

74-year-old tribal elder helps keep Sahaptin language alive

By WENDY HARRIS

Of the Herald-Republic

TOPPENISH — As Virginia Beavert stands at a blackboard writing a list of Sahaptin words for the day's lesson, her students at Heritage College trickle in behind her.

When she finally turns around, she's greeted with birthday wishes and laughs with surprise at a birthday cake placed before her.

The small group asks her age; she says she's 30.

"Seventy-four," she later admits. "Hurry up and learn this so I can quit. I'm not supposed to be working. I should be in Hawaii or somewhere."

The Yakama Indian is here to teach her tribe's native tongue — a language on the brink of extinction. She's spent the latter part of her life on this mission, one handed down by her stepfather: Record the Sahaptin language and do not let it die.

If it does die, Virginia fears, so will the heart of Yakama culture.

Of roughly 8,500 Yakama

tribal members, Virginia is among a dwindling group of

about 100 elders who speak fluent Sahaptin. They are, she said, the last generation that grew up "the old way."

"I am very worried, otherwise I wouldn't be doing this," she said.

Language is more than communication, says University of Colorado anthropologist Dr. Deward Walker. It's an expression of culture.

The world expressed through the Sahaptin language is very different than the world viewed through the English language, he said.

Witness, for example, Virginia's recent class lesson. On the blackboard is *washa*, which means to ride. She uses it in two phrases:

I-washa k'usi pa, to ride on a horse.

I-washa k'usi ki, to ride with a horse.

The second sentence is appropriate to use; the first is not, she explained to her students.

"The spirit of the horse is equal to the human spirit, so we don't take advantage of the horse by conquering it," she said. "We use 'with the horse.' Although we are sitting on top of



Virginia Beavert smiles often and jokes readily in her Heritage College class. Still, she says, 'I am very worried, otherwise I wouldn't be doing this.'

it, we ride 'with' it."

Said Walker: "For those who don't understand the language, it's hard to understand the deeper meaning of what it is to be a Yakama. The Yakamas' world can still be seen in the language, and it's very important to preserve."

Sahaptin is one of about 20 surviving Northwest Indian languages. Worldwide, there are

several thousand languages, a majority of which are expected to die out within 50 years, he said.

"Over half are in danger of extinction because they lack a literate tradition," said Walker, whose career has been devoted to studying Northwest tribes and working with them to preserve their cultures.

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