

Donald Mitchell oral histories, Archives and Special Collections, Consortium Library, University of Alaska Anchorage. Victor Fischer interview, 1997 August 25. Transcript completed by Louisa Dennis.  
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MR.FISCHER: No. E- -- Egan -- one could take a look at the votes and see where he stood. Except you really couldn't tell much about the votes.

MR.MITCHELL: Well, that's why I asked.

MR.FISCHER: The -- no. I do not know what Egan's attitude was. I -- I -- I do know that generally in those years, the people who had been in Alaska a long time, were probably least sympathetic to Alaskan Natives. And it was the newcomers, the bleeding-heart liberals, who were -- were more sympathetic. Those who romanticized Alaska. They would support Natives. And, you know, without really knowing, I would assume that Egan would have been among those who would feel that no special shrift should be given to Natives.

MR.MITCHELL: Right. Well, the reason I ask was that I think I ment- -- I told you when Ken Jensen was on Bartlett's staff, he came up with this great idea about how the state would select --

MR.FISCHER: Oh, yeah. Right.

MR.MITCHELL: -- about '62 they'd select all the land around the Villages and then just give it to them.

MR.FISCHER: Uh-huh.

MR.MITCHELL: And that would be land claims and he -- and he couldn't sell that to Egan --

MR.FISCHER: That's right. I forget.

MR.MITCHELL: -- and so I was -- I was cur- -- you know, Bartlett thought that was a great idea.

MR.FISCHER: Uh-huh.

MR.MITCHELL: And it probably would have worked in '62.

MR.FISCHER: Yeah.

MR.MITCHELL: And -- you know, so I've always been curious about what Egan's real views on all this was. And it also seems in the '66 election -- it's interesting, there's the OEO thing going on that you've already talked about, but it certainly appears that Egan didn't have the message that this whole Native land claims thing -- he only lost -- and I looked up the vote the other day. He only lost by a little over a thousand votes.

MR.FISCHER: Right. And -- and the Arctic Slope turned against him.

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MR.MITCHELL: Right.

MR.FISCHER: And that loan would have made a difference.

MR.MITCHELL: Right. And they took Egan -- Rivers out, you know?

MR.FISCHER: Right.

MR.MITCHELL: So --

MR.FISCHER: Yeah. And Egan did -- did not understand that. Just as in 1974 -- seven- -- was seventy -- yeah, '74. He did not understand the Native movement -- I mean, the environmental movement. And I have a letter somewhere where I wrote to him just before the election suggesting -- in '74 --

MR.MITCHELL: In '74?

MR.FISCHER: -- suggesting that he, Bill, say publicly, that I was born in Alaska. I love Alaska. I love the environment. I'm part of it. I've always worked for Alaska and for environmental quality. And I told -- this would be so easy for you to say, because you've always been here, and this is part of you as it is part of all of us. He never would do it. Just as that stupid thing in '66, picking that fight and going right into the Airfend (phonetic) meeting. And still insisting that he will not go along with them, which was just -- I don't remember that detail. You probably have it, but as I remember, he actually told them that he wasn't going to go along with the OEO independence.

MR.MITCHELL: Right. Well, it is interesting that one of the things that comes up about that '66 meeting is that it appears from the paper record that it is the first time that the pol- -- the politicians are all over that meeting.

MR.FISCHER: Uh-huh.

MR.MITCHELL: I mean, they're all there buying everybody lunch, or hosting dinners, or, I mean, the -- the idea that you had all these Natives who -- they wouldn't be there unless they'd been selected by other Natives to speak for them --

MR.FISCHER: Uh-huh.

MR.MITCHELL: -- just in theory as far as these politicians, you know?

MR.FISCHER: Right.

MR.MITCHELL: And it really does seem as if it's the first real sort of flexing of muscles for what really became in the end a very, you know, significant block --

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MR.FISCHER: Yeah.

MR.MITCHELL: -- blocked politically.

MR.FISCHER: Well, the thing is that politicians knew -- they were aware of the blocked voting pattern among Natives. And, you know, I remember this clearly -- I haven't paid too much attention to it lately -- but it used to be, you know, sort of the whole Village would go about 97 percent. And then you figure well -- and they're the teachers, and the -- a few other government workers.

MR.MITCHELL: The white kind.

