

**MLK Alaska State Society Tea
1334 Longworth HOB
Washington, DC
January 19, 2009**

Thank you for inviting me to make a few comments. Never having left the Alaskan Arctic until I was 15, I found myself in Mississippi on a sweltering August day in 1956. I was like a foreign immigrant despite our people having been on the North American continent for 10,000 years. There I was, totally ignorant of the civil war or slavery and was confronted with a way of life in which people were separated by color. I was an oddity who didn't fit the usual image. I saw the vestiges of a segregated way of life and tried to navigate this odd system with no help from any adult who might explain these conditions to me.

I came to Washington, DC the first time as a high school student exactly 50 years ago—the same year Alaska became a state.

Since Alaska history was never taught when I was in school, I was in the dark about our own Alaska Native history—the enslavement of the Aleuts by the Russians; our territory being sold off to the United States government; the fact that our legal status did not include the vote until 1926; that segregation existed in the territory and “no dogs or Natives” signs continued at restaurants, theatres and bars into the 1940s, that our elderly were not permitted to be cared for in the Pioneer Homes—our only means of care for the elderly infirm; that our people had to break federal laws in order to obtain ducks and geese in the spring; our children were being shipped away by the thousands to high schools thousands of miles from home by the federal government. Then we discovered that the Statehood Act was going to permit the taking of over 100 million acres of Native lands.

AS a student at George Washington University in the early 60s, my Assinaboine-Sioux friend Hank Adams and I joined in the march from the Capitol to the Lincoln Memorial to hear the inspiring words of Martin Luther King.

America, to its credit, has tried to right old wrongs and there are many people who have put their lives and futures on the line to change the status quo and often are vilified along the way—and worse, are sacrificed for the cause

MLK gave his all for the cause of civil rights and was an inspiration for us as we fought to preserve our culture and our lands and our futures in Alaska for generations to come.

Today, we are here to celebrate the most unusual event in American presidential history—the inauguration of Barack Obama as President of the United States. That fact alone has inspired the American people and amazed the rest of the world. It is an inspiration beyond description and it is built on the shoulders of the sacrifice of Martin Luther King.