Words of Grace for a Century

At 102, Soboleff's quiet power remains a cultural, social force in Alaska

BY STEVE QUINN
FIRST ALASKANS

The teacher pulled aside the Tlingit boy, whose rapt attention he secured to deliver an indelible message.

He said to young Walter Soboleff: "Take care of the old person you are going to become."

"I never forgot that," Soboleff says. "At first I thought it was a very strange talk. But it just remained with me.

"I remember that through grade school, through high school, through college, through graduate school.

"I can't forget that day. He just kept saying it to me: 'Take care of the old person you are going to become.' "

The 10-year-old became an Alaska icon who in November turned 102 years old, extending an unfinished legacy founded on peace – a voice of quiet power that would fight racism while trying to stem the methodical erosion of Native culture.

Today, Walter Soboleff Sr. sits a regal man, whose expressions of rumination produce thoughtful comments, reflecting a sharp memory, an engaged mind and a refusal to hold a grudge.

LEFT: **Walter A. Soboleff stands** at the Alaska State Museum in Juneau in front of a Wolf House Post carved in 1904 by Rudolph Walton. He is wearing a dog salmon headdress and a chilkat blanket.
STEVE QUINN / FIRST ALASKANS

Rev. Walter A. Soboleff stands in the pulpit at Memorial Presbyterian Church in Juneau where he became the state's first Native ordained minister.
SOBOLEFF FAMILY / COURTESY PHOTO

Don't confuse the seemingly tired eyes for fatigue or disinterest. Soboleff leads anything but an idle life.

He serves as board of trustees chairman for the Sealaska Heritage Institute and is willing to challenge trustees with tough questions.

He tutors students in Tlingit, a language he hopes many will carry into classrooms of teachers looking to stave off language extinction.

He sends handwritten letters and holiday cards to friends, sometimes penning 150 cards in a single sitting.

It's a life dating to a foundation laid in the 1940s when Alaska was steeped in racial discrimination: Aleuts were taken from their homes during World War II; Nome Natives sat segregated in the village's movie theater; closer to home in Juneau, Soboleff and wife Genevieve learned they could not rent a home because they were Native.

It was to be their first home, but the owner minced no words when telling the couple – he of Tlingit descent and she a Haida woman – that he did not rent to Natives.

"I told the man, 'I'm sorry I bothered you,' and I said it in a kindly way," Soboleff says of the June 1940 incident.

"I didn't feel any bitterness toward him," he says. "I just didn't. I just left him. I found a little place for my wife and me to rent near the church."

The rejection came as he embarked on becoming the Presbyterian Church's first Alaska Native ordained minister, giving Tlingits a rare public voice that still commands attention.

His response became a hallmark of who Walter Soboleff is today: humble, tolerant and benevolent, but unwilling to yield his drive to advance Native causes.

It's a collection of traits that guided him past future setbacks attributed to racism, yet conduct that would draw hundreds of admirers.

In the 70 years since being denied a place to live, he brought calm to villages, board rooms and logging camps, taking care of others as well as the elder he has become.

"We take for granted today what individuals can accomplish," says Byron Mallott, a board member with Sealaska Corp. "He did it at a time when it was almost impossible to do – and to be respected by the non-Native community.

"He was right there at the same level as the people who were in charge of our society, our economy, the churches, the educational system – but he was Native.

"Think of that in terms of courage, in terms of perseverance, in terms of dedication and in terms of integrity.

"Now, think in terms of personal strength, and you realize you're dealing with a giant of a man. There is no question about it."

"When we start on a project, **God starts us out in a very small way.** So we started out in a very small way with three people in church."

Growing up

Born on Nov. 14, 1908, Walter Soboleff grew up in Southeast Alaska with a Tlingit mother, Anna Hunter, and Alexander Soboleff, a man of Russian and German descent. His father died when Walter was about 10, around the time of the Russian Revolution.

Soboleff attended elementary school in Killisnoo and went to the Russian Orthodox school in Sitka for one year before it shut down in 1917 during the Russian Revolution. After his father died, Walter entered Sheldon Jackson School in Sitka.

