

NEWS FROM INDIAN COUNTRY

Indians' Languages may be near Extinction

CAMP VERDE, AZ. (AP) — There are only a dozen speakers of the language left — and only one person under 18 learning it — but Lorraine Sanchez isn't about to give up on the local dialect of Yavapai, once the dominant language of the Verde Valley.

Sanchez leans forward in her wheelchair, listening intently, as the weekly Yavapai language class of the Camp Verde Yavapai-Apache Nation begins. The subject this night, in a language no child has spoken in the home since Harry Truman was president, is the Yavapai words for the trees of the valley. Sanchez reflects back to the long-ago words of her parents and grandparents.

Ahnahla — mesquite, she says, as 14 other mainly elderly people write what they hear phonetically.

Ah dtas sah — sycamore. She repeats the word forcefully three times for a woman who has trouble pronouncing the 'dt' sound. Ah yohh — willow, she intones.

After class, Sanchez acknowledged the hardships of trying to save a dying language, one of several Native American dialects in the state on the verge of extinction. She had volunteered to be an apprentice to the young. Only two local teenagers had been willing to learn. One dropped out after a few weeks. The one who remained wasn't even Yavapai.

That situation is hardly unusual in a society increasingly dominated by English and Spanish where, short of an influx of money and language immersion for young Tribal members, only about 20 of the 155 Native American languages in the United States are

expected to survive this century.

Linguists say the situation is grim in Arizona.

Consider:

Of the state's 21 federally recognized Tribes, nearly half have 50 or fewer Tribal members who can speak their Native language. The number of Tribal Councils conducting meetings in English has increased dramatically in recent years.

Even isolated, growing Tribes such as the Navajos, who make up nearly half of the Native American language speakers in this country, face a language crisis. Bilingual educators on the nation's largest reservation say the number of fluent speakers of the language is half what it was a decade ago.

Meanwhile, the number of Navajo children speaking only English nearly tripled to almost 30 percent from 1980 to 1990, and educators say that trend has accelerated during the past decade.

Although an anti-bilingual education measure being pushed for the November ballot has targeted Spanish speakers, Native American educators say that if such a law passes, it could end efforts to instruct Tribal languages on the reservations.

Despite congressional measures in the early 1990s that pay lip service to preserving Native American languages, funding has been limited and the competition for the language-instruction dollar has been intense.

The only hope for the trend to be reversed is youngsters in preschool programs being immersed in their Tribal languages by Elders who speak

the ancient tongues, said Elizabeth Brandt, an Arizona State University anthropologist who has worked extensively with the Apache Tribes.

"It's going to take an extraordinary grass-roots effort now to turn this around," Brandt said, adding that Tribes need to think seriously about adopting the Hawaiian model of required immersion programs for young people to learn the language and culture. Many Tribes have been in denial, Brandt said, hiding behind a false sense of security based on such reports as the U.S. Census Bureau's 1990 Native American study. The study, among other things, reported that there are nearly 150,000 Navajo speakers in Arizona, Utah and New Mexico, and almost 13,000 Apache speakers and 12,000 speakers of the Tohono O'odham/Pima languages in Arizona.

Those numbers were arrived at by asking Native American census participants only if the person speaks a language at home other than English.

The truth of the matter, Brandt and other experts in the field say, is that there's probably only about one-quarter to one-third that number who actually are fluent speakers. And an overwhelming number of them are old enough to qualify for Social Security benefits now.

"I had a colleague who did a language survey in the Gilson Wash district of the San Carlos Apache Reservation," Brandt said. "He didn't find one speaker of the language under age 18."

That tracks with what Irene Silentman, a bilingual specialist for

the Navajo Department of Education in Window Rock, has observed.

"There has been a shocking decline in people speaking our language, especially in the Arizona part of the reservation," Silentman said. "On top of that, we only have one school district in the entire Navajo Nation with immersion and that only involves about 200 students. I wonder how effective even that is, though, because I've walked through the aisles of those classes and never heard any of the students interact in Navajo."

