

Tribal languages saved by work of linguist

DAVIS, Calif. (AP)—The first time Jose Freeman heard his tribe's lost language through the crackle of a 70-year-old recording, he cried.

"My ancestors were speaking to me," Freeman said of the sounds captured when American Indians still inhabited California's Salinas Valley. "It was like coming home."

The last native speaker of Salinan died almost a half-century ago, but today many indigenous people are finding their extinct or endangered tongues, one word or song at a time, thanks to a linguist who died in 1961 and scholars at the University of California, Davis, who are working to transcribe his life's obsession.

Linguist John Peabody Harrington spent four decades gathering more than 1 million pages of phonetic notations on languages spoken by tribes from Alaska to South America. When the technology became available, he supplemented his written records with audio recordings—first using wax cylinders,

then aluminum discs. In many cases his notes provide the only record of long-gone languages.

Martha Macri, who teaches California Indian Studies at UC Davis and is one of the principal researchers on the J.P. Harrington Database Project, is working with American Indian volunteers to transcribe Harrington's notations. Researchers hope the words will bridge the decades of silence separating the people Harrington interviewed from their descendants.

Freeman hopes his 4-month-old great-granddaughter will grow up with the sense of heritage that comes with speaking her ancestors' language.

"When we lose our language, we're getting cut off from our roots," he said. "The world view that our ancestors carried is quite different from the Euro-American world view. And their language can carry that world view back to us."

Although it will be years before all the material can be made available, some American Indi-

ans connected to the Harrington Project have already begun putting it to use. Members of Freeman's tribe gather on their ancestral land every month to practice what they've learned—a few words, some grammar, old songs.

"The ultimate outcome is to get it back to the communities it came from," Macri said.

By all accounts, Harrington was a devoted, if somewhat eccentric, scholar. Sometimes he spent 20 or 30 minutes on one word, saying it over and over until the person he was interviewing agreed he'd gotten the pronunciation correct, said Jack Marr, who met Harrington as a 12-year-old boy and worked as his assistant into his 20s.

"They trusted him," Marr said of the Indians they worked with. "A lot of people, if they tried to walk in and say 'I want to record you,' they'd get thrown out. But not Harrington. I think people recognized that we were doing this for posterity."

Harrington's sense of urgency animates the letters he sent to

Marr nearly every day.

"Rain or no rain, rush," Harrington said in one letter. "Dying languages depend on you."

However, that same drive has confounded efforts to pass the words down to new generations.

For instance, Harrington was so focused on gathering information that he spent little time polishing his work for publication, according to Marr. He hated wasting precious time being cooped up in an office.

And he was so deeply mistrustful of other researchers that he stashed much of his research as he traveled, deliberately keeping it out of reach of his colleagues. He kept even his employers at the Bureau of American Ethnology—now the National Anthropological Archives—in the dark about where he was and what he was doing, routing his mail through Marr's mother to cover his tracks.

After his death, the federal archives received boxes of Harrington's notes, recordings and other material from people who found them in barns and base-

ments across the West. It took the archives until 1991 to transfer the voluminous notes to microfilm.

While linguists, archaeologists, botanists and others have spent the years since combing through the files, Macri says the trove of information has remained all but inaccessible to members of the tribes themselves.

The Harrington Project was created with the goal of returning the words to the people who can imbue them with life again, as well as making the material more accessible to scholars.

The researchers are teaching tribal members across California how to read Harrington's cramped handwriting and decipher his notation system.

Macri's team focuses on the more than 100 California languages Harrington catalogued, such as Wiyot, Serrano and Luiseno, for which there are few other records.

"It would be hard to exaggerate the linguistic diversity that existed at one time in California," Macri said. "It was more common to be multilingual than not."

Jacob Gutierrez, a member of the San Gabriel Band of Mission Indians—"Pipimaram," in the tribe's own language—has decoded all the material Harrington gathered on his people—over 6,000 pages, and is now working on information about their linguistic neighbors.

