

Opinions

Elizabeth Peratrovich's legacy is immense. It doesn't need to be artificially inflated.

- Author: [Ross Coen](#)

| Opinion

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An illustration of Alaska Native civil rights leader Elizabeth Peratrovich created by Tlingit artist Michaela Goade of Sitka is the featured Google Doodle on Wednesday, Dec. 30, 2020. (Screengrab)

Like many Alaskans, I was thrilled to see Elizabeth Peratrovich [honored with the Google Doodle](#) on Dec. 30. People around the world logged in that day and saw an illustration by Tlingit artist Michaela Goade that depicted Peratrovich testifying

for Alaska's Anti-Discrimination Act of 1945. The law, which prohibited the exclusion of persons from public spaces on the basis of race, has become iconic, with Peratrovich rightly celebrated as a civil rights hero alongside Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Precisely because this story is so inspirational, it was disheartening to see historically inaccurate information in the Doodle.

As I have written in these pages before, the story of the Anti-Discrimination Act trades more in myths and fables than historical fact. There is no record of Peratrovich's testimony, for instance, and the version known today was constructed by a number of different writers starting in the 1970s. In addition, while Jim Crow segregation was rampant in Alaska in the 1940s, signs reading "No Dogs or Natives Allowed" never existed in the territory, despite what many believe.

This brings us back to the Google Doodle, which claims Alaska's equal-rights law was the first in the nation.

This is simply not true. Not by 80 years.

The first public accommodations law was enacted in Massachusetts in 1865. It declared there should be no restriction in public places on account of race or color. The District of Columbia did the same in 1869. New York and Kansas followed suit in 1874. Fifteen additional states enacted anti-discrimination laws in the 1880s and 1890s, many of which were modeled on a federal civil rights law passed during Reconstruction.

The statutes varied in their language, but Indiana's law, enacted in 1885, was typical: "All persons...shall be entitled to the full and equal enjoyment of the accommodations, advantages, facilities and privileges of inns, restaurants, eating houses, barber shops, public conveyances on land and water, theatres and all

other places of public accommodations and amusements...regardless of color or race.”

By the 1930s economic inequality in the United States and the rise of fascism in Europe led to calls for civil rights protections. At least 23 bills were introduced at the federal, state and municipal levels in 1939 alone. Fourteen states, including Minnesota, Nebraska and Pennsylvania, as well as the territory of Puerto Rico, enacted or revised some form of anti-discrimination statute around that time.

In Canada, British Columbia, Ontario and Manitoba all enacted anti-discrimination laws in the 1930s. Ontario prohibited the display of signs expressing racial or religious hatred in 1944.

When Alaska lawmakers began debating an anti-discrimination bill in 1945, a full 28 states already had such laws on the books.

So why do many people believe Alaska’s law was the first? It would appear the intent is to make Peratrovich’s achievement seem all the more grandiose. The claim casts her as a visionary, a trailblazer who was the first in the nation to make a stand for racial equality. It’s often said that she beat Dr. King to the punch by two decades, but the assertion misstates the fact that Alaska’s equal rights law was modeled on many that were already in place around the country.

Elizabeth Peratrovich is unquestionably a giant of Alaska history who is deserving of her every commemoration. We do her memory a disservice, however, when we invent a false history. Her story, if told with historical accuracy, would still be remarkable. We don’t need to make things up for her to be a hero.

Ross Coen is an Alaska historian from Fairbanks.