

COOS LANGUAGE AND ENTHNOLOGY

Don Whereat (October, 1991)

Leo J. Frachtenberg did the major work on the Hanis Coos language. Working under the auspices of the Bureau of American Ethnology, and on a shoestring budget, Frachtenberg worked heroically to collect and preserve native languages before they were lost forever.

In the summer of 1909 he worked with Coos informant James Buchanan. It will be recalled that Buchanan was born in a Coos village in the vicinity of present day Empire, Oregon and was reportedly a five-year-old boy in 1855 when his elders signed the treaty with Joel Palmer. Frachtenberg collected nineteen myth tales from Buchanan and published these along with twelve that Henry Hull St Clair had recorded in 1903. St. Clair's informant was Tom Hollis, a Coos who was living at Siletz at the time. Lottie Evanoff, gossip that she was, told John Harrington in 1942 "Tommy Hollis's real name was Tommy Miller, but that after he held up the local lighthouse keeper and was sent to the pen, he changed his name after he got out and never came back to Coos Bay". These thirty-two myth tales are in Volume I of Frachtenberg's Coos Text.

In reading some of these stories, it is difficult to understand just what the narrator had in mind. Frachtenberg cautions the reader about this. "Some of the texts collected from Buchanan were not as vivid in his memory as some of the other traditions, they will be lacking in continuity and clearness of description." Frachtenberg said it would have been comparatively easy to restore the passages to their original definiteness but "I thought it advisable (Mainly from linguistic considerations) to let them stand as they were narrated, leaving the interpretation to the good judgment of the reader". Anyone reading these stories would probably wish for an explanation of some of them at least.

Buchanan did explain one segment that is in "Ascent to Heaven".¹ In this story a young man climbs a spruce tree that reaches to the sky (you will have to read the tale to find the reason why). On reaching the top he discovers a prairie, and starting across eventually reaches the edge. Seeing some smoke he investigates and finds a house occupied by an old man and woman. These two live on the edge of the world. They address him as 'Grandson', "Grandson something bad is stopping with us. What are we going to do with you? Whenever the Sun (Woman) rises, she usually eats here. She eats (for) her lunch people's stomachs. It is always hot when she travels." They hid Grandson away when the Sun (Woman) arrived, but she suspected (by scent) that someone was hiding there. "You two bring it out, I suspect that you two are hiding someone." She began to eat. After finishing, she left. The young man followed and overtook her. "Who are you, (who are traveling)?" "I am devouring persons." She was traveling blazing red. He spoke to her, and cohabited with her with a penis, (made of ice). "You shall be a woman. You shall not amount to very much. You shall travel good-naturedly." Buchanan explained that the sun and moon are women. The moon was a

¹ Coos Texts, pg. 21.

good woman, while the sun woman was bad (too hot). Cohabiting with her with an ice penis cooled her off and thus made the life giving sun that we now have.²

Frachtenberg also worked with Frank Drew, a Coos informant who later worked with Melville Jacobs in 1932-33 and John P. Harrington in 1942. The majority of the work Frachtenberg did with Drew was linguistic. Although he had to be patient with his informants, they often drove him to distraction anyway. He wrote to Boas of his frustration with Buchanan and Drew over their interminable arguing over a word or phrase. His work with these two eventually resulted in the publishing of the "Coos Text", Volume I and II. Volume I contains the thirty-two myth tales and a vocabulary. Volume II is the nuts and bolts of the Hanis Coos language. At the time, Frachtenberg believed Milluk to be extinct. In his later Lower Umpqua Texts, he included the few words of Milluk that J. O. Dorsey had recorded while at Siletz.³

In 1932 Melville Jacobs started working with Frank Drew. This consisted entirely of ethnology and was not published until later. In 1933 Drew introduced Jacobs to Annie Miner Peterson as an informant. To Jacobs' astonishment and delight this remarkable woman was fluent in Milluk as well as Hanis. He worked two seasons with her and published two texts, one narrative and ethnologic, the other consisting of myths. Some of these stories are in Hanis, some Milluk, and some are in both languages. Unfortunately, Jacobs did not do any further work with either language, and so one must go to Frachtenberg to learn the language. As Frachtenberg only worked up the Hanis, this is the best language to start learning. Troy Anderson, a coquille, has worked up a dictionary of Milluk words. This may become available to us at a later date.

John P. Harrington, working for the Smithsonian Institution, came to Coos Bay in 1942. His major informants for Hanis were Lottie Evanoff and Frank Drew. Spencer Scott furnished some Siuslaw words. The group traveled back and forth from Charleston to Yahatc and this resulted in some place names and ethnology. Harrington had the habit of recording every word his informants uttered, no matter how mundane, and we are the richer for this. There are around seventeen hundred pages of notes in all, although many pages contain only a few words and his huge scrawl used up a lot of paper. His insistent, "pertaining to the words or vocabulary of a language, as differentiated from its syntax or grammar."

Frachtenberg's main informant for both languages was Louisa Smith and her husband, William. Louisa, at the time, was over seventy years of age and in poor health. She was of Lower Umpqua birth while William was Alsea; however he had spent his childhood among the Siuslaw Indians and had a fairly good knowledge of their language. Frachtenberg wrote of the difficulties working with the two informants.

