

# Shem Pete always wanted to help

by **Holly F. Reimer**  
Tundra Times reporter

Shem Pete may have been the oldest of the Susitna Dena'ina — Tanaina Indians — of the Cook Inlet Region. He died on July 2, at the Alaska Native Medical Center in Anchorage.

Although nobody is sure of his exact age, he said he was 95 years old. He didn't have a birth certificate when he was born, but he knew he was born at YUSDISHLAQ' Island, which was part of the Dena'ina town of Susitna Station. The island, located on the Susit-

na River, was washed away in the 1970s.

Mr. Pete was known for his storytelling. Usually he'd tell stories in his Native language because he preferred the Tanaina language to English.

Emil McCord, president of Tyonek Village Council, said Mr. Pete will always be remembered for teaching youth traditional songs, dance, stories and language. He said he'll also be remembered for his kindness.

"He always wanted to help people,

even when he was 95 years old," McCord said.

Mr. Pete knew hundreds of stories. But McCord said he just didn't get a chance to tell all of them.

"He made stories funny," McCord said. "He liked to laugh and tell stories about everything."

Mr. Pete lived a life of subsistence. He grew up as a hunter and fishermen. And McCord said he couldn't eat anything else. He just didn't like non-Native food.

(Continued on Page Twelve)

# • Shem Pete

(Continued from Page One)

Mr. Pete lived much of his life in Tyonek. He moved there in the 1930s. Later he moved to a cabin at Nancy Lake near Willow, where he lived more than 30 years.

He moved back to Tyonek in the 1970s. By that time, very few people spoke Tanaina. So he helped revive the Native dance group there, and also taught at least three generations of Natives traditional Tanaina songs.

Lydia Hays, executive director of the Cook Inlet Region Inc. Foundation, said Mr. Pete was a talented musician.

She said as the CIRI region became almost totally urbanized the songs and dance of days gone by ceased to exist, except in Tyonek.

"They are the only ones to still have an indigenous group in the entire CIRI region," Hays noted.

She said Mr. Pete was also a composer. He even composed a song for his wife Inga, who died of tuberculosis in 1925.

"He really had the knowledge of music and dance. He knew the footsteps and beat of the music. He was a major stipulator to maintain the traditional music," Hays said.

Besides Mr. Pete's love of music and dance, a book was comprised of his recollections of geography and history of places such as: Point Possession, Skwentna, Rainy Pass and many other places in and around the Cook Inlet region.

Hays said CIRI received a cultural heritage grant and decided, along with funding from the University of Alaska Fairbanks Alaska Native Language Center, to publish a book entitled *Shem Pete's Alaska: The Territory of the Upper Cook Inlet Dena'ina*.

Mr. Pete provided 600 of the 711 place names listed in the book.

"He was a major source of knowledge. All of the other Dena'ina elders combined couldn't come up with that amount of knowledge," Hays said.

Mr. Pete is also featured in another CIRI publication, *Our Stories, Our Lives* by Alexandra J. McClanahan. He is one of 23 elders in the book who offered their recollections.

Mr. Pete is survived by his son Billy Shem Pete, 69, of Anchorage.

McCord, who is a distant relative of Mr. Pete, said Mr. Pete's son Billy was the only person in his life.

"They loved each other. He always wanted to do something for Billy. He'd say 'I've got to go home and make some tea for Billy,'" McCord said.

"He lived his life to the fullest. And the one thing he wanted to do is go before his son," McCord said.

Mr. Pete was buried at Tyonek Cemetery. A Pana-Khida — a Russian Orthodox requiem service — was held Wednesday. The funeral followed on Thursday, also at St. Nicholas Russian Orthodox Church in Tyonek.