

Alaska Native Language Center News

On August 26, Mike Alex, 70, died of a heart attack. He was the chief of Eklutna Village and the last traditional Tanaina village chief.

Mike was an expert fisherman. He fished every summer at his location on Fire Island near Anchorage. He was best known for his work as warden of the Eklutna Orthodox Church. Over the years he built the new church, maintained the cemetery and restored the old village church. In summer of 1976 and 1977 Mike completed the restoration of the old church, the oldest standing building in the Anchorage area. It will be standing for many years more, with the concrete block foundation, new joists and wall braces Mike added. All the interior furnishings were restored as well. Mike's efforts made Eklutna into one of the major historical sites in the Anchorage area.

Mike's sense of history also went into his work to preserve his Tanaina language. He taught an evening class at Cook Inlet Native Association and participated enthusiastically in language workshops in Tanaina villages. Mike was the last person alive who knew many of the original place names of the Eklutna, Eagle River, and Anchorage area. Just before Mike's death, Jim Kari of the Alaska Native Language Center reviewed Knik Arm place names with him and Mike added several more names. The day before his death he remembered a name for a mountain at the head of Eklutna Lake that he had been trying to remember for months. Thanks to Mike's efforts, some of these Tanaina names will be registered and go on the official maps.

Mike Alex's funeral was attended by many people. A delegation of elders from Copper River sang Ahtna mourning songs. Shem Pete, age 81, of Nancy Lake (originally from Susitna), the traditional leader of the Upper Inlet Tanainas, made a new mourning song for his little clan brother. This was the first Tanaina mourning song made since 1965.



Mike Alex showing the old Eklutna church to children from Lime Village