MR.FISCHER: Yeah, the white guys who went the other way. But when I ran for the Constitutional Convention in '55, it was the Village. I can't even remember which one in Bristol Bay that cast something like 54 unanimous votes for me. I had never been in that Village. And it was years later that I found out a Jesuit priest, whom I'd met in Dillingham, liked me and he let the word out that you should vote for Vic Fisher -- Victor Fisher. And so the whole Village voted. And that's the way generally the votes went. So the politicians were very savvy and going there -- of course, I think they've learnt now that the leaders don't necessarily carry everybody, but certainly on the North Slope when they -- Arctic Slope Native Association went for Hickie, that made a tremendous difference.

MR.MITCHELL: Right. Well, you know, it's interesting talking with Jim Hawkins who I think you mentioned you remember in the old days --

MR.FISCHER: Oh, yeah.

MR.MITCHELL: -- that he said that he had been -- he'd got his job as BIA Area Director when Stepovich gotten appointed governor, because -- because of the -- the kinds of phenomena that you just described, that -- that Greening and Muktuk Marston had always had this hammerlock --

MR.FISCHER: Uh-huh.

MR.MITCHELL: -- on the Village vote. That Marston would go in there on -- on Greening's behalf and say, you know, "Me Muktuk Marston, you know, you vote my guy." And -- and that -- part of the whole strategy of appointing Hawkins was -- was that he was well known. He was, like, one of the few Republicans --

MR.FISCHER: Uh-huh.

MR.MITCHELL: -- that was well known in the Bush. And they hope that he might be able to do something about all of that. Which --

MR.FISCHER: I'm sure he didn't have much effect.

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MR.MITCHELL: I -- he didn't have much effect, but it was interesting that that was their aspiration for him in terms of he ended up with the job. How about -- I guess the other thing while we still have some tape going is what's your recollections of my old friend Bill Paul? When did you -- did you ever know Bill Paul very well?

MR.FISCHER: Well, I knew -- I knew Bill Paul mostly in a -- might say nonpolitical fashion. I -- I met Bill Paul at all these various meetings, and that would be in Juneau and --

MR.MITCHELL: This would be in the '60s, though?

MR.FISCHER: In the '60s. And -- oh, hell no. No, no, no, no, no. I knew Bill back in the '50s. And yeah, that's right. That was long before these meetings started. I met Bill Paul by playing chess with him. It -- when -- I'd be in Juneau on and off, and I was -- I was a lobbyist in '55 for the League of Alaska Cities, now the Alaska Municipal League. And got involved with some chess players. Principally against -- through Henry Kamero (phonetic) and met Bill Paul. And then during the 1957 legislative session when I was in Juneau, I played regularly. The -- the -- met with the chess club. And every -- whatever night it was -- Tuesday night or whatever, there was a competition going. And Bill Paul's house then was right across Seward -- not Seward Street, Main -- Main Street -- whatever, from the capitol building. So very often the games would be played in his house. And I went right up the chess ladder to the finals. And I thi -- I don't think it was Bill Paul who was in the finals, but he -- he and I were very even. Anyway, I made the finals and then came the last week of the legislative session, and I think it was the last night or next to last night. And I just couldn't take the evening off to play chess, so I forfeited my finals game, but anyway, that's how I got to know Bill Paul -- playing chess with him.

MR.MITCHELL: Well, was he -- obviously he was -- since he was as good of a chess player as you were, I assume he was a good chess player, is that --

MR.FISCHER: Fairly -- sort of -- I'd say middle range. I've never played against any grand masters --

MR.MITCHELL: Right.

MR.FISCHER: -- but I'm sure when it came to grand master, I'd be below the middle range. But I've played chess since I was a little kid, so --

MR.MITCHELL: Well, what was he like? Was he, like --

MR.FISCHER: Bill was the most wonderful, pleasant guy. And he -- he always had stories to tell. I don't remember a single one, but I remember he had stories to tell and had sort of lots -- lots of memories. So he -- he would --

MR.MITCHELL: Was he embittered at all at that -- at that point. Like he --

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MR.FISCHER: Not -- I don't remember that at all. I mean, no embitterment whatsoever. And maybe it was because I didn't delve deeply. It was more at the, you know, sort of, you might say the social level that our interaction took place. And then, of course, once the land claims movement got going, I'd see him at all these meetings. I'd say he was very upbeat at that point because --

MR.MITCHELL: Did he ever talk to you about land claims in the '50s?

