

Alaska Native Language Center News

Since 1973 linguist Jim Kari of the University of Alaska's Alaska Native Language Center has worked with speakers of the Dena'ina (also spelled Tanaina) language, the Athabaskan native people of the Cook Inlet region, recording their lexicon and folklore. A new major publication of the ANLC, "Dena'ina Noun Dictionary," presents for the first time a comprehensive English-to-Dena'ina listing of nouns from all dialects of the language.

Today Dena'ina is spoken by people living primarily in the villages of Nondalton, Lime Village, Stony River, Pedro Bay, Eklutna, Tyonek, Kenai, and Seldovia. More than seventy Dena'ina speakers contributed to work on the dictionary, some of the major contributors being Shem Pete of Susitna and Willow, Maxim and Nellie Chickalusion and Peter Constantine of Tyonek, the late Mike Alex and Mike Theodore of Eklutna, Katherine Nicolie of Talkeetna and Anchorage, Peter Kalifornsky and Fedosia Sacaloff of Kenai, Albert Wassillie, Harry Balluta, Pete Trefon, Alec Trefon, and Antone Evan of Nondalton, Pete Bobby, Emma Alexie, Nora Alexie, and Vonga Bobby of Lime Village, and Walter and Annie Johnson and Parasovia Roehl of Lake Iliamna.

The dictionary has over 5,000 entries and is the largest dictionary of its kind ever done for an Alaska Native language. It is divided into thirty chapters, each dealing with a particular subject area such as 'Birds,' 'Food,' 'Clothing,' and so forth. The bird and plant lists are the most extensive yet known for an Alaskan Native language, reflecting the great environmental diversity of Dena'ina territory and the rich complexity of their culture. Kari's wife Priscilla Russell Kari has also done research resulting in a book specifically on Dena'ina plant lore, "Dena'ina K'et'una," recently published by the Adult Literacy Laboratory in Anchorage.

As well as collecting words, Kari worked with traditional Dena'ina storytellers to write down some of the fascinating myths and legends of the people. A number of these have been published as bilingual booklets by ANLC, including both interlinear and free English translations. In 1974-75 Joan Tenebaum worked in Nondalton collecting stories from people there which have also been published in four large booklets by ANLC. The stories include the myths of Raven, fable-like tales of people and animals, stories of how cultural institutions arose, and historical accounts of traditional warfare and the deeds of heroic warriors. Many of the events in these stories, which have been handed down by oral tradition, sometimes for centuries, occurred at sites around Cook Inlet, making them of special interest to the residents and visitors to the area.

One Dena'ina storyteller, Peter Kalifornsky of Kenai, now writes himself in his language. An anthology of his work, including traditional stories, humorous anecdotes, and original songs and poems, have been published by ANLC.

These publications are all available from the Alaska Native Language Center, University of Alaska, Fairbanks, Alaska 99701.