

Daily News Opinion

Alaska stays true to vision of its founders

This coming August I will turn 90. I was 21 in October 1940 when I stepped off the S.S. Yukon in Seward. I had no money, no job and knew no one. With no place to stay the night, I slept on the floor of the lobby of a small hotel.

The next morning I asked several people for help to buy a railway ticket to Anchorage. A generous fellow with a Polish accent gave me a \$10 bill, so I bought breakfast and boarded the train and arrived in Anchorage with 37 cents in my pocket.

I knew nothing about Alaska, but I knew where I was going. Raised on a tenant farm in the Dust Bowl days of Depression-era Kansas, I was looking for a country.

Two days before arriving in Seward, I made a promise when the Yukon sailed in to Prince William Sound. As we looked up at magnificent Mount Saint Elias in the Wrangell Range, I said out loud: "You take care of me, and I'll take care of you." For the record, he's kept his promise, and I've kept mine.

As we celebrate the 50th anniversary of statehood, the world is looking north. They need our resources. They admire our natural beauty. And they relish the adventures Alaska offers.

Eventually, they will also discover here a new idea that was born when the Alaska Constitution and the Alaska Statehood Act were written. It's an idea that could eliminate poverty from this world.

I sum it up like this:

We, the people of the world, own most of this planet in common. The Institute of the North estimates that 84 percent of the earth's surface, including the oceans, is either owned in common or owned by no one. That's what we call "the commons," and it includes the air we breathe and the wa-

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COMMENT



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ter we drink. It is the source of life on earth. The future of the human race depends on learning how to use and care for the commons for the good of the total, not just the few.

Article VIII of the Alaska Constitution mandates that our commonly owned resources must be developed for the maximum benefit of the people, not for the benefit of a few insiders or multinational corporations.

In the past 50 years, we have built our state on that principle. It's the only place like it in the world.

Statesmen and scholars are wondering if there is an alternative to the failed capitalism of Wall Street and the worn-out socialism of Europe and the former communist world. They are looking for a better way.

Some of the top economists and scientists in Russia are studying the Alaska model. In 2006, I was the first speaker to address the People's Chamber, a body of more than 100 prominent Russians established by then-president Vladimir Putin to look for solutions to Russia's greatest challenges.

In Moscow's ornate Center for Foreign Relations, I explained how the Alaska people won ownership of much of our land and re-

sources. And I described how after 50 years of striving and learning, Alaska has become a successful owner state, pioneering a road to prosperity based on common ownership yet rooted in democracy.

I see Alaska as a diamond, a brilliant star, a state with an outstanding quality of life, celebrating our natural environment and a healthy economy.

Of course, sometimes we stumble. Some of those we elect through the free and often frustrating democratic process put politics before principle, stuff their pockets with cash from lobbyists, or see no greater vision than themselves.

But, on the whole, Alaskans have been true to our Constitution and the vision of our founders.

That's the idea I saw born when we fought for and won statehood. It's still young, but it is thriving. And my birthday wish as I turn 90 is that in the years ahead Alaska's emerging leaders will share the owner state idea with the world.

Walter J. Hickel served as governor of Alaska from 1966-1968 and from 1990-1994 and as U.S. Secretary of the Interior from 1969-1970. He is the founder of the Institute of the North and his latest book is "Crisis in the Commons: the Alaska Solution."