



*From L to R: Don Striker, Ray Collins and Amy Craver stand in front of the Nikolai Tribal Council.
Photo by Kim Arthur.*

Ray Collins, Author and Literacy Advocate, Passes

Denali National Park and Preserve is sad to report that Ray Collins of McGrath passed peacefully on April 30, 2020, two days before his 84th birthday, at the home of his daughter in Anchorage. Ray has been the chair of the park's Subsistence Resource Commission since it was established in 1990. Ray, a gifted anthropological linguist, educator, and pastor, was not only a knowledge holder in his own right, but also a tireless teacher of Upper Kuskokwim Athabaskan language and culture. Ray devoted countless hours throughout the years to working on many Upper Kuskokwim language and place names projects.

In 1963, Ray, his wife Sally, and their two children moved to Nikolai, with the support of Wycliffe Bible Translators, to study the previously unwritten Upper Kuskokwim Athabaskan language. At the time they moved to the community, everyone there was fluent in Upper Kuskokwim, including the children. While they lived in Nikolai, Ray and Sally participated fully in the life of the community. Ray promoted literacy in the Upper Kuskokwim language, mentoring language expert Betty Petruska (1945-2016), among others. Ray and Betty recorded and transcribed an important set of texts by

Chief Mishka Deaphon (1900-1986).

After living in the area for over 35 years and accumulating a wealth of knowledge on the language and history of the Upper Kuskokwim people, Ray was asked by the Nikolai and Telida Villages Councils to share the knowledge he had collected in a book so the communities could know their history. As a result, he wrote *Dichinaneke'Hwt'ana: A History of the People of the Upper Kuskokwim who live in Nikolai and Telida*, published by the National Park Service in 2000. The book is currently in the process of being reprinted with a new forward drawn from a recent oral history interview with Ray.

In that interview, Ray was asked the most important thing he learned from working with the Nikolai Elders and studying their language and traditional subsistence activities. He responded,

...that there is more than one way of looking at the world and each culture has its own way of reflecting that; I hope that I conveyed some of the knowledge [I learned from the Elders] so that it will help others to understand the traditional way of the Upper Kuskokwim people or should I say "Chin'anequ Tan?" (Ray Collins March 5, 2020).

Ray, with his deep knowledge of the middle Kuskokwim region and his love for the Upper Kuskokwim Athabaskan language culture, and its people, was truly an inspiration to us all.