

Study on elderly Anchorage Natives

Under the direction of UAA graduate student Charles Hines, eight UAA researchers have completed the first study of elderly natives in the Anchorage area.

The study is significant in several ways. Among the researchers was Dina Evan, an elderly Seaward Peninsula Eskimo, who speaks Upik and Inupiat.

The study was sponsored by the Student Originated Studies Program, a national arm of the National Science Foundation. Because it was SOSP funded, the students' work was presented to

the Foundation at a special session in Washington, D.C. recently.

Perhaps most unique about the study was its finding that elderly native persons have a very positive outlook on life and their place in it. Far from a gloom and doom prognosis, the elderly face the world with pride and hope, according to project coordinator Chuck Hines.

Hines says this attitude is "true of most older people, but seems to be more prevalent among the native elderly."

He adds that the "85 older persons surveyed in depth are very representative of the 600-700 native older persons residing in the Anchorage area."

In comparing themselves to other senior citizens, the respondents in the survey said they were better off overall, in finance, health education, and discrimination. At the same time, they felt they were worse off in the areas of morals, family relations and the respect they receive.

The typical urban elderly na-

tive in Anchorage was born in 1910 in a village of less than 100 persons who spoke primarily their native language. Medical facilities were limited and were provided on a piecemeal basis by occasional visits from a doctor or Public Health Service nurse, or by untrained individuals such as teachers, missionaries, mid-wives, or possibly a medicine man or shaman. The home was usually a one-room log or frame domicile without the benefit of any type of plumbing. Heat was provided by wood or coal, and sometimes by seal oil, depending on the part of Alaska the individual grew up in. Portions of the year were spent in sod or skin structures. In spite of this, few people classified the "degree of comfort" experienced then as anything less than adequate. They traveled by foot, dog team, kayak or umiak with occasional use of boat motors (or reindeer in some cases). Clothing was hand-made from imported or local materials. There were limited religious facilities available. The main foods consisted of fish, seal, and native plants, supplemented in various areas by whale, moose and caribou. To meet their cash needs, a portion of their time was spent trapping, commercial fishing, or working in canneries. This necessitated their spending a considerable amount of the year away from home. The study group had their troubles, too, but their main concern was health, seconded by food and supplies. There was an almost 50-50 chance that the father was not a native, but an almost 100 per cent chance that the mother was. They were very justified in their concern about health. It was a rare instance in which a family was not affected by some disease or epidemic causing death. A significant number reported that they had little knowledge of their parents because they were brought up in an orphanage or mission home. For recreation

they sang, danced, told stories, and engaged in traditional feasts or potlatches. Most of them grew up in an area which provided very little education. Eighty per cent of them grew up in areas which had no more than the eighth grade available, while 27 per cent had no education at all available locally.

In summarizing the findings of the study, the report to the National Science foundation states:

"In summing up the results, it could be said that this group of people expressed an extremely positive attitude toward their position in life. The older Alaskan Natives, as indicated earlier, have probably been subjected to one of the most extreme transitions of any generation in history without even leaving their native habitat or state. These people, with an extremely low income level, live in a high-cost area with a substantial amount of physical disabilities, in a demanding and youth-oriented society, amid cultural differences which impose a tremendous communication problem. They proved to be the warmest, most open group of individuals imaginable, and not overwhelmed by the challenges of urban living. This is not to say that they do not have urgent service needs. They desire to maintain their contact with the past and still maintain a dignified way of life. The means to provide this do exist. But fundamental communication problems are present between social service agencies and elderly native persons, problems which must be directly addressed if potential services will ever reach the intended recipients. These communication problems are primarily linguistic only at the surface level. Beneath the surface are cultural differences of more far-reaching significance."

Hines cited the help of the Cook Inlet Native Association in the preparation of the study.