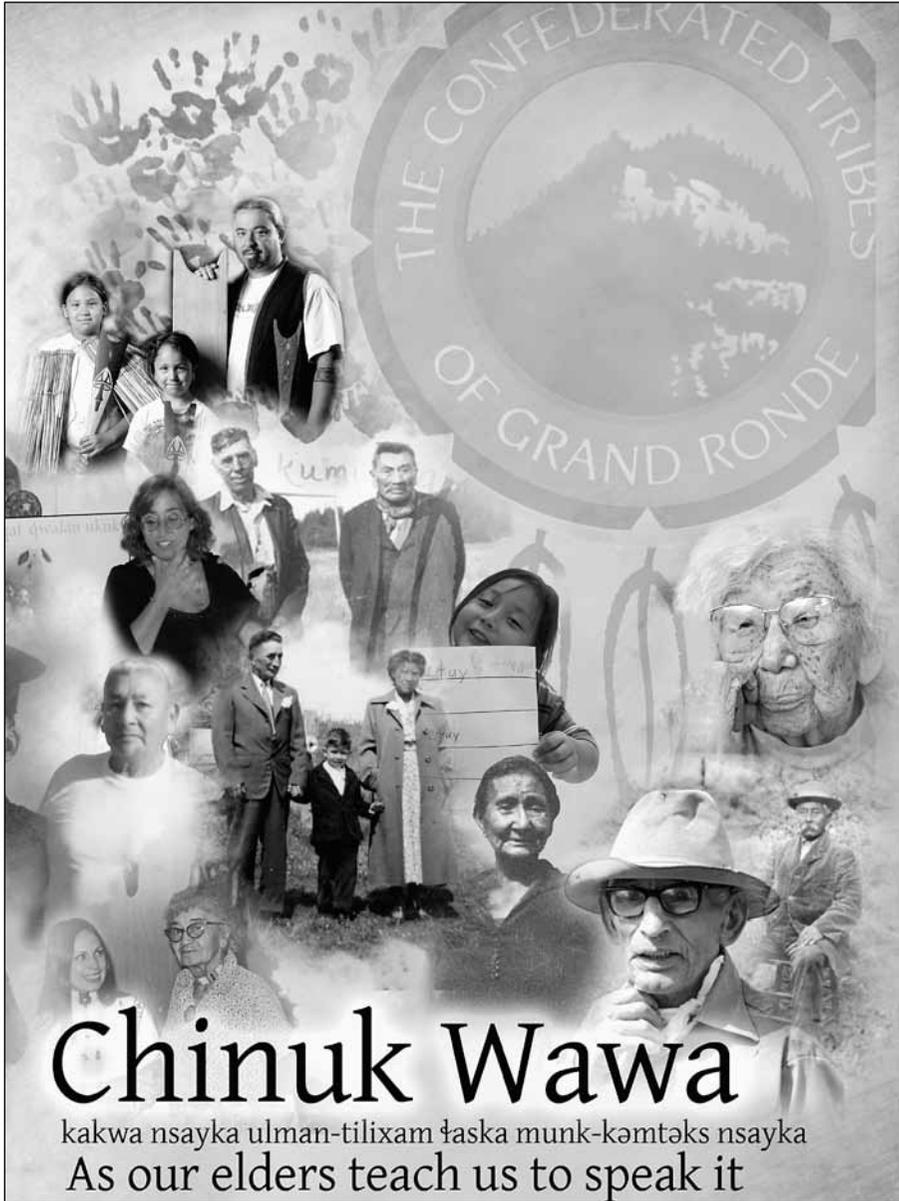


# Bringing “good Jargon” to Light

## *The New Chinuk Wawa Dictionary of the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde, Oregon*

A NEW CHINUK WAWA (Chinook Jargon) dictionary — *Chinuk Wawa kakwa nsayka ulman-tilixam ʔaska munk-kəmtəks nsayka / Chinuk Wawa as our elders teach us to speak it* — has been compiled by the Chinuk Wawa Dictionary Project of the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde (CTGR) and published this year by the tribe for distribution by the University of Washington Press.<sup>1</sup> Chinuk Wawa is a unique expression of the linguistic heritage of the Pacific Northwest, particularly through the language’s association with the era of fur-company domination, before the region’s incorporation into the modern nations of Canada and the United States. The survival of this unusual language well beyond that era — it retained vitality as a living language into the very recent past — makes for a remarkable story in its own right, one I will summarize by briefly touching on my own involvement with some of the Grand Ronde elders who were among the last speakers to learn Chinuk Wawa as a first language. The dictionary project was a major part of my job description when I first signed on as a linguistic consultant with the tribe in 1998, and it has occupied a good deal of my time and energy since then.

My first contact with the Grand Ronde Indian community came in 1978, before its restoration as a federally recognized Indian tribe, a status that Congress had rescinded some twenty-two years before, when it implemented provisions of a termination bill passed in 1954.<sup>2</sup> That same fateful year of 1954 marked another major milestone in the history of the community, with



*Created by the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde graphic designer George Valdez, the cover of the new Chinuk Wawa dictionary features several generations of Grand Ronde Indians, including: (top left) the family group of Kyoni Mercier, Nakoia Mercier, and Bobby Mercier; (second row) Kathy Cole, John B. Hudson, John Wacheno, Matthew Leno (holding paper), and Nora Kimsey (far right); (next row down) Elmer Tom, the family group of Wilson Bobb and Mrs. Lena Bobb with grandson Steve Bobb, Victoria Howard, Wilson Bobb (as an elder), and William Hartless; and (bottom left) Jackie Whisler and Clara Riggs.*

the passing of one of its last elders knowledgeable in the community's old Indian ways. John B. "Mose" Hudson was born at Grand Ronde in 1868 to a Santiam Kalapuya father and a Yoncalla Kalapuya mother, and he witnessed life on the late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century reservation, where traditional beliefs and ceremonial practices still retained considerable vitality.

