

H90-06-154

A.N.S. 401  
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Summary  
Phillip Albert

Margaret Eskilida

Margaret started today's session by defining the Ahtna Athabascan word "engie" as meaning sort of a taboo of what young children are supposed to and not supposed to do. She also presented a booklet on "engie", and told a short story of a boy and girl who were pretending a cloud was a goat. After of which the young boy followed a goat into the woods and became lost.

Margaret explained of how she felt that it was important to tell stories to children as it would teach them to behave and also how to avoid bad marriages. She continued the story of the lost boy and how he had found a dog which then helped him hunt and fish for food. The dog then eventually led the boy to an old village where the people decided to keep him as a slave rather than kill him.

After being held as a slave to help in camp chores the boy one day went down a forbidden path where he met a stranger who then helped him build a boat to escape back to his home country in. After returning home his family did not recognize him at first because of his change and also of his growth during the number of years of his absence.

Just like in Koyukon society Ahtna stories were told only in winter and not summer when there were chores to be done. Margarete said that in the Ahtna society stories were

concluded by expressing sort of a prayer asking that the winter be short and the summer long.

Session continued on how girls were traditionally isolated for one year during puberty to learn to sew and do other things necessary to make a good wife. During time of isolation girls were only allowed to wear certain clothing. No restrictions on food were given during this time with the exception of not being allowed to eat fresh meat. Bear meat was not a traditional Ahtna food except when other game resources were scarce and the people were hungry.

When Margaret was raising her children she would not allow them to sleep in other peoples houses. She also explained of how she was raised across the river from Chitina in order to learn traditional knowledge subsistence which she feels is important. She mentioned of her grandfather being from Salcha and that she is related to traditional Chief Andrew Isaac of Tanacross.

Eliza explained on how Salcha language is really different than any other Athabascan language. Margaret said that she knows exact year of her birth because it was one year after the railroad opened through Chitina in 1910. She told of not having any knowledge of the church and of the son of God during her childhood. However, she did learn to read some Bible verses in later years and has worked on translating some of the Bible and songs into Ahtna for the church.

Answered question on strange Ahtna stories especially one on woodsmen who did not bother people but just scared them and sometimes stole children to raise as its own. Margarett explained of how woodsmen gave off an ether smelling odor which put people to sleep. She also told of once hearing a strange whistle near a highway while picking some sort of weed with her son Roy. The weed "stinkweed" was boiled and used to relieve miner muscle and skin pain.

She mentioned games she played as a child such as jumping rope, pole vaulting and some sort of a dart game. Also of a game played during winter to see who could run the farthest and running on snowshoes. She mentioned how children used to bother squirrels to sort of challenge them because of a squirrels speed. She also mentioned how Ahtnas traditionally used porcupine quills for beads.

Margaret went on to telling the class about some sort of a plant which was boiled and used as a dye. Then she mentioned being deprived of several years of her traditional knowledge because of living too long among white folks. She worked ten years as a dietitian in an Anchorage hospital then quit after the 1964 earthquake at the request of her daughters. She then worked for a number of years as a custodian at the school in Chitina.

One of the students told of being in Chitina at one time and mentioned seeing a ghost painted on a building which Margaret explained was painted by someone who referred to Chitina as a ghost town. The population in Chitina

dropped dramatically after the railroad pulled out. The B.I.A. school in Chitina did not prohibit the speaking of the Native language and even encouraged it, thinking that it was important to continue its use so that the children would learn.

Eliza and Margaret explained a little about the use of the Yukon stove in earlier years and how it is not much used today. Margaret told of teaching her son Roy Bible verses when he was four years old. The youngest Ahtna speaker today is probably around forty. Margaret explained about groundhog dance and how there are stories behind songs.

She told an interesting story of an Athabascan man long ago who wanted to start a potlatch but did not know how to go about it so he got an idea while watching a raven search for food and how he circled around once discovering it. The man then had the people imitate the raven and that is how the raven dance got started. Eliza explained how traditional medicine men spread down feathers on the floor after which people would put the feathers inside mittens for luck.

Margaret concluded the session by relating a story of one of her sons being robbed and shot by hitchhikers after he picked them up on the highway during cold weather. Her son is okay now but the bullet is still inside him.