

Memorial to Carobeth Laird (1895-1983)



CAROBETH LAIRD died on August 5, 1983. Her death was not unanticipated – she had been seriously ill for a very long time – but her strong will and enormous personal power had enabled Carobeth not only to live to the age of 88 but also to produce significant scholarly works during her final years. Her strength was enhanced by an outpouring of support from family, friends, and colleagues. Since she had started publishing nearly a decade before her death, Carobeth had acquired many professional colleagues – anthropologists, linguists, and friends. She left a body of scholarly work that could be the envy of any professional anthropologist.

Carobeth Laird mesmerized those with whom she came into contact. Hers was a powerful intellect: quick, insightful, logical, and ambitious to achieve goals that had been constrained for nearly a half-century. This led her to a hard, no-nonsense approach to her work, which fortunately was softened by an extraordinary charm, a loving and very sensual personality, and a kindness that was expressed even in her angriest moments.

She had an intellectual capacity for absorbing vast amounts of information, for keeping track of the most minute details, and for never forgetting how those details were parts of a larger pattern. Her ideas on Chemehuevi culture were carefully thought out and placed in an intellectual and scientific context, while still reflecting the personal intimacy she shared with the people she loved so dearly. Her ethnography appears to have been written by a member of the culture itself.

Carobeth possessed a fine sociological and anthropological imagination. She had a natural talent for linguistics and story telling. She had an analytical ability when dealing with cultural information that ranked with the finest ethnographic writers in American anthropology. She not only was aware of the complexity of Chemehuevi culture, but also knew that to understand the Chemehuevi it was necessary to understand other cultures as well, so her work was ethnology as well as ethnography. She understood the Chemehuevi in relationship to the cultures with whom they had interacted both before and after

white contact, and she also understood the Chemehuevi within the larger comparative anthropological context.

While she did not address herself directly to matters of cultural persistence and continuity or cultural change, she was so intimately aware of the history of the Chemehuevi, having in effect viewed it during a time of great cultural change among them, that she addressed the processes of change and persistence as natural and ordinary parts of her observations. In doing so, she contributed not only one of the finest descriptions of pre-contact American Indian culture in ethnology, but also provided us with fascinating nuances concerning Chemehuevi history and their relationships with other cultures.

Carobeth Laird was not trained as a professional anthropologist. Rather she acquired many of her skills through her association with the remarkable linguist-ethnographer John Peabody Harrington, whom she married in 1916. He was impressed with her natural ability in linguistics, and they worked together closely for nearly seven years. During that time she met George Laird, a Chemehuevi nearly twice her age, with whom she fell in love. Subsequently, she divorced Harrington in 1922 and married George Laird. During the time she was married to Harrington, she collected, transcribed, and wrote a remarkable amount of information about the Chemehuevi which quite literally disappeared for decades.

In the early 1970s most of the Harrington material was gathered from a number of locations into the National Anthropological Archives in the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D. C. Several anthropologists working in California at the time went to view the material and to assist in evaluating its worth and sorting it out. Volume 8 of the Handbook of North American Indians, on California, was in preparation at the time and I was at the Smithsonian viewing those "new"

California materials. While there, I found a manuscript written by Carobeth Harrington – a superb 20-page manuscript on the Chemehuevi. I thought the article would be a valuable contribution for *The Journal of California Anthropology*, and with the help of students began to search for any further information we could find about the whereabouts of Carobeth Harrington so we could secure permission to publish the piece. Three of my students, Joan Farnum, Helen Hayward, and Jack Young, went to Los Angeles to interview a Chemehuevi woman named Georgia Laird Culp, during which time they met her mother, Carobeth Laird. After establishing she was Harrington's former wife and giving permission to publish the Chemehuevi article, she quite casually pulled out a book-length manuscript on the Chemehuevi and asked if we would be interested in it. Following that remarkable meeting the book was submitted to Malki Museum Press and published in 1976 as *The Chemehuevis*.

We discovered that after parting company with Harrington, Carobeth had continued her interest in matters anthropological. Based on her years of collaboration with George Laird, she had written the Chemehuevi manuscript and sent it to a university press, which rejected it. She was discouraged. She had for several years been working not only on the Chemehuevi manuscript but also writing material for the Chemehuevi newsletter and conducting research on behalf of the Chemehuevi association with her daughter Georgia Laird Culp, who was very active in reestablishing a Chemehuevi Indian land base and receiving federal recognition for the Chemehuevi people. This was and continues to be a very successful endeavor and another valuable story about the Chemehuevi people that one day will be told.

The significant contribution that Carobeth Laird had made with *The Chemehuevis* was recognized by every scholar who read the

manuscript. But the rediscovery of the Harrington materials brought on another story. While negotiating the contract for *The Chemehuevis* for Malki Museum Press, Anne Jennings and Harry Lawton, representing Malki, became fascinated by Mrs. Laird's anecdotes about Harrington. They urged her to develop an autobiography about her close relationship with the legendary anthropologist. She was at first reluctant, pointing out that it had not been an easy relationship and that it would be a highly personal and perhaps extremely bitter work. Yet under the encouragement of Jennings and Lawton, she embarked on the first chapter of a book. The rush of memories came in flood, so much so that she completed almost a chapter a week of a sensitive, bitter-sweet chronicle that was an unsparing account of that eccentric genius John Peabody Harrington and a compelling love story dealing with the curious triangle that developed when a Chemehuevi consultant, George Laird, entered the lives of Harrington and his young wife.

