

# Leon Metcalf Collection of recordings of the First People of Western Washington State (1950-1954)

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Essay by Jay Miller (guest post)\*



*Leon Metcalf, c. 1986*

Leon Vinnedge Metcalf (May 18, 1899-July 25, 1993) was an American music educator, band leader, composer, logger, linguist, reel to reel pioneer, and missionary with Wycliffe Bible Translators of the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL). Developing human potential--especially rhythmic order in music, reading, language, and religion--fascinated him. He composed for orchestra, band, voice, and chamber ensemble; wrote for "Musical Enterprise" and "Educational Music Magazine," and published with Fillmore Brothers Company, sometimes using pseudonyms of F.E. Noel, Vincent Vitelle, and Leo Vitello. His books included six for band, three for orchestra, and two for male glee clubs, as well as unpublished plays and sketches.<sup>1</sup>

Leon was born on 18 May of 1899, in Ohio, where the family was visiting from their home in Nebraska. He was a middle child; the oldest brother was Holace, then came John, Leon, and two sisters (Uarda, Enid), each birth spaced two years apart. Finally, a last sister (Wilma Lyle "Billie") was born on Leon's 16th birthday.<sup>2</sup>

Their father, Frank, was an Army bugler who met and married their mother, Hallie Reed, in southeast Nebraska. Her family lived on the road between Hay Springs, Nebraska, and Pine Ridge Agency, South Dakota, where they were during the Wounded Knee Massacre at the very end of 1890. His own father, John, was born in Kent, England, into a musical family related to

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<sup>1</sup> *Missoulian*, Thursday, 29 May 1941: 9.

<sup>2</sup> May 18 is also when Washington State's Mt St Helens volcano erupted in 1980.

the Oberns of the Chickering Piano Company, and his grandmother was an opera singer, partly Italian, so everyone in his family could carry on a conversation singing appropriate lines from various operas. Grandfather John moved the family to New York City to work for Chickering Piano because Kent was “too stodgy” for him. He liked new and exciting ideas and places. Leon’s father just wanted to be American, so he took his musical skills to a Texas ranch to be a cowboy, before he joined the army band. He was in high demand because he could build a violin, a boat, a gun, or a home, all equally well.

Frank wanted to be a music teacher who could earn a living from it, but Nebraska was not that place, so he went alone to Marysville, Washington, built a house, and asked his family to join him. His wife was reluctant to leave her father, avowed atheist though he was, but did so, arriving in October of 1907. Before Holace was three, he dragged his high chair over to where his father was reading music and learned to distinguish notes. At three, he began to play the violin and taught his brother John to read books and music, and they, in turn, taught Leon, who never mastered his letters until he went to school, probably because of a near fatal bout with diphtheria. Both Uarda and Leon got it but their mother virtually gave up on Leon's recovery, “and he acquired a psychological blockage that lasted most of his lifetime.”<sup>3</sup> By then, their father was too busy with his music students to instruct his own children. Later, John and Leon made a dugout canoe but it did not float well, which helps explain Leon's later interest in native technology explained to him in logging camps, and later on tape. John, who never left the area, wrote “Kayhut,”<sup>4</sup> a novel informed by many of the same elders taped by Leon. Indeed, it was a small interwoven community of appreciative people, native and settler, which was and is devoted to recording native traditions. They knew and bolstered each other for decades.

The resettled Metcalfs soon interacted with local Tulalips, particularly Little Sam who sold shellfish and who was famous both for his native doctoring abilities and as a prime source for material on the Snohomish, his ancestral tribe, to early anthropologists like Herman Haeberlin and Erna Gunther. To facilitate these barterings, Leon and other members of his family learned to speak Chinuk Wawa, the local jargon, the trade language of limited vocabulary and simplified grammar of the Northwest. Leon heard Lushootseed used, but did not think he would be able to learn it successfully, though he gained some comprehension.

By observing, Leon taught himself to play the piano, but then he started having terrible ear aches that left him unable to hear ordinary conversations by the time he was 13. His mother, who had always wanted to paint, instead “paid” for lessons in oil painting for Leon by giving her own fancy needlework to this older woman, a self-taught artist who otherwise charged 25 cents a session. By the time he was 16, Leon’s paintings were being purchased by people as gifts. With the money, Leon bought a textbook and was trying to teach himself German, adding another to his keen interest in languages, although he was a slow reader. Later in life, he developed techniques to more easily learn to read.

