



## The Oregonian

### Last of the Siletz speakers

**As native languages of the Northwest fade into extinction, tribal member Bud Lane is racing to keep Oregon Coastal Athabaskan alive -- one ancient whispered word at a time**

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**NIKOLE HANNAH-JONES**  
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"Chabayu." Bud Lane presses his lips against the tiny ear of his blue-eyed grandbaby and whispers her Native name.

"GhaaUNSTRIP-yalh," he beckons -- "come here" -- in words so old, ears heard them millennia before anyone with blue eyes walked this land.

In his voice, the Siletz man hopes to teach her a tongue almost no one else understands.

As the Confederated Tribes of Siletz Indians celebrate 30 years since they won back tribal status from the federal government, the language of their people is dying. By some standards, Oregon Coastal Athabaskan is already dead. Just four others in the world speak it fluently. At 50, Lane is among the youngest.

Across the Pacific Northwest, which includes British Columbia, Oregon and Washington, indigenous languages have vanished. More than half of approximately 30 Native languages are extinct. Nearly all that remain have less than a handful of fluent speakers. Just last month, the Living Tongues Institute for Endangered Languages in Salem and National Geographic named the Pacific Northwest one of six global hot spots for the number of languages at the edge of extinction.

With this country's history of English-only movements -- the most recent in response to the wave of Spanish-speaking immigrants -- it may seem difficult to understand what is lost when a language dies.

But language is the window to the human mind.

When an ancient language flickers out, so does knowledge of botany and ecosystems that could lead to medical and scientific advances, histories that have never been recorded, a diversity of thought not represented in the few dominant tongues. And, the Siletz fear, the thread that binds them.

"The language and the people," Lane says, "are the same."

Lane came of age in the 1970s during the height of the American Indian Movement and an indigenous renaissance. In 1975, Lane, then 17 and a military brat born on the other side of the Pacific in Guam, returned to the land of his ancestors after he graduated from high school. Two years later, the Siletz became the first Oregon tribe and the second in the nation to win back rights terminated by the U.S. government two decades earlier. Tribes began to rebuild and reclaim small tracts of once-vast reservation lands. Across Indian country, feet once again danced aged rhythms, lips parted for forgotten songs.

Some Siletz could utter phrases and the lyrics of Athabaskan songs, yet many couldn't converse. Lane longed to speak the language.

He found an old Siletz woman who knew the old words, but who never spoke them in public. She'd been taught shame of her native tongue by white society. In the confines of her home, though, with Lane's prodding, Nellie Orton found her voice.

"I asked her words for this and that," Lane says. "I asked her about the body parts. And she told me all of them." He shakes his graying head and laughs, the crinkles at his eyes deepening. "She was an amazing woman."

But as elders like Orton died, the Siletz became alarmed at how few spoke Athabaskan. Four years ago, the tribal council asked Lane to start language classes in the local school and at community sites in Siletz and cities where Siletz live. He recorded elders speaking and created a written dictionary for a language that had once only existed in the peoples' heads.

Until the tribe called on him, Lane had spent his adult life as a logger and millworker. He figured he'd hold those jobs until he retired.

Now Lane, a deliberative man, finds himself racing time.

Right down the highway from the rural Siletz reservation, a group of academics works to preserve ancient words. Gregory D.S. Anderson and K. David Harrison are two lexicon-lovers who founded the Living Tongues Institute in Salem in 2003 to revive where they can, and simply record where they can't, the world's endangered languages.

Lane didn't know of the institute until he bumped into Anderson at a conference. They chatted about how Living Tongues was attempting to save a remote Siberian language. "I thought, 'God, that's us on the other side of the world,'" says Lane. He and the linguist agreed to record a dictionary so future generations could hear Siletz words if no one could still speak them.

Languages have always died off. Dominant groups move in, and smaller languages are lost through assimilation. "It's the rapid extinction that is going on now that is unprecedented," Anderson says. "We are basically witnessing 500 years of European language expansion."

Once among the most linguistically diverse place on Earth, Oregon has drowned under the English tide. It now is infamous as a language-death hot spot. By Living Tongue's standards, hot spots are areas with a high concentration of different languages, few remaining first speakers -- people who learned the language as children -- and little language documentation.

It is a global problem. In the United States, the East Coast indigenous languages grew silent long ago. But in the vast West, Natives held on longer.

"What we're looking at now are those that are still managing to cling to existence," Anderson says. "English has already won in America. It's a done deal."

In his head, Lane knows the odds of his task. But it's not the Siletz way to fold.

The man with pale skin and dark eyes turns a full circle as he walks away from the sliding wood door of the longhouse built from cedar he split with his own hands. His movement represents leaving the spirit world for the outside one.