Already speaking English and Tlingit, Soboleff eventually converted from Russian Orthodox to Presbyterian. He says there was no dissatisfaction with the Orthodox Church driving his conversion – in fact, the Russian Orthodox Church balked at stripping the Natives of their culture and language and respected the rights of Natives. However, Russian was difficult to learn and attending Sheldon Jackson was financially feasible for a mother raising two children, so it happened naturally, he says.

At Sheldon Jackson, he completed grade school and high school, where he took his first theology class.

Living in Sitka, Soboleff held several blue-collar jobs after graduating from Sheldon Jackson in 1928. A fire in Killisnoo forced its residents to flee and never return.

Several years later during the Depression, he was offered a full scholarship to the University of Dubuque in Iowa, having shown a strong inclination toward the ministry.

It was an opportunity rarely afforded Alaska Natives, and Soboleff would not let distance keep him out of class.

So he hitchhiked, rode trains with the hobos, and slept in every YMCA room he could find en route to Dubuque.

Once there he completed his theology degree and remained for three years in divinity school.

With an increasing number of Native high school graduates attending college today, it's easy to view Soboleff as simply another graduate.

Friends and family members, however, say it's an accomplishment that requires context.

"When most people weren't thinking about graduating from grade school, he is in college getting his degree," says Albert Kookesh, a state senator who now serves as chief executive for Sealaska and co-chairman of the Alaska Federation of Natives.

"If you finished grade school, it was an amazing thing for a Native person to do back then, but Walter, he brought that presence with him and he did much more than that."

In the pulpit

Soboleff came to Juneau on June 14, 1940, newly ordained and set to assume the pulpit at the Memorial Presbyterian Church.

He and his wife arrived on a vessel operated by the Alaska Steamship Co., choosing his childhood state over opportunities in the Lower 48.

His first service, launched by the ringing of a church bell, attracted three people: two children and one adult.

Most Tlingit residents had left town to fish and camp and weren't expected back until mid-summer.

"When we start on a project, God starts us out in a very small way," Soboleff says. "So we started out in a very small way with three people in church."

As people in Juneau quickly learned of his being denied a home, he refused to complain.

"They talked with me and they became my teachers in the Tlingit culture," he says. "I learned so much from them.

"Once we got acquainted, things started to grow. They taught me the Tlingit customs, the history of the Tlingit people. It was a general course in anthropology."

The congregation grew to what friends recall

as "standing-room only," and soon his voice became a fixture on the airwaves.

Broadcasts reached people living in villages and even Canada's neighboring Yukon Territory, starting with 15 minutes every Saturday reading news accounts in Tlingit.

Soon Tlingit people found themselves glued to the box-sized black transistor Zeniths usually reserved for updates on the war, politics and the World Series.

Portions of his Sunday service were next added to the airwaves.

The soothing baritone timbre in his voice enabled him to connect with adults and children for years to come.

He left the hellfire and damnation speeches for other preachers, delivering what friends consistently called comforting sermons, as if they were one-on-one talks.

One of those people was Mallott, who grew up catching Soboleff's services about 140 miles northwest in Yakutat.

"He was speaking to you, he was speaking to Native people at a time when you didn't have a lot of that," Mallott says.

"There was nobody else doing it. He didn't think of it that way. He was just doing it. That's his way."

Civil rights in the background

Soboleff's efforts to build a church and unite diverse groups were set against the backdrop of a historic state civil rights battle playing out in Juneau.

The fight was underscored by citywide tableaus, most of them with signs reading: "No Natives." It took place a quarter mile from Soboleff's church in the state's capital.

There, Elizabeth Wanamaker Peratrovich and Roy Peratrovich Sr. pushed the Territorial Legislature for a state Anti-Discrimination Act.

It failed in 1943, but passed when the Legislature met again two years later, a success largely attributed to Elizabeth Peratrovich's defense of ancestral lands.

"They carried the ball for us," Soboleff says. "They were instrumental in the movement to eliminate this racial bias.

"It's more than one measure. It's the people working together to make a better world.

"We didn't say we would do this and you will do that. It didn't work that way. It was a natural occurrence.

"We just gave the Christian message. The Christian message is love your fellow folk. For God is love."

