

Melville Jacobs Collection of Native Americans of the American Northwest (1929-1939)

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Essay by Laurel Sercombe (guest post)*



Melville Jacobs, c. 1927

Anthropologist Melville Jacobs (1902-1971) did more to document the languages, cultures, oral traditions, and music of Oregon's indigenous peoples than any other 20th century scholar. Through his research and publications, he made a unique contribution not only to the field of cultural anthropology but to linguistics and folklore as well. His recordings and documentation have also been used in cultural and language revitalization efforts by local tribes.

Born and raised in New York City, Jacobs attended the College of the City of New York where he studied history and philosophy and received a B.A. in 1922. While there, he was influenced by Morris Raphael Cohen, a philosopher of science whose interest in the philosophy of history proved influential to Jacobs's intellectual development, as did Cohen's belief in scholarship in service of society. Jacobs also studied the violin as a young man, attending the Institute of Musical Art (Juilliard Conservatory) from 1917-1920. Music was to be a source of enjoyment throughout his life.

At Columbia University, Jacobs studied American history, earning an M.A. in 1923, before moving to the Anthropology Department, where he became a student of Franz Boas. Among his fellow students were Thelma Adamson, Ruth Benedict, Melville Herskovits, George Herzog, Otto Klineburg, Margaret Mead, and Gene Weltfish. In the summer of 1926, Jacobs, Adamson, and Klineburg drove across the country together to Washington state, sent by Boas to conduct

field research among Native Americans there. Jacobs's assignment was to study Klickitat Sahaptin language, folklore, and music. This was the first of his many fieldtrips, and it included his first sound recordings, made on Edison wax cylinders. Material he collected on this, and a second trip in the summer of 1927, culminated in his dissertation, "A Sketch of Northern Sahaptin Grammar," published in 1931.

Jacobs came to Seattle in 1928 to take a position as Associate in Anthropology at the University of Washington. Boas, who had recommended Jacobs, also arranged with the University for him to teach only part of the year and spend the rest of the year doing fieldwork, a schedule he followed until 1936. His last year of fieldwork was 1939. Jacobs became a permanent member of the anthropology faculty and stayed at the University of Washington throughout his career, teaching and mentoring generations of students as well as writing and publishing numerous monographs and dozens of articles on a variety of subjects.

Jacobs worked with tradition-bearers of the Clackamas Chinook, Tillamook Salish, Alsea, Hanis and Miluk Coos, Upper Umpqua and Galice Creek Athabaskan, Sahaptin, Molale, and Kalapuya (Tualatin, Santiam, and Yonkalla) peoples and also studied Chinuk Wawa, formerly known as Chinook Jargon. Among his many publications were nine volumes of ethnographic and folklore texts: three volumes of Sahaptin narratives (1929, 1934, 1937), one volume of Chinook Jargon (1936), two volumes of Coos texts (1939, 1940), one volume of Kalapuya texts (1945), and two volumes of Clackamas Chinook texts (1958, 1959). He also published two volumes of a psycho-social interpretation of the Clackamas texts (1959, 1960). "The Content and Style of an Oral Literature" (1959) and "The People Are Coming Soon" (1960) were the first, and remain the most, comprehensive interpretations of the oral traditions of Oregon Native peoples.

In 1931, Jacobs married Elizabeth Louise Derr, who accompanied him on his fieldwork in western Oregon and conducted her own ethnographic research as well as assisting in her husband's work. In 1959, "Nehalem Tillamook Tales" was published, based on her field research and edited by her husband. Elizabeth Jacobs also had a long professional career as a psychiatric social worker.

The Jacobses joined the Communist Party in the mid-1930s, attracted to its social and economic agenda, and remained members until the mid-1940s. In 1948, Jacobs and several other University of Washington faculty members were called before the Canwell Committee, which had been created by the Washington State Legislature to investigate Communist infiltration statewide, and, particularly, at the University. The group was subjected to disciplinary action by the University, but Jacobs was ultimately supported by his colleagues. The experience was a traumatic one for Jacobs, and he withdrew into his work and shied away from public involvement. Previously, Jacobs had traveled around the Northwest giving lectures about social concerns, including racial issues. He had also done a series of weekly radio talks for the University's "Science News Broadcasts."

Jacobs hoped to continue work on preparing his remaining fieldnotes for publication during his retirement, but he was diagnosed with cancer and passed away on July 31, 1971, one year short of retirement.

Jacobs may be most remembered for his careful collection and documentation of Pacific Northwest Native oral traditions. Like most anthropologists of his time, he believed that he was recording the last vestiges of indigenous culture (he did record the last speakers of several languages). In this, he followed the Boasian tradition of conducting extensive fieldwork and copious collecting of cultural as well as linguistic data. Although he recorded songs on wax cylinders (1926-1934) and later acetate discs (1934-1939), he did not use recordings to preserve Native language material. He advocated the taking of dictation by hand as the best means of documenting language and, even after the availability of the tape recorder in the early 1950s, discouraged his students from using them to record their consultants.

Jacobs had been trained in music, but he looked to ethnomusicologist George Herzog (and a fellow student at Columbia) to transcribe and analyze his music recordings, which he felt to be an important part of his documentation of Native American culture. Unfortunately, this aim was never realized.

Although Jacobs's interest in history and philosophy influenced his work as an anthropologist, he also saw himself as a scientist and anthropology as a scientific enterprise. His interest in psychological processes and oral literature interpretation set him apart from Boas but, like Boas, he saw the value of texts as sources of linguistic data for analysis and believed that the methodology of structural linguistics could benefit anthropology and folklore.

The Melville Jacobs Collection is archived in the University of Washington Libraries. His collection of Indian baskets, dolls, and other material objects is archived in the Whatcom Museum in Bellingham, Washington. The Jacobs Research Fund, administered by the Whatcom Museum, supports research on the culture and languages of indigenous peoples of the Pacific Northwest. It was established and initially funded by Elizabeth Jacobs (1903-1983) and her estate.

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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.