MR.FISCHER: No. We never talked historically, no. No, but later it was almost as if "my day has come" was sort of his attitude. It -- and I didn't feel at that point any bitterness in his part. It was sort of all gung ho, pushing. And, of course, all the lawyers were pushing not only forward but also sideways to get the other lawyers out of their way and get more clients. As many as they could.

MR.MITCHELL: Actually, I was -- it was interesting talking -- I stopped in Albuquerque and when I was through with Stu Udall (break in recording) -- and I came in after Hawkins left. So he showed up in like '62 as area director.

MR.FISCHER: Uh-huh.

MR.MITCHELL: And at that time Paul was living in Seattle.

MR.FISCHER: In '62 --

MR.MITCHELL: Yeah. Well, it was early -- he was -- Bennett was area director from '62 to '66 when Stewart made him commissioner of the BIA.

MR.FISCHER: Right.

MR.MITCHELL: So sometime during in that period. The '62 to '66 period. And -- and Paul, who was, you know, this ubiquitous -- is the right word I guess? Pamphleteer, right?

MR.FISCHER: Uh-huh.

MR.MITCHELL: Was whining to Bennett about how he was so broke he couldn't reproduce -- this was like in the days before Xerox machines and shit, right? Reproduce his pamphlets to send out --

MR.FISCHER: I don't know if people existed before Xerox or fax.

MR.MITCHELL: Right. But so Bennett said, "Well, I'll tell you what I'll do, Bill. Send up your shit to me from Seattle and I'll have it all -- let me graft off on the -- on my BIA machines, and I'll send it back to you in Seattle and you can send it out."

MR.FISCHER: Wow.

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MR.MITCHELL: And so this is like a big secret, right?

MR.FISCHER: Uh-huh.

MR.MITCHELL: Because all of Paul's pamphleteering was all, you know, calling the BIA a bunch of scumbags, right?

MR.FISCHER: That's great.

MR.MITCHELL: So every week, according to Bennett, Paul would send him his -- that week's missive, and Bennett would have it retyped and put out in the BIA (indiscernible) somebody should (indiscernible) those things.

MR.FISCHER: Mimeograph machine.

MR.MITCHELL: Mimeograph things --

MR.FISCHER: Right.

MR.MITCHELL: -- and they'd -- he'd Xerox off, you know, a hundred of them, and then he'd send them back to Paul, and Paul would send them out from Seattle. Land blasting the borough, which was sort of interesting. Well, I don't know. Is there anything else worth talking about while the tape is rolling? You never actually lived in Fairbanks until '66 then; is that right?

MR.FISCHER: Right.

MR.MITCHELL: So you missed Ted Stevens in the '50s and all that. And you never knew Nick Gray or any of that stuff?

MR.FISCHER: Well, I knew Nick Gray -- I mean, I knew all those people, but, you know, Alaska is a small village. You didn't have to live in -- live in any particular place. No. I knew Nick afterward. I was out of state from '61 -- fall of '61, 'til summer of '66, so --

MR.MITCHELL: Yeah. That was about the time he came down to Anchorage.

MR.FISCHER: Yeah. And that's it. I attended a hell of a lot AFN conventions during my lifetime. I was there when Udall declared the land freeze --

MR.MITCHELL: Oh, in '68?

MR.FISCHER: -- and that was pretty exciting. That was in the basement of the Switzerland.

MR.MITCHELL: In Fairbanks?

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MR.FISCHER: In Fairbanks. A terrible place for a meeting, but it was pretty exciting.

MR.MITCHELL: Well, actually tell me -- and then I will turn the tape off and we'll go back to the music, is -- how about Howard Rock? What do you remember about Howard?

