

Posted 2/6/2004 6:42 PM

Linguist records one of world's vanishing languages

By Joann Loviglio, Associated Press

PHILADELPHIA — It is estimated that half the 6,800 human languages spoken worldwide could be extinct within 100 years, and a Swarthmore College linguist's work documenting endangered tongues led him to one that was largely unknown to the outside world.

K. David Harrison spent two weeks in the summer in central Siberia in search of a language that he wasn't sure still existed. The last words of Middle Chulym might have been uttered long before, but there was no way to know without finding the small hunter-gatherer community last visited by scientists more than 30 years earlier and whose language was never documented.

A two-person camera crew accompanied Harrison and fellow researcher Gregory Anderson on their trek into deep Siberia, where they found the Middle Chulym living in a half-dozen villages that are interspersed among a larger Russian population, Harrison said. They were living in much the same way as their ancestors have for centuries, but their ancestral language is dying.

"Of the 426 members of the community, our best estimate was that only 35 to 40 are fluent speakers of the language and the youngest fluent speaker we found was 52 years old," Harrison said.

Harrison, who will present his findings on the Middle Chulym at the American Association for the Advancement of Science's annual meeting on Feb. 15 in Seattle, stresses that he hasn't "discovered" a "new" language. It may be new to science but it has lived and breathed for centuries.

Harrison's work with the Middle Chulym will appear in an upcoming PBS documentary "Vanishing Voices."

"We're also heading to the Southwest, where indigenous people are trying to save their own languages here in the States as well," said filmmaker Seth Kramer at Ironbound Films Inc., who traveled to Siberia with Harrison. "There are parallels