He slides into his 20-year-old Honda Accord and heads down a road that links, like all the roads in the town of Siletz, to the main drag. He drives past low-slung buildings -- in, out, back in to Siletz reservation land.

The checkerboard 3,666 acres are the result of 150 years of interaction with the U.S. government since the western Oregon tribes ceded 20 million acres. Twenty-seven bands and tribes were marched onto reservations. They spoke different languages, and Athabaskan dominated. And later, English.

Language, white politicians believed, was the most powerful enemy of their "kill the Indian, save the man" policy. In 1868, a federal commission concluded: "In the difference of language to-day lies two-thirds of our trouble. . . . Schools should be established, which children should be required to attend; their barbarous dialects should be blotted out and the English language substituted."

At government boarding schools, Native people had their languages beaten and humiliated out of them.

As a result, entire generations refused to speak it to their children.

In 1954, by order of the U.S. government, the Siletz were no longer Indian.

"Termination was devastating to the tribe," says Delores Pigsley, chairwoman of the Confederated Tribes of Siletz council. "The most important things to tribes are their language, their land base and their religion."

With no land and no council to hold them together, the Siletz scattered. With no community in which to speak the language, few did. Until termination, the Siletz still had large numbers of first-speakers. Soon after, the people whose land once stretched from the Cascades to the Pacific and the Columbia to the California border, didn't even own the cemetery that held their ancestors' bones.

Lane pulls up to the modest yellow ranch house he shares with his wife, Cheryl Lane, and where his granddaughter awaits his kisses. Traditional Siletz baskets Lane has woven lay on shelves, the floor, tables small and large.

Tangles of roots snatched from the earth soak in buckets in his backyard. Lane looks at them and frets. He weaves the roots into the Siletz baskets that cover his shelves, floor and tables small and large. Too many Siletz don't know the names of these plants or even where they grow.

"Our knowledge of what to do with those things out in the woods," he says, "is proof that these are our lands."

Language maintains, Lane says, "our view of 'yuhl\UNSTRIP' -- the world." It says something about a people, for instance, who have no word for murder.

Lane feels the urgency. He alone teaches a language class at the Siletz Valley charter school and community classes in Eugene, Salem and Portland. Lane also works to keep alive traditional basketry, dance and song. All form the hoop that is Siletz.

Since regaining federal recognition, the tribe's energies went to getting land, re-establishing tribal roles, creating jobs and constructing housing and health, daycare and community centers, paid for in large part by timber and casino profits.

"Tribes still have so many things on their plates -- safe water, meth, education, housing," says Robert Miller, a citizen of the Eastern Shawnee of Oklahoma and a law professor at Lewis & Clark College. "Language preservation, while it's crucial, is still down on the list of what they can manage to do."

A small minority of tribes operate extensive programs that produce fluent speakers. The Confederated Tribes of the Grande Ronde runs Oregon's only immersion program where pre-schoolers speak Chinuk Wawa. But most tribes are like the Siletz, struggling to juggle basic needs with cultural ones.

In the early '90s, the federal government passed legislation to help save Native languages. Academic institutions also are working to document and preserve them.

"Now, when it is too late, it's so hot," says Janne Underriner, director of the Northwest Indian Language Institute at the University of Oregon. "When I read we had 15 years left, I say, 'We had 15 years left 15 years ago.' I think we're lucky if we have five."

Two fluent Walla speakers still live, three Nez Perce, two Wasco. The last Klamath speaker died in 2003.

The classroom at the Siletz Valley charter school is empty but for five boys. The tribe persuaded the school to offer Athabaskan. The school accepted, but to Lane's ire, only as a foreign language. "I just hate that."

It's hard to get kids to come. They like shop and art better. Besides, the class is offered only in sixth grade.

Sanpoil Whitehead, an athletic boy with a sable braid swaying across his back, doesn't come regularly. He senses it's important. But for a boy whose world is English, Athabaskan is a captivating but dusty thing no one he knows uses besides his teacher.

Lane quizzes the boys on their numbers, laughing with them as they stumble over some of the sing-songy words.

"How would you say a melty, fruity candy?" asks a freckled boy with short-cropped hair.

Lane stops to think, then grins. "I don't know. I don't think there's a word for that. You might have to say that in English." But he chides them when they fail to use the nasal sound that distinguishes Athabaskan. "We don't want to lose the language by being lazy." The boys straighten in their desks and try harder.

Lane drills the words into the boys' heads. If they just remember some, then the first words to echo from the Oregon hills won't go silent.

Nikole Hannah-Jones: 503-221-4316; nhannahjones@news.oregonian.com

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