

• VIEWER DISCUSSION GUIDE •

# For the Rights of All: Ending Jim Crow in Alaska



Re-enactment of hearing in front of Territorial Capitol Building, 1945.  
Courtesy of Jeff Silverman, Blueberry Productions



Alaska Native Brotherhood Founders, 1912.  
Courtesy of Alaska State Library

*“It was my deepest honor to have helped share, via documentary filmmaking, this great story—this great Tlingit Indian, Alaskan and American story. We explore in the film one of those rare chapters in Native American history where our American system worked and justice was served.”*

– Jeffry Silverman, Producer,  
*For the Rights of All:  
Ending Jim Crow in Alaska*



***For the Rights of All: Ending Jim Crow in Alaska*** is a blend of documentary and drama, with re-enactments, new interviews, and rare historic footage and photographs. This one-hour film traces the remarkable story of Alaska’s civil rights movement in a series of victories for citizenship, voting rights, school desegregation and freedom from discrimination won over the course of the 20th Century—one generation inspiring the next.

It tells the story of an extraordinary Alaskan woman who becomes an unlikely hero in the fight for civil rights. Elizabeth Peratrovich—a young, unassuming Tlingit Indian mother of three—testified before the Alaska Territorial Senate in 1945 and swayed the floor vote with her compelling testimony in favor of the passage of the Anti-Discrimination Act, the first civil rights bill passed in the United States since the Civil War.

This guide is designed to encourage deeper exploration and conversations about civil rights, discrimination, the power of individuals to effect change and the impact of Elizabeth Peratrovich and others who fought for civil rights.

## PRODUCER'S NOTES

### Jeffrey Silverman, Producer

It's important to note that the events in the film happened decades before the national civil rights movement came to fruition in the 1960s.

I invite viewers to compare the reality and events in Alaska with those in the Old South. "Ending Jim Crow in Alaska" is a provocative title, to be sure. What happened in Alaska fits the definition of 'Jim Crow,' if not the severity and breadth experienced by African Americans.

As with most stories of justice achieved, there are many heroes, sung and unsung.

The film's sharp focus on Elizabeth Peratrovich is not a denial of all those who worked (and continue to work) for equal rights in Alaska, but rather an affirmation. Elizabeth is now an icon of equal rights, a symbol of standing up, of a way of thinking, of speaking truth to power, which is why Alaska named its equal rights state holiday after her.

As a symbol and beacon for elders and youth alike, Elizabeth Peratrovich represents more than one person. I have learned that community, not the individual, is a central value in all of the many Native cultures in our beautiful state. It's about loving your own point of view a little less and loving your people and your family a little more. As a documentary filmmaker, I value that lesson above all.

I believe social impact documentaries have the power to reach the hearts and minds of viewers who might not be affected or otherwise aware of a larger issue, which in this case is the struggle for civil rights by Native people.



## CHRONOLOGY OF KEY EVENTS

- 1867** United States purchased Alaska from Russia
- 1905** The Nelson Act created racially segregated schools in Alaska dividing "white children and children of mixed blood who lead a civilized life" from Eskimos, Indians and Aleuts
- 1912** Alaska Native Brotherhood (ANB) formed to advocate for Native rights
- 1913** Alaska Native Sisterhood (ANS) formed to support the ANB
- 1920** ANB, with the prodding of William Paul, Alaska's first Native attorney, fights for citizenship and voting rights
- 1924** William Paul is elected Alaska's first Native legislator  
U.S. Congress grants citizenship to all Native Americans
- 1925** Alaska's Territorial Legislature enacts law requiring voters to be able to read and write in English
- 1940** New generation takes over ANB and ANS, focusing on racial discrimination  
Roy Peratrovich becomes president of ANB; Elizabeth Peratrovich becomes president of ANS
- 1941** The Japanese Empire bombs Pearl Harbor. The U.S. enters World War II.
- 1942** The Japanese bomb Dutch Harbor and capture the Aleutian Islands.  
U.S. forcibly evacuates 900 Aleuts to camps in Southeast Alaska.
- 1943** Governor Ernest Gruening submits anti-discrimination bill to legislature. Defeated in the House and Senate.
- 1945** Anti-discrimination bill signed into law on February 16—becomes the first comprehensive civil rights law passed in the United States
- 1954** Brown vs. Board of Education U.S. Supreme Court decision determines that "separate educational facilities are inherently unequal"
- 1959** Alaska became the 49th state of the United States of America
- 1964** Civil Rights Act of 1964 passed
- 1988** The Alaska Legislature established February 16 as The Annual Elizabeth Peratrovich Day

**DELVE DEEPER**

- 1. In 1942, the U.S. government forcibly evacuated 900 Aleuts from their island homes to decrepit, unsanitary camps in Southeast Alaska. Many Aleuts would die there. Those that survived returned home to find their villages burned and their homes and churches looted. It was noted in the film that German POWs held in Alaska were treated better than the Aleuts.**

