

Only 2,000 Now Speak Tlingit—

Hoonah Indian Lady Instructing Tlingit Culture, Language at AMU

About 400 years ago a glacier moved down a valley in Southeastern Alaska forcing the resident Tlingit clan to find a new home.

The clan made a song about the migration following the coming of the ice. As is the custom of the Tlingits, the song belonged to the clan and only members of the clan were permitted to sing it. As is also their custom, the song was passed from one generation to the next.

Today only one person knows the song and is permitted to sing it.

Such are the tenuous threads linking the present with the cultural treasures of the Tlingit past.

Perhaps the most important link with the past is the Tlingit language. Without the language all the songs, stories and rituals would be dead.

Nora Florenda remembers that when she was a girl, and in fact, until about 25 years ago, nearly all Tlingits spoke Tlingit. Today they nearly all speak English and fewer than 2,000 of them speak Tlingit.

Mrs. Florendo, who originally came from Hoonah about 50 miles southwest of Juneau, is one of several Tlingits campaigning to renew interest in their language and culture. She is currently teaching a ten-week course in Tlingit conversation and grammar at Alaska Methodist University.

She is leading her 12 students, six of whom are Tlingits, toward three goals: a limited skill at conversation, an awareness of the grammar and a familiarity with the culture.

Since there is no written grammar for Tlingit, except articles written on a technical level for linguists, the grammatical part of the course is particularly difficult.

Linguist Richard Dauenhauer, AMU assistant professor of English and comparative literature, is taking the course and also helping overcome this problem.

They hope the notes they compile throughout the course will provide the basis for a popular written grammar and Mrs. Florendo is receiving credit in a directed study course for her work in developing a grammar.

Grammar is not the only major difficulty facing the student of Tlingit, however.

"Because of the unique sounds used in Tlingit, some of its words

are among the most difficult in the world to learn to pronounce," Dauenhauer said recently while discussing progress made in the first few class meetings.

A third major difficulty is spelling. Seven systems for writing Tlingit have been used at various times, including one which utilized the Russian alphabet, and even within the system used today there are many dialect differences.

Both Dauenhauer and Mrs. Florendo work with a sense of urgency to overcome these and all other difficulties. "Other Indian languages of Alaska are nearly extinct.

There is no hope for most of them. But there are still enough Tlingit speakers that with intensive support from schools it is possible to save the language," Dauenhauer said.

Eyak, one of the Indian languages related to Tlingit, is spoken by only three people, he explained, and another, Haida, by only about 200 people in Alaska and, except for a few villages, the Athapaskan languages of Alaska will become extinct during the current generation.

Mrs. Florendo feels her people have a psychological need for



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their language and culture. It is her dream to train other teachers who will help spread a renewed interest in the Tlingit heritage throughout the 14,000 member Tlingit nation.

She is especially interested in training women to teach Tlingit in their community schools and in developing a uniform system of writing to assist them.