At 16, after conflict with his Botany teacher about her lack of basic knowledge, Leon quit school when the superintendent called him “lazy and dishonest” for claiming to know more than the

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<sup>3</sup> John Metcalf, *Of Life and Living in My Time*, Freeland, WA: Ideal Press, 1984: 43-44.

<sup>4</sup> John Metcalf, *Kayhut, Whidbey Island*, WA: Printery Communications, 1988.

teacher, which he, of course, did. Leon went to work as a “whistle punk” on the Tulalip Reservation for the Card Logging Company, owned by Witt and Hilton, Grocers. Winfield Card was the manager. Leon’s wages were \$1.75 a day in 1915.

He worked beside enrolled Tulalips like the four Hatch brothers (Dex, for a race horse named Dexter, Art for Arthur, Ezra, and Si), Dan McLane, and Frank LeClare. In the evenings, these older men would tell Leon about the skills of their ancestors with stone tools for woodworking, learning how to improve on his boyhood canoe carving misadventure.

A year later, Leon went back to school and graduated at 19 in 1920. During those two years, he was in five plays because so many of the older boys had gone to World War I. For the next four years, Leon held a variety of jobs before going on to college. He worked in a shipyard, also playing in the company band whenever a ship was launched. He joined the band of the Foley and Burke, then Al G Barnes Animal Circus, going up the Pacific coast. The band was usually eight players (two cornets, two trombones, baritone, bass, two drums), and the performers came from all over the world. Later, Leon joined one of the four Worthen Circuses, which were larger, for several months. Their band ranged from 21 to 28 players. The music changed daily and Leon appreciated his improved ability to sight read.

Next, Leon returned to Marysville to conduct the town orchestra and the school band. An Native American had been conducting the town band, but money was tight so, instead, Leon was given \$5 more a week to replace the Native American, and he began composing pieces for these bands.

Restless, he returned to the Barnes Circus band, which traveled along the Canadian Pacific coast and then into the prairies. He left them in Wisconsin at Rice Lake, near an Ojibwa reservation. Leon walked to town to mail a letter to his father, who was then teaching in Georgia. He went into a music store and asked after a job as a band leader. Stanley, Wisconsin, population 3366, hired him, then 21 years old, for \$150 a month. Many returning soldiers played so well in that band that Leon composed special music for them and hitchhiked to Cincinnati to meet with the Fillmore Music Company to show them his composition called “The Trooper.” Leon asked a lot of leading questions to impress them, and thereby gained a regular publisher for his dozen books.

Back in Stanley, the local school superintendent became interested and told Leon to get a teaching certificate so he could earn as much as \$1500 a year. Leon fully realized now that it was “Not what I know but what paper I can show.” He enrolled at the University of Wisconsin for three years to earn a teaching certificate, taught in Grand Rapids, Michigan, for two years to save money, and then transferred to Northwestern University near Chicago to earn his BA. He earned money by starting the first band at Wisconsin High School in Madison, by playing incidental music in a movie theater, and by giving private lessons. For graduate work, he majored in composition at the University of Michigan. By this time he played several instruments; trombone for the circus, adding tuba, horns, and some reeds like alto clarinet. Later he played cello and viola in string quartets.

After earning his MA, Leon taught in Gary, Indiana, “music by the cubic mile” with classes of 85 children in 4th and 5th grade. He decided to take music to people who did not have it and

moved, for nine years, to Hartland, Michigan, where a millionaire was funding education programs. Throughout his music career, Leon both directed and composed music, often at summer music camps apart from his regular jobs.

Finally, he came back to the Northwest, teaching in Idaho before finding a job at Foster High School in Seattle during a visit home. After five years there, he took the job at Seattle Pacific University where he ended the music part of his career when he retired in 1963 and, with his wife, went twice to Mexico among the Mesquital Otomi and later to Peru, both with the Wycliffe Bible Translators of the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL). He heard about SIL when William Cameron (Cam) Townsend came to speak at Seattle Pacific University about his work translating the Bible into native languages. Leon became keenly interested in these efforts as a way to blend his many interests and talents.

