

Aileen Figueroa (1912-2008)

Andrew Garrett

Skuyen 'u-koy. Andrew 'n-ew. Nek 'woogey. Knewetik' chi loksi'hl ko'l kich ho hohkumek' mehl k'i 'ne-laayolumin 'we-saa'agochek'. I didn't know Aileen for a long time, but she is important in my life. I remember like yesterday the day eight years ago when I met her at Jessie Van Pelt's house here in McKinleyville: a tiny woman with incredibly bright eyes and the clearest voice in the Yurok language. I can still hear how she spoke every word like the treasure it is.

Aileen was one of the guardians of that treasure of the Yurok language, but among many wonderful things about her what I admire most is that she knew that words are treasures that are not lost but also enrich their guardians when they are given to others. If you lock them up you may lose them, but if you give them to your people, as Aileen so generously did, you also give them to yourself. To teach a language you use it, and when you use a language you strengthen it in yourself. There is a Yurok word *pkwekomeyetek'* that means to take out your ceremonial treasures from the *tekwonekws* where you keep them, and for Aileen I think this is what the language was for: when she *pkwekomeyet' ku 'oohl 'we-toh* she was strengthening one of the most beautiful treasures of the Yurok people.

I will never forget the pleasure Aileen took in hearing her language spoken. With learners she had the talent of being positive and encouraging at the same time she insisted on good pronunciation. It was a little scary when she pointed her finger at you and said “Now let me hear you say it”, but then when you did say it she was so happy to hear you, and every time you might get a bit better. She also loved talking with other elders and listening to them use the language. I remember one day in 2002 when my colleague Juliette and I were working with Aileen. This was one of those times that were common with Aileen — the day ended in exhaustion after maybe eight hours of language work, but it wasn't Aileen who was tired; it was us who couldn't go on. Earlier in the day, one of the things we did was to play a recording from about 40 years ago of Frank Douglas telling a story about coyote and rabbit, and we asked Aileen to help us understand what it meant. We didn't know Yurok very well, and we didn't get it, but I won't forget Aileen bursting out laughing at what her old friend said about

Segep and those two *wenchokws*.

Aileen was such a patient Yurok language teacher. Linguists are a special torment for language teachers, because we're always changing words around: "Can you say it this way? What if you said it that way? What would it mean?" If I were Aileen I'd probably slap me, but she loved talking about her language. She had this really polite way of saying "no" — we'd ask "Can you say it this way?" and she'd just say, "Well, if the other person knows what you mean ..."

The last time I was in this building was more than 30 years ago, when my grandfather was the head custodian of this high school. I remember how I came to Eureka and McKinleyville as a child, and I realize now that Aileen and Jessie and many others were here then, speaking Yurok. I feel irritated with myself for not knowing about the language then, for not finding Aileen and getting a 25-year head-start on knowing her, learning about her language, and being honored by her gift of words. My friend and colleague Juliette, my students Alysoun, Lisa, and Tess, and I will always treasure that gift, and in the years to come as we continue to listen to Aileen's words and learn from them, our appreciation of her gift will only deepen.

The Yurok word '*ayekwi*' is a greeting, but it means a lot more than just "hey there"; it means I haven't seen you for a long time, or it moves me to see you — that one word is rich with meaning. Early in the twentieth century, according to many Yurok elders at that time, it was also a way to say "farewell" to those who have passed from this world. I want to say "farewell" to my first *laayolumin*.

'Ayekwi', 'ne-laayolumin, kich meykwele'weyek', kich nekiletichek'.

Mos ki hap'ehkok' k'e-chwin, niko'hl ki 'ne-chpe'royochek', niko'hl ki 'ne-chpwrksichek', ke'l tu' niko'hl ki k'e-regurowok', niko'hl ki k'e-segaa'agochek'.

Wokhlew ki me k'e-noolumek' k'i 'oohl, wokhlew sku'y soo ki me k'e-laayolumek' 'we-saa'agoche'mehl k'i 'oohl, wokhlew.