"I find it to be the most rewarding work I have ever done," he said. "Every new word, story or song is an absolute treasure for me and my people."

Karen Santana, who started working on Harrington's notes about her Central Pomo tribe while she was a student at UC Davis, is drawing plans for a dictionary with phonetic spellings.

"I want to develop a system that will make sense to others," Santana said. "It's a lifelong goal, publishing something so that my tribe can refer to."

Marr said Harrington would have been satisfied to see languages born again from his notes and recordings.

"But he would have felt very sad he didn't get more. He always wanted to do more."

Nevada mourners pay tribute to fallen tribal officer

NIXON, Nev. (AP)—Hundreds of people paid respects to a Bureau of Indian Affairs criminal investigator who died after coming into contact with a substance on a table during an investigation in Montana.

More than 600 people attended a memorial service Friday for Denise Phoenix, who died Feb. 14 while awaiting a double lung transplant.

A procession of about 40 law enforcement vehicles escorted Phoenix's body from Reno to Nixon, about 30 miles northeast of Reno.

Phoenix, 43, was a member of the Pyramid Lake

Paiute Tribe, which is based at Nixon.

She was investigating a child abuse case at a home on the Northern Cheyenne Reservation in Montana last fall when she came into contact with a substance involved in methamphetamine production, said her stepmother, Phyllis Phoenix.

The investigator didn't realize she had been exposed to hazardous materials until the next day, when she could speak only in a whisper and skin peeled off her fingers, her stepmother said.

She was later diagnosed with vasculitis, an inflammation of the blood vessels that occurs when the body's immune system attacks the blood vessels

by mistake.

"The chemical seems to be the catalyst that led to these health issues," Matthew Pryor, special agent in charge of BIA law enforcement in Montana, told the Billings (Mont.) Gazette.

BIA agents and officers from across the nation attended Friday's service.

"It just shows us how much Denise has touched all of our lives," Arlan Melendez, chairman of the Reno-Sparks Indian Colony, told the Reno Gazette-Journal.

Phoenix was buried next to her children, Shasta and Justin, and her brother, Ronald Phoenix, all victims of a February 2000 traffic accident near Reno.

Phoenix was eulogized by

Pryor as a "strong Indian woman" who presented herself with confidence and a smile.

As an agent, she could be intimidating when she wanted but carried pink handcuffs that "changed the attitudes of a lot of tough guys out there," Pryor said.

The Sparks High School graduate's long law enforcement career also included stints with Elko County, the Reno-Sparks Tribal colony and Carson City's BIA office.

Survivors include Phoenix's husband, Thomas Smart, who is a sergeant with the Crow Police Department in Montana.

Tribal fuel tax deal heads to governor's desk

BOISE, Idaho (AP)—The Idaho House has overwhelming approved fuel tax agreements between the state and four American Indian tribes.

The House voted 55-8 Friday to ratify the agreements, ending the years-long dispute over whether the state can tax fuel sales on Idaho Indian reservations. The agreements now head to Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter's desk for his approval.

"The tribes came and they negotiated in good faith and we did accomplish several things that we have been trying to accomplish for a number of years. Ladies and gentlemen, I think this is a good agreement," House Speaker Lawrence Denney told the House, The Spokesman-Review reported.

The agreements, with the Coeur d'Alene, Nez Perce, Kootenai and Shoshone-Bannock tribes, holds that the tribes will collect gas taxes equal to the state's 25-cent-per-gallon tax. The tribes will raise their fuel tax if the state raises its fuel tax.

Additionally, the tribes will spend their fuel tax proceeds on transportation-related needs. The agreement also settles some interstate trucking and transfer fee issues.