Leon's first wife died, leaving one son, Charles. While teaching summer school at University of Montana in Missoula, his roommate, a Greek artist, Mr. Yphantis (meaning “weaver”), told him about a pioneer Montana family named Scherburne living near the Blackfeet Reservation. He visited them. The father was a trader who spoke several native languages and emphasized high quality. Agnes, his fifth child, became Leon's second wife. She taught kindergarten and art in Bellevue when they lived in Seattle. She died after their mission in South America, where she taught math to missionary children. In 1978, Leon married his third wife, Molly, in Michigan, and they divided the year between her home and Arizona.

In the early 1960s, Leon joined Agnes in the Bellevue schools to teach music and research literacy techniques to learn to read, using simplified spellings based on linguistic principles to produce booklets to correct for the “dishonest alphabet” of English. “Reading is more important to more people than music. ... Both music and language are learned by ear. Both can be learned from the printed page.”<sup>5</sup> Teachers in private schools experimented with Leon’s booklets and were pleased with the results among their young students.

Leon had always been fascinated with languages, how they were structured and varied in much the same way that music is. He had learned German, French, Latin, Spanish, and Russian. In 1950, he took a summer class in language transcription from University of Washington anthropologist Melville Jacobs, prior to undertaking sustained research on Lushootseed, then called Puget Salish. Jacobs had pioneered the recording of Oregon native languages using a tape recorder powered from a car battery made by the engineering department. But, by now, Jacobs was opposed to the use of such machines, except for recording songs, because it was “lazy” and delayed the hard work of transcribing face to face with a native speaker and hurt the overall quality of the data. Jacobs told Leon that at least three years had to be spent transcribing with an ink fountain pen into a bound notebook, becoming proficient in the sounds and grammar, before any recordings could be made. Jacobs never saw the value of preserving a faithful record of an actual speaker’s voice, available for all time if successively transferred to the newest and best medium. This attitude adversely effected Leon’s own earnest efforts, especially in terms of where his recordings came to reside.

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<sup>5</sup> Bellevue Teacher Is Linguistic Tool Sharpener, *Seattle Times*, Sunday 11 August 1963: 4-5.

Leon decided neither he nor these languages had enough time left for such laborious dictation and, to his credit and our gratitude, he instead began tape recording aged speakers to preserve a faithful record. He saw his first tape recorder at Foster High School, noted how it worked, but never used it, waiting to purchase his own for \$250 and take it to native homes.

After some months of writing down dictated statements from native speakers as Jacobs wanted, he began his five years of steady recording by starting with Ruth Shelton because of his lifelong ties at Tulalip. Ruth, a cherished friend, was a serious, dignified, and dedicated leader, married to William Shelton, the US appointed chief at Tulalip. She was almost blind, her hearing was bad, but her health was generally good. Her daughter, Harriette, and family lived with Ruth and took care of her. Harriette also became a leader at Tulalip and a staunch member of the Democratic Party.<sup>6</sup> She also encouraged the work of her former in-law, Vi Anderson Coy Hilbert,<sup>7</sup> who eventually undertook the laborious work of transcribing the stories on Leon's tapes from their own older relatives, as well as a few of the messages recorded and played between speakers during successive visits. Most of the messages, however, are not transcribed and remain challenging because of greater grammatical complexity of the language used by older speakers.

Leon's recording were interactive from the start. On December, 13, 1950, Ruth recorded a story about Whale and sent a message for Susie Sampson Peter at Swinomish. The rest of the tape has a return message from Susie to Ruth and then Susie's epic story of Star Child. On the reverse, Arthur Ballard--grandson of the man who founded the town of Auburn, brother of the founder of the Ballard neighborhood of Seattle, and himself the town clerk of Auburn--recited a text in Salish. Ballard had been raised by a native nanny who taught her language to him, and he called his life long dedication to Lushootseed ethnography his "only vice."

From the beginning, Leon was directed to Susie Sampson Peter, among other elders. In Tacoma, he became a good friend of Martin Sampson, Susie's son, who would translate tapes for Leon when he visited. Martin insisted that Leon concentrate on mythology, knowing his mother was a masterful storyteller who gave each character its own special voice. Susie did not yet have electricity. At their first meeting, she said, "Why did it take him so long to get here," because she had been wanting to leave a record of her knowledge. Alone, she devoted herself to reciting a different story aloud every night, so she would not forget them. Moving the recorder to Amelia Billy's house with electricity, Leon played the taped message from Ruth Shelton to Susie, setting the tone for future work. Both were blind yet recognized each other's voices and visited as if still together, though responses were delayed between Leon's taped visits. When next he came by, Susie's family had installed electricity so the taping could be done comfortably in her own home in Swinomish.

