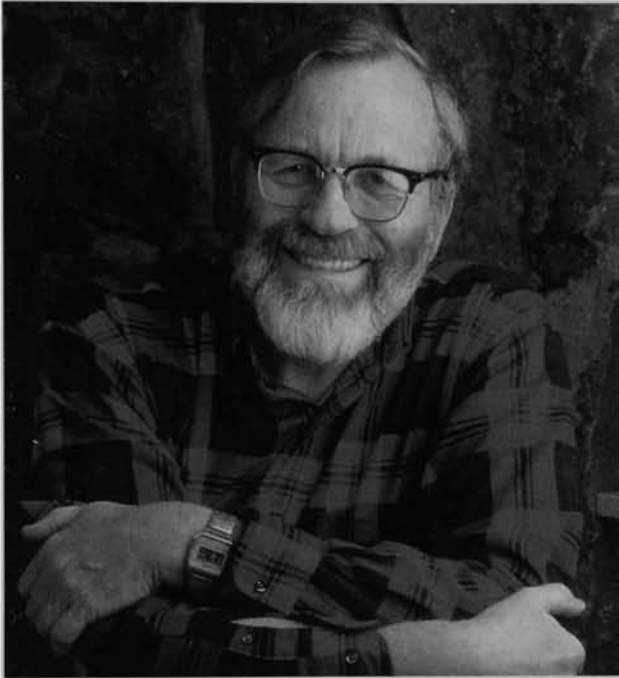


IN MEMORIAM

William Oliver Bright

ALICE ANDERTON

Intertribal Wordpath Society, Norman, Oklahoma



THE WORLD OF CALIFORNIA AND AMERICAN LINGUISTICS, as well as the field of linguistics worldwide, lost an important and beloved figure with the recent passing of William Bright. Bill was a native Californian, born in Oxnard on August 13, 1928, to a father, Oliver Bright, who was a butcher and chicken farmer and a mother, Ethel Ruggles Bright, who was a homemaker and a lover of flowers. He died of a brain tumor near his home in Boulder, Colorado, on October 15, 2006. He is survived by his wife, linguist Lise Menn, his daughter, author Susie Bright, stepsons Joseph Menn and Stephen Menn, granddaughter Aretha Bright, and two step-grandchildren.

Bill was known to his fellow linguists as a prodigious scholar—a prolific researcher, editor, and author—and a beloved and inspiring teacher. His research standards, of course, were the highest, but he was also remarkable for the sheer hours he put in, and for his ability to put each of

those hours to efficient use; the result was an incredibly impressive work product. He would line up projects on his desk, then spend the day attacking them one by one—reading and answering correspondence, on the phone working his extensive network of contacts in the field, and editing several manuscripts—finally he would pack more work into his weathered old leather briefcase to do at home, always leaving a completely clear desk in his office at the end of the day. It was a thing of beauty to behold. He knew sub-editors and other leaders in every field of linguistics, as well as poets, writers, and others. He traveled, taught, and lectured around the world. Bill was so knowledgeable and so connected in so many areas of linguistics, culture, and poetry that you could ask him almost anything in these areas and he would be able to give you copious, useful information, or at least refer you to someone else who could.

Bill received his bachelor's degree in 1949, and his doctorate in 1955, both at the University of California, Berkeley. After service in the Army, his first job as a linguist was in India (Deccan College, Poona, 1955–57); an interest in south Asian languages stayed with him his whole life. He later worked briefly for the State Department (Foreign Service Institute, 1957–8), before teaching at Berkeley (Department of Speech, 1958–9), UCLA (where he held joint appointments in Anthropology and Linguistics from 1959–88 and chaired the Committee on Linguistics, before the formation of the Linguistics Department, from 1963–4), and the University of Colorado at Boulder (Professor Adjunct 1982–2006). He also had a brief visiting appointment at Hunan University in Changsha, China in 2003. He was President of the Linguistic Society of America in 1989 (for his presidential address see 1990b), the Society for the Study of the Indigenous Languages of the Americas (1995), and the Dravidian Linguistics Association (1996). Bill edited thousands of articles for publication—for



