

Aleuts explore ways to teach Alutiiq

by Mike Rostad

for the Kodiak Area Native Association

KODIAK — At a community potlatch in Larsen Bay, some of the older folks gather around the table and speak in what the younger people think is a foreign language.

But the language is indigenous to the area, and people like Clyda Christensen, Sophie Katelnikoff, Margaret Alpiak and Moses Malutin Sr. can remember the time when Alutiiq was the main language of the village.

"We talked in Aleut from the time we were little," says Christensen, who grew up in the village of Karluk, about 50 miles from Larsen Bay. "I used to listen to my mother when she gets her friends into the house to have some tea. . . She'd be talking with them in Aleut. . . It. . . comes back to me the older I get."

Christensen's familiarity with the Alutiiq language has given her a deeper understanding of the traditions of her people — traditions which, like the language, are considered antiquity even by many Natives today, but live on in the memory of the elders.

As a child, Christensen was introduced to Alutiiq song at potlatches and other community events.

"The old people would get together and sing. . . They'd (meet in) a great big room. Men would sit down on the floor. Women would be cooking and serving. The men would talk with each other."

The chief and second chief presided at the meeting.

'We talked in Aleut from the time we were little. I used to listen to my mother. . .'

—Clyda Christensen

The children would finally be allowed to go into the room when the men were served by the women. This happened once a year. . . It was some kind of tribal meeting, says Christensen.

It was at this meeting that a young man from the village — about 17 or 18 years old — would be initiated. After that, he was given an Aleut name that meant "everybody's friend," she says. "Everybody had to respect that one person."

Christensen spoke Aleut fluently until she went to school.

"The teachers stopped us from talking our language. If we spoke Aleut, (the teacher) would hit us on our hands" with a thick oak ruler. "He hit us as hard as he could. I never tried to say anything in our language. I was scared of that ruler, because I did get hit once, and my hand was burning the whole day. . . We spoke it at home (though)."

"As the years went by, after he stopped us from talking it, pretty soon we didn't even try to talk in Aleut. We were growing up not talking it."

"If those teachers didn't stop us from speaking in Aleut, these children would still be speaking their language," says Christensen. "I don't know what is wrong with our language. Why they stopped it, I don't know. Now the little ones can't even speak it."

Christensen expresses a nostalgic feeling for her language that is exhibited in perhaps the highest form of communication — the longing in her eyes, the smile on her face.

"When somebody talks to me in Aleut, it makes me feel just like. . .

home. . . You just relax when you're talking your language."

The mentioning of the language reminds Christensen of other qualities which seem to have disappeared with progress.

"When we were growing up. . . the people at home were friendly — really friendly."

Christensen would like to see Alutiiq taught in the schools.

Christensen's wishes are shared by her peers and young people such as Brad Aga who feels the preservation of the Alutiiq language "is definitely important."

"The only people you'll see using it is the old elders. It's kind of fading away," said Aga, adding that the language should be part of the school curriculum.

He suggests that Christensen, Dora Aga, Marina Wassillie and other elders teach children in school two days a week.

Christensen went to Fairbanks to learn how to teach the language, but

she says she didn't have guidance or materials to work with.

"Nobody would help us. How are we going to start teaching them how to talk Aleut? We can't just tell them to say this and that. We gotta have some kind of alphabet to go by, because that's the only way they could learn. We didn't know what to do, so we didn't start."

Vicki Sullivan, coordinator of the Family Program of the Cultural and

Heritage Department at the Kodiak Area Native Association, says that KANA is making a "concerted effort" in teaching the language and making it part of the Kodiak School District curriculum.

Philemna Knecht, an anthropologist with KANA, and elders such as Nina Olsen are transcribing Alutiiq stories so that they may be put into a text which could be used in an Alutiiq studies program.