Soboleff wasn't among the loudest voices for civil rights, but he was willing to weigh in with his own concerns, including a letter to Washington, D.C.

Russian Orthodox priest Michael Oleksa noted Soboleff's 1943 reaction to an Army ban on contact between soldiers and Tlingits:

"The order [banning contact] places the entire Native population under a class of folk as might be termed undesirable. You will agree that a ruling to that end is unjust and indeed not consistent with principles underlying our democracy."

His words were routinely concise, poignant, effective enough to attract members from the non-Native community.

Soboleff believed in backing his anti-segregation sentiment and opening his doors to anyone wanting to attend.

"I asked them one day, 'how do you feel about inviting other people to be members of the church?' They said it would be fine," he says.

"Word got out in the community that Memorial Church is welcoming others to come.

Not that they were unwelcome, but it was established.

"Now others were coming to our church."

But after 22 years of building a congregation and bridges, Soboleff got word that the Alaska Presbytery and the Board of National Missions chose to close his church.

It came with no notice, and within weeks the church faced the wrath of a wrecking ball.

Soboleff won't publicly criticize the decision; his four children say it was a difficult time for their father, who wouldn't burden his family with his pain.

"I can't fathom how he withstood that," says daughter Janet Soboleff Burke, the eldest of Soboleff's four children.

"It still hurts us, but he won't talk about it. He'll talk about what a great choir we had or all of the good that came from the church."

Others won't take the closing quietly, nearly 50 years later.

Sitting with Mallott and longtime friend Clarence Jackson, Kookesh spoke out for his uncle, saying there was no just reason for closing Soboleff's church.

"The politics of it is it got closed because it got too popular," Kookesh says. "There were two Presbyterian churches in Juneau." The white people started to leave for his church.

"His happened to be the so-called Native church where he preached in Tlingit and he taught in English.

"He told me – and this is a quote from him – 'I've seen the worst of politics but I didn't say anything about it.'

"He will never tell you, he will never complain because he's a bigger man than us, but he was affected by politics worse than any of us when they closed his church."

Soboleff lost his building, but not his will to preach, teach or advocate.

Fisherman's life

His next assignment was to board a converted fishing vessel and ply the Southeast channels to various villages.

Soboleff smiles as he quickly rattles off a series of villages he would visit about once every

Walter Soboleff and his wife, Genevieve arrive in Juneau in 1940 when Soboleff began serving Southeast Alaska for the next three decades. *SOBOLEFF FAMILY / COURTESY PHOTO*

102 years of Soboleff

A brief timeline of the Rev. Walter Alexander Soboleff Sr.

1900s

1908 Born in Killisnoo, Alaska

1920s

1928 Graduated from Sheldon Jackson High School

1930s

1933 Joins Alaska Native Brotherhood.

1933 Accepts scholarship to University of Dubuque

1937 Received bachelor's degree from University of Dubuque

1938 Marries Genevieve Evangeline Ross

1940s

1940 Receives degree in theological seminary from University of Dubuque

1940 Walter and Genevieve denied place to live because they were Native

1940 Becomes first Alaska Native ordained priest

1950s

1951 Begins 20-year term as Alaska National Guard Chaplain

1952 Receives honorary doctorate of divinity, University of Dubuque

1960s

1962 Soboleff's Memorial Presbyterian Church closes after 22 years

1962 Becomes itinerant preacher visiting Southeast Alaska villages

1966 Begins first of four years as Alaska Native Brotherhood Grand President

1967 Named Alaska State Board of Education Chairman

1968 Receives honorary doctorate of humanities, University of Alaska

1970s

1970 Named head and founder of Native Studies at University of Alaska-Fairbanks

1971 Retires from National Guard as a Lt. Colonel

1976 Named to Tenakee Spring School Board

1977 Begins another three-year stint as ANB's Grand President

1980s

1981 Named to Sealaska Corp. Board of Directors

1989 Named Alaska Federation of Natives Citizen of the Year

1990s

1999 Named ANB Grand Camp President Emeritus, a lifetime honor

1999 Publishes Tlingit Culture Protocol

2000s

2001 Recognized by Masonic Lodge for holding highest honor at 33 degrees

2008 Angoon Airport bears Soboleff's name

2008 Walter A. Soboleff celebrates 100th birthday

2010 Delivers keynote speech at Gov. Sean Parnell's inauguration

Speaking of Soboleff

"**It's his wisdom and graciousness** that's the epitome of what you expect or want from elders of any culture, and he does it with such grace. Picture a humble, wise Christian elder. That's Walter Soboleff."

