

# Who Is Elizabeth Peratrovich? The Story Behind the Country's First Anti-Discrimination Law

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### Who Is Elizabeth Peratrovich? The Story Behind the Country's First Anti-Discrimination Law

By Richard F. Weingroff



**Governor Gruening (seated) signs the anti-discrimination act of 1945. Alaska Territorial Governors. Witnessing are (left to right) O. D. Cochran, Elizabeth Peratrovich, Edward Anderson, Norman Walker, and Roy Peratrovich. Image: Amy Lou Blood - Ordway's. Credit: Alaska State Library - Historical Collections.**

If you've ever walked by FHWA's Office of Civil Rights on the 8<sup>th</sup> floor of DOT's East Building headquarters, you probably have seen the display showing former heads of our Civil Rights office, beginning with Joseph M. O'Connor. In January 1964, Federal Highway Administrator Rex M. Whitton directed O'Connor, a former FBI agent serving as director of Audits and Investigations, to add to his office the responsibility for administering our nondiscrimination program for all Federal-aid and direct Federal contract work. O'Connor's photograph is the first of eight leadership portraits, ending at present with Warren Whitlock, who was Associate Administrator for Civil Rights from September 2011 to September 2015. A portrait of the current Associate Administrator, Irene Rico, will be added.

But wait a minute, who is the woman whose photograph is to the left of O'Connor's? Her name is Elizabeth Peratrovich, but she had no involvement with FHWA or its predecessor, the Bureau of Public Roads. In fact, she had no known involvement with roads other than using them.

So why is she on the display?

Elizabeth Wanamaker was born in Petersburg, Alaska, on July 4, 1911, a member of the [Tlingit](#) Nation. She was adopted by Andrew and Mary Wanamaker. Elizabeth, who spoke Tlingit and English, grew up poor while experiencing discrimination by the territory's white residents, as reflected in the common signs of that era: "No Natives Allowed," "No Dogs, No Natives," "We cater to white trade only." Natives were restricted in where they could live, which hospitals would accept them, and which restaurants or theaters they could enter. They could send their children only to Indian schools. Elizabeth was fortunate to attend Ketichikan High School, which had been integrated as a result of a lawsuit filed by a Tlingit leader. In 1933, she married Roy Peratrovich, also a Tlingit.

In late 1941, they moved to Juneau. Roy was leader of the Alaska Native Brotherhood; Elizabeth was grand president of the Alaska Native Sisterhood. One day late that year, they spotted a "No Natives Allowed" sign on the door of the Douglas Inn across the channel from Juneau. With the United States having just entered World War II, they were outraged by this sign of discrimination. They wrote to Governor Ernest H. Gruening. "The proprietor of Douglas Inn does not seem to realize that our Native boys are just as willing as the white boys to lay down their lives to protect the freedom that he enjoys." The sign, they said, was "an outrage."

That letter was the start of Elizabeth's campaign, with the support of Governor Gruening, to pass an anti-discrimination bill through the Territorial Legislature. In 1943, however, it failed in the House by a tie vote. Despite this disappointment, Elizabeth and her husband traveled around the State urging Native Americans to join their fight for justice.

In 1945, the House, which now included two Natives, passed the bill, which went to the Senate where it had enough votes to pass. However, one opponent, Senator Allen Shattuck, asked, "Who are these people, barely out of savagery, who want to associate with us whites with 5,000 years of recorded civilization behind us?"

During the public comment period, Elizabeth, who always knitted while attending legislative sessions, put down her needles to speak. "I would not have expected that I, who am barely out of savagery, would have to remind the gentlemen with 5,000 years of recorded civilization behind them of our Bill of Rights." After she described the restrictions her family faced, the senator asked if she thought the bill would end discrimination. She replied, "Do your laws against larceny and even murder prevent those crimes? No law will eliminate crimes but at least you as legislators can assert to the world that you recognize the evil of the present situation and speak your intent to help us overcome discrimination." The gallery broke out in loud applause.

The bill passed the Senate which, according to one account, "was forced to a defensive whisper at the close of that senate hearing by a five foot five in Tlingit woman."

On February 16, 1945, Governor Gruening approved the country's first anti-discrimination law. "All citizens," section 1 stated, "shall be entitled to the full and equal enjoyment of accommodations, advantages, facilities and privileges of public inns, restaurants, eating houses, hotels, soda fountains, soft drink parlors, taverns, roadhouses, barber shops, beauty parlors, bathroom, resthouses, theaters, skating rinks, cafes, ice cream parlors, transportation companies, and all other conveyances and amusements, subject only to the conditions and limitations established by law and applicable alike to all citizens." Violators would be subject to imprisonment for up to 30 days or fined up to \$250.

Elizabeth Peratrovich died on December 1, 1958, at the age of 47, of breast cancer. She lived long enough to see the rough early years of the Civil Rights Movement, during which the rest of the country battled with the same types of discrimination against African-Americans that she had fought on behalf of Alaska Natives. Nineteen years after Governor Gruening signed the law in Alaska, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the landmark *Civil Rights Act of 1964*, which banned discrimination throughout the country on the basis of race, color, religion, sex or national origin.

Forty-four years after Governor Gruening signed the law, February 16 was established as "The Annual Elizabeth Peratrovich Day." As one account explained, "Every year since that day, Alaskans pause to remember her, dedicating themselves to the continuation of her efforts, to achieving equality and justice for all Alaskans of every race, creed, and ethnic background." The Alaska House of Representatives named a gallery in her honor, while a bronze bust was

placed in the lobby of the State Capitol. *The New York Times* published a belated obituary on March 20, 2019: "Overlooked No More: Elizabeth Peratrovich, Rights Advocate for Alaska Natives."

In February 2020, the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the bill she fought for, the U.S. Mint will release five million \$1 coins commemorating the *Anti-Discrimination Law of 1945*, the latest in a series of coins authorized by the *Native American \$1 Coin Act* (P.L. 105-124, signed December 1, 1997). One side (tails) will feature a portrait of Elizabeth Peratrovich, the name of the legislation, and the symbol of the Tlingit Raven moiety, or descent group, of which she was a member; the reverse side (heads) will feature the traditional image of Sacagawea.

During a ceremony unveiling the coin design during the Alaska Native Brothers and Sisters Convention at Alaska Pacific University in October 2019, Chief Administrative Officer Patrick Hernandez of the U.S. Mint said:

"This coin will be a lasting tribute to Elizabeth Peratrovich and her relentless efforts to tear down the wall of discrimination against Alaskan natives. We will proudly produce this coin that honors her bravery and determination."

That's the woman whose image is displayed along with leaders of our Civil Rights office.



**In February 2020, the U.S. Mint will release five million \$1 coins commemorating the Anti-Discrimination Law of 1945, and feature Elizabeth Peratrovich. Credit: U.S. Mint.**

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