The fact that traditional western Oregon lifeways had been carried on recently enough to remain vivid in the memories of elders still alive in mid-1950s America was mostly lost on Hudson's non-Indian fellow Oregonians, many of whom have viewed western Oregon indigenous peoples (who at Grand Ronde included speakers of the Molala, Clackamas Chinook, Umpqua Athapaskan, Takelma, and Shasta languages, along with the three Kalapuyan languages) simply as a vanished race. Understandably, that perception has not sat well with living descendants of the Grand Ronde Indians of yesteryear. The late Vincent Mercier, a grandson of Hudson and a career teacher, once shared with me a letter that he was moved to send to the editor of the *Oregonian* after that paper had run an historical piece lamenting the demise

of "the Calapooia" (Kalapuyans). Following a short history lesson featuring the two western Oregon reservation communities of Siletz and Grand Ronde (he had taught school at both), Mercier went on to declare that "I am a descendant of the Calapooia Indians who resided in the Willamette Valley. . . . There are many of us still alive, alert and well."<sup>3</sup>

We are fortunate to have a detailed record of John B. Hudson's experience of traditional lifeways. That record is in the form of texts he dictated in Santiam Kalapuya, his tribal language, to the linguist Melville Jacobs; they are available (as phonetic transcripts of the Kalapuya, with accompanying English translations) in *Kalapuya Texts*, published by the University of Washington in 1945.<sup>4</sup> I first encountered this volume as a student of Wayne Suttles, late professor of anthropology at Portland State University, and to it

Courtesy Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde



*John and Eula Petite pose in front of their home in Grand Ronde in 1980. Their tribal ancestries reflect the Grand Ronde community's hybrid origins. Eula's roots were predominantly Kalapuyan and Cow Creek Takelma; John's were French-Clackamas and Rogue River Takelma.*

I owe much of my own initial fascination with western Oregon indigenous languages and lifeways. It was to secure a picture of Hudson, without which a project I was working on for Professor Suttles would have been incomplete, that I first came to Grand Ronde, where I began a years-long friendship with Hudson's surviving daughters. I developed an especially close personal and working relationship with the youngest Hudson daughter, Eula Petite, and her husband, John Petite; John, too, was from one of the community's original families. None of the Hudson sisters knew Santiam Kalapuya; nor could they speak their mother's tribal language, Cow Creek Takelma. But they all spoke "Jargon," the local English name for the hybrid lingua franca of the old Pacific Northwest, known more formally by the English name *Chinook Jargon*, or the indigenous name *Chinuk Wawa* (tshĭnŭk wăwă; literally, 'Chinook talk').