— State Sen. Fred Dyson, Eagle River Republican

"**I think he understood** a long time before most people your Native identity is an important piece of who you are, but it isn't all of who you are. It's something that's vital and alive today. It's something that is going to take us into the future. Sometimes, I honestly don't think a lot of people get that."

— Ross Sobeleff, Walter's youngest of four children

"**He's a model for so many** of us. He's got this quiet determination. He's alert. He's forceful. He asks penetrating questions. Maybe we need to change our image about 102-year-old people."

— Rosita Worl, president of Sealaska Heritage Institute

"**He had a far-reaching** (radio) audience. That the greater white society would allow him to speak in our language on the radio is something. And he didn't get arrested. People listened to him."

— State Sen. Albert Kookesh, Sealaska Corp. chairman

"**There was a great outcry** that culture should not be the same par as religion. Walter is the single man to hold up the Tlingit culture and religious freedom together. That's one of the things old people love so much about Walter. He gave them that freedom."

— Clarence Jackson, longtime friend and Sealaska Heritage trustee

two months – a testament to his sharp memory.

Yakutat, Hoonah, Angoon, Kake, Metlakatla, Klawock, Craig, Hydaburg. He also made stops at Coast Guard light stations and logging camps.

At each place, he continued preaching to people who did not have a pastor every Sunday.

He did this for eight years in what might arguably be the time of his greatest sacrifice.

It meant time away from home — unlike the previous 22 years — sometimes for weeks.

When home he would be immersed in his work with the Alaska Native Brotherhood.

He served as grand president for the Alaska Native Brotherhood for four of these years.

None of it brought wealth; rather it brought debt and a refusal to ask for handouts, says eldest son, Sasha Soboleff.

His sermons during these itinerant days were as inclusive as the congregation he build in Juneau and his reach just as lasting.

Soboleff quickly connected with one young boy living in Angoon for a few years while the boy's father worked in the village.

Soboleff told the boy a story from when he went to Sheldon Jackson: that of two frogs who fell into a pail of milk. One gave up hope and drowned.

The other refused to stop paddling and eventually the milk turned into butter and he was able to hop out of the bucket.

That boy was Talis Colberg, who grew up to become Alaska's attorney general, mayor of the Matanuska-Susitna Borough.

The two met each time Soboleff arrived in Angoon on the Anna Jackman.

"I'll never forget it," says Colberg, also an elder at Palmer Presbyterian Church. "The story stuck in my mind. I became famous in my family for pulling out the frog story."

Were it someone else sharing the story, it may not have remained so memorable, Colberg says.

"He's the first pastor I remember listening to," he says. "He would have a children's message in an age where children's messages were unusual. I still think of him as my pastor to this day."

The two were reunited about 10 years ago at a conference in Anchorage.

When Colberg became attorney general in 2007, he visited Soboleff at his home during trips to Juneau.

He is now president of the Matanuska-Susitna College and he still receives hand-written notes from Soboleff and fires off a few himself.

One day, Colberg sent a note with material written by Japanese poet Toyohiko Kagawa, who died in 1960.

"Walter writes me back to thank me for the poem," Colberg says. "He then tells me he met Kagawa. It just amazed me that he knew the guy on some level.

"When I think about it, I shouldn't be surprised. That's why I still think the world of him."

Handwritten messages

Discussions of Soboleff eventually seem to lead to his notes, quick dispatches to friends on cards.

Once typed on a manual typewriter with some keys occasionally out of alignment, notes receive a more personal touch – his own handwriting.

They are short, perhaps a few sentences, and they aren't necessarily connected to a holiday or birthday. It's simply time to write.

They remind people that this elder has the same active interest in them as he did when arriving on the Anna Jackman or the Princeton Hall boats 40 years ago.

