

The date of this newspaper article is around April 4, 1978, when John Smelcer was 14 years old. His father cut it out of the *Fairbanks Daily News-Miner*, Alaska's oldest and second largest newspaper.



Students attend Nulato stick dance

For several Native students from Fairbanks, a field trip to participate in a cultural event in a village on the Yukon River was an exciting, emotion-packed experience.

The event was the Nulato Stick Dance—a traditional Athabascan mourning ceremony—and from March 30 to April 1, eight Fairbanks students joined residents of Nulato to celebrate the event.

The purpose of the stick dance is to honor the dead and to thank the people who participate in burials.

Students who attended were Angela Williams and Arthur Noble, from Ryan Jr. High; Tamira Kokrine, North Pole; John Smelcher, Tanana; Cindy Jones and Marvin Madros, West Valley, and Rodney Evans, Lathrop. They were selected to attend by school counselors on the basis of grades and interest, and their trip to the village was paid by the Johnson-O'Malley Program of the Fairbanks Native Association.

During the stick dance, the population of Nulato, a village on the Yukon about 300 miles west of Fairbanks, swelled from 300 to 500 people. Meats, fish and soups were prepared in great quantities. A series of potlaches was held in the community hall. There the dead were eulogized in mourning songs and speeches.

On the night of the stick dance, a spruce pole decorated with a ribbon was brought into the hall and tied to a beam. Wolverine and wolf pelts were also tied to the stick.

A small circle of dancers moved toward the stick while a larger circle of people moved in clockwise direction around the stick. The dancing continued all night. The next day the stick was stripped of decorations and fur. It was carried around the village and then returned to the hall. Finally it was taken along the riverbank and broken against a log cabin. The pieces were thrown down the bank.

Years of preparation for the dance

climaxed the last night of the ceremony as relatives of the honored dead dressed certain villagers in new clothes. Smaller gifts for others who participated in the burial, such as relatives and fellow villagers and visitors, were also given.

For the Fairbanks student-visitors, the celebration was a chance to learn more about Athabascan culture. "It was a unique experience," said Williams. "It was almost unbelievable how everyone cooperated for this mourning celebration. As the old folks sang their songs with strong, sad voices, I stood trying to think of something to mourn about," Williams said.

"I watched everyone dance and saw tears fill their eyes when they recalled a death of a person close to them," she continued. "I felt sorry for half of the people who couldn't hold it back. To tell the truth, this trip was the best of all the Native celebrations I can remember."

Kokrine said, "I really didn't know

what the stick dance was until I saw it Friday night. I'm really glad I got to go on this trip because now I know a little about the culture of the Nulato Athabascans. I didn't know what dancing around the pole meant until someone told me about how it all got started and the way they do it for the people that passed away."