

Life Is Good
by Senator John Sackett, Retired

When asked, I usually say I was born in Cutoff, Alaska. It was a small Athabaskan village along the Koyukuk River in Interior Alaska. That is what I usually say. Actually, I was born at our “spring” (May and June) camp at “Old Woman’s Slough” which is about 35 miles up the Huslia River. It runs into the Koyukuk River. My aunt, one of only two midwives, was there at that time and my mother (Lucy Sackett) went there for my birth. This was in June of 1944.

The village of Cutoff was extremely isolated. It no longer exists. About 125 Athabaskan Indian lived there in small log houses. The various families came and went depending on the weather and the seasons. In those years, everyone I knew lived a migratory subsistence lifestyle. We hunted everywhere for our food and much of our clothing. We collected wood for heat and cooking. We had spring, summer, and winter camps and moved among them from Cutoff, according to the seasons and the availability of game.

We believed in a God like other people (Episcopalian and Protestant missionaries were known to the area and had arrived with the discovery of gold in the 1880’s and 1890’s) but we also believed in our own natural world and religion. We believe that human beings have two souls, an outer soul called “yeega” and an inner (body) soul called “s̄un gḡa bedze” –the life force or soul, as we conceive it in traditional Christian beliefs.

Certain animals such as the wolverine, inanimate objects such as snares, and sacred geographical locations such as a medicine man’s grave can have the power of the outer soul (“yeega”). For example, there is a place near Huslia, at the first bend of the Dalbi River, which is the former site of a large Indian village. That site is considered sacred ground. Elders told us to never stay there overnight. If we did stop there for any reason, we must burn food to placate the “yeega” of that location. To not do so would offend this force and it might seek revenge upon us. Everything around us, the land, the trees, the animals, the air, the water, everything had a life and was guided by a vast set of rules called, “Hutlanne” (hoot tlan knee). From the time I could first remember, older people told us what we should do and should not do, in order to keep the world around us in balance, and show “respect” to nature. If we followed the rules, we would have continued success in hunting, fishing, and trapping (the lifeline of Cutoff residents).

As Athabaskan, in addition to respect, we had to value humility at all times. We were encouraged to care for and share with others in the community. It was particularly important to care and share with those in dire need, regardless of their own fault or failure. We were never to brag or show off. If you did, it would “come back on you” and something bad would happen to you or your loved ones. Likewise, if you made fun of those less fortunate this too would come back on you or your family. Someone would have a similar situation happen to them. These traditional values of respect and humility served us well in our isolated rural subsistence life.

Beginning in late April and early May, everyone in Cutoff traveled by dog team, boat, or canoe to their “spring” camps. We hunted for muskrats, ducks, geese, and set nets in the slow running sloughs, waiting for the first movement of pike and whitefish. By the end of June, we would have moved to our summer “fish” camps where we set nets for Chum salmon, and the occasional Sheefish, Whitefish, and Pike. What we did not dry for ourselves, we dried for our winter dog food. We had to have enough to last until the next year and fishing season. In my youth, many of the older people knew starvation times. The fear of starvation affected every family including mine.

Many years before my birth, at age fifteen, my mother Lucy Sackett gave birth to my brother Harold Esmailka. According to our Uncle Robert Vent, Grandpa Ed Vent had set up the family's fish camp on the North side of the Yukon River between Nulato and Kaltag. The fish camp consisted mostly of a 10' x 12' foot canvas tent and a temporary canvas wrapped smoke house. Early in the season, before the salmon run, an unusual windstorm descended on the camp and destroyed everything. Today we might call it a microburst. Back then, it was just an ominous sign of bad times to come. The sudden wind scattered the camp. The family survived but their food and important supplies were gone. Uncle Bobby and Granpa Vent found remnants of a fish net and tried to catch whitefish but could not catch enough to feed everyone.

To replace their tent, the family built a small lean-to using bark from cottonwood trees. They also used strips of cottonwood bark to re-cover the smoke house. Without mosquito netting, without salmon, and without other food, the baby's future looked bleak. Harold was only six months old. Starvation was a real possibility. When hordes of mosquitos continually attack a moose, it can die. A baby has no chance. Grandpa Vent said that Harold's only chance to live would be if he were given up for adoption. They could not feed or protect him. He hoped another family could take care of him. Word went out to several villages and, luckily, Peter and Martha Esmailka of Nulato came by boat to rescue him. They adopted him and he became Harold Esmailka. Peter and Martha did an excellent job of raising Harold and he survived.

