

She studies to keep oral history

The Associated Press

Tacoma — When Rachel Craig grew up in the northwest Alaskan village of Kotzebue, the only transportation was by dog team, and Bush planes were a rare curiosity.

To get a high school education, Kotzebue youngsters had to attend boarding school in White Mountain near Nome or Mount Edgecumbe across the channel from Sitka.

When she decided to start college at age 53, Mrs. Craig traveled even farther, to the University of Puget Sound in Tacoma. She started classes last fall with the goal of becoming an

— even better historian for her people — the Inupiaq Eskimo.

Mrs. Craig first left Kotzebue many years ago to attend vocational school in Seattle. There she met her husband, David, and they settled in the Seattle-Tacoma area for 15 years.

When the Alaska government began negotiating with Native people for settlement of land claims, she joined the Washington chapter of the Alaska Federation of Natives. Eventually, she became its president.

"I saw that we weren't getting the right kind of information to enable us to enroll (members) properly," she said.

Members of the Northwest Alaska Native Association, a corporation of Alaska natives, asked Mrs. Craig to return to Kotzebue in 1974 and work in the corporation. So she, David and son Brian, then 9, packed up and headed north.

"Here we were — hunting people, fishing people and berry-picking people — and suddenly, we were corporate people," she said. "If we wanted to keep our land holdings, we had to be solvent economically."

Kotzebue had changed dramatically, and Mrs. Craig felt a need to salvage the oral history

of her people, not only to document land claims but to teach young Eskimos about their roots.

"Assimilation has created a lot of problems for us," she said, citing high levels of suicide and alcoholism among Eskimo youth. "All that traditional history was being lost with every elder who died. I could see that before long, we'd look like Eskimos, but we wouldn't know who we were."

Mrs. Craig's first project was to locate sites of historical importance to her people. That information was submitted to the federal government, which

eventually reserved 40 million of Alaska's 300 million acres for Indian people.

While doing her research, Mrs. Craig decided the best way to retain Eskimo heritage would be to consult elders about what traditions and values should be remembered and cultivated.

Year after year, she traveled to Eskimo villages, taking her son with her. Although he never learned to speak Eskimo, Brian mingled easily with Eskimo youngsters wherever he went.

From Mrs. Craig's research, language classes and cultural materials were developed for elementary and high school.