



Thursday, January 24, 2008 - Page updated at 12:00 AM

Permission to reprint or copy this article or photo, other than personal use, must be obtained from The Seattle Times. Call 206-464-3113 or e-mail resale@seattletimes.com with your request.

Language dies with chief

By MARY PEMBERTON
The Associated Press

ANCHORAGE, Alaska — Chief Marie Smith Jones, the last full-blooded Eyak and the last person fluent in her Native language, died at her home in Anchorage. She was 89.

Ms. Jones died in her sleep Monday. She was found by a friend, said Bernice Galloway, a daughter who lives in Albuquerque, N.M.

"To the best of our knowledge, she was the last full-blooded Eyak alive," Galloway said.

She also was the last person alive who was fluent in Eyak, said Michael Krauss, a linguist and professor emeritus at the University of Alaska Fairbanks, who collaborated with Ms. Jones for years in an effort to preserve the Eyak language.

"With her death, the Eyak language becomes extinct," Krauss said.

Many of her siblings died young when smallpox and influenza tore through the Eyak Nation of south central Alaska, Galloway said.

"She was a woman who faced incredible adversity in her life and overcame it," Galloway said.

Ms. Jones was honorary chief of the Eyak Nation. The Eyak ancestral homeland runs along 300 miles of the Gulf of Alaska from Prince William Sound, near Cordova.

She was born in Cordova on May 14, 1918, and grew up on Eyak Lake where her family had a homestead. She married William F. Smith in 1948. Smith was a fisherman from Oregon.

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

Ms. Jones moved to Anchorage in the early 1970s to be closer to her children.

Ms. Jones twice spoke at the United Nations on peace and the importance of indigenous languages, Galloway said. She became active in environmental Indian issues.

With Ms. Jones' help, Krauss compiled a complete Eyak dictionary and grammar. She wanted a written record so that future generations would have a chance of resurrecting the language, Krauss said.

[Copyright © 2008 The Seattle Times Company](#)