/A

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Transcriber: Micki Sievers

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(00:00:20)

(Hensley has unrelated conversation with class)

(00:01:40)

Hensley tells class not to forget the concept of Indian country that was developed back in 1763 or before that. An area set aside for non-whites, a line that went from Canada to Florida. That idea of separation, because the conscious or unconscious idea that they had to be separated because their ways were so different. In Indian country there were specific rules for traders and settlers, the land beyond the pale where the white controlled and the Indians did so to speak. In reality it was a way to organize the taking of Indian lands, it was a way to try and keep the settlers there so they could build up their economy. In a way to try and keep the peace so the settlers didn't offend the Indians, but also as a way to keep the whites there to settle the territory, build up the land, and maintain their communities. This idea of Indian country also ended up being something that developed this idea of trust lands. The non-native began to say you have the right to use and occupy the land, but they own it. Later on this land became compensable, so they could be reimbursed by the federal government later for the taking of that land that they formally used and occupied. This was developed into The Indian Claims Commission, prior to that it was The Court of Claims.

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A student asks Hensley to discuss apparition again. Hensley states it goes back to this idea that they had when they showed up in the New Worlds, what rights to do these human beings have. After they planted the flag, what rights did discovery give you, back then it was an exclusive right to trade, vis-a-vis any foreign power. Then this right to trade was converted into right of that land, then ultimately to leasing America and occupy it.

(00:06:20)

Hensley discusses what occurred in Central and South America where you have about 95% of the land is held by 5% of the people. They never worked out a way, just like America, to deal with the question of

those who were there vs those who came. So places like El Salvador and Guatemala where the vast majority are locals but the foreigners now control everything.

(00:07:10)

Hensley says here there was no middle ground either, except the reservation, but there you only have about 50 million acres of land in Indian hands. In the American Revolution some Indians fought for the U.S and some for the British, promises of Indian lands were made to soldiers, which created an impetuous to secure that land, and in the process created the first BIA during the revolutionary period. This included Benjamin Franklin and Patrick Henry because it was important to keep the peace with the Indians. There was also a fundamental agreement that congress should be the repository of Indian policy as opposed to the states. Congress got very involved with every intimate detail of Indian life. There was conflict with the settlers, Indian country, and the home of home office, the states vs the federal government, the frontier vs the developed areas. There was a continued development of the idea that the non-Indian world, wherever the settlers came from, they more or less had a natural right to that Indian land, it was sanctioned by the religion. When you go back to the 1600's and read Puritan preachers, they blessed the taking of Indian lands. They burned 400 Indians of the Pequot tribe and their town, they justified it based on religion. That natural right idea stemmed from this idea that the Indians were uncivilized, they couldn't be as human as we, because they did not have a writing system, they didn't have real permanent homes, they did not practice agriculture to the extent of Puritans, they also did not enclose the land, and they did not believe in the European god. In short they were treated like savages, like the animals that ran free, the revolution simply created a further impetuous to taking Indian lands, despite the efforts of the Federal government to maintain a civilized approach to taking it.

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The federal government decided to protect the Indian by removing him in the Indian removal period. Treaties continued to be used as the vehicle to keeping peace and outlining land sessions to the feral government. They made provisions for Indian titles for lands that would be owned by the Indians, which lands were to be held in trusts for the Indians by the federal government, and made provisions for social or human services to give so much foods, blankets, and such. Also for blacksmiths, cattle, utensils, agricultural aid and more. That was sort of the early social services aspects of the federal government that we still have today and for education in schools. The treaty making directly with the tribes ceased in 1871.

(00:12:40)

Hensley discuss between 1830-1840s the Indian removal period was then and they moved them beyond the Mississippi to the lands they had allocated to the Indians. Then when oil was found on it, the government said well that didn't include the ownership of oil. There was a continuation to the coast to subjugate the Indian and secure his land. A similar type force was moving in from the other direction, the Russian advance 1580-1640 the primary period where Siberia was taken for the crown, which was an economic motivation as well, sable in Siberia and otter in Alaska. Even though it only took 60 years to reach the Pacific, the Chukchi's held them off. The initial information of Alaska came from the Chukchi in about 1711, Bering's voyage in 1728 was the first one where the government was trying to understand more about that part of the country and continued the subjugation and taking of the yasak (tribute) from the Natives. In 1720 Bering first located the Diomedes' and Saint Lawrence Island, but he missed the mainland. Gvozdev in 1732 sighted Alaska near Wales, at the tip of Seward Peninsula. The fur hunters called the Promyshlenniki, came up in Siberia hunting a trading fur, and organized themselves into little companies on the basis of shares. In a capitalistic environment naturally the big companies generally get formed, you can't really compete in small groups, so the wealthy merchants began to control the trade