The circumstance that the Hudson sisters' mother and father spoke different, mutually unintelligible, tribal languages is in itself revealing of the unique linguistic history of this community. Mixed-language households were the norm at Grand Ronde, reflecting the diverse languages and relatively small populations of the original tribal groups who were uprooted from all over interior western Oregon and resettled at the reservation. Clearly, the polyglot nature of the original reservation community was an important factor contributing to the universal currency of Chinuk Wawa there. What is less clear is why the Hudsons' children should all have known Chinuk Wawa, considering that both parents, in common with most other members of the late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century reservation community, could also speak English. The key to understanding this seeming redundancy of languages lies in the old Indian life of the reservation, which was conducted largely in Chinuk Wawa, even into the time when all save



*The Hudson sisters were photographed in about 1982. Clockwise, from the top, are Eula Petite, Ila Dowd, Velma Mercier, and Martha Mercier.*



*Wilson Bobb, at age ninety-two, stands in front of his home near White Swan, Washington, in 1983. Of predominantly Tillamook, Tualatin Kalapuya, and Klickitat heritage, Bobb maintained family ties and held land both at Grand Ronde, where he had served as council chairman before termination, and at Yakama Reservation, where he was living in retirement when the author visited him.*

a few very elderly individuals could comfortably speak English. At Grand Ronde, if not everywhere else in the old Pacific Northwest, Chinuk Wawa retained a strong association with “being Indian.” And being Indian was not restricted to the public forum; the language remained in use in many Grand Ronde homes, especially in those counting elderly family members. It is not surprising, in view of this history, that the Chinuk Wawa of Grand Ronde people also preserves many indigenous features of pronunciation, grammar, and style — traits that one of the most fluent elders I recorded, Wilson Bobb, viewed as definitive signifiers of “good Jargon.”

The passing in 2001 of Ila Dowd, the longest-living Hudson sister, also marked the effective passing away of the last generation of Grand Ronde Indians who had acquired Chinuk Wawa as a first language in the home. It is fitting that the Chinuk Wawa Dictionary Project should have had its inception around the same time, since a principal motivation for compiling a dictionary was to preserve the elders’ Chinuk Wawa for posterity. Another principal motivation for compiling a dictionary was to provide a resource for those interested in learning more about Grand Ronde’s unique

cultural heritage. Tony A. Johnson, a Chinook tribal member from the lower Columbia River, was hired by the tribe in 1997 to organize a formal tribal language program. Although there originally had been many indigenous languages at Grand Ronde, Chinuk Wawa was the only one still spoken when Johnson came on board. That circumstance, and the special place of the language in the community's history, made Chinuk Wawa the obvious community candidate for language preservation and revival. Knowing of my work in documenting the language some twenty years earlier, Johnson brought me into the new program. That began a ten-year collaboration between us that saw the development of regular adult language classes, the establishment of an immersion preschool and kindergarten (funded by a grant from the Administration for Native Americans), and now, finally, a dictionary documenting Chinuk Wawa as it was spoken by past generations of Grand Ronde Indians.

