

# Honoring Solomon

*Hundreds dance, tell stories of revered Native matriarch*

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FAIRBANKS — Whether they had been scolded, encouraged, loved or touched in another way by her, hundreds of people mourned the loss of 102-year-old Athabascan matriarch Hannah Solomon on Thursday.

Solomon passed away Sept. 16, and her Celebration of Life at Sacred Heart Cathedral was as impressive as Solomon's life span.

Sitting at the front of the center aisle of the cathedral was a handmade white casket with floral trim.

Inside, Solomon was dressed in a purple head scarf, flowered jacket and beaded slippers. A large, beaded cross was placed in her hands. People laid knit socks and mittens at her feet.

The casket was lined with a silky floral print, mostly pink in color and cheerful despite its function. The fabric was requested by Solomon.

"When she died, she wanted to be surrounded by flowers," said Michelle Peter, who helped her cousins create the lining.

The occasion was more festive than might have been expected. Many of the attendees embraced each other in greeting and laughed with one another.

Guest speakers had funny stories to share. Guitar and fiddle players started cranking out dancing music before the ceremony began.

"At 102, it's a celebration of life," said guest speaker, Rep. Reggie Joule, "But it doesn't eliminate that piece that's gone."

Joule, from Kotzebue, first met Solomon in the 1970s during the World Eskimo-Indian Olympics, where he said she scolded him for misbehaving.

Solomon was born in 1908 in Old Rampart near the Canada border. She was raised in Fort Yukon and married Paul Solomon Sr.

Together they created a family whose total size is larger than many small villages. Solomon died with hundreds of descendants spanning five generations.

In her time, Solomon helped create the Fairbanks Native Association, helped found the city of Fort Yukon and support-



Daughter Regina Varner, left, and longtime family friend Steve Ginnis pay their respects to Hannah Solomon on Thursday at the Sacred Heart Cathedral in Fairbanks.

ed Tanana Chiefs Conference, the Alaska Federation of Natives, and Doyon Limited.

She has pieces of her Athabascan artwork in museums around the world.

According to the funeral speakers, though, it was Solomon's legacy of family, culture and leadership that defined her accomplishments.

Sen. Albert Kookesh of Angoon was another guest speaker.

A Tlingit Indian, Kookesh said he had married into the Athabascan culture and is proud to represent them in his sprawling district.

His uncle, Walter Soboleff, died this year at 102 as well. Soboleff was a Tlingit patriarch.

Kookesh said Soboleff taught him that, in the Tlingit culture, totem poles are originally stood up with the support of women tree roots.

Over time, the roots deteriorate. When the rope breaks the totem pole still stands, embedded in the ground.

"We all expect you to still stand," Kookesh told the family of Solomon

Steve Ginnis of the Fairbanks Native Association alternated between the Gwich'in language and English as he spoke about Solomon's lasting effect on the state and her culture.

"Gwich'in people have always had a strong voice," he said. "We carry our pride. It was handed down to us through people like her. Grandma always said at every funeral: 'Love one another. Take care of each other. Respect each other'."

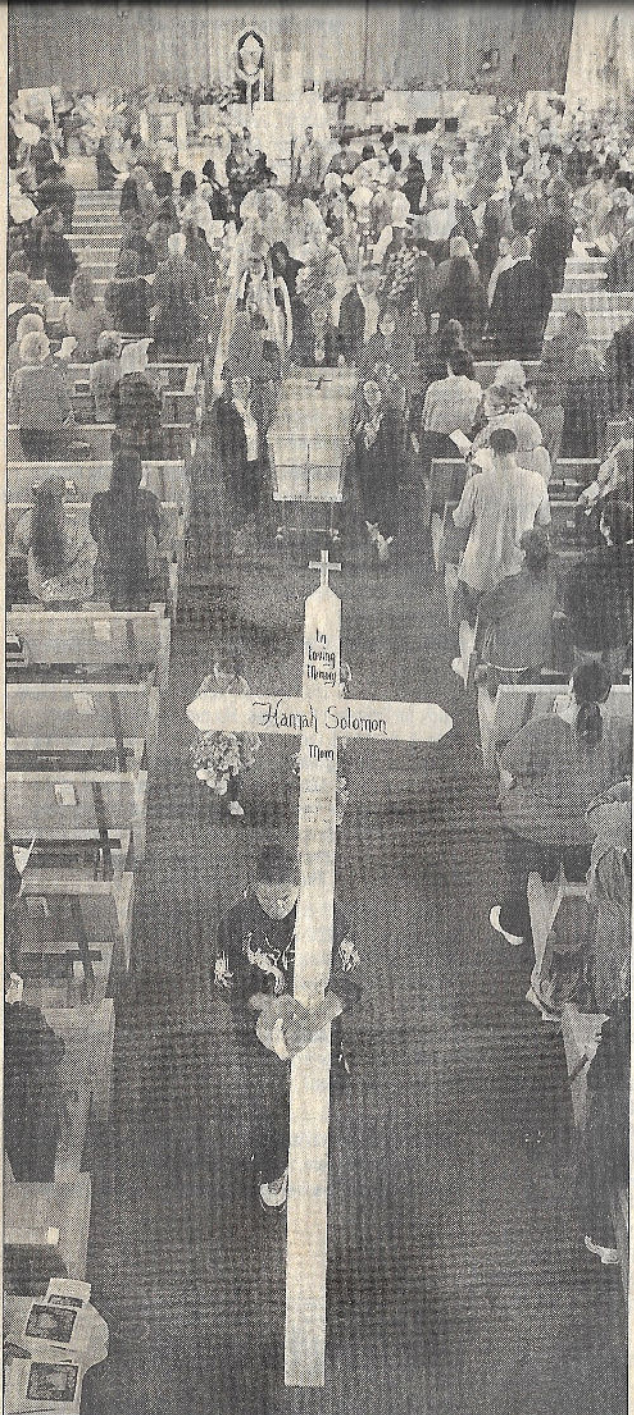
Daisy Stevens, Solomon's daughter, put together a eulogy that told a story of her parents reuniting.

Stevens wrote that on her parents' trek up the golden stairs to heaven, her mother stopped to turn around one last time.

Her husband told her not to worry — their many descendants would survive.

"You have done a good job sharing your love with them and teaching them our traditional and cultural ways,"

Stevens wrote her father as saying. "Because of this, your work will be carried on for many generations to come."



Photos by ERIC ENGMAN / Fairbanks Daily News-Miner

A cross and casket are carried out of the Sacred Heart Cathedral in Fairbanks during the Celebration of Life memorial service for Hannah Solomon on Thursday afternoon in Fairbanks. Solomon died Sept. 16 at age 102.