The current malaise in Native American languages is the result of long-standing federal policy to eliminate them, something that has worked all too well, said Jon Reyhner, a bilingual specialist at Northern Arizona University in Flagstaff.

After the U.S. government herded Indians onto reservations in the 1800s, the focus turned to eliminating the Native languages. One of the favored tactics in Bureau of Indian Affairs boarding schools, even up to the 1950s, was washing out students' mouths with soap if they spoke their languages at the schools.

That left deep psychological scars among generations of people that carry over to this day. Coupled with the accessibility of mass communications to even the most remote corners of all reservations, the indigenous languages have declined.

"If nothing has happened with the children on their native language front by the time they are 10, you've lost the battle because peer pressure kicks in then and that's where English becomes all pervasive," Reyhner said.

Republican apology on resolution doesn't do much for some Tribal members

TOPPENISH, WA. (AP) — A sign on display in the museum at the Yakama Nation Cultural Center says:

"We are a sovereign nation within the sovereign United States. Washington state was created in 1889, 34 years after our treaty with the U.S. government in 1855. Our treaty takes precedence over the state."

Indians have a right to self-determination, and Tribal sovereignty is a means to achieve that, several Yakama Indians said recently.

"It is very important for us," said Norman Robinson Jr., 33, of Toppenish, a first descendant of the Yakamas, meaning his mother is an enrolled member of the Tribe but he is not. "It gives us a chance to run our reservation as we see fit."

Recently, the state Republican Party apologized for adopting a resolution against Tribal sovereignty at the state Republican convention in Spokane.

The national Republican Party has also repudiated the Washington state Republican resolution.

Faced with widespread condemnation inside and outside the state, the

state party also adopted a new resolution "clarifying" its position in support of sovereignty.

The Republican's latest actions didn't do much for Tracy Ough, 22, a Yakama Nation member from Toppenish.

"It shows how much trust they have in us," he said. "We're just trying to get respect, and let them know we can do our own stuff our own way."

John Fleming, a non-Indian living on the Swinomish Reservation in LaConner, sponsored the Republican's original resolution.

The resolution called for the federal government to "take whatever steps necessary to terminate all such non-republican forms of government on Indian reservations." Fleming also suggested he'd like to have the resolution introduced at the national Republican convention.

The Republican National Committee (RNC) took its unusual action to head off a threat to presidential candidate George W. Bush's message of racial inclusiveness.

"We are writing to assure you we reject this resolution and everything

it stands for... the elimination of Tribal governments is not an option," the RNC said in a recent letter to Tribal leaders.

Here in Toppenish, non-Indians living on the Yakama Nation reservation have organized recently in opposition to the Tribe's reservation-wide ban on alcohol, scheduled to take effect in September. The group, called Stand-Up, also has spoken out against the Tribe's plans to start its own utility.

"The more sovereign we get, the more jealousies...the whites feel," Robinson said.

"It's like this alcohol ban. They live on our land. They have to realize they have to live by our laws.

We are a nation within a nation."

Herman Dillon, chairman of the Puyallup Tribe of Indians, said the Republican's apology rang hollow since the party continues to blame the media, Tribes and other critics for misrepresenting the original resolution.

"A simple apology would have gone further than this. Stop blaming the media and just take responsibility for what has passed in your convention," Dillon said through a spokeswoman.

Begay Back Home after Finishing 20th in British Open

ALBUQUERQUE, N.M. (AP) — Notah Begay is taking a break after his 20th-place finish in last month's British Open.

"I'm ready for some rest — and a green chile fix," he said after arriving at the Albuquerque International Sunport after a long flight home.

Begay, the only American Indian on the PGA tour, has been gone from Albuquerque for six busy weeks. During that time, he won back-to-back PGA events and finished fourth at the Loch Lamond Invitational in Scotland.

"When I left here, there were a lot of questions," Begay said. "Now things have changed. I've always been confident that they would change, but it has been something else."

Begay, 27, had missed five cuts in his last 10 tournament appearances.

But his fortunes seemed to turn around, starting with last month's U.S. Open, where he ended up finishing 22nd.

"That was big for me, moving up the leaderboard like that," he said. "It gave me a lot of confidence."