

Parents: Speak Your Native Language to Children—

Tragedy of Dying Native Languages

By MADELYN SHULMAN

Staff Writer

NOTE: With this article, the fourth in a series, the Tundra Times concludes its examination of Alaskan native languages today on its brightest note—the Eskimo people.

In several schools in the Yukon-Kuskokwim, native teachers conduct first and second grade classes in Eskimo. Bilingual education has come to Alaska—painfully late and centered in the Bethel area of Alaska where the native language is its strongest.

The program in Bethel, Akiachak, Nunapitchuk and Napakiak begins first graders with courses in reading, writing, math, social studies and science in the native language. Then, for one or more hours per day an English teacher teaches English.

Educationally, the children are not held back while they learn a second language. By the time, after three or four years, their program is mainly in English—they should have mastered the second language, as well as have a firm base in other subjects in their native language. By high school, these students should have a pride in their language and culture that the traditional U. S. school system could not give them.

At the center of the Eskimo

Language Workshop, the University of Alaska project which prepares materials and trains teachers for the bilingual programs, is Irene Reed, one of the original six students who studied Eskimo in Dr. Michael Krauss's first class in the language in 1961.

In the workshop, talented and trained Eskimos translate stories, text books and other school materials. Also, they write original stories and books in Eskimo, to provide a wide and varied school literature for their students—a literature that has been adapted to the culture of the students.

For the school year which begins in September, the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the Division of State Operated Schools plan to expand the bilingual program to nine new schools. As the school year ends, the results of the bilingual program are pouring in—children who learn faster, better with more parental concern and support than in the all English curriculum.

Expansion of the program is mainly limited by the facilities available to train more teaching aides and teachers. The University of Alaska Eskimo Language Workshop is also responsible for developing and producing the teaching materials for the program, though teachers in the schools often develop their own as well.

The Yukon Kuskokwim area has the largest number of Eskimo speaking people in Alaska—15 or 20,000. The dialect of the area is Central Yuk, one of three Yuk Eskimo languages in Alaska.

The other two are St. Lawrence Island and Pacific Gulf Yuk. This latter is dying, reports linguistics Professor Krauss. Only a few children of the Prince Edward Island, Kodiak Island and Cook Inlet speak their Yuk language. On St. Lawrence Island, Yuk is still strong, however.

The approximately 800 residents of Savoonga and Gambell on St. Lawrence Island speak Siberian Eskimo—the same language spoken by the approximately 1,000 Eskimos who live on the other side of the 40 mile Bering Strait—in Siberia.

Cold war politics has divided these two groups who until 1948 often visited freely between their villages and attended feasts and celebrations in each other's lands.

While the language on St. Lawrence is strong, it could probably be invigorated by contact with the mainland people. This summer, Michael Krauss is studying the St. Lawrence Eskimo language under a grant from the National Science Foundation. He hopes to establish a writing system for the language to enable

(Continued on page 6)

Native Languages...

(Continued from Page 2)

other agencies to begin producing schoolbooks and training teachers to teach Eskimo on the island.

As of today, Alaska bilingual education is far behind the excellent Soviet textbooks, the Eskimo speaking nation of Greenland and even the Canadians who have published extensive literature in Inupiat Eskimo.

In Inupiaq country in Alaska, the language's future is perilous. Already, in some communities the children do not speak Eskimo. In Barrow, the language is strong. In Nome, it is dying and signs of decay are already apparent in Point Hope and Kotzebue.

Of the 10,000 Inupiat Eskimo about 7,000 still speak their language.

However, English is quickly making inroads.

"Any parent who knows his native language and does not speak it to his children is contributing to the death of that language," charges Dr. Krauss.

Also contributing to that death are neglect in the schools and the mass media which are already reaching out into Inupiat country—to Barrow, Nome, Kotzebue, Point Hope and their surrounding villages.

In the schools, the first tentative efforts are being made to teach Inupiat in the schools or institute a bilingual program. The basic linguistic work has already been done by a number of talented linguists in the Summer Institute of Linguistics, a church sponsored project which does bible and gospel translation as well as linguistic work. News of the bilingual program in Bethel, however, is reaching Barrow, Kotzebue and Point Hope and arousing interest in a similar program in these schools.

However a proposed T. V. station in Barrow plans programming in English alone and while parents seem to want Eskimo taught in the schools they often do not speak it in their homes.

Another weakening blow to Inupiaq is the U. S./Canada border which artificially divides the Inupiaq communities of the North.

While many systems have designed to write Eskimo, among the central Eskimo group in Canada most of the people read and write in a special syllabic

writing of Eskimo developed by E. J. Peck in the late 19th century.

Despite the fact this writing has not been widely taught in the schools, it has achieved wide popularity and by the middle of the century most Eskimo people in that area could read it. Its distinctive form is one reason for its popularity, according to many Eskimos, and it has been used for a wide variety of Canadian publications—including newspapers, magazines and books.

In Barrow, the population is becoming aroused about a high school system which requires their children to board away from home and study an English curriculum in city high schools. Despite a population of over 2,000, there is no high school in Barrow and beyond 9th grade their young people leave home.

A question arises constantly among people who question bilingual education. Isn't this a 'melting pot society' in America? Isn't it more valuable to integrate children into the standard U. S. culture and language?

Yet, people who have spent years studying and speaking with the native people see the results of wrenching a people from their culture—usually onto welfare and alcohol in the slums of Anchorage and Fairbanks.

"It's a form of spiritual extermination," says Michael Krauss. "An education system designed to weaken the Eskimo's ties to the land and destroy his adjustment to his environment so he can be moved away and/or his environment changed without his consent."

As Alaska's economic development proceeds will the people who gain wealth in the north continue to be white Alaskans from the outside or the Eskimo people who have survived on the land for untold generations? If the Eskimos gain control of their own future, will there still be enough young people with a love of the frozen, barren north to continue their culture.

Eskimo is the key to that culture and a living language is one clue to a living people—like the Greenlanders in the east and all the other nationalities who have preserved their differences with pride.

(Last of a series)