In a letter to Professor Franz Boas dated March 17, 1911, Frachtenberg wrote, "In reply to your letter of March 10th; I wish to say that I will try to complete my work on Siuslaw as soon as possible. The work is greatly impeded by the peculiarities of my

² Buchanan Ethnography, pg. 41

³ James Dorsey, 1884.

informant. Owing to her advanced age, she is extremely moody, cranky and at times obstinate. She has recovered from her illness and seems to use her recent ailment as an excuse for taking frequent rests. I do consider myself lucky if I can induce her to work for a continuous four hours. Furthermore, whenever she happens to have a quarrel with her husband (and such is the case quite often), she absolutely refuses to work. She certainly tries my patience to the utmost capacity. I have made up my mind to use her as my informant for another ten days. Should her moods by this time not change, I shall be forced, much against my wishes, to proceed to Acme and work with Mrs. Martin." Although Frachtenberg's Siuslaw Text is far less complete than his Coos and Lower Umpqua Texts, it is still the most definitive work on the language. The following are others who have done some work with Siuslaw.

In 1884 J. O. Dorsey wrote down a few Siuslaw words while he was on the Siletz Reservation. Unfortunately, he didn't do more while the sources were fresh. When Frachtenberg came along in 1904, the trail was getting cold.

In 1953 Morris Swadesh found the Barrett family in Florence, Oregon and was able to get some Siuslaw words and phrases on tape. His informants were Mae Barrett Elliott and Clay Barrett. A short segment of Lower Umpqua was obtained from Billy Dick. As noted previously, this tape is of good quality.

Del Hymes spent some time with the Barrett family in 1954. Hymes was not as fortunate as Swadesh. He writes, "Mrs. Elliott was too busy during the fishing season to have time for linguistics. Howard Barrett, the youngest and most interested and least knowledgeable of the language, arranged three sessions in his home. Much of the sessions were taken up with visiting among the men, who do not often see each other." Hymes visits with the Barretts resulted in "Some Points of Siuslaw Phonology", published in the 'International Journal of American Linguistics'. (There is a copy in the office.)

In 1966 Joe Pierce wrote in the same journal, "Genetic Comparisons in Hanis, Miluk, Alsea, Siuslaw and Takelma". Harrington's young assistant, John Marr, made sound recordings of the language using Frank Drew as informant. The recordings are now on tape here in the office. While of poor quality, they are of considerable help in understanding the language.

In the summer of 1953, Morris Swadesh taped some three hundred words and phrases of Hanis. Martha Johnson of Florence, Oregon was the informant. This is a clear tape and professionally done. While in Florence, Swadesh received less amount of words and phrases in Siuslaw and Lower Umpqua using Mae Barrett Elliott and Clay Barrett (Siuslaw) and Billy Dick for Lower Umpqua. These tapes are equally good. In Charleston, Swadesh found Lolly Metcalf, a Milluk speaker. Lolly was ninety years old at the time and her memory of the language not all that good. In fact, she had never used it as a language, but had been exposed to it through her mother and grandmother.

These tapes are all here in the office and are available to all.

SIUSLAWN -LOWER UMPQUA

Quoting Leo J. Frachtenberg, "The Siuslawan stock embraces two closely related dialects, Lower Umpqua and Siuslaw that were spoken by the people living on the lower courses of the Umpqua and Siuslaw rivers. The northern neighbors of the Siuslaw's were the Alsea Indians (whom they called Hanls hitc), on the east they came in contact with the Kalapuya, (chiefly the Yonkalla tribe, known to them as the Qa l xqax), and on the south they were contiguous to the Lower Umpqua's (Qu lyax). It is generally recognized that the lower Umpqua territory extended east to Elkton, and that the Siuslaws claimed to the headwaters of the Siuslaw River, thus extending eastward as far as Walton and Lorane.) Possessions of the Siuslaw Indians extended north to Tenmile Creek,⁴ and eastward they extended as far as Mapleton. The Siuslaws refer to themselves as Ca'yucLa, and were called CayucLe by the Coos and Quas or Kwas by the Alsea Indians.

The territory of the Lower Umpqua was bound on the north by Five Mile Lake, on the south by Ten Mile Lake, while on the east they claimed the whole region adjoining the Umpqua River as far as Elkton "The Lower Umpqua call themselves Qu'ltc, and refer to their language as Qu'itc ax wa'as. These terms are of native origin, and are formed from the stem qui or qoi "south". The Alseas called them Tkulmak, and they were known to the Coos as Bildji'yex, i.e., Northern Indians."

Frachtenberg was unable to ascertain the etymology of these words. What little work that was done by Frachtenberg and J. O. Dorsey on the Lower Umpqua-Siuslaw language revealed very small differences between the two, and these were chiefly of a phonetic and lexicographic character. (Lexicographic means he found some similarities in the pronominal (belonging to, or the nature of a pronoun) systems. He reaches no conclusion, and still leaves us wondering: did we have common words or parts of words through borrowing, or from common ancestors somewhere in the distant past?

⁴ There is a Ten Mile Lake and a Tenmile Creek.