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Third annual Bilingual Bicultural Conference held in Anchorage, Alaska in 1977

Moses Wassillie, interviewer

Series: Potlatch series

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Moses Wassillie said Dr. Walter Soboleff gave a brief history of bilingual education in Southeast Alaska and talked about some material that had been developed in Tlingit. He encouraged people to taped materials for preservation of the language.

Dr. Soboleff said as far back as 1904 John Swanson was writing the legends and myths of the Tlingit people. In 1917 Dr. Boas and Lewis Sharter of Klukwan wrote a grammatical book on the Tlingit language. In 1962 the Summer Institute of Linguistics published Tlingit reading book one and then number two. In 1963 the English Tlingit Dictionary for nouns was created. The gospel of John was translated in 1969. In 1973 the Tlingit verb dictionary was created by the Summer Institute of Linguistics. In 1976 Beginning Tlingit was done by Nora and Richard Dauenhauer. He said he sees the product of many hours of work out in the hallway of other language groups to create the language in writing to save what is left for their young people. When Dr. Roy Omalik retired he translated the complete King James Bible into Inupiaq. What he did will last for a long time. Native heritage and history materials are probably in the writing, but there is not enough. There should be intensive taping of materials because in the years to come these people will be gone. In the future they will have the taped materials they can take the time to transcribe the materials. He talked about time schedules as opposed to traditional times. He emphasized that they need to encourage their young people how to be on time.

Song by John Sebastian

Moses Wassillie said one of the topics at the discussion was the Lau versus Nichols case which was initiated in California. Virginia Martinez was one of the lawyers involved with the case. Virginia Martinez said the Lau law says that the child is being denied equal opportunity if that child can't work to his or her potential. If a child is in the sixth grade and tests at a sixth grade level, but when tested in the native language they test at the eighth grade level even if the child was not an underachiever that child was losing out because they have potential for more and they aren't getting it. The remedy is to provide full participation of the language minority student into the educational program. That means that child needs to be instructed in the language that they understand. In the state legislature to be able to get bilingual statutes passed you usually have to convince the legislatures that they are not advocating cultural pluralism, but they just found out that the kids just don't learn quickly enough. They are giving them a transitional program. A lot of legislatures view it as a compensatory program. The children have a language handicap. The state is working with HEW and other resources to submit a plan that is an adequate remedy for violations that are found. If they find that there is a denial of equal education opportunity under Title 6 then funds can be cut off.

Moses Wassillie said a feature of the conference was the show and tell workshop where teachers describe what they are doing. Jenny Alowa's bilingual class developed methods of reading and writing Cyrillic. She said their dialect of Siberian Yupik has many rules when you are learning to read and write. They learned Cyrillic because they have relatives right across from St. Lawrence Island that they never see. They are only thirty miles away. Once a week on the radio they visit with each other. They wanted to get to see them. Last year they sent letters to everyone including Senator Gravel to get permission to go visit them. They got as far as the Soviet Embassy. She thinks very soon they will be able to go back and forth and visit their relatives.

Moses Wassillie said Katherine Peter works for the Alaska Native Language Center. She had problems with the English alphabet but plans to work until she dies. She said when she first started her alphabet it was hard for her. She said there was a story that was on the shelf for fifty years. She transcribed the story. She said it gave her encouragement to stay with the program. She wonders what the language will be in fifty years. She wants to encourage the younger people.

Moses Wassillie said Nellie Lord works with young people in Sitka learning the language, dances and songs of the Tlingit people. One of the problems is development of advanced curriculum materials for advanced students. Nellie Lord said they don't have anyone preparing materials for them. Their advanced students are ready for something other than the basics of their language. They also teach them dancing. They are learning the songs and can sing fluently. She is still learning. There is a lot to learn with the Tlingit language because of the tone marks. She can read it, but if you don't put the tone marks in the right place you can be saying something completely different. She is really happy to be a teacher. It makes her proud that some of her high school students are interested and they are student helpers. They come down to help every day.

Song by Bobby Goldsboro

Moses Wassillie said in the recommendations and summary session on the last day of the conference Charles Natcong with Sheldon Jackson College gave a report on the writing systems for native languages. Charles Natcong said everyone has to agree on your writing system and use it in the way you have agreed on. He said this way you have consistency throughout your language and writing system. He said you may be a full speaker in your language, but this isn't enough. He said you can't do it with the English alphabet. He said teachers must know the alphabet for the language that they are teaching. You must develop your own teaching materials. He said when you develop your own materials you know why you are developing it and how you are going to use it. He said changes to the writing system must be kept to a minimum.

Moses Wassillie said some of the recommendations and resolutions from the second bilingual conference was given in a summary by Ramona Duerr. She talked about what the state department has done to implement the recommendations. Ramona Duerr said since the last conference the state advisory council whose task it is to give suggestions on matters of bilingual education which includes the annual conference has invited input on the agenda and has made suggestions for this year's conference. She said this year's conference has many more workshops. They had a small conference planning committee. She said in the past year they have

had several technical assistance workshops held primarily in Anchorage and Juneau. The workshops attempted to help school administrators develop and establish bilingual programs. Much of the technical assistance from the Department of Education to the village bilingual program has been with the cooperation of the local school districts. Some of the resolutions they have responded to and others they are just beginning to be worked on or beginning to address with the advisory council.

Song by John Sebastian

Moses Wassillie said one of the concerns of the last bilingual conference was how to change the bilingual law and regulations and if they have enough time to do it. Ramona Duerr talked about the process to change the bilingual law and the regulations. Ramona Duerr said the hearing process began in May of 1976 and continued until late July. She said there is a way to amend them and make proposed changes through another hearing process. The regulations are not in concrete. The law would have to be changed through their legislators.