Even before the book, *Encounter With An Angry God*, was completed, Anne Jennings provided one of America's leading literary figures, Tom Wolfe, with a copy of the galley proofs. Wolfe wrote the dust-jacket copy for the first printing, and gave a glowing tribute in Harper's *Bookletter* to this "exciting new literary talent bursting forth at the age of 80." When the work was published in 1975 by Malki Museum Press, it was reviewed enthusiastically in newspapers and magazines throughout the nation. A paperback edition by Ballantine Books sold more than 200,000 copies. *Encounter* will continue to be recognized as an enduring contribution to American literature and a significant contribution to the history of American anthropology.

If Carobeth Laird had published no other book than *The Chemehuevis*, she would enjoy a fine reputation in anthropological history. It is one of the finest, most detailed, ethnog-

raphies ever written. There was very little information about the Chemehuevis prior to her book; there were only some minor articles and some general mentions in other books on Indians of the western deserts, along with a good, but rather sketchy, ethnography by Isabel Kelly.

The Chemehuevis is an important book not only because of its enormous amount of ethnographic detail, but because that detail is so well analyzed. Laird implicitly understood what anthropologists today call a systems approach. She saw how each aspect of the culture was systemically related to other aspects of culture. The book is not a laundry list or simple description, it is an analysis of culture. This is particularly clear in her use of mythic materials where she draws out the sociological, economic, psychological, and philosophical implications of the myths for everyday Chemehuevi life. Although her analytical talent was first demonstrated in *The Chemehuevis* and in several articles published during the 1970s, it was brought out later in a more detailed, complex, and sophisticated manner in her book *Mirror and Pattern*, published posthumously in 1984.

The completion and publication of *Mirror and Pattern* was delayed for a very long time due to serious illnesses. At one time when she was terribly ill, Carobeth spent some time in a nursing home and was shocked and concerned about the treatment of the aged in American society by the medical profession. This resulted in her book *Limbo*, published in 1979 by Chandler and Sharp. It is a very personal portrayal of the difficulties of an aged person in our contemporary society. It is an important book and has become a minor classic, used in many colleges and universities for nursing majors so that students can become aware of a patient's view of the profession. This was a totally unexpected contribution from Carobeth, who had been for so many years committed to her writing about the

Chemehuevis, but it was not surprising because for a large part of her life she had been devoted to nurturing and healing others.

Her last book, *Pilgrim and Stranger*, an autobiographical statement, is now in press. It is unfortunately the final contribution of this literary genius.

After the publication of *Encounter With An Angry God*, Carobeth Laird was well established as a literary figure. With the publication of *The Chemehuevis*, she became well established as an important contributor to American ethnology. During this time she also became a very public figure despite her ill health. She attended anthropological conferences, publishers conferences, received numerous awards, appeared on television, and was the subject of many newspaper and magazine articles – she became a media event. She became almost a cult figure, surrounded by a complex network of scholars, literary figures, students of anthropology, many loving friends, and the most remarkable set of groupies that one could imagine.

After her death there were many who mourned. Her loss was personal and professional. I'm sure that everyone who worked with her felt what a great good fortune they had had, that Carobeth kept her soul and mind so intact for so many years, despite so many exigencies, so that we could receive her splendid and unique contribution to American Indian anthropology and her loving and nurturing support for our own ways.

LOWELL JOHN BEAN
Dept. of Anthropology
California State Univ.
Hayward, CA 94542

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The photograph of Carobeth Laird was taken by Michael J. Elderman, of The Photoworks, Riverside, California.

PUBLICATIONS OF CAROBETH LAIRD

- 1974 Chemehuevi Religious Beliefs and Practices. *The Journal of California Anthropology* 1(1): 19-25.
- 1974 The Buffalo in Chemehuevi Folklore. *The Journal of California Anthropology* 1(2): 220-224.
- 1975 Two Chemehuevi Teaching Myths. *The Journal of California Anthropology* 2(1): 18-24.
- 1975 Duck Magic (Poem). *The Journal of California Anthropology* 2(2): 147.
- 1975 *Encounter With an Angry God*. Banning: Malki Museum Press.
- 1976 *The Chemehuevis*. Banning: Malki Museum Press.
- 1977 Intimation of Unity. *The Journal of California Anthropology* 4(1): 50-54.
- 1977 Chemehuevi Myth as Social Commentary. *The Journal of California Anthropology* 4(2): 191-195.
- 1978 The Androgynous Nature of Coyote. *The Journal of California Anthropology* 5(1): 67-72.
- 1978 Origin of the Horse. *The Journal of California Anthropology* 5(2): 251-255.
- 1979 *Limbo: A Memoir About Life in a Nursing Home by a Survivor*. Novato: Chandler and Sharp.
- 1984 *Mirror and Pattern: George Laird's World of Chemehuevi Mythology*. Banning: Malki Museum Press.