"I always try to keep them positive," Soboleff says. "People don't realize how important they can be."

Several notes went to Bill Thomas of Haines, a fisherman raised by his staunchly Republican grandmother Mildred Sparks, and a man who decided to enter politics.

In 2004, Thomas, also a Republican, claimed the first of four consecutive victories for a seat in the Alaska Statehouse.

Today, Thomas, a man of Tlingit descent, serves as co-chair of the House Finance Committee, putting him among the powerful lawmakers in the Legislature.

"Walter always tells me, 'Your grandma is smiling down from heaven,' " Thomas says. "She always made sure we heard Walter's services on the radio.

"If we missed Sunday school or church, we sat in front of the radio. Every time he came to Klukwan, it was important that he was there. "

Sometimes Soboleff won't wait to write.

During a House floor session, Thomas felt he had been wrongly accused of being aligned with the cruise ship industry

"I knew if I got into an argument, Walter would be upset. So I decided I'd sit down and bow to accusations people cannot justify.

"A few days later I saw Walter. He looked at me and said, 'You did right. I'm proud of you.'

"Walter always has an important message, and he'll always have a church. He just doesn't need a building."

While serving as an itinerant preacher, Soboleff added to his duties four consecutive terms as the Alaska Native Brotherhood's Grand Camp president.

For decades ANB and the Alaska Native Sisterhood served as the most prevailing civil rights voice for Alaska Natives.

ANB along with the newly formed Alaska Federation of Natives asserted itself in the final years leading to the federal government's Alaska Native Land Claims Act in 1971.

The act passed on Dec. 18, awarding nearly

Janet Soboleff Burke dotes on her father while passing out Christmas gifts at Burke's Juneau condo where all four of Walter's children, plus grandchildren and a great-grandchild enjoyed the holiday. STEVE QUINN / FIRST ALASKANS

Barbara Cadiente-Nelson asks Walter Soboleff to do some Tlingit translation during a night class that gets assistance from the 102-year-old elder. *STEVE QUINN / FIRST ALASKANS*

$1 billion and 44 million acres to Alaska Natives. Soon, 12 Native corporations and 200 village corporations formed to manage and develop land and the monies.

As a bill was being debated, Soboleff weighed in with federal lawmakers, including this note to Congressman Henry M. Jackson on July 12, 1968.

Soboleff contacted Jackson because he served as chairman of the Committee on Interior and Insular Affairs.

In part, Soboleff writes:

"We are part of an invaluable American resource which under conditions spelled out in the bill before us will eventually bring increased support to the facets of democracy.

"An expeditious settlement above and beyond what the rule spells will be of mutual benefit to the Natives, State and Nation.

"Your clarion call to battle under 'Old Glory' was proudly answered affirmatively and many of our Braves never returned to enjoy their great Nation.

"We request your utmost consideration without malice, but with honor and integrity for a just solution."

During his first term as ANB president in 1966, he delivered a keynote address at the annual convention in Hydaburg.

He spoke of respect for the organization's founders – some of whom he knew – and their faith in the church.

He then empowered the members when writing:

"In times past and within this time we continue to become involved in issues vital to progress: Economics, Health, Land, Racial Equal Rights, Schools. In degrees of shade these areas are meeting solutions that in part challenge us to responsibility and trust. Strange as it may seem a number of these issues were provided for in the U.S. Constitution, and yet people always had to get in the way."

Working for Soboleff in the 1960s and again for three more terms in the 1970s were people who emerged as today's leaders including Kookesh, Mallott and Rosita Worl, president of the nonprofit Sealaska Heritage Institute and Sealaska Corp. director.

Worl recalls working for Soboleff as the executive director for higher education.

One day Worl, then in her late 20s, approached him and said, "I can't wait until I'm 40 years old for you to talk to me. I need you to talk to me now."

Soboleff responded by saying, "Go close the window blinds."

"I knew I had overstepped my boundaries," Worl recalls. "I went and closed the window blinds."

A few weeks later, however, Soboleff sent a note to Worl.

"It said, 'I would like you to represent me at the statewide school board meeting.'

