

# Eyak

The smallest Native group in Alaska today is the Eyak. It is also the most recently recognized Native American group, a separate and distinct Indian culture. About 120 people living today are of Eyak descent.

Only one Eyak — Marie Smith Jones, the 78-year-old Chief — still speaks the language. Hers is a lonely distinction. “I sit in front of the TV. I talk and talk to it in my language, but it don’t talk back. I pray in my language, but God don’t talk back in it,” said Jones, sitting at the kitchen table in her tiny Anchorage apartment. “When the pain gets so bad, then I call him. I call him just so I can hear my language again.”

The “him” is Dr. Michael Krauss, a linguist at the Alaska Native Language Center in Fairbanks and the only other person in the world today who speaks Eyak. Krauss learned in the 1960s when he worked with Jones and Eyak Elders Anna Nelson Harry of Yakutat and Lena Saska Nacktan of Cordova to record Eyak stories and write an Eyak dictionary. Some of

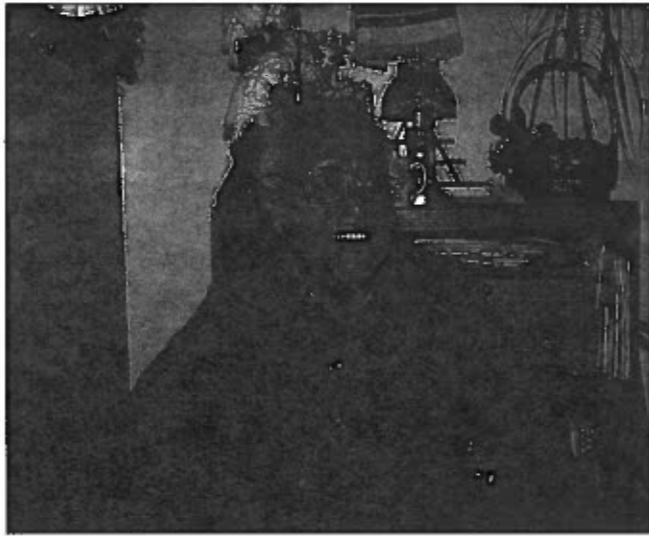


the stories were published in 1982 as *In Honor of Eyak: the Art of Anna Nelson Harry*. Eyak is documented well enough to someday be revived as a spoken language, but for now Krauss calls it “a language of memory.”

Meanwhile, an effort is underway to keep Eyak from becoming a culture of memory. A handful of Eyak descendants — including Jones’ daughter Ramona Smith Curry and her great niece Jenna May, both in Anchorage, and Pam Smith, Glen “Dune” Lankard and Monica Reidel of Cordova — are learning

what it means to be Eyak, trying to revive their culture. “We are gaining visibility,” asserts May. The Eyak and their friends are working to gain federal recognition for Eyak tribal status, regain ancestral lands in Cordova and support sobriety. With so much to do, learning the language is only a part. “We’ve accepted that we won’t get the language fully recovered right now,” said May, “but we are learning celebratory phrases to pass down.”

**FACING PAGE:** *The bones of an unidentified Eyak man returned to Cordova by the Smithsonian Institution were repatriated on this spit, a former Eyak burial ground, in 1993. John F.C. Johnson (left), with the Chugach Heritage Foundation, arranged for return of the remains. He and Dune Lankard (right) prepare a burial spot under the guidance of Eyak Chief Marie Smith Jones (seated). (Photo courtesy of John F. C. Johnson)*



ABOVE: Marie Smith Jones, the last Native Eyak speaker, sits in her Anchorage apartment on the eve of her 78th birthday. (L.J. Campbell, staff)

ABOVE RIGHT: Glen "Dune" Lankard speaks during the first Eyak potlatch in modern times, held in Cordova in June 1995. The seated dignitaries are, right to left, Maggie Escalita, an Athabaskan chief from Chitina; Marie Smith Jones, Eyak Chief; linguist Michael Krauss; and anthropologist Frederica de Laguna. Pam Smith, Dune's sister and an active Eyak revivalist in Cordova, is standing. (Soren Wuerth)

Much of what is known about the Eyak comes from interviews and field work conducted by Frederica de Laguna and Kaj Birket-Smith, published as *The Eyak Indians of the Copper River Delta, Alaska* (1933). Krauss' work in the 1960s provided additional insights, in part through Anna Nelson Henry's masterful storytelling.



At the time of Russian arrival, the Eyaks occupied the Gulf of Alaska coast between present-day Cordova and Yakutat. According to old stories, the Eyak moved out of the Interior down the Copper River to the coast. Although Eyak has distant links to both Athabaskan and Tlingit, it started developing as a separate language about 3,500 years ago, according to Krauss.