MR.FISCHER: Howard. I just found -- I was -- last night I was going through a list of my files in the archives. And there is listed something I had been missing forever. And that -- that I felt guilty about having in my possession. And that is a folder of photographs taken by Howard Rock. In 1969 there was a world (indiscernible) board meeting in Point Hope. And Howard and I had flown to -- from Fairbanks to Kotzebue and then got on a Twin Otter from Kotzebue to Point Hope. And there were very few people on the plane. Only four, so we were sitting together. And then all of a sudden Howard sees a lead along the shore. And he's like, "Hey, look at the whales." And he was like a kid he was so excited. And there was this lead -- it was probably anywhere from 60 to 80 feet wide, and it was like a highway. There were these white beluga whales that looked like passenger cars. And it was, like, a three-lane highway, because they were just sort of going like this, you know, next to each other and in different lanes. And occasionally you'd see great big truck -- semi -- a black shape just come- -- coming up and then disappearing again. And as you look ahead and back, there were whales as far as you could see. And Howard kept saying, "Those people are out in the ice. They must be out in the ice by now." This whole -- I can't wait until -- he just kept talking excitedly. And sure enough, as we approached Point Hope, there was the whole village was out on the ice by the lead. And you could see this row of tents, and we -- we went into the airstrip. And some people arrived by snow machine, and they hauled us right out to the ice. We went straight out to the ice. And the next 48 hours were among the most exciting times I've spent anywhere. Howard took a whole bunch of pictures, and at one point he gave me his folder of photographs. And I just ran across -- totally irrelevant and shouldn't be in the tape, but --

MR.MITCHELL: Right. But, I mean, photographs of that particular trip?

MR.FISCHER: Of that -- of pulling the whale. They got three whales that day. And he -- his camera had lots of pictures. I don't know if you've seen a picture of me with the whale in the background. I don't know, I'm holding a spear or whatever. It looks -- very heroic pose, and Howard took that. But that was also the time when sort of after the whale -- whales were cut up and meat distributed, the town went on a binge to celebrate. They (indiscernible), and then people just drank themselves into oblivion. And along the way I was staying at Howard's brother's place. I forget his name. Victor, Vincent, or something.

MR.MITCHELL: Uh-huh.

MR.FISCHER: And (indiscernible) -- and all pent-up venom against Howard came out. And it was a horrible evening from that standpoint. You know, you've turned, white man. You lived with the white man. And you're one of them and not one of us. And it was painful. Just very, very painful to hear it from his older brother.

MR.MITCHELL: And how did -- how did Howard react to all that?

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MR.FISCHER: Howard just sort of took it quietly. Howard wasn't drinking. I mean, he wasn't drinking then. Howard drank a lot at various times, but as I remember, he certainly wasn't drunk. He was a sick one -- while (indiscernible). And it was exciting up until then, and then it became very painful. Anyway, yes. I know Howard. I served on his advisory board a (indiscernible) of times.

MR.MITCHELL: What was he -- was he generally enthusiastic? Generally morose? Generally --

MR.FISCHER: I -- I would say he was -- during the -- I mean, he was enthusiastic when we were in the plane going to Point Hope.

MR.MITCHELL: Right.

MR.FISCHER: I would say about the (indiscernible) times, it was such a struggle to finance the paper. To keep it alive. It was a week after week, month after month, trying to keep it alive. That I'd say it certainly from a standpoint of being the editor, he'd -- but the publisher, he was certainly not enthusiastic. But he was certainly dogged about it and just determined to persevere. Just determined. I mean, just -- he -- he -- he starved himself in order to put out the papers is really what it amounted to. And --

MR.MITCHELL: Well, particularly after '68, when, you know, Forbes died in '68 and that was really the end of the money bag.

MR.FISCHER: Yeah. But let's -- and it was after that that I (indiscernible) advisory board and worked as close as I could with him.

MR.MITCHELL: You think he was happy about the result, or was he --

MR.FISCHER: I think -- I think he realized that he was -- he was an important influence in bringing Alaska Natives together. He was -- he was very conscious of that. He was conscious of himself, you know, that series that he wrote --

MR.MITCHELL: Uh-huh.

MR.FISCHER: -- about his life, and the stories about his childhood, and sort of how he progressed. Those were testimonials, and I remember he -- he -- he was talking about it one time. About how important it was for him to tell other people about his life. About the life, the Eskimos, about the hardships, and the joys. And that it sort of -- it was almost as if that justified his life and his existence. You know having left the heritage of that in writing -- to actually having written, not just having lived. But to have it -- have it down in black and white.

MR.MITCHELL: Well, I guess you sort of exhausted our subject matter. Unless there was -- is there anything else about the pre-'71 era that's worth talking about? Don't have to think anything up.

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MR.FISCHER: No. I assume you've got the Federal Field Committee operating and all that sort of stuff.

MR.MITCHELL: Yeah. Yeah. In fact, I'm -- one of the more interesting things -- well, actually.

MR.FISCHER: You deal with a lot of shit on there, you know?