"What it said to me was, he was talking to me," she says. "He was placing this responsibility on me and expecting that I would represent him well at that meeting."

Soboleff calls ANB's work crucial in the Native community's formative years.

"It helped Western society to appreciate the needs of the people during the change economically, politically, socially and religiously," Soboleff says.

"It was an instrument in the change to help people make adjustments. Now we're getting more of the Native people into the educational system."

Soboleff never feared change. Rather, he pursued it.

In 1970, he left Southeast Alaska for an extended period for the first time since going to Dubuque in 1933.

He founded the University of Alaska-Fairbanks Native Studies Department, where he spent four years.

By then, he had closed out a 20-year tenure as the Alaska National Guard chaplain, retiring as a lieutenant colonel.

He returned to Juneau, also spending time at a family home in Tenakee, about 70 miles southeast of Juneau.

He served another three years as ANB's Grand Camp president through 1979 and has a lifetime title of Grand Camp President Emeritus.

In the boardroom

Soboleff also spent eight years in Sealaska Corp.'s boardroom as a director, new environs for a man spending most years in a pulpit.

Mallott says Soboleff represented an ideal fit when the Alaska Native corporations statewide underwent growing pains, some of solvency, others of mission.

"A lot of that period was very contentious, but he forestalled a lot of acrimony in the board room," Mallott says.

"Without a doubt he influenced Sealaska to grow into a more civil, thoughtful and deliberative body far sooner than it otherwise might have without his presence.

"You need to remember, that even in the '80s and the late '70s, he was an elder back then.

"He never raises his voice and you respect him so highly that when you're around him you don't raise your voice.

"You become more civil; you become more thoughtful; you become more deliberative. You listen.

"All those things you take for granted of being good and necessary: He brought that; he brings it today."

He brings it to the Sealaska Heritage boardroom; he brings it to the breakfast table; he brings it to a classroom of students learning Tlingit.

Soboleff serves as trustees chairman, fully engaged, says Worl, the organization's president.

"The most important thing I'm amazed at is the force he is at running our meeting, that SHI runs its true course," Worl says.

"He acts very much like a chair," she says. "He reads everything. He knows our financials. He knows about our operating plan.

"He's an icon for our people. To me he represents everything I'd like to be: calm, have that kind of wisdom."

The institute published an anthology of biographies including that of Soboleff 15 years ago.

Unlike other biographies, Soboleff's ends with a list of Tlingit values assembled by Soboleff, but the elder insists that's all he did: collate.

Since then, Soboleff has been calling for cultural scrutiny.

"We need to constantly re-examine our culture," he says. What does respect mean? What is sacrifice? What's cooperation?

"If you expect people to respect you, you have to respect yourself, respect your conduct and others will respect you.

"In Tlingit culture, we never had suicides because we knew who we were. Now in the culture, there are those who say, 'who am I?'

"Years ago, you knew your family. You were not alone. You never felt alone. Today the young people say, 'who am I?'

"They say, 'I'm alone. I'm broke.' Bang. I'm gone."

Soboleff befriends new people while looking to longtime friends to carry out this mission.

One new friend is John Moller, a man of Aleut descent who serves as Gov. Sean Parnell's rural adviser.

Moller, 49, met Soboleff shortly after the elder turned 100. Moller introduced Soboleff for the keynote address at Parnell's inauguration in December.

The two men occasionally meet for breakfast, with Moller doing most of the listening to an elder providing guidance but not all of the answers.

"Our conversations tend to center around where do we go from here as Native people," Moller says. "His conversations tend to use analogies and examples of the past for the purposes of the future.

"He told me the next generation of Native leaders have to have an open mind and an open heart, too."

"He spoke of the importance of preserving culture and preserving our languages. We have a responsibility as a people to make that happen."

Soboleff still does his share.

One night a week, he joins a group of 15 adult students advanced in their lessons of Tlingit.

"This new generation is at least getting to appreciate the language," he says. "It isn't completely lost yet.

"They understand some of it. They appreciate it. There was a time in the Tlingit culture when we felt ashamed of it.

"I think that day is gone. There is no need to feel ashamed of your culture.

"Never." ■

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