Nine years later in Galena, Grandpa Vent invited Harold to dinner and told him that he must continue his education. It was the key to his future. Harold went on to the Holy Cross Catholic Mission in Holy Cross, Alaska. Later, he graduated, worked very hard, married well, and became a successful businessman, entrepreneur and father. Like me, he is now retired. Unlike me, he went into business not politics. To this day, we both value practical experience and formal education. I have always looked up to him and have been proud to have him as my brother.

The early stories of hardship and starvation made us stronger and instilled in us a strong work ethic. To live off the land (literally and figuratively), people had to depend on resourcefulness and initiative. We had to make sure that there was enough fish and dry meat for the entire year (this was before electricity and refrigeration). Work aside, spring camp and fish camp were fun exciting times for me. I loved all the planning, travel, and activity.

In the fall, families prepared their winter trapping cabins. Many cabins were placed in locations that could serve as both winter trapping cabins and temporary fish camps, in case of any late fall fish runs. Nets and fish traps were stored along with trap line equipment. Since most of the trapping cabins were small to begin with, additional supplies made most cabins even more confined. By September, as the weather cooled, families would hunt for moose. In October, they would hunt for black bear. By custom and state regulations, trapping started about the middle of November, at the earliest. By then, because of the coldness, animal pelts were in their winter prime.

This had always been the traditional and normal cycle of events. Only later, and in order to have their children educated, families moved closer to communities with established schools. As people moved, primarily for education and/or employment, subsistence lifestyles and customs changed. Independence and self-sufficiency lessened. In my lifetime, I have seen an overall change from independence to dependence, from optimism to despair as some were unable to make a successful transition to changing lifestyles and demands. This continues to be a challenge for many rural families.

Unlike other communities or villages, Cutoff remained relatively isolated. The lesser known Koyukuk River flows into the Yukon River. Travel and communications were difficult. The people of Cutoff had strong cultural and familial bonds. Our isolation helped maintain the “old” ways. We knew that Cutoff prevented us from obtaining what was available in larger communities or in mainstream urban Alaska. We often felt powerless, without knowledge or resources, especially when medical emergencies arose. When I was four years old, I remember listening to a man scream for three days before dying. He suffered internally. We did not know why nor did we know how to help. After he died, we learned he needed a catheter. He died in great pain because there was no catheter to relieve the pressure of urine in his bladder. There were many needless deaths. Families buried loved ones, one after another. Many died of tuberculosis, pneumonia, and other health problems that, but for a simple health clinic, could have survived and lived. Like most villages at that time, Cutoff was without basic public services. We had no airport, electricity, radio, television, telephone, running water, or proper roads.

Adding to all these concerns was Cutoff’s physical site. It was on low flat land which made it great for duck hunting but susceptible to constant flooding. The ground was always damp and people were always sick. In 1949, everyone decided that a change was necessary. They decided to move the village four air miles downriver to a beautiful hillside along the Koyukuk River. They called the new village Huslia. When it came time to move, the people were motivated and self-reliant. Unlike today, it never occurred to them to ask for government aid. They simply cut and hauled logs and built new homes at the new location. Gradually, many more people moved to Huslia. My family was one of the last to leave Cutoff. As soon as I turned six years old and before they left, I was sent to the St. Mark Mission School in Nenana, Alaska. It was traumatic and frightening for me and many other elementary school age children. We went, alone, to a far away unknown place without friends or family. I spent a year there before my family moved to Huslia and I was able to return home.

The men of Huslia had cut logs and timber for a new school. With donated supplies like windows, roofing, etc. from the Episcopal Church, they built Huslia’s first school. It was a simple one-room school. Now I and other children could return from distant boarding schools to attend school in our own community among friends and family. For a six year old kid at St. Mark’s boarding school, this was great news!

