New Life for a Lost Language

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I did not grow up with the language, stories, or songs of my Rumsien Ohlone ancestors. Luckier than some, I at least knew the names of those who had come before me, leading back to the time when Spanish missionaries and soldiers first settled in the Monterey area.

The beginning of the end of a way of life. Disruption, displacement, subjugation, disease — these took their toll. Speak your language? No. Spanish is what you must emulate, the "gente de razón" — the "people of reason." Freedom? No. We decide when you come and when you go. We know what is best, after all. And nothing about you is much good except that you have a soul which we can save. And we need you to do our work, so you can be our slaves.

The mission system was short-lived, but its effects lived on. As more and different peoples came into California, native peoples began to scatter and intermarry. Finding themselves at the bottom of the social structure, with little future but to do other peoples’ dirty work, it was not easy to feel proud of who they were. Alcoholism and poverty were rampant. It is no wonder that they felt little incentive to teach their children and grandchildren the language.

Wine and whiskey cut down these Carmel Indians como guardián otherwise there would be some alive to help this work on the language.

La única vieja que hablaba el idioma the only old lady who would speak the language in our hearing was la Omeica. All the others did not like us young people to listen.

—Isabel Meadows, 1932, age 86

Traditions went underground — so deeply that most (or at least many) were lost. Our families learned to blend in so well that we eventually "disappeared" to the outside world, and the anthropologists declared us extinct.

We were not extinct, but our languages and many other traditions were gone or nearly gone. That is why I grew up know-
ing of my Indian heritage, but little of our traditional culture. My grandmother and I were very close and she told me the stories of her family and her growing-up years. It was through her stories, more than anything else, that my sense of extended family and view of our family’s history formed. She had learned about plant uses, but not our language or other cultural traditions. As a young adult, I began to wonder about the language, songs, and stories of our ancestors.

No elder to learn from
so
I looked to books
not knowing where else to go.
The books I found
didn’t say much
though,
except that we didn’t exist.
I went to the mission—
would I find something there?
What I found was
emptiness
sadness
and despair.
Where,
I wondered
(and still do)
is the story of the people
who
built this place
filled this place
labor
died
in this place?

This modern tourist attraction—the mission—did not have what I was looking for, but little by little the questions I had about our language and basketry, stories, and songs began to lead me in many directions. Eventually, I connected with people familiar with out-of-the-way resources. And one day, someone told me about the John P. Harrington field notes and where I might find them on microfilm.

This was the real beginning for me. John Peabody Harrington, a linguist working for the American Bureau of Ethnology, spent several years in the 1930s working with older Rumsien people in the Monterey area. He worked primarily with Isabel Meadows, sitting with her for hours, writing down her recollections of language, history, stories, songs—anything she remembered and shared.

My first visit to the San Jose State University library to look at these field notes was an adventure in itself—and a lesson in perseverance. I had called in advance and talked to an assistant who offered to have some microfilm waiting for me at the desk. I was on the verge of finding something I had been seeking for so long.

I arrived at the appointed time, introduced myself, explained the reason for my visit, and waited excitedly for the microfilm. But, to my surprise, they could not find it at the desk. Surely it must be there, I thought. The person had been so kind, and had promised. They looked again, but there were none to be found.

This was a setback, but not a problem, I thought. I asked them to point me in the direction of the Harrington microfilms, and I would simply pull my own reels. To my surprise, not one of them knew where the microfilms were located.

Another setback, but not a problem, I thought. I then asked them to show me to the card catalog so we could locate the materials that way. Not in the card catalog, they replied. This was a problem! I found it impossible to believe that something in a library was not cataloged.

They were all very kind, but unable to help me. “Come back another day,” was their advice. There was a certain librarian who would know where the microfilms were located. But I stood there, incredulous—and I could not make myself walk away. Clues to my culture were in this room, perhaps just feet or inches away. How could I leave when I was this close? I began walking the aisles, hoping that I would stumble upon the right shelf or cabinet.

I walked down row after row of shelves, scanning desperately for that name—John P. Harrington. I did not find it, but my persistence paid off, for soon one of the assistants came looking for me with good news. They had located someone on another floor of the library who knew where the Harrington materials were stored.

Miraculously, she led me to a set of vertical storage drawers. They were identical to so many others, with one exception—these were labeled “John Peabody Harrington.” A guide to the Harrington microfilms helped me decide which reels to begin exploring.

My first choice was a reel containing Rumsien vocabulary, collected by Alphonse Pinart in 1878 and reviewed by Harrington with his primary Rumsien informant, Isabel Meadows, in the early 1930s. I was near disbelief as I rolled my way through frame after frame. I had to remind myself this was not a dream—and I began making copy after copy after copy. No matter that each would cost a quarter. How could I leave any of it behind?

What I thought lost
was now before my very eyes
held within
my very hands
—the words of my ancestors!

Several years later, I learned I could have bought the same vocabulary listing for less than $10. But that was not important. It was the beginning that was important—no matter what the cost. Now I know that there were several vocabularies collected from Rumsien speakers in the late 19th and early 20th centuries by Pinart, Henshaw, Kroeber, Taylor, Merriam, and others. They are obscure publications not readily available to the average person in the average library, but these are what made the beginning of my Rumsien language learning possible.