Figure 1. Bill studying Karuk with consultants Violet Super and Vina Smith, in Orleans, California, February 25, 2004.
(Photo by Susan Gehr.)

example, as editor of *Language* (1966 to 1987), *Language in Society* (1992–9) and *Written Language and Literacy* (1998–2003), as well as the *Oxford International Encyclopedia of Linguistics* (1991)—and many books. He served on numerous editorial boards, including the University of California Press, Oxford University Press, and Malki Museum Press. He wrote many articles and books on linguistics. No wonder he has been called “one of the most active and influential linguists” of his time (Dennis Holt, book note on *The Life of Language: Papers in Linguistics in Honor of William Bright*, in *Language* 75(3): 615).

Bill achieved fame early in his career for his work on the northern California language Karuk (Karok), which began with his dissertation (often cited as a model of what a descriptive grammar should be, and later published as *The Karok Language* in 1957), and which he continued off and on throughout his professional life. His last work with the tribe was helping to prepare an online

dictionary and analyzed text collection. In 2006 he was made an honorary member of the Karuk tribe, and given the name *Uhyanapatánvaanich* ‘Little Word-Asker.’ The accompanying declaration says:

Bill said yes to so many of our calls for help on the documentation and restoration of our language. He did so almost entirely on a voluntary basis. Moreover, he did so with great respect for us. Though we might have called *The Karok Language* “Bill’s Book,” he never hoarded the rights to his work on Karuk. Representatives from many tribal language programs told us how fortunate we were to have Bill working on our language. We agree.

...On his many visits to Karuk country, he attended many of our ceremonies. He enjoyed visiting with everyone there. Our fluent speakers loved to talk with Bill. They said that he spoke like a real Karuk elder from long ago [from *Uhyanapatánvaanich*, ‘Little Word-asker,’ William “Bill” Bright, MS].

His interests extended to other American Indian languages of California, the U.S., Central America, and



Figure 2. Bill in a blissful moment with Lise's grandson Finnegan Menn, January 2006. (Photo by Lise Menn.)

Mexico; he had extensive expertise in and comparative files on the Uto-Aztecan family and on South Asian languages; and he published widely in all of these areas. Another main focus was sociolinguistics and ethnolinguistics, subfields which he helped to define. He had a long interest in writing systems and oral vs. written language, which guided another whole area of his research and publishing. One of his favorite areas of research was the Coyote stories of American Indian cultures; he particularly enjoyed the humorous and racy ones (1993a). He did extensive research, and published several books and articles, on the placenames of California, the U.S., and Mexico, and beginning in 1999 wrote "The Placename Department" in the *SSILA Newsletter*. He had a special interest in helping document endangered languages. He was a wonderful resource on the varieties of Spanish, especially old California Spanish. He was also very knowledgeable about the life and work of the linguist and anthropologist J. P. Harrington, and assisted several students and colleagues, as well as California Indians, in the interpretation of Harrington's

vast legacy of field notes. He was very interested and active in historical linguistics and language contact. He did a number of cross-language lexical studies, covering such topics as Karok names (1958), animals of acculturation in California languages (1960b), words for 'cat' and 'quail' (1960b, 1992a), hispanisms (1959, 1979a, 2000a and 2000b), and animal names in northwest California (2005b). The field owes him a special debt for a number of bibliographies that he published that were of enormous utility in several subfields, on such themes as the publications of Harry Hoijer (1964a) American Indian linguistics and languages (1978c), and the languages of California (1982a). He wrote encyclopedia entries on Dravidian languages (*Encyclopedia International*) and American Indian languages (1974), and the Karok section for the *Handbook of North American Indians* (1978b). (A brief sample of his over 400 books, articles, book notes, and reviews can be found at the end of this article.) With all this, Bill was just as much at home bumping around the rancherias of rural California (knocking on doors looking for Kitanemuk speakers,

for example) or sitting under a blanket all night at a Kumeyaay (Diegueño) reburial ceremony at Cuyapaipa, California, as he was at academic conferences, editorial board meetings, and in the university classroom.

