

Tanaina Indian is homeless in his homeland

By JIM and PRISCILLA KARI

(Editor's Note: James Kari is a Linguist with the Alaska Native Language Center at the University of Alaska — Fairbanks. Kari and his wife wrote this story at the direction of Shem Pete.)

A prominent Tanaina tradition bearer, Shem Pete of Nancy Lake, is looking for a place to live once again. Shem is undoubtedly the Willow area's first and most resilient citizen. Born at Susitna Station in about 1898 he is the recognized leader of the Susitna Tanaina Indians.

The Lower Susitna River had been an area of high population until early in this century when Susitna Station and several surrounding villages were decimated by flu epidemics. Shem's mother and his older brother, who was the last village chief, died at Susitna in 1918, along with three other members of his family and 200 or more Susitna area natives.

Susitna Station dissolved in the 1930's when most of the people moved to Tyonek.

Still very active and ebullient, Shem has lived, hunted, fished, trapped, and panned for gold all over the Upper Inlet. He is the foremost Tanaina storyteller and one of the outstanding native language storytellers in Alaska.

He is also the last Tanaina potlatch song leader, as well as

an expert on the culture of the Upper Inlet. His memory for details is truly remarkable. For example, he knows over 500 native place names in the Upper Inlet including intimate details of geography and history in such far flung places as Rainy Pass, the Sqwentna, Yentna and Kaheltna Rivers, the Tokashi Mountains and the Chulitna River, the Talkeetna River, Knik Arm, Matanuska Valley, Tyonek and Point Possession.

And he is one of the few Tanainas who know the aboriginal names in the proposed State Capital area.

Shem's main residence area has been the country between Susitna Station and Nancy Lake. His mother packed him in a cradle to their Red Shirt Lake village in about 1900. The Tanainas, like other Athabaskans, had camps in several areas to make best use of seasonal resources. They had no private ownership of land but instead had individual and family use areas.

Shem decided, in about 1944, to settle at Nancy Lake rather than move to Tyonek. He heard that a road would parallel the train someday. He built the first of three residences on the big peninsula on Nancy Lake. Shem never owned or filed for that land. Since he was the first person to build on Nancy Lake, he

thought he was staking land. His mother had told him that that point was an old Tanaina village site.

In about 1950 he learned that someone had homesteaded this land and he was forced to move. Then he bought a 3½ acre lot nearby and built a second cabin. In about 1965 this cabin, it seems, was swindled from him. A man showed him a paper with Sehm's signature, a bill of sale for \$500, and he was forced to move.

Shem's third residence is off the lake shore but still on the Nancy Lake Peninsula. He built a pre-cut cabin on land leased from a private party in 1965. This is the little cabin Shem lives in today with his son, Billy.

They haul their water from the lake, set out a few rabbit snares, and burn wood. But this spring, the owner of the property gave Shem and Billy an eviction notice. Shem claims that he was told he could live on this land for the rest of his life, but the lease has a 30-day notice clause.

Shem cannot afford to buy the land at today's prices and he adamantly rejects any suggestion that he move to a Pioneer Home.

Shem may now move on to someone else's land in the Willow area, and, if he lives long enough, he may get some Native Land Claims land to live on. He is an at-large member of Cook Inlet Region, Inc. and is not a member of either of the nearest Tanaina village corporations, Knik and Eklutna.

Shem has told Cook Inlet Region Inc. of his eviction notice, and, it is possible that the cor-



LOOKING FOR A PLACE TO LIVE — 80 year-old Shem Pete of Nancy Lake, a prominent Tanaina Indian tradition bearer, is being forced to move from his Willow area home for the third time since 1950. He is one of the few Tanaina Athabascans who knows the original Indian names in the proposed state capital area.

poration will be able to help him. There are many people in the Willow community who sympathize with Shem and have offered to help him move his cabin.

While some neighbors may tend to blame Shem and Billy Pete for their lack of foresight, the fact remains that many early Willow residents have made fortunes on land sales, and the only Natives from that community own no land.

In the 40's and 50's no one helped Shem to file for a Native allotment. He continued to use his country as he always had, and later discovered that all the rules had been changed. He still has a traditional Native view of the utility of a general resource area rather than the monetary value of a plot of land.

Shem appreciates the irony of his predicament. On August 25th Shem and Billy Pete were in a car accident when being

driven home. Shem cracked a bone in his right shoulder. After three days in the hospital he was back home. Within a few more days he was hauling water from Nancy Lake using his left arm. With a smile, Shem said, "I'll be all right in a few weeks. Good thing I didn't hurt my legs, I can still run."

Shem Pete has been invited to speak on "Effects of Exploration on Native Cultures in Alaska" at the Captain Cook Commemorative Lecture series at the Anchorage Historical and Fine Arts Museum on October 11th at 8:00 p.m.