

'I may not agree with a word you say but I will defend unto death your right to say it.' - Voltaire

Editorial—

The

Illness and the Cure

"The Lummi language class has been discontinued for the summer. The class will begin again next fall when school starts," wrote the Lummi Squol Quol, a Lummi community paper at Marietta, Washington.

There is something tragic about the simple statement. There is a gnawing poignancy to it. If one lingers on the subject and tries to seek out the consequences of a methodic discouragement of a people's language, a lump can form in one's throat. The suppression of a language brings out the grim reality that a basic culture—the very root of a people's spirit—had been discouraged and strangled until a mere breath, in some cases, remains.

The process of doing away with native languages was done so well that the victims were, many times, wholly unaware that a great heritage was being divested from them. Today, it is a sad experience to hear the innocent victims say, and apparently proudly, "Our children all speak English now and they can hardly say anything in our own language."

It is also a sad experience, but one that could be regarded with admiration, that tribes, like the Lummi of the State of Washington, are educating their children to speak their own language that had been in the process of disappearing. They, and few other tribes in other states, are doing this now realizing that a heritage, like the language, is one in which a spirit of a people can be perpetuated to sustain the all-important well-being of a people. Other fine traditions serve the same purpose. When they are taken away, they have a drastic—and tragic—effect. The people from whom they have been wrested can become listless in spirit and can be molded into something other people wish them to be, and which they can never be no matter to what a force, like a dominate culture, wish them to be.

Fortunately, some of the dominant cultures are beginning to undo the harm that had been done. This is commendable. Some of the native people of Alaska are also beginning to realize that some of their precious traditions are being methodically taken away and they are showing concern. It is a promising development when our people seek ways to sustain their well-being through retention of their traditions.

The rising desire of our people to retain their heritages does not, of course, mean that they are rejecting the ways of the dominant cultures. They have also found very fine and useful things in those cultures to enhance their ways of living.

There should indeed be a happy medium in the fusion of the cultures. The process should be allowed to seek its own level. In time, it could very well turn out to be a unique and charming culture for Alaskans in which the best of all peoples might be enjoyed.