Our first teacher lasted three months. It was a difficult adjustment for him. Every child between the ages of 6 and 16 was in the first grade! It took some time to get things under control but through many community meetings, order and a proper curriculum was established. The school grew. Unfortunately, the Huslia School only went to the 8th grade. After that it was back to boarding schools. To continue my high school education, I had to look beyond Huslia. Like many rural students, my family applied to the Mt. Edgecumbe High School in Sitka, Alaska. Nine hundred students applied for six hundred spaces. I was placed on the standby list.

Fortunately, one week before school was to start, Miss Lois Morrie of the Alaska Department of Education helped to get me admitted to another school in Sitka. I entered a Presbyterian boarding school called Sheldon Jackson. It was a stroke of luck and I enjoyed Sheldon Jackson very much. I met and made friends from all over the state. Furthermore, the school was only about a mile from Mt. Edgecumbe where many of my relatives attended school. Sheldon Jackson was a turning point in my life, an excellent one. I learned about so many other people, places, and things. My self-confidence grew and I graduated Valedictorian in 1963.

After graduation, I decided to attend Ohio University in Athens, Ohio. I had never been outside the state of Alaska but Miss Kathy Russell, a teacher I respected, suggested her Alma Mater, Ohio University. What a tremendous change. I took a train across the United States to Ohio. It took three days. After I enrolled at the university, I began to realize a certain cultural shock and became homesick for Alaska. I continued my studies but remained homesick for the next year. I would spend hours researching and reading everything I could about Alaska, its history, geography, and government, etc. From that experience, I slowly began to think about politics, public service, and the political landscape of Alaska.

The next year I attended the University of Alaska in Fairbanks. This was in 1964-65 during which time many Native organizations were created. It was the beginning of the land claims movement. In Fairbanks, the Fairbanks Native Association welcomed into their membership Native college students. Then the Tanana Chiefs Conference scheduled a meeting in Fairbanks to discuss land claim issues. I was curious about their efforts and decided to skip a class and attend one of their meetings. I had only gone to listen. Soon I was designated a delegate from my region. Three days later, I was elected President of the Tanana Chiefs Conference.

I must tell you now that this action was contrary to how Athabaskans normally dealt with leadership. By custom, a young person listened while an elder spoke. But we were in the midst of rapid change. Despite confusion and rapid changes, elders recognized that there were unusual opportunities and challenges in the new times. Contrary to custom, they were willing to trust a younger person to influence and shape changes for the benefit of Native people. In those new times, they were willing to make room for younger more formally educated Native persons. They encouraged them to seek leadership roles. That is how I became the President of the Tanana Chiefs Conference (for the first time) and a college student in the same year.

Through my involvement with these early Native organizations, I saw the disparity between rural and urban Alaska, Native and non-Native Alaska. I believed that even after land claims and the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act was achieved, even after village and regional corporations were established, rural Alaskans, both Native and non-Native, would still have to fight for equality and equity. This was only the beginning. I understood that many of our needs could only be resolved with state assistance. We needed to avail ourselves of the same help and services that large urban cities and organizations received from the State of Alaska and considered their due. The best way to do this was through the state legislature.

The next year, with the encouragement of many elders, I ran for and won a seat in the Alaska House of Representatives (Initially, I lost the election by one vote, after nine days, when the absentee ballots came in, I won the election by one vote, whereupon my opponent asked for a recount. That took 30 days. After the recount I won the election by two votes.) Thus began my political career. I was 21 when I ran. I won and took my seat in the Alaska House of Representatives when I was 22. More importantly, I was the first Athabaskan Indian to represent our region in the state legislature in Juneau, Alaska. I was elected twice to the two-year terms.

My first four years as a Representative were a difficult period of learning. I came from a small village where everyone was equal and attempted to get along. We treated each other with respect, especially if the other person were an Elder. This mindset made it difficult for me to debate or argue issues with legislators more experienced or older than myself. My rural Athabaskan background and philosophy were foreign to my colleagues and seemed out of context with their political world.

I could not obtain anything of any magnitude for my district. I could not persuade many of my colleagues. I did not understand the banter of politics and found myself frustrated. My shyness and reticence hampered me. Politeness was not a virtue in the blue-collar world of Alaska politics. In time, I considered myself a failure. I told myself that if I could not help my district and the people I represented, I should get out. And so, in 1969, I did not file for re-election. I left the legislature and returned to the University of Alaska in Anchorage to complete my college degree. I was absent from the state capital for two years. During that time, I re-evaluated my objectives, and re-considered what it would take to be effective, keeping in mind that the needs of rural Alaska still existed.