Bill's life was in many ways a bridge between the early years of linguistics and the latest theoretical models and developments, as well as between linguistics and other disciplines. He traced his professional heritage through his own mentor Murray B. Emeneau and Mary Haas to Edward Sapir and Franz Boas. At UCLA he had an office for some time on the same floor of Haines Hall as Harry Hoijer, who was often seen thumping along the corridor with his cane. He always kept current with the latest trends and theories in linguistics, thanks no doubt partly to his editorial duties. As a teacher of field methods, American Indian languages, sociolinguistics, Aztec, and more, Bill passed on some of his knowledge and attitudes toward language to a long line of students who pursued studies of California and other American Indian languages. The bridge got longer. In the year before his death, while Professor Adjoint at the University of Colorado, he expanded his teaching repertoire further, by becoming a volunteer tutor of English as a Second Language with the organization Intercambio de Comunidades in Boulder. His work also made connections between language and culture, between poetry and language, between oral and written literature and language, and between music and language (about which he had discussions with Charles Seeger, father of the singer Pete Seeger and founder of the Society of Ethnomusicology). And he had a fascination with old-fashioned printing, typography, and fonts; in recent years he was a consultant on Indic scripts for Agfa Monotype and other companies.

Though he did extensive analysis, documentation, and teaching on the structure of language, Bill also fundamentally cherished its sheer beauty. He enjoyed reading poetry, and wrote poems himself, from haikus to longer verses. He made sure that his students realized that beauty could be conveyed in any language; if you took Aztec from him, for example, you were expected to learn a bit of Aztec poetry in addition to the vocabulary, morphology, and syntax. And he made sure he had beauty of many kinds in his own life—not only wonderful friends, but also poetry, nature (an avid hiker, he inherited from his mother a love of flowers and

was expert in the names, habits, and uses of California plants), and music (he particularly loved opera and chamber music—especially Bach—and volunteered as a translator with the Boulder Bach festival). He knew and enjoyed little places to eat in the countryside and in many cities—especially ethnic food from all over the world; so it was always fun to meet up with him at conferences for a meal. Perhaps this savoring of life is what made him so well-rounded, down-to-earth, and accessible. He knew how to accept with grace what life brought:

When you're trying to write about tricksters
And you go downstairs at 6 A.M.
And see Coyote padding up the road,
Don't think it's a good sign.
He's not there to inspire you.
Later that day, someone might steal your hubcaps.
You might not write another line that week.
Then you'll remember:
Coyote the trickster, right?
Coyote, the thief.

[*A Coyote Reader*, 1993a, p. xviii].

Even though his knowledge, experience, and expertise in so many fields were legendary, with students and colleagues he was always generous, humble, kind, and helpful. The ever-busy Bill Bright somehow always found more time than most of his fellow faculty members to attend departmental parties with students of all levels; he was right there with everyone else, in the laid-back days of the young Linguistics Department at UCLA, sitting cross-legged on the floor and swapping stories and jokes. In fact, Bill always seemed to relish the idea of being a student himself; he was forever curious, and approached each new area he studied with a youthful excitement and intellectual hunger. He also had a great sense of social justice, championing those who were shunned or ridiculed. In every way Bill put the lie to the notion that great scholars are boring, aloof, or dry. Like language itself, his life in linguistics was intertwined with music, poetry, and the myriad flavors of humanity.

The University of Colorado at Boulder held a memorial service for Bill in November, 2006, which featured testimonials by students, colleagues, friends, and family, as well as performances of Bach by local musicians who were friends of Bill and Lise. There was a similar memorial at the annual meeting of the Linguistic Society of America in Anaheim, California in January. The Council of Geographic Names Authorities

honored Bill at their 2006 Annual Geographic Names Conference in Boulder in October. Those wishing to memorialize him individually are encouraged to make a contribution to the American Civil Liberties Union or to the Bill Bright Memorial Award at the Endangered Language Foundation (by mail at 300 George St., Su. 900, New Haven, CT 06511, or by using the link at the ELF site, www.endangeredlanguagefund.org, or giving through www.networkforgood.org).

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