

Knowledge of Native Elders  
Peter and Elsie John  
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By: Joe Kwaraceius

Today Peter and Elsie John were honored at R.S.S. for their past and present contributions as elders. They also were honored for their 65th wedding anniversary. Peter John gave thanks and continued with a speech about how important education is to today's children and young adults. He further emphasized that they should keep on trying, even if the going is tough and they get tired. He also said that they should go back to school if they had quit before. Peter's brother-in-law followed with another speech, honoring Peter, and stressing the importance learning and keeping Athabaskan traditions intact. He also pointed out that even Athabaskan oratory is important, that in accordance with Athabaskan custom, he showed that it was his place to also, speak for Peter as a member of the other clan in the family. He also stressed that honestly, with full voice, and a firm belief in one's abilities was also important. Other speeches followed, pretty much reaffirming what had been said, some were made in Athabaskan. That compelled Peter to make another speech also in Athabaskan.

In elders class, Peter tried to explain his motive for making the second speech. He fingered the beads (ch'etth'ena?) that hung from his neck, saying that he felt that he was challenged to speak in his native tongue, and that he was also speaking in the place of his ancestors. The owners of such beads were leaders and/or rich men (distinction was somewhat hazy) [gholeeya?].

He really stressed education again in this class. He laments that very few children come to visit and ask questions at his home in Minto. He states that he is one of the few real tradition bearers left in the village.

Peter noted that today almost everyone in Minto like the things that Western culture has introduced, including leisure. Work is easier nowadays with alternative ways of supporting one's self. Nowadays, he says people hunt less and are forgetting their skills. He adds that even game wardens have made life harder by saying how much the Minto people should hunt. Moreover, Peter stated that his people don't have their old way of life anymore and that they don't have hunting anymore either. All they had left was education.

One other thing Peter discussed was improvisation. One time during hunting, his gunsight broke off the barrel. He tried shooting without it, but he missed the caribou he was aiming at. Then he broke a stick to the size of the gunsight and got his caribou. Another person he knew had repaired a snowmachine engine using a stick. Peter said they didn't have manuals to help them or any mechanics. They learned to fix things themselves.

Sometime during class, Elsie started coughing and a student offered them both water. They accepted the water, but Peter did comment about it. He said that he doesn't drink much water, it goes fast downhill, but has a hard time going uphill. (I have heard and read that a young boy training to be a hunter abstains from drinking too much water. The water is supposed to slow one down when running).