

# Koyukon elder, Abbie Evan Joseph, dies

by Dianne Gudgel-Holmes  
and Eliza Jones  
for the Tundra Times

Koyukon Athabaskan elder, Abbie Evan Joseph, approximately 94 years old, died Sept. 22 in the Fairbanks hospital.

A resident of Tanana and the Fish Creek area for the past 64 years, she was born in the fall in the upper Kantishna River in the early 1890s to Chief Peter and Celia. She was the last survivor of the Minchumina Athabaskan people.

A younger sister, Helen, drowned in Lake Minchumina in the mid-1930s. Abbie and Helen were small children when Lt. Herron and his men became lost on an expedition near Telida/Minchumina in 1899, but apparently did not see white people until about 1905 when prospectors flooded the Kantishna area for one year during a gold strike.

Mrs. Joseph's best remembered characteristics — cheerfulness, hard work and physical strength were fostered since childhood by a rugged, nomadic subsistence lifestyle and parents who believed a pleasant disposition, free from unkind words towards others, was the key to an accident-free, lucky life.

While caring for her bedridden mother for seven years with Native medicine and techniques in the isolated Interior region, Abbie attempted tasks too strenuous and skilled for her small hands. One such task was the scraping and tanning of a bull moose hide that was so essential for her family's clothing.

As a young teen-ager, Abbie became the sole supporter of her family. She did not hesitate going out in

the dark of winter, killing, skinning and packing home moose, single-handedly.

It was through the trials of her mother's crisis and her responsible devotion to provide for her parents that helped Abbie attain those desired personal traits that are so admired in Athabaskan society.

For those people able to understand Athabaskan, Mrs. Joseph was a storehouse of information and stories about the old days and ways. She made the time of the elders come alive with her vivid storytelling.

In 1910 she married the widower John Evan, nephew of Chief Evan of CosJacket. By 1920, Abbie and John had four children — Walter, Martha, Lizzie (Starr) and Kerble. In that same year, John was mistakenly shot and killed.

At the same time, Kerble, age 1, died. Both were buried together in CosJacket. Mrs. Joseph's grief was magnified when her remaining children were adopted out, as was the custom at that time; the girls went to their Uncle Roosevelt John of Birch Creek, and Walter to his Uncle Andrew of CosJacket.

Mrs. Joseph spoke fondly of Walter as the child that came back to her. It was unusual in those days for an adopted child to return to the surviving parent; but he did shortly after Abbie married Edgar Joseph of Fish Creek.

From the mid-1920s, Mrs. Joseph lived with Edgar in the lower Tanana region with their children, Stanley and Peter, and Edgar's adopted niece May. Only Peter and May have survived Mrs. Joseph, along with many grand and great-grandchildren.

When asked a few years ago where



Abbie Evan is shown with her husband John Evan and children Walter, left and Martha, right, in this 1919 photo. Photo courtesy of UA Fairbanks Archives

she would like to be buried, Mrs. Joseph replied, "My first husband is buried up at CosJacket, and then the one who was married to me last time was buried up here at Mission Hill

(Tanana). He is sleeping up there with his children. So anyplace will do. Anywhere on the trail is alright with me."

Burial took place in Tanana.