

Alutiiq Text Hints at Historic Literacy

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St. Herman Seminary archivist Daria Safronova and school dean, Father John Dunlop, display some of the recently rediscovered Alutiiq language artifacts found in the school archives. There's a close up of the book after the jump.
Brianna Gibbs/KMXT photo

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Thousands of historic documents line the archive walls at St. Herman Seminary. The well-lit, slightly chilled room is home to some of the seminary's most precious literature, and recently rediscovered proof of the astounding literacy of Alaska Natives.

Daria Safronova is an archivist and teacher at the seminary. She sits at a wooden table in the back of the seminary's library, surrounded by dozens of aging books and transcripts. Gently, Safronova takes a paperback book from her stack of documents and begins to flip through the pages.

-- (Native Literacy 1 :24 "This is an Alutiiq ABC book, again printed in St. Petersburg in 1848, and there were hundreds and hundreds, and we even have hundreds and hundreds of these books. And what is unique about it, it's bilingual as well. It starts in Alutiiq and at first you learn to read syllables in Alutiiq, but in Russian letters, in Slavonic letters, and then it is in Slavonic.")

Safronova

said a majority, if not all, the documents and books are multilingual publications.

-- (Native Literacy 2 :32 "It seems mind boggling at first, especially for people who don't deal with linguistics. Because we are dealing here with three languages, actually four. We are dealing with Church Slavonic, the language of the church. We are dealing with Russian, which is like modern English, where everyone communicated in that language. We are dealing with Alutiiq language that was used at home. And we're dealing with English language that was introduced when Russians left.")

Father John

Dunlop is the dean at St. Herman Seminary and said he isn't surprised that much of the documents in the archives are multilingual. He said teaching literacy through church documents was one of the Russian Orthodox missionaries' primary goals.

-- (Native Literacy 3 :25 "I think one of the general principles of the Russian mission to Alaska was translating liturgical material and biblical materials into the native languages. That went throughout the course of the mission here, and it's really one of the keystones of orthodox missionary is to translate things into local languages.")

The result

of this work, according to Safronova, is the creation of an extremely literate culture, more so than any other indigenous people during that time.

-- (Native Literacy 4 :39 "That it was done in 1848, it was unprecedented in all the lower 48 states where the only example of native literacy was the Sequoyah from the Cherokee tribe who created his own literacy. But otherwise there was some missionary work done in Dakota states and Catholics were interested in translating the gospel. But what's unique about this is it is bilingual, and the native people themselves were active participants of the process.")

Because

Alutiiq people could read, write and speak so many languages, including Russian, it is now thought that at one point they were perhaps even more literate than the majority of the population of Russia.

-- (Native Literacy 5 :37 "But then the history gets even more interesting, just to finish with education process, it was not only bilingual books that were used, but also monolingual Alutiiq and monolingual Church Slavonic. So these people were more educated than people in Russia, where majority of the population of peasants were illiterate. So to understand that, if more people knew that it, it would reinforce native pride in how literate these people were.")

Safronova

said in a way, the last half century has been a dark age for literacy, meaning these multilingual skills have been lost over the years. However, she said she has hope for a linguistic renaissance, especially with Kodiak College offering classes in both Russian and Alutiiq this fall. I'm Brianna Gibbs.

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