

Heritage of Value: Alaska Native Languages

By MARC OLSON

Alaska's Native languages are a "heritage of value," and the Alaska Native Language Center at the University of Alaska is a leader in the attempt to encourage their continued use as viable, living languages.

The Center, under the

leadership of Dr. Michael Krauss, is now entering its fourth year of operation. In this relatively short time it has taken large steps toward preserving the languages, not as dying dialects in researcher's notebooks, but as usable, writeable, and readable languages for now and in the

future.

As a result of ANLC efforts, there now is an orthography, or complete writing system for every Native language. This accomplishment involved the construction of complete systems for a number of languages, and

(Continued on Page 6)

Native Languages...

(Continued from Page 1)

improvement on several others.

Besides developing writing systems and printing books, ANLC is also involved in numerous other aspects of Native language development.

The Center works outside the state, on both national and international levels. ANLC works with organizations and individuals who are involved in Native language programs outside of Alaska and in other countries with Eskimo, Indian and Aleut populations.

Fund-raising is an important task. The Center has raised several times the money originally appropriated by law for its founding in 1972.

A major responsibility is the training of Native speakers, through workshops and individual instruction, to read, write, and teach, in the furtherance of their languages. Several persons who have attended workshops are now leaders in their local language programs.

Literacy and written materials are considered extremely important to the furtherance of Native languages. The Center has published materials in most Alaska Native languages, and has printed the first books ever in some of them. Publications include the first book in Aleut in 70 years, the first in Sugcestun Aleut in 125 years, and the first in Haida in 72 years.

Methods of obtaining material for publication are numerous. Many books are original works

written by Natives who have learned to rite in their languages through the Center. Tape recordings of history and traditions made by older speakers are transcribed by Native writers, and compiled into books.

The Center constantly uses its collection of Alaskan Native languages tapes and written materials from all over the world. Some of the books have been copied for distribution to Native groups around the state, and more will be copied in the future.

The roots of the Alaska Native Language Center go back years before the actual program was established. Dr. Krauss began his work on Native languages, principally in Athabascan and Eyak, in 1960. Much of what he did later became the basis for the Center.

Dr. Krauss worked with several others, including Irene Reed, Martha Teeluk, Osahito Miyaoka and Paschal Afcan, on the development of a writing system for Yupik Eskimo. This ultimately resulted in a bi-lingual education system in four Yupik schools in 1970.

This was the Eskimo Language Workshop, headed by Irene Reed in the Bethel area. Its program included the publication of several Yupik books. The "educational and popular success" of the program was the spark that set the wheels in motion for ANLC's start in 1972, and bi-lingual education throughout Alaska.