

## **Hopefully, by the time this appears in print, Alaska's legislators will have agreed to keep government functioning.**

This is not a commentary on their performance, but is intended to show that impasse among statesmen is not new. Both state and federal governments have shut down before, getting back to work after some inconvenience, but without too much harm except to political reputations.

In the beginning there was little government (that is, in 1947 when “a handful of pioneers” chose the name Chugiak rather than earlier times when the Dena'ina Indians roamed these parts disturbed only by the Russians who preceded later settlers). Alaska became a territory of the United States, overseen primarily from Washington, D.C. From 1884 until 1959, the governor was appointed by the President. As of 1913, a legislature elected by the people met every other year in Juneau for a 60-day session—and usually got its job done within that time. Things have changed since.

The very first Legislature convened March 3, 1913, and ended on May 1, exactly 59 days later. In that time, the 16 representatives and eight senators passed 84 bills. Their first act was to give the right to vote to women, several years before Congress saw fit to do that. It was not until 1945, though, that an anti-discrimination bill championed by Elizabeth Peratrovich prohibited discrimination against Alaska's original residents.

Among the four score and four measures the first Legislature enacted were compulsory education for children age 8 to 16, creation of professional boards, a business tax and a \$4 poll tax on males between 21 and 50 years of age, criminal and civil codes, regulation of banks and corporations, and mine safety codes along with mineral claim procedures and provisions for mine inspections.

The legislative body consisting of miners, merchants, newspapermen, lawyers and others met in the Elks Hall in Juneau. Four went there from Nome via dog sled, traveling hundreds of miles to Valdez where they switched to a steamship. Each was paid 15 cents a mile for travel. They earned \$15 per day while in session—the same wage paid to laborers in the gold mines a dozen years earlier.

**When Chugiak made its appearance on the map 34 years later, the 18th Legislature had increased in size to 40 members—two-thirds its current makeup.**

Fish traps were a major issue and the Legislature placed before voters a referendum banning the contraptions. It passed by a huge margin but was not implemented. The Cold War was on everyone's mind and defense spending was fueling a surge in population.

The biennial Legislature in 1947 met for 59 days, from January 27 to March 27. It passed an operating budget calling for \$848 million, up by more than \$425 million over the amount approved two years earlier. Taxes were increased on mining, salmon and alcohol, but on the first two industries revenue fell far short of projections. Within a year the Territory of Alaska was flat broke. Voters reacted by ousting the majority. The 19th Legislature instituted an income tax for the first time, levying a rate of 10% of a person's federal tax. The education tax was \$10 per year

levied on each employed person collected by each employer. Yes, if you worked for more than one employer, each deducted \$10, with no rebate.

Chugiak-Eagle River residents were very active in efforts to gain services for the new settlement. They arranged for a do-it-yourself fire department and saw the need for a school. A territorial school for grades 1-8 finally opened in 1951. Darlene (Stockhausen) Halverson, whose family was among the early settlers, was one of the first students. In her book, "The Chosen Place," she recounts the day when the school bus pulled up that first morning. For three years she had ridden the bus driven to Anchorage by a driver named George, but now it was [Paul Swanson](#). He would be taking her, her sister, and neighbors to the brand-new building in Chugiak.

It would be another three years of asking territorial officials for help in meeting public needs before Gov. B. Frank Heintzleman was inveigled into coming as guest of honor at the Chugiak Spring Carnival. That event brought more attention to Chugiak and led to more requests for a library and a secondary school. After eighth grade, students were still being bussed to Anchorage. It was a long, arduous and dangerous trip over the unpaved road. Eagle River Hill was treacherous, the log bridge crossing the river only inches above the water and the grade much steeper than today. At one time, 13 white crosses dotted the highway shoulder to mark lives lost on the hill.

Statehood was finally achieved in 1958 when Congress passed the [Alaska Statehood Act](#), adding the 49th star to Old Glory.

**That allowed Alaskans to elect their own governor. It also provided more local control over affairs. Even so, Chugiak-Eagle River had too small a population to elect a local person to the Legislature.**

They did, however, come to play a role in gaining district representation which divided the at-large Anchorage district.

Residents were becoming even more politically savvy. All 26 local civic and social organizations joined to form [Operation Chugiak High School](#). They went to Juneau and convinced the Legislature to appropriate money for a high school. It opened in the fall of 1964, a small building designed for 400 students. In no time it became overcrowded and has been added onto many times. A second high school has since opened in Eagle River.

Passage of the Mandatory Borough Act brought local government to the area. The Greater Anchorage Area Borough was one of seven dictated by the state, its boundaries extending from Portage on the Seward Highway to Goat Creek on the Palmer Highway. Half of the land area lies north of the Eagle River watershed.

Local voters elected Eagle River businessman [Glenn Briggs](#) as their first Borough Assembly member. Friction between the five Anchorage City Council members and their colleagues from the 30 rural precincts resulted in a call to unify city and borough governments. [Ed Willis](#), who had led the successful fight to gain Chugiak High School, was elected to succeed Briggs, who favored consolidation of borough and city governments. Constituents almost unanimously opposed unification, fearing high taxes and imposed regulations.

In 1974, a delegation from Eagle River traveled to Juneau and asked the Legislature to allow Chugiak-Eagle River to separate from the Anchorage borough and form a second class borough of its own. A bill setting an election was passed and became law without the signature of Gov. Jay Hammond. Brought before voters, separation was approved by 55% of voters. The borough was to begin operation July 1, 1975.

**An assembly of seven members, a five-member school board and a mayor were elected to lead the Chugiak-Eagle River Borough.**

They were not sworn in until December 30, 1974, due to a lawsuit filed by a group of property owners who charged that the legislation was unconstitutional. The election was upheld in Superior Court, but on appeal was overturned by the state Supreme Court on April 15, 1975. The measure applied only to Chugiak-Eagle River, the court ruled, rather than the entire state and therefore violated a provision in the Constitution.

While local residents happily pursued forming their own borough government, Anchorage created a third commission to write a charter for a unified government. The election to ratify it was held six months after the supreme court ruling. Although only 20% of Chugiak-Eagle River voters were in favor, up from 10% in each of the first two tries, the charter was approved.

In the 1974 statewide election Chugiak-Eagle River finally gained not one but three voices in the Legislature. Willis was elected to the Senate while Bob Bradley and Sam Cotten were seated in the House. They were the first in a long list of local men and women who distinguished themselves as lawmakers.

From a raw frontier settled by a small group of strong-willed, independent people, the community has grown to about 35,000.

Voters have become more sophisticated but have not forgotten how to get things done. Its representatives continue to make their presence known on both municipal and state governing bodies.

*Lee Jordan has been an Alaskan since 1949, moved to Chugiak in 1962 and in 2016 moved back to Anchorage. An Alaska history buff, he enjoys writing about the place where he did not want to be sent, but came to love. He has written four books on Alaska history and has a blog at [www.byleejordan.com](http://www.byleejordan.com).*

Lee Jordan

Despite twelve times telling the Army to send him “anyplace but Alaska,” Lee Jordan arrived in Whittier on Jan. 4, 1949. He has been here ever since. Married to Barbara Erickson, they have four children, nine grandchildren and five great-grandchildren. The Jordans recently moved to Anchorage after 54 years in Birchwood. A retired newspaper editor and publisher, he coached youth baseball for many years and is active with the Chugiak-Eagle River Chinooks Booster Club. He is the author of three books on Alaska history and maintains a blog on [www.byleejordan.com](http://www.byleejordan.com). Reach Lee at [leebee@gci.net](mailto:leebee@gci.net)