The development of this dictionary was truly a community enterprise, as underscored by George Valdez's excellent cover, where elders of years past appear at different times of their lives and share space with participants in the contemporary language program. A number of linguists and local historians over the years were responsible for preserving the audio and written data from which I compiled the main matter of the dictionary. A particular concern of mine was to provide etymologies (word origins) based on modern records of the source languages that contributed to Chinuk Wawa's hybrid lexicon. Before our dictionary, the only comprehensive compilations had been made in the mid nineteenth century, long before such records became available. Sarah Braun Hamilton, who joined our adult Chinuk Wawa classes while a graduate student in applied linguistics at Portland State University, made a number of invaluable substantive contributions, outlining a learners' grammar of the language and creating explanatory diagrams and notes for clarifying the dictionary's conventions. Her considerable technical expertise and impeccable sense of design turned out to be especially vital to the project because those skills made it possible for us to produce the dictionary entirely in-house — taking it from original database format, through various iterations in Microsoft Word, to completion as a printer-ready pdf. David Lewis, then the tribe's Cultural Resources manager, took the completed dictionary before the tribal council, to whose support we owe its final fruition. As a matter of policy, the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde gives preference to local businesses. While the dictionary's "do-it-yourself" character reveals itself in occasional small technical imperfections, we do take considerable pride in the fact that this is a 100 percent locally made Oregon product — from our own collective labor of compiling, proofing, and constructing it to the tribal council's decision to launch it and on to its

final realization at the presses and binderies of Eagle Web Press and Your Town Press in Salem, Oregon.

THE DICTIONARY IS DIVIDED into five main sections. An introductory section includes a guide to the organization and layout of entries in the dictionary, a historical introduction focused on the elder speakers, a guide to pronunciation, and a grammar sketch geared to language learners rather than to linguists. This section is followed by the main dictionary, generated from our own customized version of Toolbox, a dictionary software program developed by the Summer Institute of Linguistics.<sup>5</sup> Each entry consists minimally of a word spelled and alphabetized using the standard CTGR Chinuk Wawa alphabet developed by Tony Johnson and me, along with detail on that word's pronunciation, meaning, and origin. Many of the lead entries are followed by lists of subsidiary compounds incorporating the respective lead words — compounding being the principal means by which new vocabulary is generated in Chinuk Wawa. Example sentences illustrate the usage of many words and compounds. Some of the elements of a typical dictionary entry are illustrated by the accompanying diagrams, created by Sarah Braun Hamilton and excerpted from the section “How to Use This Dictionary.” The “Header” and “Examples” diagrams show a word as entered in the dictionary, one of the three numbered senses recorded for that word, and two example sentences illustrating that sense. Note that some words appearing in the two example sentences are joined by dashes; these indicate compounds, as in *shawash-wawa*, which is composed of *shawash* ‘Indian’ joined to *wawa* ‘talk, speech’. Depending on context, the resulting compound can mean either ‘(any) Indian language’, or (as here) ‘Chinuk Wawa’. The *Auxiliary constructions* diagram illustrates the single most productive means for forming compounds in Chinuk Wawa: by attaching one of the auxiliary modifiers *chaku-* (‘become . . .’, ‘get to be . . .’; as in the two example sentences shown on the facing page), *munk-* (‘cause to be . . .’), or *hayu-* (‘ongoing . . .’; restricted to action verbs). The initials accompanying the four example sentences appearing in the two diagrams identify two of the Grand Ronde elder speakers whose Chinuk Wawa forms the main matter of the dictionary: WB (Wilson Bobb, 1891–1985) and VH (Victoria (Wishikin) Wachenno Howard, ca. 1865–1930).

Recognizing that Grand Ronde Reservation was not an island unto itself and that the Chinuk Wawa spoken there had much in common with that used by Native people in related communities, we have followed the main dictionary with an independent supplementary regional dictionary collating words and usages attributable to Natives of the greater lower Columbia region but that we do not have from Grand Ronde community members.

**Header**

**kəmtəks** [kʌm.dʌks] *verb*.  
 1) To know, understand, remember.

**Examples**

**ma kəmtəks shawash-wáwa?** Do you know Chinuk Wawa? (WB 162).  
**wik-ʔhənchi na kəmtəks ya** I can never understand him (what he's saying) (WB in text 15.9).

**Auxiliary constructions**

— *auxiliary constructions*.  
**chaku-kəmtəks**  
 1) Get to know, learn, understand.  
**aʔqi 'kakwa ma chàku-kəmtəks, 'dret ma 'ʔush kəmtəks** THAT'S the way you will learn it, you CERTAINLY will know it really well (WB in text 18.17).  
 2) Become aware of, get to thinking about.  
**alta ya chaku-kəmtəks ya chəch** Then she gets to thinking about her grandmother (VH in text 13.90).

