

Fifty Miles from Tomorrow: A Memoir of Alaska and the Real People

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Nunavut tigummiun! Hold on to the land! It was just fifty years ago that the territory of Alaska officially became the state of Alaska. But no matter who has staked their claim to the land, it has always had a way of enveloping souls in its vast, icy embrace. For William L. Iggiagruk Hensley, Alaska has been his home, his identity, and his cause. Born on the shores of Kotzebue Sound, twenty-nine miles north of the Arctic Circle, he was raised to live the traditional, seminomadic life that his Iñupiat ancestors had lived for thousands of years. It was a life of cold and of constant effort, but Hensley's people also reaped the bounty that nature provided. In *Fifty Miles from Tomorrow*, Hensley offers us the rare chance to immerse ourselves in a firsthand account of growing up Native Alaskan. There have been books written about Alaska, but they've been written by Outsiders, settlers. Hensley's memoir of life on the tundra offers an entirely new perspective, and his stories are captivating, as is his account of his devotion to the Alaska Native land claims movement. As a young man, Hensley was sent by missionaries to the Lower Forty-eight so he could pursue an education. While studying there, he discovered that the land Native Alaskans had occupied and, to all intents and purposes, owned for millennia was being snatched away from them. Hensley decided to fight back. In 1971, after years of Hensley's tireless lobbying, the United States government set aside 44 million acres and nearly \$1 billion for use by Alaska's native peoples. Unlike their relatives to the south, the Alaskan peoples would be able to take charge of their economic and political destiny. The landmark decision did not come overnight and was certainly not the making of any one person. But it was Hensley who gave voice to the cause and made it real. *Fifty Miles from Tomorrow* is not only the memoir of one man; it is also a fascinating testament to the resilience of the Alaskan ilitqusiat, the Alaskan spirit.

William L. Iggiagruk Hensley was a founder of the Northwest Alaska Native Association and spent twenty years working for its successor, the Iñupiat-owned NANA Regional Corporation. He also helped establish the Alaska Federation of Natives in 1966 and has served as its director, executive director, president, and cochair. He spent ten years in the Alaska state legislature as a representative and senator, and recently retired from his position in Washington, D.C., as manager of federal government relations for Alyeska Pipeline Service Company. Hensley and his wife, Abigale, live in Anchorage, where—now an Iñupiat elder—he is the chair of the First Alaskans Institute.

Prologue

On Saturday, December 18, 1971, everything changed. It was warmer than usual in Anchorage at that time of year; it was a bit above freezing. But as always during the long winter months in the Far North, the hours of daylight were excruciatingly short. The sun did not rise until just after nine o'clock in the morning, and it set well before three in the afternoon, hours before the start of the big event. As the sky darkened, people began streaming toward the center of Alaska Methodist University, now known as Alaska Pacific University. There were Iñupiat and Yupiat, Aleut and Athapascan, Tlingit and Haida, students and elders, tribal and village leaders, politicians, businessmen, and ordinary citizens.

They had come to watch history in the making. At last the long, tempestuous process of turning Alaska into a real state was about to be completed. The grand poohbahs of Big Oil were poised to start tapping the 10 billion barrels of petroleum discovered three years

earlier at Prudhoe Bay. Big Labor could hardly wait for the construction jobs that would be required to build the \$8 billion, 800-mile-long pipeline needed to funnel the black gold to market. And the environmentalists had their sights on the 150 million acres that were promised as protected wilderness areas, parks, and fish and wildlife sanctuaries.

But I think it is fair to say that no group was more anxious that day than Alaska's Native peoples. There were tensions in that room. After all, a centuries-long saga of warfare, treachery, apartheid, betrayal, and hopelessness was coming to an official end. For more than a hundred years, Native Alaskans had waited for clarification of their rights to ancient homelands. And finally, after considerable disagreement, a settlement was about to be announced. The United States Congress had agreed to set aside 44 million acres and earmark nearly \$1 billion for Alaska's Natives.

