

88-49-77

Andrew P. Johnson, Cy Peck, Nora Downhauer and Vesta Johnson speak at the Native Arts and Literature conference held in Sitka, Alaska in December 1975

1976

Series: Potlatch series

Moses Wassillie, moderator

Andrew P. Johnson said English doesn't express the whole thing. He said with their language they express their entire inner feeling. He spoke in Tlingit.

Song by Gordon Lightfoot

Cy Peck, Sr. talked about the ritual of receiving visitors. He said it has a high priority. He said the hosts of a community appreciate the fact that people have traveled to see them, to talk with them and to associate with them. Ritual is a high priority. They may invite the visitor to warm their hands by the fire. They mean come and partake with them. In the Chilkat Valley there is an expression used on this occasion. The cottonwood tree is something that has respect for an individual visitor. The cottonwood is a quiet burning tree that produces great heat. It is said that the cottonwood tree has respect for the visitor. He closed with an expression. He said it is impossible to make a translation word for word. He said a groundhog is a creature that hibernates. They live on the highest peaks. When the winter weather sets in the groundhog hibernates and stays there. When the sun heat begins to heat the ground the thaw begins. The groundhog appears. When the groundhog appears on a boulder it will let out its sound. The valley down below echoes the sound. Every creature hears the groundhog and they know that spring is here. He said they all know that the culture has been asleep for many years. Now like the spring thaw appears the groundhog who is going to whistle and all the creatures in the surrounding area will hear. Their children and grandchildren will hear their voices. They are going to revive the culture of the ethnic nation. He speaks in Tlingit.

Song by Jessie Colin Young

Cy Peck, Sr. said the English language is not his mother tongue. The English language is foreign to him. Therefore translation is important that a Caucasian translate himself to him in Tlingit. Translation works both ways and it can help both ways. The law says that ignorance is no excuse. There are many people in the country that do not understand law, but yet they have to pay the penalty. Translation and interpretation works both ways. If he is ignorant of a law and he breaks the law he is not at fault according to the Tlingit law. If it is not translated to men it is not interpreted to him. If he breaks that law he feels that he is not at fault but the Caucasians say that ignorance is not an excuse. English is not his mother tongue so therefore he is not ashamed to speak broken English in his efforts to try to communicate with us. He asked why Tlingit culture, why ethnic culture? He said it is his way of life. It is their way of speaking. It is their very actions. It is their culture. It is their traditions. It is their uncles and grandfathers who have died in this land. They are as the great warrior in lower forty eight. He asked what do walk on, it is not just dirt. It is the blood of their uncles and grandfathers who have fallen before them.

Moses Wassillie said Nora Downhauer is another person who has tried to teach the Tlingit language. Nora Downhauer said a lot of younger generation want to learn the language. They feel that through the language they could learn about the culture. This doesn't happen overnight. It will take a long time to bring back the language. They are going to have to try. How are they going to try? They don't know. This hasn't been resolved. In addition to her frustration she also felt like an outsider when Jim McKinley was speaking in his own language. She said at one time they were one people. They separated and their language was different. She said she could not understand him. She understood the feeling of hunger to know the language and to be able to understand the culture.

Moses Wassillie said Vesta Johnson, a Haida Indian, told about reading and writing the language. Vesta Johnson said recently they had a Haida symposium. It was the first time in Haida history that they got together and talked about their language. It was beautiful. She said like Henry said they never realized that they could actually read and write the language. It can be done. It can be taught to their children. Just like a seed is born and grows. She said it feels like a big job now. She is excited about the work. She challenges them to support the big programs. There are obstacles and there's a lot of negative thinking. They must be positive about it. She said this is the first time that they have gotten together with the Canadian Haidas. The unity was stressed. She would like to stress unity at these meetings.