I concluded that there were two extremely important attributes necessary to be effective in the legislature. First, I had to be knowledgeable in my chosen field (and my field was finance because adequate funding could solve many of our rural needs). Second, I had to become a leader in a non-Athabaskan world. I needed to emulate a more western tradition in my leadership style. I had to become politically perceptive, aggressive, loud, smart, and an expert in the state budgeting and financing process. I had to become a new person, one that my political colleagues would seek out and work with. Political power in the state legislature is something that is given or conferred upon you by others. To sustain it, you must be knowledgeable, trustworthy, fair, and honorable. Your word must be your bond. You can have a regional point of view but you must always also have a statewide point of view. You can represent your district but you must also represent the State of Alaska. In the balance are political power, longevity, and success.

By 1972, I was ready. I ran and won the Senate seat for interior Alaska. My district ran from the Bering Sea to the Canadian border. For the next 14 years, I became this new person. I not only won the election but I also won a seat on the Senate Finance Committee. For the first six years, I studied the state budget and finance process until I knew it inside and out. No one could question my ability or knowledge in this area. I became more aggressive, sometimes loud, tenacious like wolverine, and an effective legislator. I remained on the Finance Committee my entire 18 years.

During my years on the Senate Finance Committee, as either a member or Chairman, I was able to appropriate hundreds of millions of dollars toward rural priorities, often to the chagrin of my urban colleagues but with their support and vote. I did not work in a vacuum. I worked closely with both urban and rural legislators like my friend Rep. Nels Anderson, (D) from Dillingham, and, especially my close political friend and ally in the Senate, Sen. Frank Ferguson (D) from Kotzebue. Although, as rural legislators, we were a minority, we worked cooperatively with every majority group on behalf of both rural and statewide priorities. In doing so, we also funded many urban priorities. That is more difficult to do today.

Through our joint efforts, we obtained funding for projects such as airports, telephones, television, health clinics, police protection, fire stations, community halls, roads, schools, sewers, clean water, erosion projects, and many other rural priorities. We tried and succeeded in redressing many basic health and safety needs in rural Alaska while also supporting urban and statewide priorities.

An example of a difficult funding issue was legislative compliance with the Court decision on the Molly Hootch Act. The court decision required the state to build new schools throughout Alaska but mostly in rural areas where the need and neglect was most evident to the court. After resistance by many urban interest groups and legislators, funding was obtained for a

large scale school construction phase throughout Alaska (much to the satisfaction of rural students and the delirium of the urban based, statewide, construction industry).

Of particular significance was the Power Cost Equalization (PCE) project for which I was the prime sponsor. The subsidy reduced energy costs in rural Alaska and provided a direct boost to rural families and businesses. The original agreement on power cost equalization involved the recognition and grudging acknowledgement that the low cost of electricity in Anchorage (and other communities along the Fairbanks, Anchorage, and Matsu Valley corridor) was because the State of Alaska sold its natural gas from the Cook Inlet field on a subsidized basis. It was very cheap. Thus the cost of power and energy in Anchorage was about five cents a kilowatt hour while, at the same time, it was forty-five cents a kilowatt hour in rural communities.

Equity required a re-distribution formula and system. Rural Alaska was not provided cheap state gas for its electrical generation. We used fuel oil and paid full retail. Because of these objections, urban legislators (read Corridor) could not pass funding for the electrical inter-tie system despite being in the majority. Without it, electrical costs in Anchorage would rise.

In exchange for our support for the expansion of the inter-tie, urban legislators agreed to support the Power Cost Equalization Bill (PCE) that I sponsored. It was agreed this would compensate rural and roadside Alaska communities for the disproportionate distribution and subsidy of state owned natural gas. As a result of PCE, the cost of electricity in rural and roadside Alaska was reduced (but it never was as low as those systems using state natural gas). Unfortunately, after I left the legislature, the original understandings and justifications for electrical subsidies were forgotten and set aside. As a result, Alaskan communities lost the benefits of this program. Today, the cost of energy continues to rise. It is one reason for the changing demographics in rural areas. It is cheaper to live in Alaska's urban centers.

