



# Scholar sole speaker of Huron language

The world's last Huron-language speaker is anthropologist John Steckley who teaches at Humber College.

By **JOHN GODDARD** staff reporter

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Anthropologist John Steckley has made the Huron tongue and Huron history his focus for more than 30 years, "and every year I think of how little I knew the year before," he says.

Sometimes he feels alone in his interests, he says. At other times, he feels in demand – especially around Christmas and particularly this one.

Earlier this month Steckley published an authoritative Huron-English dictionary, the first such volume in more than 250 years. Laval University also just received a \$1 million federal grant to develop Huron-language teaching materials, drawing on Steckley's expertise.

And this is the season of "The Huron Carol," sometimes called "Canada's Christmas hymn."

Most church congregations and concert choirs know only the 1926 anglicized version, but every year singers contact Steckley to learn the 1643 original.

"The Huron version is much better," the professor says. "It's more filled with meaning and much more authentic. The Hurons didn't even have a Gitchi Manitou – that's an Ojibwa term."

The Huron were a mostly agricultural people living between two water bodies now called Lake Simcoe and Georgian Bay. Their first contact with white people came with the arrival of French fur traders in the early 1600s.

Death quickly followed. By 1640, disease had decimated Huron numbers and by 1650 the Beaver Wars had all but wiped them out.

Remnants of the tribe settled north of Quebec City at Lorette, and in Kansas and Oklahoma. The language long ago died, except in writing, but all three communities are working to revive it, Steckley says.

"I guess I'm the closest you could say passes for a Huron speaker," he says in a modest tone. "I have eight dictionaries of Huron at home, all 17th- and 18th-century, only one of which was ever published."

Written by French Jesuit missionaries, the volumes are "beautiful dictionaries, better than any in English at the time – by far," he says. "They are just amazing documents and they taught me."

Such records show that the long ago Huron were a musical people, Steckley says. They possessed an extensive vocabulary related to music and a rich repertoire of songs for all occasions.

The Jesuits, eager to win converts, composed others.

One was "The Huron Carol." Oral tradition attributes it to Jean de Brébeuf, the first Jesuit priest fluent in Huron who was later famous – and canonized – for his stoic calm while being tortured at the stake and scalped.

Between 1629 and his death in 1649, Brébeuf devoted himself to the Huronia mission centred at what is now Midland. He is believed to have written the carol while in Quebec City in 1643, although the earliest surviving transcription was made at Lorette in the 1700s.

The melody derives from a French song, "Une Jeune Pucelle (A Young Maid)," Steckley writes in an unpublished paper. The original title was "Jesus ahatonnia," meaning, "Jesus is Born" or more literally "he has just been made."

"The okie spirit who enslaved us has fled," the song begins in one of Steckley's translations. "Don't listen to him for he corrupts the spirits of our thoughts. Jesus is born."

If that sounds like heavy-handed proselytizing, the carol does convey how the Jesuits spoke and what their message was, Steckley says.

The hymn also contains culturally authentic metaphors, such as three elders greeting the newborn babe by anointing His scalp with sunflower oil – "a traditional sign of respect," the professor says.

In 1926, Jesse Edgar Middleton, a poet and historian from the Guelph area, wrote a charming – if inauthentic – English "interpretation" of the carol, setting the Nativity story in the Huron bush.

The newborn lies not in a manger in swaddling clothes, but "within a lodge of broken bark" tucked in "a ragged robe of rabbit skin."

Instead of wise men bearing gold, frankincense and myrrh, "Chiefs from far before Him knelt/with gifts of fox and beaver pelt."

The carol remains one of the most regularly performed Canadian songs, Steckley says.

Franco-Ontarian singer Michel Payment recently performed it in English, French and Huron during the First Light festival at Midland.

Bruce Cockburn also sang a Huron rendition on his 1993 album *Christmas*. "Special thanks are due to John Steckley," the liner notes read, "for his

help as translator and pronunciation coach."