

Copper River School District personnel spent an afternoon at Kluti-Kaah Memorial Hall on Friday, January 24th, for a special in-service meeting on the subject of Athabascan culture and how it relates to the schools.

The program was part of the "I Care" movement, spearheaded this fall by CRNA staff member Dorothy Shinn, of Tazlina.

A number of local Ahtna Elders spoke to the group of 90 persons on a broad range of cultural topics. Young Indians also spoke of their experiences, and the unique problem of the Native student.

Robert Marshall, the Copper River Native Association's Board President, was the first speaker. He discussed the meaning of the Native Potlatch: "We share our sorrows," he said. "We talk to each other." The Potlatch is little understood by non-Natives. It is a gathering of Indian people for funerals or honorary celebrations of a living person's life.

Potlatch attendance is important, a significant event for all Ahtna Natives. Potlatches are never advertised. When Native students miss school because of a potlatch, teachers sometimes don't understand the reason, and believe that the child and his parents are being irresponsible.

Marshall has four children. All are high school graduates, and two are college graduates. He pointed out that

United States, supported by Ahtna, Inc. A number of students are also attending colleges, supported through programs funded by CRNA.

"We are trying to educate our children," Marshall stressed. "We can't do it alone... we have to work together. If we don't, we don't accomplish anything."

Walter Charley, originally from Chitina, and now living in Glennallen, was concerned with misunderstandings of the Potlatch. Anthropologists and others have been criticized by Natives for a lack of understanding of the deeper meanings of the Potlatch.

Walter Charley compared Potlatch in the Indian culture to the teachings of Christianity. Indians were taught to help each other. A major teaching was, "You take care of that people — that sick people over there. And you take care of that poor people over there." In potlatching, material objects are given away in a special manner, in honor of a person.

Walter Charley also commented on the problems of prejudice, and how cultural values, overlapping those taught by Christianity, had helped him. He told the group that he had been thrown out of hotels, restaurants, and movie houses, solely because of his race. "I didn't turn around and say, 'I hate those people'." It goes back to the old Indian culture. "Paralleling the Christian concept of turning the other cheek, there is an old Indian say-

well-known local resident who worked at CRNA for many years in cultural activities. Her most recent position, which she retired from this fall, was as CRNA's Johnson O'Malley (Cultural) Program Coordinator. She raised the JOM Program to new levels through her unique personal qualities and strong interest in Native values.

Ruth Johns began her speech with a discussion of the local school system as it was in the 1930's.

"It wasn't very important that we go to school in those days," she said. The schoolteacher was in Chitina, and taught in the winter. (At that time, Chitina was the major community in the Copper River Basin). From June through August, the teacher volunteered to come up to Copper Center to teach the Native students of the mid-Copper River region, including students from Copper Center, Gulkana, Tazlina, and Kenny Lake. There were 40 to 50 Native students in that class, ranging in age from six to 16 years.

"Our school was crowded. Kids was all eager to learn."

School was sporadic back then. Teachers would come and go. And young Native students, Ruth among them, found themselves in a bind.

Athabascan was their first language, but school was in English. This caused problems at home. "After we learned this English, it was hard for our Elders," Mrs. Johns recalled. If an adult asked a child a question and the child answered "Yes," in English, this was an insult.

Although eager to learn, young Native students were also trapped. "We were kind of stuck. We thought it was bad to be learning English."

Mrs. Johns commented that she had only attended grade school because her parents — for those times of living off the land — rightfully felt she didn't need a high school education.

"I'm very proud of my culture. It taught me many good things."

Still, she commented, times change. "You young people, I want you to learn, to stay in school... It's changed; I regret that I didn't make it to college."

An expert on spoken Athabascan, Ruth Johns has successfully passed a number of University of Alaska courses in written Athabascan, a difficult language to transcribe. She has also worked with other local Native Elders and Millie Buck of Chitina on important cultural materials.

When Ruth Johns' brother, Wilbur Joe, was teaching at Glennallen School last year, she spoke to his class about Ahtna culture. Someone asked her then if there was a change in Native students today.

Commenting to the teachers at the in-service training, Mrs. Johns noted that she had seen several changes. First, Native children were losing respect for their Elders. "It's very sad. That's not our Indian way; we were taught to respect older people, to respect everybody."

A second change was the lowering of parental expectations.

Directly addressing the teachers at Kluti-Kaah Hall, Mrs. Johns said, "I hope that you'll tolerate our Native children, because there is a problem there. They are bashful. When they say 'Yes', they sit there and say 'No'. They mean yes — within no."

Roy Ewan, of Gulkana, is Ruth Johns' brother. He is president of Ahtna, Inc., and has held many positions on regional and state boards and associations. Recently elected by the Alaska Federation of Natives as the state's Native "Citizen of the Year," he gave a short speech on his schooling in Copper Center.

Then Buster Gene of Gakona spoke, from the perspective of his 76 years.

Mr. Gene started working for the Alaska Road Commission when he was only 14 years old. He worked for the Department of Highway from 1924 to 1975, and was a member of the Alaska Native Brotherhood, and active in other Native affairs.

A well-known leader of Native dance, who has led regional troupes in state performances, Mr. Gene talked about his frustrations at the loss of the Athabascan language. "When we talk to them (the younger people) most of them do not understand our language — Athabascan language..."

