

November 27, 1999

INDIANAPOLIS STAR

Research rescues language of the Miami

By Jennifer Harrison, Correspondent

When Ross Bundy died in 1964, a language was nearly buried with him. Bundy was the last fluent speaker in the tongue of the Miami Indian nation. His knowledge was so precious the Smithsonian Institution asked him to go to Washington and create a recording of spoken Miami. Bundy was too ill to travel from Marion. The tape was never made.

Almost unnoticed, the Miami language faded from memory. But now, the language is slowly reawakening.

The Miami tongue began to stir when California scholar, David Costa, studied the language for his doctorate in linguistics. Costa crisscrossed the country to find remnants of the language in the dusty records of French missionaries; in colonial correspondence, travel journals and maps; and in the manuscripts left by earlier scholars.

Costas' thesis, completed in 1994, congealed a body of knowledge that sparked a revival of interest among the Miami to reclaim their language.

In his work, Costa visited the Miami of Indiana and Oklahoma. He met Daryl Baldwin of the Indiana Miami at a conference in Muncie about nine years ago. Excited by Costa's research, Baldwin decided to pursue advanced studies in linguistics himself.

Baldwin, now 37, realized the peculiar jargon of linguistics made Costa's research inaccessible to the average Miami. Baldwin's desire to preserve the Miami's cultural heritage led him to act as a translator between the linguistic and native communities. Julie Olds of Oklahoma joined the effort to reunite the Miami with their Algonquian dialect about 1995. Olds and Baldwin worked together to gain support of their respective Councils or leadership.

While many of the Miami were forced to leave Indiana in 1846 as part of a government relocation plan, some members were allowed to remain on special reserves. The Miami Nation now consists of two groups, the Miami Indians of Indiana, and the Miami Tribe of Oklahoma. Of the 5,000 Miami living today in the United States, 2,000 live in Indiana.

Baldwin organized a one-week language camp in 1994. Camps are now held each August on tribal property next to Seven Pillars on the Mississinewa River, near Peru. The language camps, which attract up to 60 people, began with an academic approach. But Baldwin quickly added social opportunities to use the language. Word games, cooking, skits and recently, sports - the traditional Woodland game of lacrosse - became teaching activities.

Scott Shoemaker, 23, a Miami studying at Ball State, has participated in the language camps for the last five years. Shoemaker likes the "feeling of community we have at the camp," and he's learned a lot too. He now helps teach others.

"The language is part of who we are. When you speak Miami, you think Miami," said Shoemaker. "By learning the language, you learn about our ancestors' views of the world and their place within it."

David Motz, Evansville, developed a Miami language CD-ROM in 1997. The program provides learning exercises for beginning to advanced students.

But these tools are only part of the picture. Community building needs to go hand-in-hand with waking the groggy language from its long rest.

"It's been our experience that a language cannot be reclaimed by itself. A certain amount of community reclamation must also occur," Baldwin said at the recent 31st Algonquian Conference in West Lafayette.

Despite the many types of social destruction they've experienced, the Miami have always enjoyed a strong kinship. Other activities that help build community include pow-wows, native drum groups, and increasing cooperation between the Indiana and Oklahoma tribes. The two tribes have cooperated in developing a Web site for the Miami Nations and their community language programs.

For older Miami members, hearing the ancestral tongue stirs their hearts and memories of earlier times. Mildred Walker, 86, grew up in Wabash. She moved to Oklahoma, her mother's home, when she was 16. There, she and her siblings attended Indian school in Wyandotte.

"It was very, very bad to speak one word of Indian [there]. They were teaching us to be white. They couldn't change our color, but they could certainly not let us speak Indian. So I was very happy when I learned we were going to renew our language," Walker said.

The language initiative helps forge a stronger cultural identity for the Miami and increases bonds between

generations. Scott Shoemaker said he was always close to his grandfather, Chief Francis M. Shoemaker, and visited him often while growing up in Kokomo.

"When we visited he would tell me who I was and who all my ancestors were all the way back before recorded history. He told me stories about the Miami people he grew up with. It really gave me a deep connection to the past and a greater understanding of what it means to be Miami," said Scott.

As Scott grew more proficient in the language, he began speaking Miami to his grandfather each time they visited. Although grandfather Shoemaker hadn't heard Miami since he was a child and didn't understand him, he told young Shoemaker "it sounded beautiful."

When Scott paid one last visit to his grandfather in March 1996, his last words to him were spoken in Miami: "Neeyolaani-kati mehsha" ("I will see you later Grandfather").

In Miami, there is no word for good-bye.#

The web address for the Miami Nation is:
<http://www.geocities.com/RainForest/7156>