

Manuscript brings heritage to Tsimshian

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A manuscript compiled long ago and sent back east but never forgotten by the Tsimshian people is now being turned into "the most extensive and remarkable body of North American Native literature ever to exist in written form," according to one linguistics expert.

But to the Tsimshian people of the Metlakatla Indian Community the manuscript and the two books that have been pub-

lished from it thus far represent a link to a past that is fast slipping from their grasp — the rich heritage of legends and stories of the Tsimshian people.

The manuscript was compiled by William Beynon, a half-Tsimshian Indian who was interested in the heritage of his people.

Beynon was born in Victoria, British Columbia in 1888 and grew up speaking Tsim-

shian and English. Because of his bilingual abilities he regularly interpreted the Tsimshian language for anthropologists and sociologists until his death in 1958.

His efforts at gathering Tsimshian legends and stories spanned the years from 1932 and 1939 and resulted in the collection of about 250 narratives of Tsimshian legends from tribal Elders.

Beynon had regularly corres-

ponded with famed anthropologist Franz Boas of Columbia University in the east and sent the manuscripts to him around 1940.

Dr. Boas had made extensive studies of Indian tribes around British Columbia and had devised the alphabet that was used until recently by the Tsimshian people.

Boas died in 1942 and the Tsimshian manuscripts were placed in Columbia Univer-

sity's Rare Book and Manuscript Library where they resided until being found in 1979.

The Tsimshian people were aware of the manuscript for some time out didn't know where it had gone, said Russell Hayward, coordinator of the language and history for the Metlakatla Indian Community.

Hayward said MIC tribal members who traveled Outside

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Metlakatla seeks money to print more books

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would search for the manuscript but it wasn't found until 1979. Hayward said that he isn't sure how the manuscripts were found.

One account of their discovery says a private Native American consulting firm from Seattle and the University of Alaska in Fairbanks both traced the manuscript to Columbia at about the same time.

The tribe then urged Columbia to copyright the manuscripts to prevent their being exploited commercially and in 1980 Columbia had the manuscripts microfilmed and distributed to the Smithsonian

Institute, and to other museums and major universities across the country.

Hayward said Metlakatla arranged to have two volumes of legends published from the manuscripts and has enough for five more books.

Hayward said the Metlakatla community is very eager to get more volumes published.

"It means a lot to us. It is educational to a new generation. Everybody just wants to get it (publication) done. They all want to read the books."

He said the books are sold at all community events and can be obtained by writing to him at Box 155 Metlakatla,

AK., 99926 and enclosing a check for \$21 made out to MIC.

Interest in the volumes is apparent when people are first informed of the books. Janie Leask, president of the Alaska Federation of Natives, and a Tsimshian, called the books "exciting."

Michael Krauss, a linguistic professor at the University of Alaska, Fairbanks and Director of the Alaska Native Language Center, said the manuscripts "represent the largest corpus of texts of the Native American languages."

The problem is money is needed to publish the books,

Hayward said. The cost of printing 200 copies of each volume was about \$1,600 and although 120 volumes have been sold, more money is needed to print the books.

The two books sell for \$21 which covers the cost of the book plus postage and handling.

MIC has been talking with the Alaska Historical Commission to obtain funding for the printing but missed an application deadline in December to apply for funds, according to Commission executive director William Hanable.

The deadline was missed because of illness on the part of

the person handling the application, said Hanable. Another application deadline is set for May and the MIC people can apply then, he said.

The Historical Commission grants money to publish material that "contributes to the understanding of Alaska," said Hanable, who added that the Commission has helped publish works similar to the legends in the past. The commission contributed money for the publication of the late Belle Herbert's "Shaan Da: In My Lifetime," and helped the Tlingit-Haida Central Conference to return records relating to Indian land claims.

Hanable said the average grant to organizations for works is about \$5,000 to \$7,000.

The manuscripts are done in a phonetic Tsimshian language and in English.

Hayward translated the second volume into a new Tsimshian written language developed recently. He said that he translates the work as often as possible and will continue to do so with the future volumes.

