

ESKIMO DANCE: WITCHCRAFT!

Kotzebue Based Church Labels Cultural Dance Shamanism, Witchcraft

By LAEL MORGAN
Staff Writer

Is witchcraft and shamanism being taught in the Kotzebue day school? Concerned parents descended on the Kotzebue School Board last week to find out and discovered the answer might be, "yes".

It began with a petition that read: "We are against Eskimo dancing being taught to our children in the Kotzebue day school and request it be removed from the school program."

The request was signed by 124 Kotzebue residents and presented by Jack Jones, school board member and parishioner of the Friends Church.

"What's wrong with Eskimo dancing?" asked officials who had worked hard to get \$80,000 federal funding for an Eskimo cultural program.

Jones explained his ancestors had once danced for joy after a successful hunt but that they also danced at big meetings where witch doctors were present.

"We were made to understand in this dancing is some sort of witchcraft," he said.

A gussuk member of the school board looked quite sur-

prised.

"I think some of my kids are taking Eskimo Dancing and I wonder if they're learning witchcraft."

Nellie Ward, president of the Student Council, got the floor. A lot of kids are getting up and coming to school at 8 a. m.--before classes officially start--to take Eskimo dancing, she defended.

"Some of them like it so much they're even getting interested in the Eskimo language. It's beautiful."

"They keep telling us we're losing our culture. Why try and stop our teaching it?" wondered Mrs. Mae Shroyer, a school board member. "We asked everybody. Advertised it before we started the course."

Dick Grissom, manager of Alaska Airlines, cited a Supreme Court decision (Brown vs. New Jersey) that religious organizations cannot interfere with the workings of a public school.

"If Eskimo dancing is a religious ceremony, I would suggest the Friends Church sue the school and myself," challenged Charles Perry, principal of the school. "Does the Friends Church have a right to impose its moral values on people who are not members of the Friends Church?"

"I think it would be re-

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refreshing to see a trial that succeeded in this town," snapped Gary Thomas, Friends pastor who is also a board member. "It would be refreshing to see law and order back in Alaska again."

Perry noted that Eskimo dancing was optional and no child was forced to take it if he did not want to.

"I think there has been some pressure put on children to dance," Thomas charged.

"Maybe Mr. Green (Paul Green who heads the dance teaching staff) has been pushing a little too hard. If everybody was as enthusiastic as he is, this place would be boiling," Perry conceded.

But he noted not a single parent had complained to him about the program.

Then the discussion turned to witchcraft and paganism.

"What about Halloween? How pagan can you get?" one mother asked. "You celebrate that."

The Friends Church will be the first ones to fight it," Thomas said with a grin.

A Catholic priest and Episcopal minister spoke in favor of retaining the program.

On studying the petition it was discovered a couple of people known to be Eskimo dancers had signed. Someone suggested a second petition be started in favor of dancing to see if the same people would sign again.

It was noted that some of the original signers were not members of the Friends Church, but that seemed to be beside the point.

"We used to dance here, too, until the Friends Church came," Tommy Fields, school board member, recalled. "But dancing is sharing pleasure. Someone might take off their clothes. If the Friends Church had gotten to Point Hope first they'd have stopped dancing there."

As for the witchcraft, Field noted there were two kinds—good and bad.

"Who knows, maybe we're doing the good kind...and if the kids don't know the good kind from the bad kind, what difference does it make?"