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.

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

BY STEVE QUINN
FIRST ALASKANS
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. Aluts were taken from their homes during World War II; Nene 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 mixed 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 respect by the non-Native community.

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 – 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 Kiliusino and went to the Russian Orthodox school in Sitka for one year before it shut down in 1917 during the Russian Revolution.

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 Kiliusino forced his 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.

But an idle life.

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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.

"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 order [banning contact] places the entire Native population under a class of folk as might be termed undesirable. You will agree 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 unsolicited, 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 Tookesh. "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 50 years later.

Sitting with Mallott and longtime friend Clarence Jackson, Tookesh 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," Tookesh says. "There were two Presbyterian churches in Juneau. The white people started to leave for his church."

"This 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."

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

- **1908**: Born in Killisnoo, Alaska
- **1920s**: Graduated from Sheldon Jackson High School
- **1923**: Joins Alaska Native Brotherhood
- **1928**: Receives degree in theological seminary from University of Dubuque
- **1938**: Marries Genevieve Eunatme Ross
- **1940**: Becomes first Alaska Native ordained priest
- **1951**: Begins 20-year term as Alaska National Guard Chaplain
- **1962**: Soboleff's Memorial Presbyterian Church closes after 22 years
- **1966**: Begins first of four years as Alaska Native Brotherhood Grand President
- **1968**: Receives honorary doctorate of humanities, University of Alaska
- **1970**: Named head and founder of Native Studies at University of Alaska-Fairbanks
- **1999**: Named ANB Grand Camp President Emeritus, a lifetime honor
- **2001**: Recognized by Masonic Lodge for holding highest honor at 33 degrees
- **2008**: Angoon Airport bears Soboleff's name
- **2010**: Delivers keynote speech at Gov. Sean Parnell's inauguration

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
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 which maybe 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 oldest 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 be Walter'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 to 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 boat 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 Kukwan, 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.”

“Few days later I saw Walter. He looked at me and said, ‘You did right. I’m proud of you.’”

“You can imagine it is a person who can be a great deal of help in the world of politics. 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
**Barbara Cadiente-Henson**  
ass. Walter Soboleff to do same?  
translation during a right  
class that gets assistance  
for the 102-year-old  
elder.  

$1 billion and 44 million acres to Alaska  
Native. 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,  
1964.  

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

In part, Soboleff wrote:  

“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 role 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.  

“During his first term as ANB president in  
1966,” he said, “I need you to talk to me now.”  

Soboleff responded by saying, “Go close  
the window blinds.”  

One day, Wofl, then in her late 20s,  
approached him and said, “I can’t wait until  
I’m 60 years old for you to talk to me. I need  
you to talk to me now.”  

Soboleff never feared change. Rather, he  
chaired the committee. He brought 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 Wofl, 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,” Wofl says.  

“He acts very much like a chair,” she says. “He  
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Soboleff never learned a foreign language,  
but the elder insists that’s all he did: “Now  
you know 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  
Alutiiq descent who serves as Gov. Sean Parnell’s  
rural adviser.  

Moller, 49, met Soboleff shortly after the elder  
turned 80. Moller introduced Soboleff for the  
keynote address at Parnell’s inauguration in  
December.  

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