The hundreds assembled stood motionless as the evening's business began. A familiar voice echoed through the room, piped in from Washington, D.C. "I want you to be among the first to know that I have just signed the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act," said President Richard Milhous Nixon. The new law, he declared, was "a milestone in Alaska's history and in the way our government deals with Native and Indian peoples."

I was there. For five years I had battled to secure our traditional lands. As an unknown graduate student, I had helped to organize Alaska Natives, explaining to all who would listen that we were in urgent danger of losing the lands that had sustained our forefathers for thousands of years. I had run for state office and won, then painstakingly learned the ways of politics. More than a hundred times I had traveled across the continent between my home state and Washington, D.C., where Congress would decide the fate of Native claims. And I had faced the wrath of officials and business interests who wanted to crush those claims.

"Take Our Land, Take Our Life." That was our motto, a phrase I repeated over and over as I made speech after speech on the floor of the state legislature, or lobbied at conventions and church meetings. Our demands were reasonable and just. I argued: people of goodwill must recognize that we deserved a fair settlement. Alaska has a way of enveloping souls in its vast, icy embrace. For some, the inescapable attraction lies in its pristine rivers, lakes, forests, and glaciers, and in its unbelievable expanses -365 million acres, more than twice the size of Texas. Others are drawn by its enormous resources, the unthinkable rich stores of zinc, gold, timber, wildlife, fish, and oil. For me, Alaska is my identity, my home, and my cause. I was there, after all, before Gore-Tex replaced muskrat and wolf skin in parkas, before moon boots replaced mukluks, before the gas drill replaced the age-old tuuq we used to dig through five feet of ice to fish. I was there before the snow machine, back when the huskies howled their eagerness to pull the sled. I was there before the outboard motor showed up, when the qayaq and umiaq glided silently across the water, and I was there when the candle and the Coleman lamp provided all the light we needed. I was there when two feet of sod and a dirt floor protected us from the winter elements and the thin walls of a tent permitted the lapping waves, loons, and seagulls to lull us to sleep in the summer. There, before the telephone, when we could speak only face-to-face, person-to-person about our lives and dreams; before television intruded upon the telling and retelling of

family chronicles and legends.

Still, by the time I was born our culture was already seeing the devastating effects of Alaska's undeniable attractions for people from what we called "Outside"-anywhere beyond the lands our ancestors had fished and hunted for ten thousand years. From the first, the Outsiders brought epidemics of disease that decimated our people. Their massive whale hunts had caused terrible deprivation among those who depended on whales for survival. In the early spring of 1899, the business tycoon and railroad executive Edward Harriman led an expedition along Alaska's coast. He reported:

White men, uncontrolled and uncontrollable, already swarm

over the Alaska coast, and are overwhelming the Eskimo.

They have taken away their women, and debauched their

men with liquor; they have brought them strange new diseases

that they never knew before and in a very short time

they will ruin and disperse the wholesome, hearty, merry

people we saw. . . . But there is an inevitable conflict between

civilization and savagery, and wherever the two touch each

other, the weaker people must be destroyed.

And as the Outsiders moved in and took control of our lands and resources, they'd brought another crushing burden: the heavy hand of government over our lives. With Outsider control came Outsider demands. My family and I were supposed to learn a new language, adopt profoundly different notions of private property; we were supposed to adjust our communal society to one based on capitalism, selfinterest, and individual choice. Even before statehood, the effort to change Native Alaskans into proper "Americans" was starting up, a joint project of the Christian missionaries and the U.S. government. When I was fifteen, I was cleaned up and sent off to boarding school in Tennessee, where I studied everything but my own people and our history. I swallowed hard, teary-eyed, and left my family for an odyssey that, half a century later, led me to a brick home on Arlington Ridge in Virginia, just a few miles from both the home of George Washington and the White House.

In the intervening years, I learned a great deal about a nation in the midst of a profound transition. I lived in America's South before the explosion of the civil rights movement, and saw firsthand the old, tradition-bound system that was soon to change. I lived through the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. I marched from the U.S. Capitol to the Lincoln Memorial to hear Martin Luther King, Jr.-and later learned of his murder in Tennessee, a

state I had come to love. I experienced the Flower Power years and the antiwar movement. I saw Alaska become the forty-ninth state.