out there as well. Generally the taking of Siberia happened by an infiltration of Promyshlenniki and Cossack people. They were generally a religious people to, most the first sables caught were contributed to the church or a particular church, like a ceremonial deal. When they came to Alaska they changed their practices somewhat, they saw the Aleut as easy to take from, so they'd coerce them into hunting fur for them, and they'd stay in the village while the Aleut men were out hunting. If the Aleut men didn't hunt for them, they'd shoot them so the others would then hunt. They went from island to island during the period where it was an unorganized effort on the chain. Supplies were used to get furs when the Natives needed something, because if the men were off hunting for something else, who would feed people who were there.

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Hensley states they used native auxiliaries. He mentions the reading of Baranof, he had 1,000 Aleuts when he first went down to Sitka, very few Russians, and some Creoles. The Russians lived very much like the Natives, ate the same food, lived with them, married them, had children by them. There wasn't a class system between them, but over a period of years, the mixed bloods became part of the system. Captain Etolin was Creole who eventually became head of the company. Between the 1740s and 1780s they had pioneered, so to speak, the entire Aleutian area. Shelikhov with the Shelikhov-Golikov Company started trading here in 1783. They had pretty much taken care of the coastal region by the 1780s. In the meantime the British, French, English, and Spanish had sent ships into Southeast Alaska between the 1780s and 90s, primarily because of a report that Captain Cook had secured all these furs and sold them to China. Later on in the early 1800s began the first voyages near Kotzebue in 1816, Captain Beechey believed The Franklin Expedition to have made it to that area, occurred in the first two decades of the 18th century, 1800-1830. First contact by white Europeans and their ships in this region, by the 1840s they started to get a whole slug of visitors up there when they started doing the whaling. A huge change occurred, Inupiaq believed they were the only ones in the world, in a few years all the sudden there was a whole variety of people coming up there. A lot of new language and technology.

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Hensley states this was a time of new changes coming about, the first Aleut was baptized as early as 1759 into the Orthodox Church. There wasn't a great deal of missionary activity in the beginning of Russian times, Russians were focused on furs and money. In Kodiak they had their first chapel built in 1795, in Sitka they didn't build one until 1817. Father Veniaminof had the most impact on the religious end, began in 1825, and became a bishop in 1834. So by 1861 they had about 7 churches, and 35 chapels scattered throughout various communities across the chain, Prince William Sound, and Sitka.

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Hensley states from what he gathered, religion wasn't pushed as hard and Veniaminof had the sense to do it in their own language, he wrote texts in Aleut and learned the language. When the mixed bloods got an education, they were real practical, and they started teaching astronomy and navigation because of the marine orientation, arithmetic and things like that. Count Rezanov had such a grand vision of what the potential for Russia was, he had an entire Pacific conception of what Russia could do, so far as economic activity and control, he had an idea of going and controlling as much of California as possible, except on the Oregon and Washington coast they kept running into this American aster, who was already settled, so they had to settle in Fort Ross, and the gold rush in San Francisco screwed up his plans, and their failures in the Hawaiians. Can you imagine what this area might have been like if his ideas managed to bear fruit.

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Hensley now discussed how Rezanov was married to a daughter of Shelikhov, he was involved in the court, in the Czars grounds, so he had influence, but he came to America. He was very critical of the Russian priests for not doing enough. They weren't as industrious as the Jesuits he said, who are very educated before they get sent off amongst the people. He also criticized them for not learning the local languages. With the arrival of civilization of course came disease, in 1836 there was an outbreak of smallpox, more than likely from some ships in Southeast Alaska, but they don't know exactly where. In the town of Tongass, 25% of the people died, out of 1,000, 250 died. About 50-60% of the people died in the region of Southeast Alaska, and spread by ship throughout Alaska and decimating entire communities. It was just the first of the epidemics that began to occur.

