



PETER KALIFORNKY

**Kenai author publishes first book,
in English and Dena' ina Athabascan**

See Story on Page Seven

Kalifornsky writes 1st book

"In the first place, I didn't know anything about writing."

With this frank admission, Peter Kalifornsky describes one of his chief handicaps on the road to becoming an author, which he now is. The University of Alaska Native Language Center has recently published his first book.

"KAHTNUHT'ANA QUE-NAGA, The Kenai People's Language."

Although Kalifornsky learned how to read English during four years in school as a boy, he began in 1974 not only to learn writing English, but reading and writing his Native language, the Dena'ina language of the Athabaskan linguistic family.

Kalifornsky's book is a collection of stories, songs and linguistic exercises, the fruit of three years of work.

Kalifornsky was born in 1911 at Unhghenesditnu (Kalifornsky Village) on the Kenai Peninsula, just north of the Kaslof River. At the age of four, he was sent across Cook Inlet to stay with his maternal uncle, Theodore Chickalusion, in the Polly Creek-Johnson River area. Chicka-

lusion was the last powerful Dena'ina shaman; the six years Kalifornsky spent with him had a profound effect on his life and many of his stories are based on memories of this time.

Two hundred years ago, the Kenai Peninsula was heavily settled by speakers of Dena'ina (or Tanaina). According to Jim Kari of the Language Center, "Today there are no more than ten speakers of the Outer Inlet dialect of the Dena'ina language and just three fluent speakers on the Kenai Peninsula. The other Outer Inlet speakers are in Tyonek or Anchorage."

Kari has high praise for Kalifornsky's contributions to the linguistic study of Dena'ina. Kalifornsky chuckles when he describes the tortuous process of compiling words in the Native language, making lists of words beginning with a certain letter, moving on to a new list when his memory was exhausted. Story composition took a long time too.

"You take a Native word, and then you study the back-

ground of it. Then you go back and try to translate that back into English," Kalifornsky says.

Kari elaborates on Kalifornsky's method of composing a story:

"It is interesting to observe Peter work on a story. He first writes key words on a blackboard he has on his wall. After that he may think about these words for days, adding more as ideas develop, and discussing the story with his sister Fedosia Sacaloff. Then he proceeds to work the main ideas into a text."

"That blackboard is great," Kalifornsky says with a smile.

Kalifornsky has spent most of his life on the Peninsula, "doing everything that a person can do." He has built and repaired boats, trapped and fished. His active life in manual work has been shortened by a series of injuries he sustained while working for the Alaska Railroad building the Portage Tunnel and in Dutch Harbor shortly after the Japanese bombed it in the Forties.

Kari, who has worked closely with Kalifornsky for several years, best sums up the contribution the new author has made to the preservation of Native culture:

"There is no question that the ability to write his language has made for major changes in Peter's life. While I am sure that Peter has always been a reflective, imaginative person, with his literacy skill he has developed a sense of commitment to the traditions and history of his people.

"Peter's work is a significant contribution to the history and ethnography of the Outer Inlet Dena'ina. His account of life at Polly Creek is the only documentation of this portion of Dena'ina territory. His descriptions of Dena'ina marine-oriented activities, such as the making of sealskin boats, or life at Kustatan, are of ethnographic importance because the Outer Inlet Dena'inans were the only Athabaskans who lived in a marine environment. His stories on law and beliefs are valuable analyses of some of the more enigmatic and little understood aspects of Athabaskan culture (the complexity of which is generally underestimated). His "sukdu" or traditional stories (along with two of his stories previously published by ANLC, "K'ela Sukdu, The Mouse Story," and "Ch'enlahi Sukdu, the Gambling Story") form the major collection of traditional Dena'ina folklore from the Kenai Peninsula. Peter and I have compiled the place names list in section 5 with the help of his memory plus the documentary sources (de Laguna, Dall, and Petroff) and some important writings by the late Alex Wilson of Kenai.

"Peter has also done a remarkable job of recalling place names and unique lexicon for the extinct Seldovia dialect, which he has not heard spoken since the early 1940's. While many of the place names have been lost with the passing of elders in recent years, the list of 166 Dena'ina Kenai Peninsula place names is a major statement on traditional territory. The distribution of the names shows concentration of Dena'ina use in certain areas (the Kenai River below Skilak Lake, the Swanson River, the beach between Swanson River and the Kaslof River). The names themselves provide a fascinating glimpse of how the Kenai Dena'inans perceived their country."

A page of the first draft of Kalifornsky's second book now in preparation—on shamanism.