We were also successful in obtaining early payment of the state's obligation to regional corporations (\$600,000,000), as stipulated in the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act. Without those funds, the twelve regional corporations would not have been able to meet the deadlines and benchmarks Congress imposed on them in the settlement. There was little incentive, by many legislators, to fund the state's portion of the settlement. It did not impose any deadline or penalty on them. Unlike shareholders, they had no direct interest or involvement in establishing the corporations. Although many objected to any financial settlement, their consent and vote was critical.

Each of these and many other projects had unique histories and conflicts within the legislature and state government. Each required active leadership to organize and pass enabling legislation into law. There are numerous amusing and even some disappointing stories about our fight for Alaska wide projects. Although there were few rural legislators in the entire legislature, we acted together. That was the key to our success. In the Senate, Sen. Ferguson and I were always able to be in an influential or powerful position throughout our legislative careers (except for one brief two week period which is another story).

Aside from my legislative duties, in 1972 I became the founding President and Chairman of the new regional corporation DOYON Ltd. It is a "for profit" corporation based in Fairbanks. At the time, I was once again the President of Tanana Chiefs Conference. We worked on the articles of incorporation that created DOYON Ltd. The President and Board of TCC were designated registered officials of the new "for profit" corporation. Shareholders then had elections to determine who would be the first President and Board of this new regional corporation. I was elected the first President of DOYON Ltd. The new Board elected me its first Chairman.

All the twelve regional corporations had to learn, create, and accomplish at the same time. The federal guidelines were strict with specific benchmarks. People new to the corporate structure and federal regulations worked on those benchmarks. The Board itself was composed of untested board members. The staff was new and unsure about many things. The selection of lands alone was a monumental task. On top of everything, we did not have sufficient funds to operate the new corporation and Congress was not timely in voting its share of the financial settlement. Nevertheless, because of dedicated board members and employees working together, we were able to accomplish our goals. Those early years at DOYON were wonderful. We had an intelligent, dynamic board. Everything was explained until everyone understood the issues. The majority of votes on the board, if not all, were unanimous. The board and employees were united in purpose, not split into factions. We all learned at the same time. Everyone was excited. We had a common objective. We wanted all the shareholders, both village and regional shareholders, to be actively involved and successful. We wanted to justify the faith the shareholders placed in us.

During this time, I commuted between Fairbanks and Juneau either working at DOYON or in the State Legislature. Although many of my constituents and shareholders overlapped, I was not able to devote 100 percent of my time to either. Once DOYON was operational, I realized that it was time to make a choice between the corporation and the legislature. I believed that the Alaska State Legislature could best serve past and future priorities of rural Alaska.

This was especially so as many urban Alaskans thought that with the passage of Land Claims, the Native corporations were rich and should finance priorities in their regions. The state did not have to spend money on rural residents. I believed that all Alaskans were entitled to the same benefits of our oil wealth. It was a matter of fairness and equity. As Chairman of the Senate Finance Committee, I was in a position to advocate this philosophy. For this reason, I resigned as President and Chairman of DOYON and devoted all my time to the legislature and the State of Alaska. I am proud of my service to the constituents and shareholders of my district. Our quality of life, in villages and roadside communities, has improved greatly. Younger people may not fully realize how different life was before land claims and before both rural and urban legislators recognized the need to improve the health, safety, and quality of life in every part of Alaska. I hope that spirit of cooperation continues. With proper leadership, it can.

I always had painful back problems. Often I had to conduct legislative business lying on the floor on my back. By 1986, however, I could no longer continue. Finally I was diagnosed as having degenerative arthritis of the spine. The pain was due to stress and arthritis. This prompted my early retirement from public service. Some ten surgeries later and with the help of medical pain clinics, I am much improved and able to function with only infrequent restriction.

I have had a wonderful life. I feel privileged to have lived in both the old ways and the modern world. I have achieved my goals. I believe I have made a positive difference and helped improve the lives of my fellow Alaskans, rural and urban. Now, at the age of 66, I continue to study and learn. I continue to find areas where I might be of assistance. It gives me joy.

Life is good.

John C. Sackett
Alaska State Senator, Retired
November 2010