

Bilingual/Multicultural Conference held in Anchorage

by Steve Kakaruk

Tundra Times

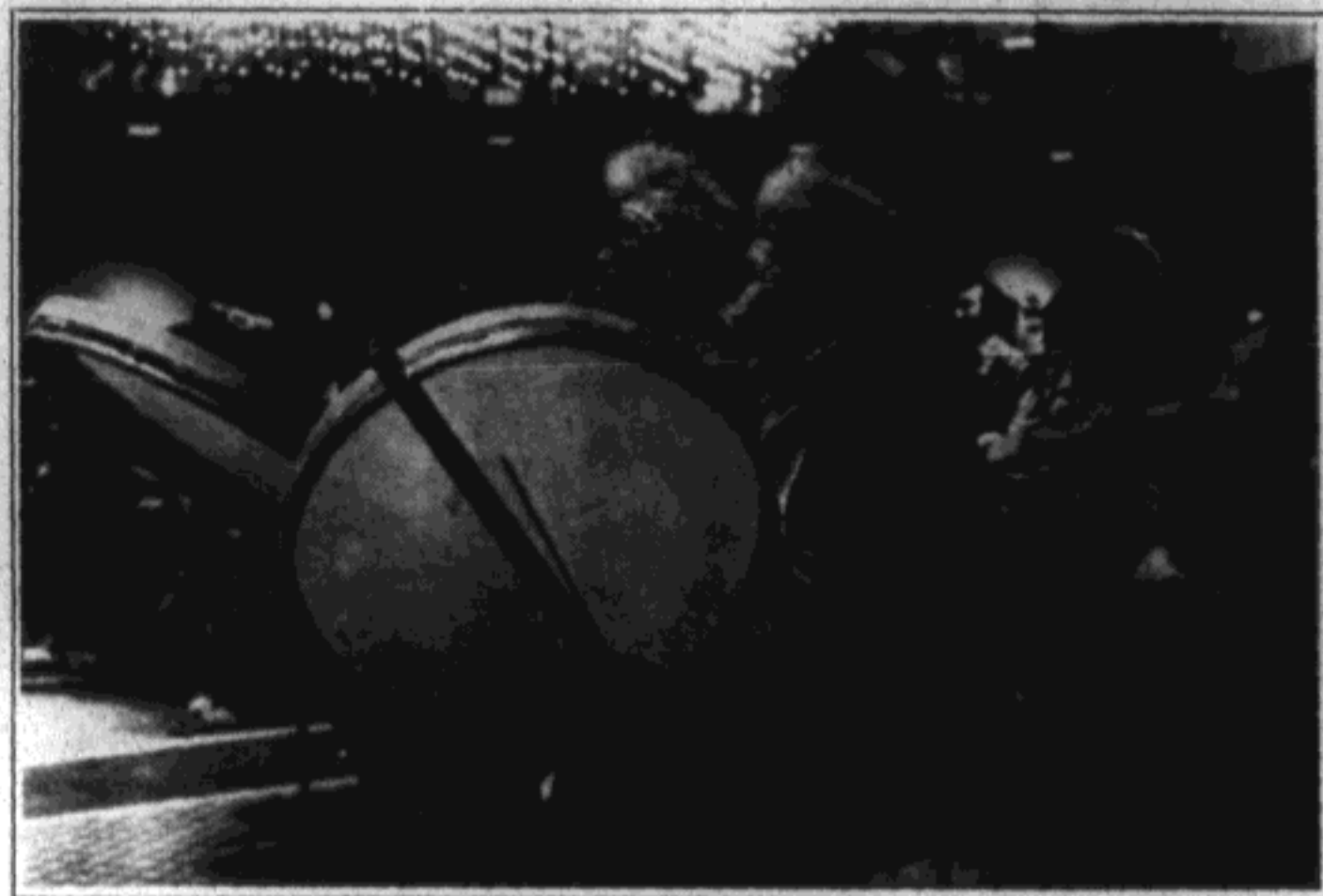
The 12th Alaska Bilingual/Multicultural Education Conference was kicked off by Governor Bill Sheffield, who delivered the welcome address. This year's conference theme, "Through the Looking Glass: A Multicultural Future," covered over 87 scheduled workshops, demonstrations, exhibits and cultural performances.

