

# Walter Williams, 1919-1985

Walter Williams was born in Sitka, Alaska on May 24, 1919. He was the son of Elma and Victor Villarma. Through his mother, he was both Tlingit and Haida. His grandparents were Thomas Dimitri (Kon-da-we), Frank Daniels (Kin-du-ga) and Katherine Daniels (Koo-teen). He was adopted by Mark Williams of Hoonah, and raised in the Tlingit tradition. After a long illness, he died in Seattle on December 19, 1985. He is survived by a daughter, Kathy Williams of Fallbrooks, California and two adopted sons, Doyle and Damon of California.

Other survivors include his sister, Francis Davies and a brother, Hernando Villarma, both of Wrangell; an adopted sister, Annie Dick of Sitka, and several nieces and nephews. Funeral services were held at the Catholic Church in Wrangell, and he was also buried at Wrangell.

After attending Wrangell Institute, he enlisted in the Navy and served in the South Pacific in World War II from 1944-46. From 1946-48, he attended Riverside College and earned an Associate of Arts Degree. He then went to Gonzaga University in Spokane, earning a Bachelor of Education Degree in 1953. For the next nine years he taught in the Lower 48, and then returned to Hoonah, Alaska. He attended Sheldon Jackson College and the University of Alaska-Juneau from 1970-74 working towards a Master of Arts Degree. He authored two small booklets on Tlingit culture and education entitled "A Tlingit Gent Above Suspicion" and "On Becoming Human." He taught Tlingit culture classes at the University of Alaska-Juneau and in the Indian Studies Program at the Juneau-Douglas High school. In recent years he gave guided tours of the Alaska State Museum.

Over the years, Walter became a master storyteller and informant on Tlingit culture. When the State of Alaska inaugurated the satellite communication system for schools, one of the first voices heard across the Last

Frontier was that of Keidlatk'i-eesh — "Father of the Seagull."

For the past 15 years, he was in demand as a speaker and performer for academic, governmental, educational and Native programs. He was fluent in both Tlingit and English. In his presentations, he used both languages, giving immediate translations and explanations. He laughingly recalled how he had been punished for using his language in school, but in later life was paid to speak Tlingit at large public gatherings.

Walter was strong in the true Tlingit tradition. His strength came from his early childhood training and pride in who he was, his people and his Tlingit-Haida heritage. In his dramatic presentations, he communicated his pride in his culture to hundreds of school children, adults and visitors. When he stepped forward to speak, listeners could sense the power, strength, kindness and understanding which came from being Tlingit. When he told how Raven made human beings, he told of the problems Yeil had until he discovered grass or "Chook" from which he made "real people." Of course, the fact that Walter was of the Eagle side and of the Chookaneidi ("people of the grass") clan, was not overlooked. He loved to poke a little fun at people, and sometimes commented that since people had come from grass, that might explain why some Native leaders swayed one way or the other — depending on how the wind was blowing!

The great storyteller is now gone from our midst. He will be greatly missed by all those who benefitted from his presence here on earth. He often used a Tlingit blessing at the conclusion of his talks. The phrase he used can be literally translated as "May the spirit above all spirits watch over you." It is only fitting that as he leaves behind his family, friends and the many people he taught to be proud of their Tlingit heritage, that he be given that same blessing — *Aax kaani, haa-kinaa-yegi yee-eeenx nax satee.*