



"We're just warming up, boy!" Berkman Silas boasted at 2:00 am Thursday morning as he took a short break from his fiddling. "You never seen the old people get hot yet!" To prove it, they danced on, and on, and on . . .

Leave classroom behind to teach language

Henry Titus struggled for two years to teach Ruby school children his — and their — Athabascan language but he quit in frustration when he decided they had learned nothing.

"I enjoyed working with kids . . . but as far as teaching the kids in Ruby, the Athabascan language was taboo. After two years not even one of them knew a single word of what I had been teaching them.

"They poked fun at me and talked dirty."

Titus wants the language to be passed on, "but I don't know how to do it if the kids don't want to learn."

Only one of the 11 dialects of the Alaskan Athabascan language is still spoken by Athabascan children. If nothing happens to change this sorry statistic, the language will be extinct in Alaska in another 25 to 75 years, according to University of Alaska, Fairbanks linguist Jim Kari.

Kari and Titus spoke to elders gathered in Minto. These elders, who traditionally are responsible for passing on their heritage, were not happy. They decided that they need to fight for their language but how.

Eliza Jones, a specialist in the Koyukun language at the UAF Alaska Native Language Center, recommended that the Tanana Chiefs Conference establish a special language commission.

Jones, an Athabascan, said that most school districts agree

that teaching the language is good but it often takes much time to go through all the paperwork and school board approval to get the classes set up.

Paul George of Nenana found that even if the class is established in the schoolhouse, better learning comes from outside the school walls.

"I found out kids could not learn (to speak their language) in a white man's school!" George told the group he had worked with students for up to three years with no results.

Finally, "I opened my house to them. Kids came over every day. You know what? They really could learn!" In the informal home atmosphere, George first taught his eager followers rhythm, song, and dance, and the rest fell into place.

Hannah Solomon agreed that the home is a good place to teach Native language. "My kids all talk Indian," she stressed. "They didn't pick it up by written language, but by speaking!" Solomon suggested that the schools could have more success if speaking instead of the written language was stressed.

"If you want to learn the language, go out into the wilderness!" advised David Solomon, who helped translate the Bible into his Native tongue.

"When we're in the wilderness, we feel like Indians. Without our language, we don't feel like Indians!"