Sheffield said, "this conference is more than education; it's also a celebration. We're celebrating the diversity of our beautiful state of Alaska and we're celebrating the strength of Alaska's original languages and culture, and welcoming the new (languages & culture)."

In Alaska's school system people of diverse cultures and languages experience the ability to learn their own and other languages from the state's yearly billion-dollar commitment to education.

Sheffield issued a proclamation for the week of February 2-8, 1986 as Bilingual/Multicultural week. It reads:

"Throughout its history, Alaska has been recognized for the wealth of its human resources. Its citizens have worked together to offer the best education possible to the young people of this state. The state's commitment to equal educational opportunity for its bilingual and bicultural children is demonstrated through the programs of bilingual/multicultural education offered in Alaska's public schools and through the involvement of Elders, parents and community members in our bilingual and multicultural program. This proclamation is a pledge to Alaskans to maintain this state's richly varied cultures and histories and to work cooperatively within local communities to provide meaningful and top-quality educational programs for all of our youth. To commemorate the importance of bilingual and multicultural education in Alaska,



The Dillingham Eskimo singers performed for thousands. photo by Steve Kakaruk



Governor Bill Sheffield welcomed thousands at the general session proclaiming Feb. 2-8 as Bilingual/Multicultural Education week. photo by Steve Kakaruk

the 12th Alaska Bilingual/Multicultural Education Conference will have as its theme: "Through the Looking Glass: A Multicultural Future." Therefore, I, Bill Sheffield, Governor of the state of Alaska, do hereby proclaim the week of February 2 to the 8, 1986 as Multicultural Education week and urge all Alaskans to appoint themselves to the programs that are offered to the public schools."

Elsie Mather, Linguist Author of "Cauyarnariuq: Yupik Eskimo Textbook," delivered this year's keynote speech, "Preserving Our Culture

Through Literature," at the general session. Mather said she remembered the first conferences, when only a handful of people came to the events. Elders were highlighted then as much as today. If not for the Elders' insights on teaching, many of the present bilingual educational methods may never have been used.

Elders are important teachers in the Native community and often are forgotten in today's age of "instant knowledge" people. Alaska Native Elders would formerly take as many

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as 20 years to learn a single topic well; today, young people wait in line at colleges for a four-year degree and become 'experts' in all areas of life.

Elders still teach in many of the old ways. When teaching, they expect their students to become true experts in the traditional lifeways and grow into respectable human beings, respon-

sible tradition bearers, and eventually become teachers themselves.

"The most important part of education comes from our Elders' wisdom," said Mathers. "They're eager to pass on the traditional stories related to us." Mathers knows that young people today have trouble learning traditional ways. Mathers said, "the gap that has developed between our young people and our Elders is probably why it's so hard to teach young people our values."

Mathers further said, "often our grandchildren are not around their grandparents enough." Elders, however, are eager to teach, insists

Mathers.

Many of the lessons Elders teach involve learning by doing methods of teaching. Explanations of the whys and wherefors are provided in the context of a specific activity.

Much of today's learning is done through books and writing, and students face many challenges in continuing their educations.

Mathers said that we need to turn to our Elders for meaningful literature and resources to save our history. She

them. Through bilingual programs, it is hoped that culture will be preserved for the young to understand and in their turn, pass on.

The whole purpose of having bilingual programs is to offer choices.

"There is still a lot of opposition out in the world from those that do not understand our cultures."

"There are many of you, I'm sure, who know your own cultures and languages well; but I think in many cases we rely too much on our own

"We rely too much on our own interpretation or perceptions about our cultures..."

said, "much of our education comes from the work of books," and added, "we are living in the age of literacy, we are writing everything down, and we expect everyone to read."

There are many reasons for learning. One is to pass values on to our children. Presently, many customs have been adopted from other cultures without really knowing what they mean. Yesterday's meaningful traditions are becoming a part of the past as younger generations adopt new values without really understanding

interpretation or perceptions about our cultures," said Mathers.

Calvin Coolidge, a Yup'ik Eskimo from Nunapitchuck, was once asked at a church meeting how one could best serve his people. He said people could best serve God and their people by using their Yup'ik language.

Mathers said that the gap between our past and present is ever-widening and that we need to take a hard look at our programs to ensure we make a solid bridge.



Elders at the 12th bilingual conference shared many moments with conference goers seeking traditional educational guidance.

photo by Steve Kakaruk