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Hensley states in 1867 Russians began to abandon this place for some reasons, they maintained that they never really wanted a colony. Whoever was the Tsarina at that time says well let them go trade, just don't ask for my help, she didn't want to get involved. They were primarily interested in the commercial aspects of what was offered in Alaska and somewhat protected by the government, it was too far away separated by a vast ocean from the colony, and they said they needed their forces in another part of the world instead of protecting Alaska they needed to protect themselves from the Chinese. The Russian American company had also been operating under an imperial order from the Czar. Rezanov was able to get a monopoly that gave him a 20 year monopoly but other groups tried to start gaining power and then what would happen to Alaska. At this time America was friendly with the U.S, and of course America was expanding, and had America believing it was the chosen people. They were unrestricted and had no qualms with doing anything, there was no driving humane spirit. Manifest destiny was moving them on as they headed west. The Russians wouldn't really let them in but the Russians did business with them in San Francisco and they knew the Americans wanted in on the ports. There were talks of the sale of Alaska as early as 1859, natural a senator from California was an instigator because they could see some potential up there, and they offered the Russians 5,000 initially. The civil war came, and then it wasn't until after the civil war that they got down to business again. The territory of Washington and the Hudson Bay Company had been moving in and wanted apart of Alaska, the Russians gave them a lease to develop the fisheries in Southeast Alaska. Then Washington wanted to annex Alaska if they could. So these were some of the motives that Russia disposed of Alaska, and their company wasn't as profitable and they were running into tall that competition.

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Hensley now goes onto the American motives. They knew the oceans and rivers were prolific in fish, and the Russian government wasn't too interested in renewing the charter. The countries were friends and they wanted to prevent the transfer of Alaska to any unfriendly power. They also had industrial interests in the Pacific, and were interested in the supremacy of the Pacific, and to some extent commerce with China and Japan. It was a very vast land that was not really owned by either in reality, this whole land was transferred from one European race to another, and they didn't really own it. However, within a matter of weeks there were flocks of people from all walks of life who arrived in Sitka. Hensley says he wishes he could see how it was, some Russians were still there and they had been at a leisurely pace and the Russian governor had been the law and ran things with a firm hand, and everyone respected law and order. Then here comes this wild bunch of people in effect, so there was quite a great change. Hensley wishes he could have heard the reactions of the Indian people about how they perceived what was happening. According to Bancroft the Indian was mad, not so much because of these other non-Indians there, it was because they didn't get the money and yet people were moving in on their land. Speculation and lawlessness abounded, it's no wonder all but a dozen Russians left for Russia, a lot had a mind to stay because this was their home. Prince Maksutov left, the last of the heads of the company,

he had twice the amount of people on the ship that they should have had, but everybody saw what was happening and thought they had to get out of there. So 5 years later, after 1867, Sitka was down in population and everything went downhill. The military and army was sent in and stayed for a few years, but then they went on to fight Chief Joseph in Idaho. In reality there was no civil government, it was military protectorate so to speak. Complaints were being made to Russia because America was not carrying out its promises to protect the people. There was no law or civil justice on any type, there were no legal documents being made for land claims or deeds, criminals would go unpunished, and the situation in Sitka deteriorated.

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A student asks about the first legislative act for Alaska and mentions a customs district, but majority of his comment is hard to hear. Hensley agrees and then goes on to say that there was lust, theft, and drunkenness both amongst whites and Indians alike. The garrison was in the heart of town, and of course they had night passes, there was a very relaxed control, and the officers were weak. There were more problems with Indians than any other time before, when the troops were there. The only positive thing Hensley read was the Natives could receive higher prices for their pelts from the Americans like they did earlier. Some incidents that were written about at that time, a Chilkat Indian was killed for breaking a showcase glass in someone's store. Three people were wounded over the breaking of an egg, a native woman and soldier were bargaining for an egg and the soldier broke it, the woman wanted him to pay for it, and some Indians went after him and caused a big scuffle. A chief went aboard a steamer to be a witness in a case of a military prisoner, and he was so poorly treated that he committed suicide, and it almost caused a war between his tribe and there. Troops were withdrawn in 1877 but there was no Indian outbreak and of course liquor was doing its damage. Russians did not give Indians booze unless it was a special occasion, but they did make Alaska Indian Country in 1873, but only as far as liquor was concerned, they designated it Indian Country, and they revoked all permits for sale of liquor. It had a limited effect because bootlegging of liquor by traders was too lucrative, they still went around bartering for furs and selling booze. They made hooch and it was the scourge of Southeast.