Harry Johns, Sr., was the next speaker. Well-known throughout the

caribou, and was punished after an unexcused absence, in which he stayed out of school to butcher it. Because of the absence, he was forbidden to attend a wrestling meet.

Concerned with the idea that "Indians are getting a free handout," she spoke of the value of Indian Education funds and their importance to Native children.

Like Edna Charley, Mrs. Jackson was concerned about the transition for Native students from the smaller schools, such as Gakona, which she termed a 'great' school, to Glennallen.

She decried the rift between white and Indian parents, and offered a solu-

he said. "It doesn't come from the kids..."

His sister, Dorothy Shinn, also showed strong concern over the impact of prejudice on teenaged Native students. She then read a letter from Lillian Boston of Chistochina.

The Athabascan Culture Seminar was the first of its kind here. After it was over, CRNA Executive Director Edna Charley commented that the speakers graphically described the rapid transition of Native life. This includes the loss of a language, and a severing from the subsistence lifestyle.

"Natives have been forced to give up the old way of life, and make a transition to (formal) education," she said.

She hoped that the seminar offered an opportunity for school district staff to get to know the region's Native leaders, many of whom are relatives of local Native school students.

Edna Charley also expressed the hope that teachers would realize that each successive Native generation will be "better able to help our children," with new tasks.

Also attending the seminar was the region's new school superintendent, Leland Dishman, who gave the opening remarks.

"Moving into the Copper River School District from the Pribilof Islands was a major change for me," he said later. "I moved from a community of 99 percent Natives into a community with a minority Native population. The Native children in this district do not have the opportunity to see and associate with (as many) adult Native leaders on a daily basis (as Pribilof children do). This absence of positive role models for our Native kids causes a void in their lives."

"Being only part Indian (Cherokee) does not give me the role model identification that I wish to present to the students. However, at every opportunity, I try to stress that I can and will fulfill that role model void personally."

"I firmly believe that our Native youth can make the grade and become the type of adult that can serve the coming generation in a positive manner."

At the conclusion of the program,

Copper River Elders explain culture to local schoolteachers

Copper River Basin, he has served as pastor of the Copper Center Chapel for several years, and has also acted in a number of positions on state and local levels.

He spoke of the difficult time he had at school. At that time, children were not allowed to speak their Native tongue of Athabascan while in school. When he did speak Ahtna, "Right away, quick, I was made to stand in the corner for speaking my own language."

Mr. Johns described a series of violent episodes in his childhood, culminating in a brutal beating at the hands of a local schoolteacher.

Harry Johns, who worked for the Highway Department for 45 years, had served as a member of the PTA in the 1960's. He commented on the current absence of Natives on the PTA, Copper Valley Electric Board of Directors, and other organizations.

Although almost 20 percent of the region's population is Native, there are currently no Natives on the Copper River School District Board.

Edna Charley, CRNA's Executive Director, a Tlingit Indian, spoke of the difficulties Native children tend to have when they transfer from small outlying schools, such as Chistochina, to Glennallen High School.

She also spoke of varying cultural values, and changes she had noticed in her own five-year-old son after he began school, including louder speech and a tendency to interrupt conversation. These traits, more acceptable in the white community, were contrary to Indian values of quietness, she noted.

Echoing Ruth Johns, she encouraged teachers not to ignore Native students if they didn't speak up.

She was also concerned that limited education and experience of Native parents hindered their ability to help their children scholastically as much as they'd like.

Lorraine Jackson, of Gulkana, who is working for the Copper River Native Association in village-based alcohol programs, spoke directly to the teachers.

"We as parents really need encouragement," she said. She cautioned teachers to acknowledge important cultural differences, and cited an incident in which her son killed his first

tion. "Maybe we can get some parents from both sides, and do some activities together. We can't have it like this all the time. We need to work together, especially on this prejudice."

Mrs. Jackson emphasized the importance of Native student involvement in school committees, such as the student handbook committee.

Donald Johns, an Alcohol Counselor at CRNA, called his Elders an "inspiration."

"I cherish my culture," he said. He expressed sorrow over the loss of the Athabascan language, and the impact that loss had on his parents, Harry and Ruth Johns.

"I have feelings there is prejudice."



Harry Johns Sr. sings traditional songs.

Ahtna songs were sung by the Elders who were present.

The Athabascan Culture Seminar was the first of its kind in the region.

It was moderated by Ken Johns. Jim McKinley, Copper Centers Village's Traditional Chief, gave the invocation. The program was jointly hosted by the

Copper River Native Association and the Copper River School District.

It was developed by CRNA staff members Barbara Bayless, Mark Routzahn, Dorothy Shenn, and Sue Becker, and by Copper River School District Assistant Superintendent Dr. Mike Johnson.



Walter Charley

Ahtna, Inc. vigorously supports higher education for Native students.

Ahtna regularly awards three \$500 scholarships to graduating Native high school students on their way to college. It also awards \$2,000 in college scholarships for the school year, and gives loans of up to \$5,000 a year to eligible Ahtna students at a four percent interest rate.

Fifteen Native students are now attending colleges or universities in the

ing to take an insult and "pierce your ear with it."

A popular speaker throughout the state, Walter Charley has held many positions on boards and committees in his long and vigorous life — including once acting as Glennallen's PTA president, and membership in the local chapter of the Alaska Native Brotherhood.

The next speaker was Ruth Johns, of Copper Center. Ruth Johns is a



Copper River school teachers at in-service.