

Language on Its Deathbed--

Wave of Anti-Athabaskan Influences Destroying Language

By FRANK MURPHY

When a language dies, should anyone mourn its passing? The people who spoke it now have learned a more popular tongue.

Supposedly, they can communicate more freely with the world about them. It seems to be a good thing, a leaving behind of an unnecessary burden.

Yet, what if these people have no written history and their traditions and culture are locked in the minds of old men, who speak comfortably only in their native tongue?

What if their young people find themselves strangers in their own land and cannot draw comfort and wisdom from their elders because of a language bar-

rier?

What happens to the pride of a people when their language and customs are discarded as outmoded and useless? Perhaps what seemed like a burden, will become a treasure once it is too late to recover it.

Koyukon Athabaskan is a language on its deathbed. Spoken irregularly along the Koyukuk and Yukon Rivers from Allakaket and Stevens Village downriver to Kaltag, it was formerly the most widespread form of Athabaskan in Alaska.

The 7,500 Indians, who share its heritage, belong to a group which includes numerous tribes in Canada, as well as the Apache and Navajo in the lower 48. Over the last fifty years, an

educational system based on the exclusive use of English and a tidal wave of other anti-Athabaskan influences have, in effect, destroyed the language.

Now, no one under twenty-five speaks Koyukon Athabaskan, and only those over fifty are truly proficient.

Over the last few years, a movement has developed to save the language. Just two people started it all. David Henry, who had compiled a Koyukon dictionary and primer for a linguistics institute, was asked by Sally Hudson, an Athabaskan woman, born in Rampart and now living in Fairbanks, if he would be willing to hold classes in her home to teach Athabas-

(Continued on page 6)

The Dying Language...

(Continued from page 1)

can.

Sally rounded up eight interested people and they met for an hour and a half once a week. Sally did it because: "It frightened me to see our language dying out and so much else dying with it."

From the start, Dave Henry did not want to teach just the language but stressed learning the method by which it could be recorded.

"Most of my students speak Athabascan better than I do. But I'm trying to give technical assistance, so that they can write it in a systematic way and so that they have the tools to write anything in the language and preserve it."

Prior to this, there had been no written Athabascan that accurately represented the spoken language.

These small private classes continued for two years, until the Fairbanks Native Community Center offered the use of its facility to hold an expanded three hour session on a weekly basis.

The initial response was enthusiastic, with twenty or more people attending each class. However, constant shifts of time and location made necessary by demands of other activities in the heavily used Native Center, severely hampered the program.

This was most damaging to the younger students, who had no previous experience with the language.

Having discovered that there was widespread interest in learning Athabascan, Henry decided to apply for federal funding to start a bi-lingual program in the schools of the Koyukon region.

A proposal was written and submitted to the Title I board of the Department of Health, Education and Welfare. John Sackett, president of Tanana Chiefs Regional Corporation, and a member of the State Senate, used his political influence to back the proposal.

As Henry says, "It was Sackett who got people on the ball for this program. Without the support of powerful groups like Tanana Chiefs, the Indians might be overlooked entirely because they're so small numerically."

The program includes a six week training session for bi-lingual instructors, the establishment of Athabascan classes in the State Operated Schools at Nulato, Koyukuk, and Huslia by Jan. 1, 1973, and the printing of an alphabet book, a syllable

book, intermediate primers and pre-primers, and an expanded dictionary to be used in the future, as the program develops a secondary level.

Seven days before the training session was to begin, Henry received word that the funding had been approved.

Those "approved funds" would not be converted into cold cash for some time to come, so with nothing more than a travel voucher and an optimistic outlook, Dave Henry visited the villages involved in order to recruit instructors. More applicants than necessary responded and the village councils had to decide quickly which of the applicants would be chosen to participate in the program.

The instructors-to-be flew into Fairbanks and, somewhat familiar with a cashless economy, managed to scratch up housing, transportation and material and begin the training session, while still awaiting the arrival of federal money.

The course also attracted a number of Athabascans from Fairbanks, some of whom, like Sally Hudson, had been studying the language for several years.

According to Henry, "Enthusiasm keeps the program moving ahead, despite all drawbacks."

The students range from a great-grandmother to teen-agers, but at the end of seven hours in the class room, "nobody is tired or bored."

Speaking to John Kito, Director of Bi-lingual Programs for State Operated Schools, it would seem that most of the program's problems are behind it. Kito, who is responsible for implementation of the Athabascan Bi-lingual Program, explained that the delay in payment had been due to bookkeeping problems inherent with a new program. Henceforth, funds should flow smoothly. Kito sees a bright future for Koyukon Athabascan.

"The program itself is a great thing. It's strong now and it will get stronger if the bush people let everyone know that bi-lingual education is a need, a want and that they deserve to have it." Dave Henry and Sally Hudson also hope a combined language and culture course could be developed in the urban high schools, where young Athabascans are almost completely cut off from their heritage.