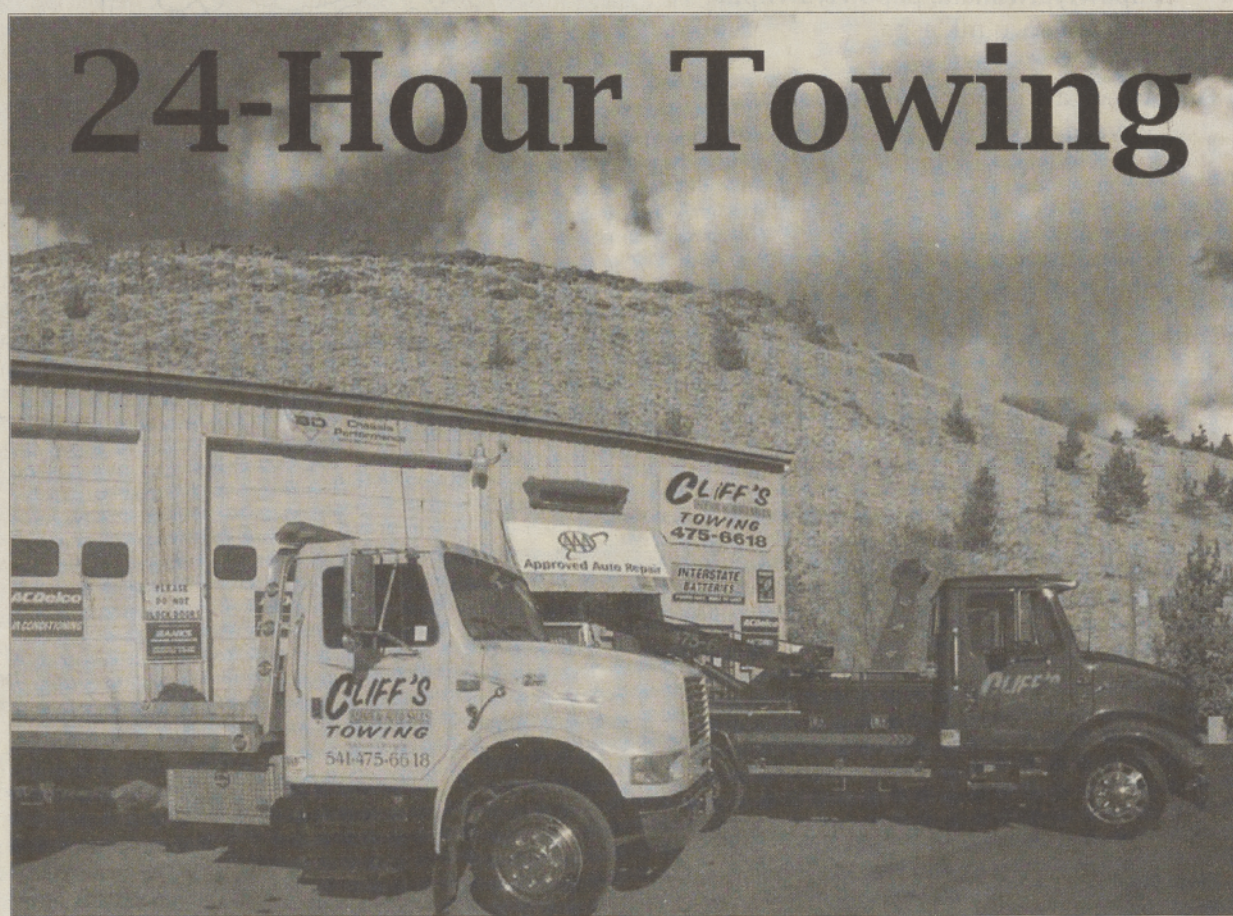
For years the state has sought to tax reservation fuel sales, but the attempts have been repeatedly shut down in the courts on constitutional grounds because states can't tax sovereign Indian nations.

Cliff's Repair & Auto Sales

Free towing w/engine or trans replacement from Warm Springs & Madras area



Approved Auto Repair



475-6618

330 S.W. Culver Hwy.
Madras, OR 97741

Free Battery Check & Installation with purchase