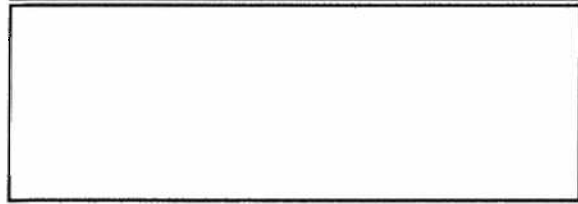


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Obituaries - Walking On - 2007-2011

By **Mary Pemberton and Lori Townsend**
Anchorage, Alaska (AP/NFIC) 2-08



Chief Marie Smith Jones in 2004

Marie Smith Jones, who worked to preserve her heritage as the last fluent speaker of their Native Eyak language, has passed on. She was 89.

Jones passed away in her sleep in January at her home in Anchorage. She was found by a friend, said daughter Bernice Galloway, who lives in Albuquerque, N.M.

"To the best of our knowledge she was the last full-blooded Eyak alive," Galloway said. "She was a woman who faced incredible adversity in her life and overcame it," Galloway said. "She was about as tenacious as you can get."

As the last fluent speaker, she worked to preserve the Eyak language, a branch of the Athabaskan family of languages, said Michael Krauss, a linguist and professor emeritus at the University of Alaska Fairbanks who collaborated with her.

She wanted a written record of the language so future generations would have the chance to resurrect it, said Krauss, who directs the university's Alaska Native Language Center.

Jones helped Krauss compile an Eyak dictionary and grammar. Jones, her sister and a cousin told him Eyak tales that were made into a book.

"With her death, the Eyak language becomes extinct," Krauss said. In all, he said, nearly 20 native Alaskan languages are at risk of the same fate. He called them "the intellectual heritage of this part of the world. It is unique to us and if we lose them, we lose what is unique to Alaska."

"So Eyak is the first of what is going to be a procession of language loss in Alaska. The question is who is next and why should we care?"

Krauss can quickly answer that question. He has carefully documented and built a meticulous data base and dictionary of the Eyak language. He also speaks Eyak. Krauss says when an Alaska Native language is lost, we lose the knowledge of people who specialized in living in the state.

"Nothing could be more Alaskan than the indigenous languages. When we lose them we lose something that is important to all Alaskans. We lose a whole ageless system of thought. We lose more than we can understand and that's a bad thing."

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Her friend and video archivist Laura Bliss Spann first met her in 1992 and along with Krauss worked with her on preserving the Eyak language and video taping her appearances at Potlatches and other gatherings. Bliss-Spann says Chief Marie accomplished a lot in her long life.

"She overcame a lot in her life. Alcoholism, prejudice and a lot of other things. She had a way of touching so many people around her. A life well lived."

Bliss-Spann says Chief Marie loved to read the grocery store tabloids and she had a particular affection for the Pillsbury dough boy. Bliss-Spann says Chief Marie knew she would be leaving soon and she gave one of her favorite small porcelain statues of the dough boy to Bliss-Spann's daughter days before her death.

"She told my daughter, keep him in your line of sight because when I go, my spirit is going right in there and I'll be watching you." Bliss-Spann laughs at the memory. "So I guess Marie's spirit is in that little poppin' fresh right now!"

"Now I know that I am the last one for a purpose. To bring my people back to their own again."

Bliss-Spann's documentary of Chief Marie is entitled More than Words and it opens with Chief Marie saying how painful it is to be asked how she feels about being the last speaker of her Eyak language. She ends the film with these words.

"Now I know that I am the last one for a purpose. To bring my people back to their own again."

The Eyak ancestral homeland runs along 300 miles of the Gulf of Alaska from Prince William Sound in south-central Alaska eastward to the town of Yakutat. Jones was born in Cordova in 1918 and grew up on Eyak Lake, where her family had a homestead.

Many of her siblings died young when smallpox and influenza tore through the Eyaks, her daughter said. In 1948, she married William F. Smith, a white Oregon fisherman who met Jones while working his way up the coastline, Galloway said.

The couple had nine children, seven of whom are still alive. None of them learned Eyak because they grew up at a time when it was considered wrong to speak anything but English, Galloway said.

But Galloway said her mother was a traditional Indian in many ways. She was the youngest of her siblings and waited until her last older sibling died in the 1990s before taking on the responsibility that comes with being the oldest child. It was at that time that Jones pursued her interest in preserving the Eyak language and the environment, Galloway said.

"There was a transformation of our mother into a very pro-active, politically active individual," Galloway said.

Jones twice spoke at the United Nations on peace and the importance of Indigenous languages, Galloway said.

Krauss described Jones as a "wonderfully ordinary Eyak lady who lived to a ripe old age not because of an easy life but because of a rather hard life, coming up and surviving as an Eyak in the 20th century."

Being the last of her kind for the last 15 years, Krauss said, "was a tragic mantle that (Jones) bore with great dignity, grace and spirit."

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