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Hensley continues that the settlers kept blaming the lack of progress on the fact that there was no government and that they needed a court and land laws, which they didn't have any land laws. Fortunately for the Indians as late as 1883 there was only a customs district and the only laws that were applied to Alaska were the regulations of the Secretary of Treasury. The Russian American Company was sold to San Francisco business people who called it The Alaska Commercial Company and they made arrangements to acquire the old Russian American Country. They were primarily interested in the seal islands which are the Pribilof Islands and the fur seal.

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(Recording suddenly cuts off)

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Hensley seems to pick up on new topic stating their survival was limited, in fact he thinks they were brought up from the mainland, and then a student has a question. The student mentions information about unrest and how they went down to fight the Nez Perce and Chief Joseph that there was no people of American running America in this part of America. So the people of Sitka wrote a letter to the British government to ask them to come protect them, and the British sent the HMS Osprey and protected them until U.S.S Alaska came up. Hensley agrees and says in fact they didn't even come under the proper diplomatic channels as it turns out. Hensley states that so after numerous petitions, they finally

got some civil government, and by 1882, Sitka was down from about 1,000 people to about 500, most of which were Indian. So they got government, appointed a governor who would also act as a judge, made Sitka the temporary capital. The governor reported to the president of the U.S they had established a district of court, clerk of the court, they didn't even make it a territory. The Clerk of the court was also the recorder of deeds, mortgages, and more. They provided for a marshal and some deputies, functioned it under the laws of Oregon, and created a land district with the office in Sitka. They did not apply the general land laws of the U.S, just the mining laws. The secretary of the interior was to establish a commission to examine the condition of the Indians, what lands were to be left to their use, what provisions for education to be made, and what rights of the lands occupied by the settlers should be recognized. In reality what you had was the beginning of the stealing of the land, because presumably the Americans had believed they bought the entire state or the entire land mass. They validated claims that were made illegally between 1867 and 1884. So while they did not convey any specific rights to Native people to secure land, they verified the rights of the whites to the mining claims that they had made, as well as presumably to whatever lands they secured that were transferred by the Russians.

(00:51:02)

A student asks about clarification on the Organic Act of 1884, which Hensley recommends her look at David Case's book about it. Hensley goes on and says but it was a specific act of Congress and in that it did specify that Indians, Eskimos. And Aleuts would be protected in their use and occupation of lands claimed by them. This was ignored, because who was going to enforce a law against the white man. Presumably the Americans felt that like in the Revolution that they had defeated the British and had acquired any rights that the British may have had from the Indians in terms of their contact. Presumably the Americans felt that they had the right to do whatever they had to do to secure that land for themselves. But during the congressional debates the proponents of the acquisition of Alaska, they claimed they had no intends to disturb the rights of the Native people. Then of course what began to happen then was the discovery of gold in the Yukon Territory. Not too long after in the Interior 1902, in the Nome area 1998 (Hensley meant 1898), by the 1900s 20,000 people descended upon Nome. People who founded it he believes had been reindeer herders, from Scandinavia. What began to occur was a drastic reduction, because of influx of people, in the ability of the Native people to survive. As far as the Organic Act was concerned it did not extinguish any Native title, in fact they confirmed it. When they had discussed the act of extinguishment of Indian title, that it had to be a specific act of congress, not simply assumed.

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A student asks a question that is hard to understand but Hensley responds that he supposes it wasn't as attractive to farm here compared to other areas of the U.S. Russians had acknowledged that they had not intended to change the Natives way of land tenure, even after the sale. Most Indians and Eskimos were unaware of the sale, Russian companies told each other but it likely did not get to the interior. Between 1880 and 1900, the non-natives had increased from 430 to 34,000 in a 20 year period, while the Natives declined from 33 to 29, and congress began moves to begin securing of title. They gave the Metlakatla land, made provisions for town sites, for trade and manufacturing sites, and gave the president authority to set aside reserves for forests.

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A student asks a question and Hensley says they can get into that, the Indian Allotment Act, in relation to what was happening in the 1880s, the Dawes Act was in 1884, and was applied to Alaska in 1906. That was the Americanizing process, disintegrating the land to hopefully disintegrate the Indian and make an American out of him. So far as treaties were concerned Native people were viewed as

uncivilized and the civilized ones had the opportunity to go back to Russia because most of them were Creoles.

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(Hensley begins dismissing the class and recording ends)