I immersed myself in the Alaska Native land claims movement, and helped found the Northwest Alaska Native Association and the Alaska Federation of Natives. I ran for the Alaska legislature and won, and twice became the head of the state's Democratic Party. President Lyndon Johnson appointed me to the National Council on Indian Opportunity, where I served with, among others, George Shultz, Donald Rumsfeld, and Hubert Humphrey. I even became a corporate executive with an Inuit-owned company in my home area of northwest Alaska, where we worked mightily to uplift our people economically by melding our ancient cultural ways with the modern tools of capitalism.

The world I was born into and the life I lived in my early years will never exist again. Yet, contrary to Edward Harriman's predictions, we're still here. And our spirit lives on. It is our history that is fading, because it's never actually been written down and fully told. I am an avid collector of anything involving the Inuit or Alaska, and I have scoured countless old book collections. It amazes me: most of the books written about Alaska have been by people aiming to glorify their personal brush with Alaska's magnetism. Most knew almost nothing about Alaska Natives, even after spending a lifetime among us as teachers, missionaries, or bureaucrats. Many saw only the surface of our lives and never understood our inner world. Some focused on the bizarre or contradictory—on our tattoos, our eating habits, our nose-kissing, our smells, our a natkut (shamans). In most cases, they did not comprehend our language. The fact that wrenching changes had befallen us and we were working hard to adjust our lifestyles and values to those of the immigrants was lost in the stories they told.

And I began to realize that someday, somewhere, somebody was going to try to tell my story—and through it, our story. So ultimately I decided I might as well try to do it myself.

The Inuit sense of propriety includes a strong taboo against blowing your own horn. I didn't want my own people to think that I was trying to elevate myself; we all know that in life, it takes many people to create success. So when I made up my mind to do my best to shine some light on the Arctic and on the story of a people most Americans barely know exist, I didn't hesitate. I immediately called my relatives to let them know what I had in mind so they wouldn't be surprised. They unanimously encouraged me.

The writing itself has been an odyssey. Along the way, I have learned much about myself, my family, and our people. In the midst of the project, I heard that there was to be an auction in Indianapolis, that among the items for sale was a batch of letters "from Eskimos in Kotzebue, Alaska, 1915-1918"—and that six of them had been written by Iggiagruk, William Hensley, my grandfather! He had corresponded with Isabel Reed, from Elkhart, Indiana, telling about life at that time. He wrote of the local deaths from influenza, about his six years working with the reindeer herd, about hunting foxes and lynx. He asked her about the world war that was raging. It was as if the spirit of my ataata, my grandfather, had suddenly come to life and was speaking to me. I had never known him and knew little about him, and to me, it was like a small miracle.

When I began writing, I knew nothing about the craft, and essentially summoned up the gift all Iñupiat have within them—the art of storytelling. I imagined myself in a small sod iglu telling about various episodes in my life as I remembered them.

Honesty is a paramount virtue among our people, and I knew that in telling my story I would have to confront painful issues—something that is not easy for an Iñupiaq man. We are expected to be strong and reserved, and to suffer in silence. Well, I am of mixed blood, and perhaps I can be forgiven for discussing issues that our people usually take with them to their graves.

In the process of writing, I began to see that my story was the story of a hundred thousand Alaska Natives of every tribe, spanning several generations—a story of families and cultures in danger of being obliterated by change, disease, and cultural upheaval. The more I wrote, the more I realized that it was even broader than that. Our story was the story of an entire people across the polar world—and of others as well. I saw the American Indians, who were pushed from shore to shore and yet to this day carry on their identity and culture in parcels scattered across this great land. I saw the generations of immigrants to America who suffered the indignities all minorities face as they tried to fit in. I began to understand how millions of people throughout the world have fought to maintain their identities and unlock the hold of colonial powers on their leaders and resources. We have all tried to find our way amid torrents of change in a world in which others controlled our physical space, as well as our minds, spirits, and identities.

Excerpted from *Fifty Miles from Tomorrow* by William L. Iggiagruk Hensley.

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