

Linguist tries to keep old names alive

By P.E. Hyslop

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Preserving the old ways is an important part of keeping Native culture alive so later generations will benefit. Old people are having stories printed in books of what life was like before contact with missionaries. Native dances and songs are being regenerated, elders are being looked up to with renewed respect, and everywhere Natives are coming forth with strengthened identities, proud of their past. They are adamantly determined to save what they can, while overlooking the obvious.

Take a look at a map of Alaska; the place names are all in English. There are few cities with Native names, most villages have their Hill Streets and Main Streets, the streams and rivers bear no names of ancestors living there thousands of years before. Even village names have little or nothing to do with the original Native names. Alaska could be any other state in America with her lack of originality.

When explorers started blazing trails and "discovering" what was already named by Natives thousands of years before, they renamed everything. The ones who attempted to preserve Native place-names often misspelled and mispronounced what they recorded and so erased the original names forever from history. Substituted were names of explorers, transients, surveyors, and people venerated by western society.

Since 1971, with the passage of ANCSA, there has been incredible growth in Alaska. Everything has been given English names and Native names remain off the map. The prospects do not look good for Native names to ever be rediscovered. No one is interested.

"People are overdosed on issues and no one has energy for things like this," said Jim Kari who has devoted his life to preserving Indian language in Alaska. A linguist, Kari speaks Dena'ina and Ahtna dialects and knows more Athabascan history than most Athabascans.

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The old people cannot believe that a man from Los Angeles can speak their language, and fluently at that. They laugh and shake their heads but they respect him and many are grateful that someone is recording the old Indian names.

Kari has written books on Native language and with his wife has authored the first published ethnogeography of an entire traditional Alaskan Native language area, *Dena'ina Etnena Tanaina Country*.

The Dena'ina Indians used to live around the Anchorage area in the Cook Inlet region, but since the 1700s all trace of their culture has nearly disappeared. A few villages on the perimeter of the big city are feeble reminders of what was once a rich and productive culture. There are only about ten people left who speak the Outer Inlet dialect of Dena'ina. Kari works closely with them and so far has salvaged ninety-three place names of different streams and hunting grounds.

The way the Indians named places is beautiful, he said. "The way they named their land is a good indicator of Indian spirituality. The names are poetic."

One of Kari's favorite Dena'ina place names is *Qichi Qinghitneq*

terested groups don't make extra effort in having their ancestral grounds retain their original names. English names and legends will find their mark on the maps and history books.

Sleeping Lady is not an Indian legend, said Kari. It was made up because the Athabascans do not know the story. Another example of an Athabascan name forever barred from maps is a place once called *Vendashinu* meaning 'shallow lake river' that was renamed Stink River in 1914 by a topographer.

Kari believes Native place names will add to the positive cultural climate of the state if anyone takes interest in the effort. He feels the urgency of recording the names because the people helping him are old and many

have already died. He feels the loss.

"It took thousands of years to evolve the Native culture and one hundred years after contact this has been totally transformed. The Natives had a sophisticated way of living that can't be dismissed as gross stereotypes," he said. He has found documentation of explorers who thought Natives were not civilized enough to have place names; with this attitude everything was renamed. Only the old people know the place names and soon they will be gone taking with them a rich culture not many people feel is important enough to pursue.

"I'm weighed down by language loss," said Kari, "I feel a lot of grief personally for my Native friends that are dying."

meaning "the old lady made it that far," named for a creek that flows into the Chulitna River. Pronunciation should not be a problem. He said there are a lot of Hawaiian place names in Hawaii and effort is being made in Canada for preserving Native culture. But if Natives and in-