Book 7
of the
Athabascan Indians of Interior Alaska
Social Studies Unit

A Production of the
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In the winter, after the hard work of summer and fall was done, after the winter food supply had been gathered and prepared, the Athabascans had leisure time for entertainment. Many of the Athabascans used to pose riddles, and riddling is still very popular among some groups. Among the Koyukon, riddles were asked in the second half of winter, beginning in
December when the sun begins to come back and the days grow longer and brighter. The riddles were associated with the return of light.

Riddles are like poems. A riddle is an act of imagination -- an act of seeing something in terms of something else.

The world of the riddle seems different from the everyday world because riddles
turn things upside down and inside out. When the riddle answers put things back together again, we see that the riddle world is the same as the everyday world, but gives us a new or different way of seeing the everyday world.

The two dozen riddles in this book have been adapted from the collection of Koyukon riddles published in 1913 by Fr. Julius Jette, S.J. They
will lead you to the world of
the riddle-imagination, the
world of Athabascan poetry.
Why not enter it by making up
some riddles of your own?
1. I drag my shovel on the trail.

Answer →
Answer

1. I grade my show!

2. A beaver.
2. At the tip it's dipping in the ashes.
24a. Bare ground
when the snow is melting.

3. Far away, a fire flaring up.
bedded down on snow.
23a. The northern lights.

4. Small dots far away.
at a caribou
I broke my bow, shooting

23.
22a. Paddle whirls.

5. It really snowed hard in opposite directions on my head.
In the water.

22. We go singing.
21a. An island.

6. We come upstream in a red canoe.
tears away at me.

21. The water

6a. Red salmon.
20a. Eating.

7. It sounds like when we shake a quiver.
Really fast.

Little hills in there.

When we dump

Flapping in the wind.

Tang. Hanging birch bark.
19a. Eating.

8. Like a broom, I'm sweeping with my body.
When we put small sticks into a house.

19.

8a. The tops of grass.
18a. A stump on which the snow has fallen.

a sheepskin hat.

18. We are wearing

94. A salmon berry.
17a. Sled runner tracks.

10. It is like a herd trailing up the hill.
In opposite directions.
Sun on water, streaking.

17. Grease-like, like

With totems.

Tombstones carved.

The graveyard.
16a. Sled runners.

II. I make chips.
We drag along the trail.

16. With a noise
15a. A fire poker.

12. I brace it with my back.
15. I dive into the heat.
14a. The sun or moon.

13. I stick my head in the fire.
Beyond the mountains.

I reach

burning on the end.

13a. A log.