

# **Native American Heritage Month**

## ***Did You Know?***

### **Elizabeth Wanamaker Peratrovich (1911 - 1958)**

Elizabeth Wanamaker Peratrovich, was a pioneering advocate for civil rights in the United States, particularly known for her efforts to combat racial discrimination against Alaska Natives. Her instrumental role in the passing of Alaska's Anti-Discrimination Act of 1945, the first state/territorial anti-discrimination law enacted in the United States, decades before the Civil Rights Act of 1964, credited her advocacy for equality on behalf of Alaska Natives.

Born on July 4, 1911, in Petersburg, Alaska, Peratrovich belonged to the Tlingit nation, the indigenous people of the Pacific Northwest coast and witnessed blatant discrimination against Alaska Natives throughout her early life. For example, many public spaces posted signs restricting Alaska Natives' participation in civil and social life with phrases like "No Natives Allowed" and "No Dogs, No Natives." Racial segregation was also a harsh reality, with many businesses and public places openly discriminating against Indigenous people.

Peratrovich and her husband Roy later moved to Juneau, Alaska, seeking greater access to lawmakers who could bring about positive change for Alaska Natives. They drafted and introduced an anti-discrimination bill in 1941 to the Alaska Senate, though it failed to pass. Despite this setback, Peratrovich persevered and continued raising awareness of the unjust treatment of Alaska Natives, lobbying lawmakers, the governor, and others to advocate for the passage of anti-discrimination legislation.

In 1945, representing the Alaska Native Brother/Sisterhood, Peratrovich and allies presented an anti-discrimination bill to the Alaska Senate. Peratrovich took the floor and delivered an impassioned speech, advocating for equal treatment of indigenous peoples and discussing the toll discrimination had on her family, friends, and Alaska Natives. The Senate voted in favor of the bill, ensuring full and equal accommodations and privileges for all citizens in public spaces. As a result, Alaska became the first territory/state to end Jim Crow.

Peratrovich's advocacy improved the lives of Alaska Natives and set a precedent for equal rights legislation across the nation. Her efforts resonated far beyond Alaska's borders, inspiring others to challenge discrimination in their communities. Elizabeth Wanamaker Peratrovich's legacy reminds us of the individual and collective power to effect change.

## Sources

Davis, Jennifer. 2021. "Elizabeth Peratrovich, Civil and Voting Rights Activist." *Library of Congress Blogs*. Retrieved October 1, 2024 (<https://blogs.loc.gov/law/2021/11/elizabeth-peratrovich-civil-and-voting-rights-activist/>).

Vaughn, Carson. 2019. "Overlooked No More: Elizabeth Peratrovich, Rights Advocate for Alaska Natives." *The New York Times*. Retrieved October 1, 2024 (<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/20/obituaries/elizabeth-peratrovich-overlooked.html>).

### ***Native American History is American History!***

A Native American Heritage Month spotlight will be published every other week in November 2024. Dr. Julian Culver ([julian\\_culver@brown.edu](mailto:julian_culver@brown.edu)) wrote the above spotlight. Have a spotlight to share? Newsletter submissions are due to Casey Wahl ([casey\\_wahl@brown.edu](mailto:casey_wahl@brown.edu)) Wednesdays by 11:00 am.