

# Native women get little recognition

by Maureen Blewett  
Times Writer

The birth of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act was long and

difficult. It was attended, of course, by women.

The child today is a robust 10-year-old. But, with a decade to for-

get, many Alaskans no longer remember that women helped bring it to life.

There was Lillie McGarvey, who scraped together airplane tickets and flew to the Aleutian Island villages of her birth to organize village councils in 1970 when the settlement agreement was still a gleam in the native community's eye.

There was Laura Bergt, appointed to the Alaska Native Claims Task Force, who helped write the act.

There was Christine Yazzi, secretary to one interim Copper River organizing association — "They needed a secretary and I said, why not?" — and a director of another.

And others. Ruby John of Cantwell, who testified eloquently before Senate subcommittees. Frances Degnan of Unalakleet, a director of the Alaska Federation of Natives the year the land claims bill was debated in Congress. Irene Rowan, with her husband in Washington, D.C., who typed.

"It was a tough job," recalls McGarvey. "Someone had to do it — the people who were there."

"All of a sudden a law was passed and natives were members of a corporation. They had heard about corporations, but no one knew how to set one up."

Scrounging money, McGarvey returned to the islands she had left as a young bride almost a quarter of a century earlier. She and other Aleut leaders taught villagers how to deal with the Western concept of a profit-making companies. Today, the Aleut Corp. owns a transportation and freighter business and has a net worth of \$14.9 million.

McGarvey and other women across Alaska raised money to send lobbyists to distant Washington, D.C., spent years attending night meetings, traveled to lonely, isolated villages.

Yet, today, despite their contributions — and despite the fact that at

poration twice. Twice she lost to men who had never worked for the organization.

"If I had been a man, I would have won."

Is she bitter? McGarvey doesn't answer the question — "It didn't matter at the time. I was too busy. There were too many other ways I could help out."

Harvard-educated anthropologist Rosita Worl suggests it could have been different.

"Our corporations treat their women just like any other Western corporation," says Worl, a Tlingit. "If we had been allowed to develop traditional organizations, women would have had more equality."

Lone Janson, researcher, agrees. Is it so unusual the women who worked so hard to create the regional corporations don't head them? she asks. "I doubt you'll find many corporations anywhere in the U.S. headed by women."

But many — Janson estimates over half — of the 180-odd village corporations are headed by women.

Rowan, who headed a village corporation in the mid-70s, explains why.

"Women often have business experience and anyone with business experience is an asset to any board." There is a greater need for that expertise on the village level than on the regional level, she says. "It all depends on where you put your priorities."

Running a village is expected in the traditional culture, Worl says. The mothers and grandmothers of today's native woman often ran the villages for long periods of time while their husbands hunted. Women were vital to the survival of the community.

The pattern continued. Native men went to Washington to lobby for the land claims act, Worl says. "The women were the ones who stayed home to work and contribute the large sums of money which sent the



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Bill Kossen of The Times

**Work: it's Western culture which puts women at the bottom of the totem pole**

villages.

Yet, today, despite their contributions — and despite the fact that at the beginning of the land claims history some native leaders did not know how to balance a checkbook — not one woman heads a regional native corporation.

If women are not named formally to regional leadership, they are also not part of the informal process. Virtually no women attend the top-level, informal meetings of two dozen native leaders held every six or seven months. Women serve on the boards of directors of regional corporations but they often function as secretaries — “the ones who do the work,” as one woman said.

In the 10-year history, only one woman has ever headed a regional corporation — Yazzi, appointed to a one-year term for the Ahtna Corp., re-elected to a second.

Why? “It’s the culture,” answers McGarvey.

She ran for chairman of her cor-

poration. “I never felt I had a need for recognition,” says Ruby John, who today runs a gas station in Cantwell with her husband.

“We’ve always worked in the background.”

“Being a woman isn’t a liability,” says Rowan. “In my culture, we are a matriarchal society. Women played a key role, basically one of support to the husband or brother. Basically the women stood behind the man.”

Behind the man. Not at the bottom of the totem pole.

It is the urban Western culture, says Worl, not the traditional native culture, which puts women at the bottom of the totem pole. “I would suggest that is what the feminist movement is all about.”