

Superhuman struggle to read

By BILL HESS

Tundra Times Staff

After making an almost superhuman effort to learn to speak, read, and write the English language, Katherine Attla of Huslia is now working to keep Native Alaskan languages and culture alive among the young. Attla was the keynote speaker at the Bilingual-Bicultural conference held in Anchorage last week.

Hundreds of participants from statewide attended the event, which was sponsored by the Alaska Department of Education.

Attla recalled how as a young girl growing up in the village of CutOff, she spoke only her Athabascan tongue up until the age of 12. "Then I
(Continued on Page Ten)

Determination coupled with coffee cans led to her education

(Continued from Page One)

began to understand and speak very little," she remembered. "At age 14, I was able to speak better." There was no school for Attla to go to, and still she could not read or write.

In those days, she spent much time out on a trapline with her grandfather. When they needed new supplies from the store, he would have Katherine take a dog team into the community to get what they needed. "The first thing I would do when I reached the village," Attla remembered, "I would start playing football!" Finally, after the game was over, she would go to the store and get the supplies. Most of them, anyway.

"You forgot this, and you forgot that!" Grandfather would tell me. Then I decided I'm going to make a list, so I wouldn't forget!" Making a list was not easy for a girl who couldn't write. Attla found herself taking the paper wrapping off cans of milk to write and using the lead from .22-caliber bullets for pencils.

For textbooks, she had the labels on the supplies which she already had bought. She recalled taking down a can of coffee, and copying over and over on her milk wrappings what she believed was the word "coffee." Attla's step-mother could not speak English, but she could read it. She took a look at her daughter's work, and discovered that she had not been writing coffee at all, but rather the brand name!

Other times, Attla found herself with nothing to write on. Then she would use her finger and write words in the snow. "But my finger got cold," she said, "so I had to use a stick!" At times, she

would study late at night. Then her grandfather would tell her she had to get up early to go check the traplines, and so she had better go to sleep. "I would turn down the lamp," Attla recalled. "Then when I heard him snoring, I would turn the lamp back up. I would study."

Her efforts paid off. Later, she was able to get a job in a village store as a clerk. Her work there sharpened her reading and writing skills. When her children went off to school at Mount Edgecumbe, she was able to read their letters, and write letters back. Attla has served on the Koyukuk River Fish and Game Advisory Committee, the local school board, the Huslia Council, the Indian Education Committee, and is now on the Indian Education Advisory Committee.

Not bad for someone who never went to school. Attla's reading and writing skills have tested out at a junior high level. She is often a guest teacher in the schools of her area, teaching skin sewing, how to clean a moosehide, and story-telling. Although she feels strongly that the young Native students of Alaska do need good educations and should be fluent in English, she feels it is equally important that they know their own language and culture.

There are meanings in Attla's Athabascan tongue which do not exist in English. Despite modern times, Attla stressed that the young never know what they will have to deal with in the future.

"There might be times where they are alone in the country, out on the traplines," she stressed. "This is one way to get stuck without their Native tongue."



Della Keats, an Eskimo traditional healer, greets a friend at the recent Bilingual, Multicultural conference held in Anchorage last week.