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FAIRBANKS
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Celebration marks Alaska's path to statehood

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Photo by [Sam Harrel](#)

Wednesday marked the 50th anniversary of the first step toward statehood.

On May 28, 1958, the U.S. House of Representatives passed a bill proposing that Alaska become the 49th state of the union.

The bill wouldn't be passed by the Senate until June 30, 1958, and signed by President Dwight D. Eisenhower, making it official, in January 1959.

"Today marks the first day that Alaska got its foot in the door," John H. Venables said in a historical re-enactment of Judge James Wickersham on Wednesday evening at the Noel Wien Library.

Venables also stepped on stage as William Henry Seward.

Adorned in historical costume, Venables filled the audience with the cold facts about what has historically been called "Seward's Folly."

William Henry Seward served as secretary of state under President Abraham Lincoln, whom Venables called "just a log-splitter from Illinois."

According to Venables, Seward lost the presidential nomination to Lincoln by only four votes.

He then served as secretary of state under Lincoln and President Andrew Johnson. During that time, he purchased 586,412 square miles of Alaskan land from Russia for \$7,200,000. At that price, Alaska was bought at only 2 cents per acre.

The purchase was mocked by the public at the time, but Venables, speaking in character as Seward, humorously predicted the future by telling the audience, "They may laugh now, calling it 'Seward's Icebox' but I predict some day the United States will need Alaska's resources."

Acting as Judge James Wickersham, Venables sat in a judge's robe with the Stars and Stripes on his right and the eight stars of gold on a field of blue to his left.

Wickersham served as Alaska's third territorial delegate to Congress in 1917, where he passed the Organic Act of 1912, which made Alaska a territory. He also helped create the Alaska Agricultural College and School of Mines, now known as the University of Alaska.

"It was a fight all the time trying to be the voice of the people," he quoted Wickersham. "But then again, Alaskans have a fighting spirit."

Apparently, Alaskans also have a dancing spirit.

Following Venables' performance, residents headed to Pioneer Park for a barbecue and bonfire where they joined Sen. Lisa Murkowski, Borough Mayor Jim Whitaker and City Mayor Terry Strle in celebration.



Photo by [Sam Harrel](#)

Sen. Ted Stevens caught many by surprise as he was seen dancing to the music alongside local children also enjoying the music.

"One of the best pieces of advice I ever had was to dance like no one is watching," one dancer said. "I guess Mr. Stevens already took that advice, though."

The 50th anniversary celebration continues Friday with the "Proud to be an Alaskan Festival" at Pioneer Park from 5-10 p.m. and Saturday at Griffin Park for kite flying activities at 2 p.m.



Photo by [Sam Harrel](#)