

8a – Segregation in the Far North

In the spring of 1944, seventeen-year-old Alberta Schenck walked into the Alaska Dream Theatre in Nome and took a seat in the "Whites Only" section. When the manager asked her to move, Schenck, whose mother was Eskimo and whose father was White, refused. The manager then called the chief of police, who forcibly ejected the teenager from the theater and arrested her. Schenck spent the night in Nome's city jail.

It wasn't the first time Alberta Schenck had protested discrimination against Alaska's Native peoples. In fact, she had voiced her disapproval of the theater's policy just a few weeks earlier. Schenck was then employed as an usher at the theater after school. But every time she directed a Native moviegoer to the segregated balcony she felt humiliated for both herself and the customer. When Schenck finally complained to the manager about the policy, she was fired. Later, she wrote a letter to the editor of the Nome Nugget in which she described the pain and injustice of segregation.

"What has hurt us constantly," Schenck wrote, "is that we are not able to go to a public theater and sit where we wish, but yet we pay the SAME price as anyone else and our money is GLADLY received."

Throughout the territory, Native peoples faced similar discrimination. So pervasive was segregation in Alaska that a reporter visiting the territory in 1943 observed that the social position of Native peoples seemed "equivalent a Negro in Georgia or Mississippi." But Schenck had staged her one-woman protest at a time when Alaska's Native peoples were beginning to organize politically and demand fair treatment. Native activists had an important ally in their struggle: Ernest Gruening, the governor of the Alaska Territory. In 1943, Gruening had submitted a bill to the territory's legislature calling for an end to the segregation of Alaska's Native peoples in public facilities. However, the bill was defeated.



The day after her arrest, Alberta Schenck sent a telegram to Gruening describing her experience at the Dream Theatre. The governor wrote Schenck back, vowing to re-introduce the bill during the next legislative session. "[I]f it becomes law," Gruening wrote, "you may be certain that the unpleasant experience which has been yours will not happen again to anyone in Alaska. It should never have happened - in America."

The governor kept his promise. This time, the measure passed. On February 16, 1945, Gov. Gruening signed the bill into law, officially guaranteeing "full and equal accommodations, facilities and privileges to all citizens" of the Alaska Territory.

*This article is reprinted by from the Teaching Tolerance curriculum kit
A Place at the Table.*