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<sup>6</sup> Harriette Shelton Dover, 2015, *Tulalip, From My Heart: An Autobiographical Account of a Reservation Community*. Darleen Fitzpatrick, ed. Seattle: University of Washington Press; Lawrence David Rygg, 1977, *The Continuation of Upper Class Snohomish Coast Salish Attitudes and Department as Seen through the Life History of a Snohomish Coast Salish Woman*. Western Washington State College: MA Thesis.

<sup>7</sup> [https://depts.washington.edu/lutteach/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/L\\_Ls-0003-Lushootseed\\_language\\_resources.pdf](https://depts.washington.edu/lutteach/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/L_Ls-0003-Lushootseed_language_resources.pdf).

On 31 May 1952, after a long recording session, Susie Sampson Peter asked Leon to give her father's wooden dish, two horn spoons, her own mat creaser and two mat needles to the University of Washington Museum, now the Burke Museum and custodian of Leon's tape reels. She wanted them saved for posterity, especially available to the native school groups who visited the Burke and were always personally greeted by Erna Gunther for as long as she was in charge.

On 18 June 1952, Myrtle Woodcock visited Leon, taking a bus into south Seattle to Calwood, Leon's home named for his son Charles, wife Agnes, and Leon. She recorded Chinook language examples, and a prayer to the Sun.

At Tulalip, Martha and Levi Lamont made a recording and served Leon dinner. A decade later, they became prime sources for linguist Thom Hess when he began the modern study of Lushootseed to create useful grammar, dictionary, and texts. When Levi's son was killed in a logging accident, Leon gave him a blue serge suit to wear at the funeral. At Muckleshoot, Annie Daniels, Willy Gus, and others made recordings. Annie Daniels, who lived alone during the week while her caretakers were working, was without heat or food so Leon stacked and split firewood under her porch roof, cooked a meal, and warmed the house for her.

Reel to reel tape was expensive so Leon never traveled with more than one or two at a time. Nor did he make safe copies. In return for native hospitality, Leon, who was always conscious of diet, gave gifts of fresh fruit, such as grapefruit, or salmon smoked by his brother John, enjoying the irony of giving salmon to natives instead of the usual exchange. Clothes and furniture were special gifts. He mostly recorded during weekends or holidays from college classes, particularly during the summer. He never specified what elders should talk about and so benefited from the freely-given contributions. Speakers would plan ahead what they would record on the next visit. Whenever he traveled, he made recordings. Driving to California to visit a brother, he recorded Hoxie Simmons and Mabel Adams Burns in Oregon. Another time, he went all around the edges of the country by train to visit friends and to attend a music conference, taking time to meet Morris Swadesh, a famous linguist recommended by Jacobs, to get helpful suggestions for his recordings.

The Metcalf tapes have resided at the Burke Museum on the University of Washington campus since 1970 not, ironically, in the University archives or special collections because Professor Melville Jacobs,<sup>8</sup> Leon's former summer school teacher in transcription, regarded them as the work of an amateur. Fortunately, a Burke curator grasped their worth and accepted them. Over time, the Burke relied on the UW Ethnomusicology Archives to produce backup copies and help care for the original tapes. In 2019, the Burke Museum moved into a new building with climate control and fire suppressants, providing a much-improved environment for all its holdings. Local reservations and native families have taken an increasing interest in their elders' own words, and donated funds, often from their casino revenues, to have these tapes re-recorded with the most sophisticated and advanced technology, especially lasers that do not damage tapes yet greatly enhance their sound quality and understandability.

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.loc.gov/static/programs/national-recording-preservation-board/documents/Melville-Jacobs-Collection.pdf> .

Overall, Leon was proud he made the right choice and delighted to have made and saved these tapes, living to see them used and appreciated, although not as yet to their fullest extent. In August of 1986, Leon was honored at the International Conference on Salish and Neighboring Languages, held that year at the University of Washington.<sup>9</sup> His collection was added to the Library of Congress' National Recording Registry in 2009.

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\*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.

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<sup>9</sup> [https://depts.washington.edu/lutteach/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/L\\_Ls-0003-Lushootseed\\_language\\_resources.pdf](https://depts.washington.edu/lutteach/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/L_Ls-0003-Lushootseed_language_resources.pdf);  
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