**Etymology**

*Etym:* From Nootka Jargon **kamataks** 'understand' (Clark 2005): cf Nootka Nootkan *kamat* 'known, definite' (Sapir and Swadesh 1939:284), Makah Nootkan *kabat'ap* 'to know a fact' (Pascua 2001); . . . Cf Bay Center CW [kámɬaks] <kámɬaks> 'to know', Demers <komtoks> . . .

Regional Chinuk Wawa comparison: phonetic spelling in [brackets], original in <chevrons>, gloss in 'single quotes'

These parts of a typical dictionary entry are excerpted from the section “How to Use This Dictionary” in the new publication.

This section, too, was generated from a Toolbox database and is organized like the main dictionary, except that far fewer example sentences are available for illustration. Many of the examples we have given are drawn from texts created by Catholic missionaries because, generally speaking, those texts exhibit much closer conformity to Native pronunciation and usage than examples from other historical sources. The two dictionary sections are succeeded by a combined English-to-Chinuk Wawa index keying to both sections.

Finally, an appendix of Chinuk Wawa texts is included, preceded by a picture gallery showing all Grand Ronde elders who contributed texts as well as brief biographical sketches of all the speakers represented. In addition to Grand Ronde elders, the sketches include individuals who provided regional Chinuk Wawa texts. Each text is laid out in numbered segments, with the numbers corresponding to many of the usage examples given in the two dictionary sections. Tracing them from the dictionary sections back to their origins in the sample texts helps clarify the role of context in shaping meaning in Chinuk Wawa.

Our greatest regret in offering this dictionary to the world is that one of our own could not be here to share in the achievement of our common goal. Jackie (Mercier) Whisler (1951–2007) left us far too soon, and the best we can do now is to dedicate the dictionary to her memory. Whisler was a granddaughter of Velma Mercier, one of the Hudson sisters, and began learning Chinuk Wawa in 1978 from her great-aunt Eula Petite, who taught the community's first classes devoted to reviving the language. She later proved herself invaluable — indeed, irreplaceable — as the tribe's chief immersion preschool teacher, succeeding brilliantly where others (and I must count myself in that number) struggled to create a classroom culture conducive to true language immersion — no mean feat in our English-ruled, media-saturated, modern world. The language's current revival owes much to her dedication and energy, and she remains a powerful source of inspiration to the tribe and its Chinuk Wawa language program.

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Courtesy Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde



*Jackie (Mercier) Whisler and Kathy Cole pose together at the tribe's Spirit Mountain Casino in about 2005. Like Whisler, Cole is a state-certified Chinuk Wawa teacher, and she currently serves the tribe as head of its Cultural Resources Department.*



*Jackie (Mercier) Whisler and Clara Riggs stand together in about 1978. Riggs was one of the Grand Ronde elder speakers recorded at length by the author. Whisler was active in the movement to restore the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde to federal recognition, and she later became one of the first tribal members certified by the state of Oregon to teach Chinuk Wawa.*

## NOTES

1. Chinuk Wawa Dictionary Project, *Chinuk Wawa kakwa nsayka ulman-tilixam taska munk-kəmtəks nsayka / Chinuk Wawa as our elders teach us to speak it* (Grand Ronde, Oregon: Confederated Tribes of the Grand Ronde Community of Oregon, 2012; distributed by University of Washington Press).

2. On Termination of the tribe, see David Lewis, “Termination of the Confederated

Tribes of the Grand Ronde Community of Oregon: Politics, Community, Identity” (Ph.D. diss., University of Oregon, 2009).

3. Vincent M. Mercier, “Alive and Well,” *Oregonian*, June 6, 1978.

4. Melville Jacobs, *Kalapuya Texts* (Seattle: University of Washington Publications in Anthropology vol. 11, 1945).

5. See [www.sil.org](http://www.sil.org).