June 9, 1950

The Honorable Joseph C. O'Mahoney
United States Senate
Washington, D. C.

Dear Senator O'Mahoney:

It is our understanding that the Senate Committee on Interior and Insular Affairs plans to take final action on the Alaska Statehood Bill, H. R. 331, on Monday, June 12, or during that week.

The rights, and in fact the destiny, of the native and Indian people of Alaska are at stake in the Senate decisions to be made, since the Committee, according to its Print on this bill, is considering amendments which eliminate all guaranties of the property rights of these people.

It is our confirmed judgment that an Alaska Statehood Bill without such guaranties will put all native land rights in Alaska in jeopardy. The history of Indian land protection in the United States supports that view.

Prior to the policy of statehood guaranties of native rights, the fraud and violence committed against Indians on the American frontier became known as a "Century of Dishonor." Solemn Federal promises to respect Indian possessions were again and again violated or forgotten as soon as the Federal authority over territories was withdrawn. The State of Georgia openly defied the United States Supreme Court to carry out its decisions upholding Indian land rights in Georgia under Federal treaties. In other States, as, for example, in Kansas and Missouri, Indian restricted lands were rapidly alienated through forced sales to meet high state-imposed taxes. The United States Supreme Court later declared these taxes invalid, but the damage had been done. Indians of Georgia, Texas, Kansas, and Missouri, are still waiting for redress for wrongs suffered at the hands of those States in the 1830's and 1850's.

About 70 years ago, when the public conscience had been deeply aroused, Congress adopted a new policy to ensure respect for Federal promises to our Indian tribes. It is now an honored American tradition that a new State, seeking admission to the Union, must pledge its respect for the land rights and all other rights of native communities within its borders. Every State admitted since the 1870's—
Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, Washington, Idaho, Wyoming, Utah, Oklahoma, Arizona, and New Mexico—willingly gave that pledge. Hawaii offers a similar pledge today in another statehood bill now before the Senate Committee. These pledges have been honored, and the Indians in those States have had a measure of security in their lands and possessions unknown to their kinsmen in other areas in earlier years.

Alaska is our last frontier. There is serious danger, unless the nation takes steps to prevent it, that Alaskan frontier developments may involve the despoliation of the native and Indian people. The United States guaranteed in the Russian Cession Treaty of 1867 that these natives and Indians would be protected in their property. In the First Alaskan Organic Act of May 17, 1864, Congress made the pledge more specific, and promised that within the Territory of Alaska all Indians and Eskimos would be protected "in the possession of any lands actually in their use or occupation or now claimed by them." This pledge was repeated and amplified in the Act of March 3, 1891 and the Alaska Act of May 1, 1936. The Supreme Court of the United States has confirmed these commitments and again and again, as in the recent Karluk case, which this Association helped carry to a successful conclusion, has had to intervene to protect Alaskan native possessory rights.

The United States must require that Alaska pledge its respect for these commitments of the nation in the legislation under which Alaska seeks to enter the Union. Such an expressed commitment would merely confirm existent rights; it would not change them. But the absence of that pledge would be an open invitation to Alaska to disregard the rights of its many thousands of Indian, Aleut, and Eskimo citizens.

We feel sure all Americans of good will join us in appealing to you to require in the Alaska Statehood Bill now before you a strong pledge protecting the land rights of natives and Indians on our last frontier.

Sincerely yours,

Oliver La Farge,
President

OLF/D