On the coast, the Eyaks held rich salmon fishing grounds at the mouth of the Copper River. But they were a relatively small group, raided and squeezed by their neighbors, particularly the Chugach Alutiiq of Prince William Sound who claimed some of the same territory. The Eyak were friendlier with the Tlingits. Their social structures were similar, and intermarriages occurred frequently. But assimilation by the larger Tlingit society contributed to the disappearance of Eyak.

The Russians traded with the Eyak, sent them missionaries and recognized them as a distinct culture, even designating Eyak territory on their maps. But this was lost on the

Americans. By the 1880s, Tlingit expansion had pushed the remaining Eyaks into the Copper River delta, where about 200 Eyaks lived in two villages and several camps. The Americans arrived and started canneries, competing with the Eyaks for salmon. They introduced alcohol, disease and — from the Chinese cannery workers — opium. By 1900, the 60 surviving Eyaks had congregated at an old campsite near the canneries on the west end of Eyak Lake. In 1906, this last Eyak settlement, known as Old Town, became part of the new town of Cordova, created as a railroad port terminal.

Jones grew up in a two-room cabin on Eyak Lake with her sister and parents, Scar and Minnie Stevens, who worked for the railroad and salmon canneries. Although she was forbidden to speak her language at the government-run school in Cordova, she and her family conversed in Eyak at home. Her mother was devout Russian Orthodox, a faith Jones testifies to today, but raised her in Native ways. Her parents fished the salmon runs, taking her in the boat as a 4-day-old; they preserved berries in seal oil; her father showed her how to hunt and live off the land. She couldn't stomach milk as an infant; her mother chewed up fish and other foods to feed her. She remembers her mother getting help from a medicine woman once, and her parents told about Jones' maternal grandfather, a shaman, who used to go into a trance, balancing flat on a string strung across the living room. Jones started working in the canneries when she was 12, in 1930.

That's the year young Frederica de Laguna

landed in Cordova to begin anthropological work in Alaska. The U.S. Marshal directed de Laguna to the local Natives. De Laguna soon realized the Eyak language was unique and through her work, the Eyaks gained a place in the literature as the most recently re-recognized Alaska Native group. Jones remembers watching de Laguna and her associates interviewing "my favorite uncle. I pretended I was fishing on the beach, but I was watching them. I didn't want them to hurt him."

In the years that followed, de Laguna pioneered other documentation of Alaska's early Native people. Jones, meantime, stayed in Cordova through four marriages and a long bout with alcoholism. She quit drinking in 1970 and moved to Anchorage in 1973. In 1992, her sister Sophie died, leaving Jones as the last Native speaker of Eyak. She remembers calling Sophie to confer on the meaning of an elusive Eyak word, and together they'd remember.

Jones has emerged the past few years as something of an activist. She is outspoken against logging ancestral Eyak lands and participated in a lawsuit to stop clear-cutting by the Eyak Corp., a village corporation out of Cordova made up primarily of Chugach Alutiiqs and Tlingits. She is trying to fund a scholarship at the University of Alaska Fairbanks for Indian children. She feels that God has been preparing her to be the last speaker of the Eyak language. "I know I'm supposed to lead my people," she said.

As Eyak Chief, Jones has told her people's story at intertribal gatherings in the Lower 48

and carried the Eyak banner with her son, William, in the Alaska leg of the international Peace and Dignity Journey of indigenous people. Fliers from the events top the piles of papers in her apartment; the walls are covered with family photographs and Indian art. Jones has seven children — Leonard, Ramona and Sharon in Anchorage; William in Valdez; LaVina in Albuquerque; Sondra in Spokane; and JoAnna in Tucson — 25 grandchildren and 5 great-grandchildren.

In 1995, Jones and de Laguna returned together to Cordova for the first Eyak potlatch in 80 years. Dr. Krauss came also, greeting Jones in an outpouring of Eyak. The event was videotaped for a documentary, "More Than Words." The potlatch celebrated the reburial a year earlier of an unnamed Eyak man, whose bones had been held by the Smithsonian Institution since 1917. As Chief, Jones was to lead and she was nervous, afraid she would make a mistake. About two dozen people gathered in a mist at the burial site for a brief

healing ceremony, then adjourned to an empty warehouse for feasting, dancing and gift exchanges. Jones brought the celebration full circle by bestowing Eyak names to the young people. She chuckled at the name she chose for Lankard, an outspoken critic of logging Eyak lands. His Eyak name: *Jamachakih* means "little bird that never stops chirping." Said Jones, "He was a little chatterbox when he was young."

Later during the potlatch de Laguna commented: "It's a rebirth of a people.... The hope is in the children, who come to feel pride in being Eyak. We don't know the form Eyak culture will take in the future, but it will always be distinctly Eyak." ■

*Eyak descendants ceremoniously replanted trees on some of their ancestral grounds in Cordova that have been clear-cut by the Eyak Corp., a village corporation composed primarily of Alutiiqs and Tlingits of Cordova. (Jenna May)*

