

ATHABASCAN

word of the week



Photo by Dawn Pomrening

Teacher Dawn Pomrening teaches students at the Johnny Oldman School in Hughes how to make computer maps of traditional camping places and Denaakk'e place names using information from elder interviews. From left are Natasha Ambrose, Nicholas Cleveland, Wendy Cleveland, Gareth Ambrose, teacher Dawn Pomrening, Adrian Cleveland, Marvin Yatlin, Ethan Nicholai, Curtis Ambrose and Zac Pomrening.

Elders share their stories with students

Students at the Johnny Oldman School in Hughes completed a unit on "Who I Am" by writing and sharing their experiences about growing up in the villages they are from. There are students from Hughes, Huslia, Ambler and the state of Wisconsin in the junior high to high school class. Students wrote about fishing, hunting and berry picking on the rivers and hills around Hughes.

As a link to their past, elders visited the classrooms and identified camps where they grew up and camps where they raised their own families. The oldest elder, Cecelia Beetus, 89, shared stories of living in winter camp on the Kkoonootne (Kanuti River). Kk'oonootne means "fish roe river."

In spring, her family moved to the Kk'oonootne Tsaalaatne, a subsidiary of the Kk'oonootne, over the portage from Allakaket. The meaning of tsaalaa is uncertain (-ne is a suffix for stream or creek). Grandma Celia said they "went there every spring, never miss, not once."

Grandma Celia got married in 1938 to Joe Beetus, of Hughes, at age 16. In summer, she moved along with her mother-in-law Ida and Little Beetus to Tl'edok'edaal Denh, a fish camp 12 miles north of Hughes. The town name means "the bar is long."

Her husband worked every summer until October. In the winter they moved to Kk'eeyh Yee, or "Birch Lake." They used to have ptarmigan and rabbit snares.

The students produced maps for each of the elders in AEJEE, a geographic information system software program, with data



Photo by Susan Paskvan

Musicians Bill Derendoff, Wilson Sam, Don Ernst, Jackie Wholecheese, Roy Folger, Joss Olin and Anna Frank sing In "Sweet Bye and Bye" at the funeral service for respected elder Cue Bifelt in Huslia. After the English verses, Wilson Sam sang the Denaakk'e verse, followed by Frank singing with the Menhti Kenaga' verse. Standing along the wall are Corrina Sam, Mary Ann Sam and Roger Huntington.

from MapTEACH.

Later that night, grandma Celia shared stories about late grandpa Johnny Oldman, who the school is named after. She spoke in Denaakk'e the entire time to aunt Madeline Williams. Aunt Madeline said grandma Celia used many "high words," which are old words that carry a deeper meaning in our language.

From Hughes, I went to Huslia for the funeral of uncle Cue Bifelt. He was known for being a champion dog musher and river boat pilot. Four men, Samson Henry, Warner Vent, Patty Yaska and Sam Brice Sr., shared their memories of traveling with uncle Cue and how he had "stories around every bend."

He knew the river from the mouth of the Yukon all the way up to Fort Yukon; and from the

mouth of the Koyukuk River to its headwaters.

Although the speakers lamented that they didn't record him as they were traveling, hopefully through the years, the stories will be carried on in the oral tradition.

Many of the place names in Denaakk'e have been documented by Eliza Jones with information from elders.

We are in the process of confirming the locations, meanings and stories so the information can be shared with the future generations so students can know about the camps and lifestyles of their grandparents.

Correction to the Feb. 11 Word of the Week article:

There is no long "o," only a short "o" in Denaakk'e, pronounced "aw."

The Athabaskan Word of the Week appears every Saturday on page A3 of the Fairbanks Daily News-Miner. The words are provided by Susan "K'etsoo" Paskvan of Yukon-Koyukuk School District. She is originally from the village of Koyukuk on the Yukon River in Interior Alaska. She is Tleeyegge Hut'aane, which is Koyukuk Athabaskan. She seeks stories and phrases from both Denaakk'e (Koyukuk Athabaskan) and Denak'a (Lower Tanana Athabaskan), which are languages spoken in the Yukon-Koyukuk School District region. Yukon-Koyukuk School District serves the villages of Allakaket, Hughes, Huslia, Koyukuk, Nulato, Kaltag, Ruby, Manley Hot Springs and Minto. The Board of Education places a priority on teaching the Native languages within the district.