

Atka Villagers Perform Phenomenal Bilingual Prog.

By LAEL MORGAN

"Atka was one spark of life in the Aleut nation," philosophizes Michael Krauss, director of the Alaska Native Language Program. "It was the only place left in the world where children spoke Aleut."

But they didn't speak it very well. Their number was small. And many linguists predicted that Aleut, beautiful though it was, would soon be a dead lan-

guage.

When the Russians subjugated the Aleuts in the mid-1700s, they forced their own language on the natives. Churchmen did devise a written Aleut language but the language of the church and of government was Russian.

On purchase of Alaska by the United States, the use of both Aleut and Russian was outlawed. Education became compulsory but that education was in Eng-

lish.

Many of the older Atkans can recall being beaten by their teachers for speaking Aleut and, as recently as 1971, grammar school students were chided for

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speaking their native tongue in the classroom.

Yet Atkans have always loved their soft, musical language and quietly, behind the backs of white administrators, they preserved it, as best they could, in the privacy of their homes.

Luckily, in 1952, a Norwegian linguist named Dr. Knut Bergsland journeyed to Atka and made recordings of the older villagers telling Atka's history in Aleut. The oldsters have since died, and the Aleut of this generation is not as polished as of old; but the tape recordings remain as a guide.

The turning point for Atka—and Aleut—came in June of 1972 when the Alaska legislature passed a law that if 15 or more children in a village spoke a language other than English, the village would have a bilingual program.

In October of 1972, Bill Vaudrin of State-Operated Schools, made the arduous tug trip to Atka to ask if the villagers wanted such a program.

The answer was "Aang!" That's "yes" in Atkan Aleut and it was an enthusiastic YES.

Two villagers, Nadesta Golley (Atka housewife and unofficial postmistress) and Moses Dirks (a 20-year-old reindeer hunter

who had graduated with honors from Adak High School) were selected for training as bilingual teachers.

Both spent time at the language center at the University of Alaska in Fairbanks and Dirks journeyed to Norway to study with Bergsland.

Then, this summer, Bergsland returned to Atka to help complete the program.

"They turned out 18 books — 486 pages, camera-ready, in 40 days," Dr. Krauss marvels. "It's a phenomenal achievement. Nothing in any other bilingual program will probably ever match it.

"They were deeply inspired and slave-driven and also superbly prepared."

So, also, are the school children of Atka. Their basic knowledge of their native language was sound and, under the guidance of Mrs. Golley and Moses Dirks, they're really becoming polished speakers.

And they're learning to write Aleut . . . something their parents never had a chance to do. An adult Aleut writing class is also in the planning stages and it would appear that Aleut will become a vital language of the future.