

**A**LASKA may not be the last frontier in the world. A few other territories would qualify, for instance Antarctica. But Alaska is the last one in the U.S.A.—in fact, “the Last Frontier” is one of its nicknames.

The 49th state, admitted to the Union in 1959, Alaska is of a size that dwarfs Texas, but has a population of less than half a million spread over it. Nevertheless, “Seward’s ice-box” is now the scene of heated controversy over the disposal of its 375 million acres.

There are at least six contending interest groups: the Federal government, especially the Bureau of Land Management, which controlled nearly all Alaskan land before statehood; the Alaskan state government itself; the oil and gas interests; the Eskimo and Indian groups; the established (mostly Caucasian) population; and newcomers seeking the frontier life. We might also add, the conservationists.

A bill concerning Alaskan land was before Congress last year, which according to the *Anchorage Times* “was the Carter Administration’s highest environmental priority in the 95th Congress.” Most of the land would still be under Federal control for national park and conservation purposes. With the disputes, alternative proposals, etc., 1978 went without legislation being passed, and the matter will have to be raised anew.

The discovery of oil on the North Slope has added a new dimension. The Federal government has obtained over \$1 billion in the sale of oil and gas leases. The Alaskan pipeline has added fuel to the controversy over conservation. Closer attention is bound to be paid to the situation in the wake of the Iranian debacle.

Newcomers to Alaska from continental U.S.A. are the subject of a recent book, *Coming Into the Country* by John McPhee. He describes Americans settling in the wilderness and being driven off by

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## HOG-TIED IN ALASKA -THE LAST FRONTIER

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By Bob Clancy

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bureaucrats of the Department of Interior.

I wrote to the Bureau of Land Management, asking for an explanation of this situation, stating that it is my understanding that our public domain belongs to all of us, not to the government. I received a lengthy reply from Laurent G. Ouellette, Chief of the Division of Lands and Realty, who explained that, yes, the land belongs to all of us, but so much of it is still in litigation that because of the uncertainty and unsettled claims almost all lands are closed to entry and appropriation.

Mr. Ouellette added that author McPhee acknowledges that newcomers find that the country has a “code of seniority rights” so that the best locations are taken by first comers and thus the settled areas restrict the use of those areas from the general public.

In reply to this, I wrote: “I feel my rights more threatened by eviction of settlers from the public lands than by their settling on it . . . Land does not necessarily have to pass into private ownership for it to be used. It can still remain the public domain . . . . As for the first comers taking the prime locations, that is natural. If the differences become considerable, Henry George had a simple answer which is readily applicable: let those enjoying the

better advantage pay a rental to the public agency concerned with that land.” (I did not receive a reply to this).

Less easy to sort out are the conflicting interests of the various levels of government. The Alaskan state government considers itself cheated because the Federal government has not turned over all the land promised to it after statehood. Alaskan Lee Poleske writes: “My own view on both federal and state attempts to tie up the land is that they are interested in enlarging their bureaucracies. As long as the government can control the land they can control the people. The best solution is in dependence for Alaska so we, not the government, can decide how our land will be used.”

And there is in fact an Alaskan Independence Party whose platform seems a mixture of good purposes but with some provisions whereby land may be monopolized. It does seem to be the case that far-away Washington pulls too many strings in Alaska. But a localized government is not *ipso facto* the answer. When Alaska was no more than a remote Russian hunting and trading post, exploitation of human beings went on. Some of the Alaskans sounding the cry for freedom own some very choice real estate.

With all these forces and counter-forces at work, the image that focuses in my mind is that of the hopeful pioneer and his family coming into Alaska—willing to work hard and battle the primeval elements for the sake of an independent life, just as his predecessors did in the continental U.S.—and finding that even in this vast and spacious land the forces and counter-forces hog-tie him.

We’ve got to do better than that. Alaska, our last frontier, where raw land is the biggest asset and the biggest issue, is showing up our wrong way of doing things. On this immense canvas we need to start our picture with the concept of equal rights of all to the use of land . . . .

## Harriet floors the tax man!

Wilbur Pereira writes from Los Angeles:

Former actress Harriet Wendall, 65, has what the California Press calls a “novel idea” about paying property taxes: she ignores the county tax assessment (which takes into account the value of buildings), makes her own assessment—and pays that.

Los Angeles County wanted \$1,262.64 from Mrs. Wendall. But she has decided that she ought to be taxed on the value of the land (\$38,620) which she owns in Santa Monica. So she handed over an arbitrary 5% of the value of the land . . . \$1,855.28.

Tax officials were baffled when they received more than they requested—and decided to treat the overpayment as a gift.

Mrs. Wendall adheres to the ideas of Henry George, and in her letter to the county tax collector she declared: “Taxing buildings discourages the construction of housing, which increases rents and unemployment. Not taxing land enough causes inflated land prices, one of the major causes of inflation.”

I have known Mrs. Wendall for many years. She is a splendid lady who is willing to back up her beliefs with her cheque book!