Team works to preserve California's native languages

By Lisa Krieger, San Jose Mercury News
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SAN JOSE - Bringing voices from the grave, volunteers at UC Davis are working to decipher nearly a million pages of notes from conversations with long-gone Native Californians, reviving more than 100 languages from the distant past.

Word by word, they type the scribbled and cryptic notes left by John Peabody Harrington, an eccentric and tireless linguist who in the early 1900s traveled throughout California interviewing the last surviving speakers of many native tongues, including the local Muwekma Ohlone tribe.

Their effort to organize a database of Harrington's vast material will build a Rosetta Stone for these languages and their dialects, creating dictionaries of words, phrases and tribal tales and customs that were destined to disappear.

"It is an enormous amount, and it is incredibly difficult to read," said Martha Macri, director of the UC Davis Native American Language Center and co-director of the effort to computerize Harrington's papers.

"He was totally obsessive. We've become a bit obsessive ourselves."

Notes tell tale

His notes tell tales about rocks of gold discovered on Mount Diablo, superstitions ("If any man throws at this eagle rock and hits it, his wife will bear him twins") and ordinary customs ("The women are carrying tule on their backs.") Most are mere phrases ("itr-rezk, used to stab a pig" or "chiqueon, a person who hesitates taking food.")

San Jose native Margaret Cayward is using his

notes to study native music as part of her doctoral thesis at the University of California-Davis. "It's helping us rediscover old knowledge and values in the music," she said. "Music was a major part of life for Californians, with ritual or sacred significance."

In Fremont, descendants of the Muwekma Ohlone tribe used his notes to create Chochenyo flash cards, puzzles and bingo games for their children.

In Macri's office, eight large file cabinets are filled with 182 reels of microfilmed images of Harrington's work, copied from his original papers that are stored at the Smithsonian Institution's warehouse in Silver Hill, Md.

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Each reel, costing $1,000, contains 500 to 2,000 pages of material.

Seven years into the Harrington project, funded by the National Science Foundation, it is about two-thirds complete.

Many of the project's most devoted volunteers are Native Californians; one person, alone, has transcribed over 3,000 pages.

"They have changed my life," said Linda Yamane of Seaside, who based her book of Ohlone tales, called "The Snake That Lived in the Santa Cruz Mountains," on his notes. "Along with a lot of hard work and perseverance, they've made it possible to bring back my Rumsien (Monterey area) Ohlone language and other cultural traditions from the brink of extinction."

Hired in 1915 by the Smithsonian Institution, Harrington spent four decades wandering California with unbounded freedom to document languages before they disappeared.

Discrimination

It was a time when Native Californians faced fierce discrimination. Few elders spoke the languages to children, so little information was passed on for future generations.

"They trusted him," said Bev Ortiz, an anthropologist at California State University-East Bay. "The tribal elders had the wisdom and courage to see that the time would come when it would not be bad to be an Indian - and the language would be there for their descendants."

Harrington traveled by car and on foot to find surviving speakers, collecting maps, photographs, and plant and animal specimens along the way.

One camping trip, on horseback, took him through the rugged Santa Lucia Mountains.

Gifted in phonetics and lexicography, "he spent more of his waking hours, week in and week out, transcribing Indian languages than doing any other conscious thing," said Victor Golla of Humboldt State University. "No linguist, before or since, ever spent so much time engaged in the field collection of primary data."

Yet Harrington published little of his work. Although he sent back reports to the Smithsonian, many of his notes seem to have been deliberately hidden from colleagues.

"I think he thought he'd get back to them," said Kathryn Klar, a University of California-Berkeley anthropologist. "He was a top linguist of his time, and he didn't want to be under the thumb of those with lesser training."

After his death in 1961, as Smithsonian curators began cataloging his papers, they discovered stockpiles of boxes stored in warehouses, garages and even chicken coops throughout the West.

Six tons of material - among them Indian-made flutes, Kachina dolls, dead birds and tarantulas, baskets, rocks, empty soup cans, half-eaten sandwiches, dirty laundry and two shrunken heads from the Amazon - eventually arrived at the Smithsonian, filling two warehouses.

Mixed with the squalor were invaluable photographs, sketches, maps, correspondence and expense accounts - along with extensive translations, a linguistic treasure of the highest order.

"The collection is an American treasure," Klar said.

Impressive phonetics

For the Harrington project workers, the central challenge is understanding material that Harrington never meant to share.

His translations of native words are littered with puzzling abbreviations. And his notations do not represent a standardized phonology, just impressionistic phonetics. Also troubling is his practice of shifting, over the years, the symbols used when transcribing sounds into words. The bilingual Harrington wrote many translations in old California Spanish, with idiosyncratic spelling.

And much of his material is disorganized, with notes about one language interspersed with those of another.

"There was a method in his madness. He was trying to get as much down as fast as he could," Klar said. "But reading it takes endless patience."

Despite the frustrations, the Harrington project team says its efforts are slowly shedding light on a long-lost way of life - and educating a proud new generation of Native Californians about the ways of their ancestors.

"This is not an academic exercise. It is peoples' lives," said Sheri Tatsch, a Native American postdoctoral scholar with the project.

"We're learning not only about the languages, but day-to-day life - the culture and customs, the politics. A language is a universe; it's family, society, religious practices. When you start pulling it out, you start to understand."

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