

Editorial



Mourning Tyonek's Shem Pete

We mourn the passing of Tyonek elder Shem Pete. Musician, storyteller, dancer, teacher. . . Shem Pete could be remembered for many of his talents.

We like to recall his ready smile and his sense of humor. In his attempts to pass on his culture to others, he made the learning fun.

Mr. Pete was born at Susitna Station, a tiny village that has virtually disappeared as a result of the ravages of the flu epidemic in 1918. He spent much of his life in Tyonek.

He was well known for his stories and his work on language and cultural heritage with the University of Alaska. Cook Inlet Region Inc., along with funding from the University of Alaska Fairbanks Alaska Native Language Center, published 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.

As Lydia Hays, executive director of The CIRI Foundation, explained, Mr. Pete was simply a major source of knowledge.

When he moved back to Tyonek in the 1970s, he helped revive the Native dance group there and also taught at least three generations of Natives traditional Tanaina songs.

As far as anyone can tell — he had no birth certificate — Shem Pete was the oldest of the Susitna Dena'ina of the Cook Inlet Region. When he died July 2, he took with him a wealth of irreplaceable knowledge.

It's important to point out, however, that CIRI and others recognized and honored Shem Pete — long before his death.

These honors and those bestowed on him by people in his home of Tyonek mean he will be long remembered.

Tyonek Village Council President Emil McCord says Mr. Pete will be remembered for his teaching, as well as his kindness.

"He always wanted to help people, even when he was 95 years old," McCord said.

