

THANKS FOR THE MEMORIES

Bean changed depictions of California tribes

Book on Agua Caliente due from anthropologist

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Lowell John Bean is a gentleman and a scholar. And most importantly, he is a kind soul. In 1958 when he arrived on the desert as a graduate student in anthropology from UCLA, his gentle demeanor was recognized by the Cahuilla who allowed him to learn about their society with unprecedented access to their culture and customs.

Ann Japenga explained for Palm Springs Life in 2008, "When he came to the Coachella Valley in the late 1950s, he'd been told by leading anthropologists that there was nothing in the lowly 'digger' culture of California Indians to study. Fellow student Carlos Castaneda went off to New Mexico and earned fame writing books about the flashy Yaqi shaman, Don Juan. Against the advice of almost everyone, Bean went to see for himself what was happening in the California desert."

The story of his introduction and then induction into the inner circles of Indian life is fascinating. He was quiet, observant and humble. His willingness to work was endearing. "When he inquired with tribal leader Jane Penn, she told him they didn't need any rookie anthropologists hanging around. However, she said, sizing up his gentle and willing spirit, they did need help cleaning eggs... Lowell knew his way around a farmyard. Thus was born Lowell Bean's First Rule of Anthropology and Life: Make yourself useful."

"Hour after hour, sanding the grime off eggshells, Lowell found that, eventually, everyone important came by the hen house. Teachers, lawyers, Bureau of Indian Affairs agents, tribal leaders, and elders all came to talk to Penn. Bean found the story of 'Cahuillaland,' as he called the area, unfolding before him. In



Former chairman of the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians Tribal Council Richard Milanovich, right, honors Lowell Bean for his work. COURTESY OF THE PALM SPRINGS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

the evenings, he wrote down what he'd heard and began to see a story emerging — a story far different from the one he'd been told."

"Historians, the public, and even anthropologists had viewed the California Indians as simplistic, primitive people,' he says. 'And they weren't. It turned out these were very complex cultures with beautiful music, epic poetry, sophisticated social organization, and philosophical systems.'"

Bean would go on to write about all of those subjects in scores of books and papers, as well as matriculate to a teaching position at California State University, Hayward.

With his prodigious knowledge of the indigenous people of California he tirelessly campaigned to change the depiction of California Indians in school textbooks, creating new interest in Indian studies throughout the state.

So integral did Bean become to that

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cause, longtime Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians Tribal Chairman Richard Milanovich presented him with a ceremonial blanket traditionally given to important elders in 2008 saying, "Dr. Bean, you have our respect and gratitude."

Together with Jane Penn and Cahuilla elder Katherine Siva Saubel, he founded the Malki Press and Malki Museum on the Morongo Reservation. Through those efforts he also enabled the publication of other important scholarship.

One example illustrates his astute understanding of historical significance, and his kindness.

A 1976 newspaper article published in the Alabama Journal recounts the story of Carobeth Laird, who became a published author at the unlikely age 80. Married to legendary anthropologist John Peabody Harrington for six tumultuous years in her youth, Carobeth had been sent by then-husband Harrington "alone and under dangerous circumstances, to Indian reservations because, he said she had a 'perfect ear' for vowels, consonants and diphthongs, and the ability to record them in the symbols he had devised."

Harrington compiled voluminous records over decades of research, eventually filling warehouses full. When he died in 1961, scholars combed through six tons of material.

Carobeth had divorced Harrington in 1922 and married a Chemehuevi man,

George Laird. Decades later, one of their daughters, Georgia Laird Culp, was organizing the Chemehuevi tribe in Arizona when three scholars digging through the mountains of field notes left by Harrington went to interview her in Los Angeles, where her mother, Carobeth Laird, was also living. Carobeth sat quietly to the side as the scholars talked with her daughter.

"They posed a rather technical question about the Chemehuevi language structure," said Mrs. Laird. "In a rather offhand fashion I said that the Shoshonean language is closely related to the Piute, but that all belong to the Uto-Aztecan linguistic stock. You should have seen their ears perk up." The scholars focused their attention on Mrs. Laird and found that she had written a definitive book (on the Chemehuevi language) ... but had not found a publisher."

One of the scholars present that day was none other than Lowell Bean, who immediately arranged for the publication of Laird's book, saving the manuscript from obscurity and contributing immensely to further scholarship.

Bean, not unlike Carobeth Laird, will also have a book published at an advanced age. "Time Immemorial: The Traditional Ways and History of the Members of the Agua Caliente Indian Reservation" is expected soon.

Interestingly, one of the only currently available excerpts echoes the question asked decades ago that happily resulted in the publication of Laird's book. It reads, "The language spoken by the Cahuilla people is classed by linguists as Takiic, a branch of the Uto-Aztecan language family, related to the language of the Hopi, Comanche, Lusenio, and Serrano Indians among others."

Those interested in the written words of Bean and the language of the Cahuilla can reach out to the tribe for more information by contacting Kate Anderson at kanderson@aguacaliente-nsn.gov.

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