It's hard to imagine being forcibly moved away from your home, much less placed in old and unsanitary camps. How does this treatment impact individuals, society, culture? What does home mean for you, your family and those who belong to your community?
- 2. In the film, Reverend Walter Soboleff said when looking for a place to rent, the landlord, who knew he was Tlingit said, "I'm sorry but we don't rent to Indians...I said, well, I'm sorry I bothered you and I left. And, as harsh as that was, I had a good attitude, because I felt sorry for the men who treat people that way."**

Have you ever been denied a service that was available to others, based on your race, gender, economic level, age, or other reason? What did that feel like? Talk about the response of Reverend Soboleff and why you think he apologized to the landlord and left without a confrontation.
- 3. Alberta Schenck Adams was fired for refusing to carry out the movie theater's discriminatory policy. She rejected the status quo, not accepting it just because "that's the way things have always been."**

Have you been in a similar situation where something seemed wrong to you but you did it anyway because it had been done that way for a long time? How did you feel about it? Would you handle it differently next time? If so, how would you express your point of view?
- 4. Speaking before the Alaska Senate, Elizabeth Peratrovich began, "I would not have expected that I, who am barely out of savagery, would have to remind gentlemen with 5,000 years of recorded civilization behind them of our Bill of Rights."**

Peratrovich argued to end the laws of Jim Crow. Where does the expression "Jim Crow" come from and what does it mean (see <http://www.alaskool.org/projects/JimCrow/Jimcrow.htm> for information on Jim Crow)? Is there any parallel in today's society where the legacy of Jim Crow lives on?
- 5. Peratrovich went on to say, "Do we believe that the passage of this bill will eliminate discrimination? Well, have you eliminated larceny or murder by passing a law against it? No law will eliminate crime, but at least you as legislators can assert to the world that you recognize the evil of this present situation and speak your intent to help us overcome discrimination for all Alaskans."**

What forms of discrimination do we have today, and who experiences discrimination in our society today? If laws don't eliminate the problem, what is the value of passing legislation against actions that causes others to suffer?
- 6. Diane Benson, the actor who portrayed Elizabeth Peratrovich in the film talked about "growing up without even a doll that resembles you—without anything that even tells you who you are." She said, "It's very difficult to grow up without any role models."**

Who were your role models when you were growing up? What were their strengths and weaknesses? What did they communicate about the values of our society at that time? If you could go back and create the ideal role model, what qualities would that image have?

**IDEAS FOR ACTION****1. Celebrating Your Heroes**

By helping to secure civil rights for her Native brothers and sisters and all minorities, Elizabeth Peratrovich has become a role model for many Alaskans. Who are the people in your family, community or culture who have taken risks to improve the lives for others? Sometimes the work people do behind the scenes goes unrecognized. Consider how you might honor individuals who've worked for positive change—whether living or deceased—to recognize their contributions and provide an inspiring role model for others.

**2. Spurring Discussions About Civil Rights**

The story of Alaska Native's struggle for civil rights is not widely known, but it was an important event in the history of civil rights in the U.S. and in Native American history. Share information on the film, your response to it, and to civil rights issues overall by writing a letter to the editor of your local newspaper, or creating a post on a social networking site, or on your blog. Showcase someone you feel has championed civil rights by writing about them in the same way.

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**RESOURCES****Alaska Native Heritage Center**

<http://www.alaskanative.net>

An educational and cultural institution for all Alaskans, the Alaska Native Heritage Center provides programs in both academic and informal settings, including workshops, demonstrations, and guided tours of indoor exhibits and outdoor village sites.

**Alaskool**

<http://www.alaskool.org/>

For teachers, students, and anyone interested in Alaska's first people, Alaskool offers online materials about Alaska Native history, education, languages and culture.

**Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia, Ferris State University; What is Jim Crow?**

<http://www.ferris.edu/news/jimcrow/what.htm>

This page, located on the Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia, provides background on Jim Crow laws, the "system of etiquette" that arose as a result and its impact on Blacks.

**National Museum of the American Indian**

<http://www.nmai.si.edu/>

The National Museum of the American Indian is the first national museum dedicated to the preservation, study, and exhibition of the life, languages, literature, history, and arts of Native Americans. Established by an act of Congress in 1989, the museum works in collaboration with the Native peoples of the Western Hemisphere to protect and foster their cultures by reaffirming traditions and beliefs, encouraging contemporary artistic expression and empowering the Indian voice.

**National Native News**

<http://www.nativenews.net/>

The service provides Native and non-Native public radio listeners with a regular, timely and balanced source of news about Native issues. National Native News covers the social, economic and cultural issues that affect every community, and helps radio listeners understand the interconnectedness between Native people and their non-Native neighbors.