

sold american the story of alaska natives and their land 1867 1959

Sold American: The Story of Alaska Natives and Their Land (1867-1959) is a profound narrative that captures the complex relationship between the Indigenous peoples of Alaska and the vast changes brought about by colonization, government policies, and societal shifts over nearly a century. The acquisition of Alaska by the United States in 1867 marked the beginning of significant transformation for the Native communities, as they faced new challenges and opportunities in the wake of rapid modernization and exploitation of their resources. This article explores the history, struggles, and resilience of Alaska Natives during this period, highlighting key events, cultural impacts, and the ongoing fight for land rights.

Historical Context: The Purchase of Alaska

In 1867, the United States purchased Alaska from Russia for \$7.2 million, a transaction often viewed skeptically by critics of the time. The acquisition, known as "Seward's Folly," was spearheaded by Secretary of State William H. Seward, who envisioned Alaska as a land of abundant resources. However, this transaction marked the beginning of a turbulent era for the Indigenous populations living on this land.

Impact on Indigenous Communities

1. Displacement and Disruption:

- The purchase led to an influx of settlers, miners, and commercial interests, which profoundly disrupted the traditional lifestyles of Alaska Natives.
- Many Indigenous peoples were forcibly removed from their ancestral lands, leading to loss of culture, language, and traditional practices.

2. Resource Exploitation:

- The discovery of gold in the late 19th century attracted thousands of prospectors, further encroaching on Native territories.
- This period saw the overexploitation of natural resources, including fish, fur, and timber, which were vital to the subsistence lifestyles of the Native communities.

3. Cultural Erosion:

- The arrival of missionaries and government officials aimed at "civilizing" the Indigenous populations led to the suppression of traditional customs, languages, and spiritual practices.
- Schools established during this time often enforced Western education at the expense of Native knowledge and culture.

The Early 20th Century: Struggles and Resilience

As the 20th century dawned, Alaska Natives faced new challenges arising from both national policies and local developments. The Alaska Native population was grappling with the consequences of colonialism, but they also began to organize for their rights.

Legislation and Land Rights

1. The Dawes Act:

- Although primarily enacted in the contiguous United States, the principles of the Dawes Act (1887) influenced policies in Alaska, promoting land allotment and assimilation.
- This act aimed to break up communal Native lands into individual plots, undermining traditional communal living and governance.

2. The Alaska Native Brotherhood (ANB):

- Established in 1912, the ANB emerged as a critical organization advocating for the rights of Alaska Natives.
- The Brotherhood sought to combat discrimination and promote civil rights, laying the groundwork for future activism.

World War II and Its Aftermath

World War II brought significant changes to Alaska, both socially and economically. The military presence in the region altered the daily lives of many Natives and opened doors to new opportunities.

1. Economic Opportunities:

- The war effort necessitated the construction of military bases, which provided jobs for many Alaska Natives.
- Some Indigenous peoples enlisted, leading to greater visibility and recognition of their contributions.

2. Post-War Changes:

- After the war, the United States government recognized the need for better policies regarding Indigenous peoples.
- This period marked the beginning of a renewed focus on land claims and rights.

The Land Claims Movement: 1950s and Beyond

The 1950s were pivotal for Alaska Natives as they organized to reclaim their land and assert their rights. The push for land claims was a response to decades of dispossession and marginalization.

Key Events Leading to Land Claims

1. Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA):

- Passed in 1971, the ANCSA was the result of years of advocacy by Alaska Natives for recognition of their land rights.
- The act resulted in the transfer of approximately 44 million acres of land to Native corporations, along with nearly \$1 billion in compensation.

2. Formation of Native Corporations:

- Under ANCSA, regional and village corporations were formed, giving Alaska Natives a stake in the management of their resources.
- This unique model aimed to balance economic development with cultural preservation.

Impact on Alaska Native Culture

1. Cultural Revitalization:

- The land claims movement sparked a renaissance of Native culture, language, and traditions.
- Many communities began to revive traditional practices that had been suppressed for decades.

2. Ongoing Challenges:

- Despite the progress made, Alaska Natives continue to face challenges, including economic inequality, loss of language, and environmental issues related to resource extraction.
- Climate change poses a significant threat to traditional ways of life, as melting ice and changing ecosystems affect subsistence hunting and fishing.

Conclusion: A Legacy of Resilience and Adaptation

Sold American: The Story of Alaska Natives and Their Land (1867-1959) is a testament to the resilience and adaptability of Indigenous peoples in Alaska. Despite facing immense challenges, Alaska Natives have continued to assert their rights, preserve their culture, and adapt to changing circumstances. The legacy of their struggles is evident in the ongoing efforts to reclaim land, revitalize traditions, and engage with modern society while maintaining a connection to their heritage.

As we reflect on this history, it serves as a reminder of the importance of acknowledging Indigenous rights and addressing the past injustices that have shaped the present. The story of Alaska Natives is not just a historical account; it is an ongoing narrative of strength, resilience, and hope for future generations.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the significance of the year 1867 in the context of Alaska Natives and their land?

The year 1867 marks the purchase of Alaska from Russia by the United States, which initiated a complex relationship between the U.S. government and Alaska Native communities regarding land rights and ownership.

How did the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act of 1971 impact the narratives discussed in 'Sold American'?

The Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act of 1971 aimed to resolve land claims and provided Alaska Natives with land and financial compensation, directly addressing the historical injustices highlighted in 'Sold American' regarding land dispossession.

What were some of the main challenges faced by Alaska Natives between 1867 and 1959?

Between 1867 and 1959, Alaska Natives faced challenges such as loss of land, cultural suppression, and the impacts of colonial policies that marginalized their rights and traditional ways of life.

In what ways did the U.S. government's policies affect the social structures of Alaska Native communities?

U.S. government policies often aimed to assimilate Alaska Natives into Western culture, disrupting traditional social structures and leading to loss of language, customs, and community cohesion.

How does 'Sold American' address the concept of sovereignty for Alaska Natives?

'Sold American' explores the struggle for sovereignty among Alaska Natives, emphasizing their rights to govern themselves and manage their land, a struggle that has historical roots in the events following the 1867 purchase.

What role did activism play among Alaska Natives from 1867 to 1959, as discussed in 'Sold American'?

Activism among Alaska Natives grew as they sought to reclaim their rights and land, with efforts ranging from legal battles to community organizing, highlighting a persistent resistance to federal policies that threatened their heritage and autonomy.

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