Linguist Tracks Missing Chief Red Thundercloud

By George McMillan

Finding Chief Red Thundercloud, a Vanishing American who vanished, was the problem that confronted Professor of Linguistics G. Helmuth Matthews of MIT and the Mitre Corporation.

The reason for this is that the Chief is a Catawba Indian, and the only known speaker of the Catawba language. Contacting him would be a major linguistic and anthropological find that could help chart the migrations of prehistoric Indians.

Prof. Matthews had been a student of the Sioux since his college days at the University of Pennsylvania, when he was looking for a topic for his Master's thesis. It seems that standard procedure was to commit oneself to a strange or unusual language, so he chose Sioux. He has been studying it ever since.

The Professor met Chief Thundercloud last summer on a Piscataway Indian reservation in Gadston, Mass., a suburb of Wrensboro. The reservation, ordinarily a one family affair inhabited by Narragansett Indians (who are always welcome), was having its annual Pow Wow, doing the ancient dances which had been passed down to them from a group of professional entertainers who were there to help attract tourists. Chief Thundercloud was one of those entertainers, and amazingly enough, claimed to be able to speak Catawba.

"I knew that at least one word he said was authentic," noted Matthews, "but I also knew he couldn't really speak Catawba. Because, of course, Catawba is a dead language." Only it turned out the Chief really could.

Vivatses in Budok

But then Professor Matthews found out why the Indians are called vanishing Americans. The Chief drove off in his Buick, with his wife and two sons, leaving behind only a mailing address in New York City.

Letters sent to this address met with no response, so the professor was faced with a dilemma—should he consider the last language lost for good, or should he saddle his automobile and ride to the Pow Wow trail tracking Chief Red Thundercloud.

Well, Professor Matthews hadn't done any field work since 1956, and wasn't anxious to return now. Using his sharp wits, which had been honed by dealing with Techmen for almost seven years, he decided to tell his story to the "Boston Herald." Arlene Grimes wrote a column poking fun at the professor who lost the last language and ended it by saying:

"Where Indian go, white man follow. This summer Prof. Matthews will take up the Pow Wow trail in pursuit of Chief Red Thundercloud.

"Her successor was unfounded, but it saved the day. The professor saw the article, winced, and sat back and waited. Sure enough, Thundercloud read the paper and sent a letter to Matthews giving him the Chief's new address in New York.

"Now Prof. Matthews is busy trying to raise funds from the University of Pennsylvania to go to New York to study the Catawba language. He has to learn the language from someone who speaks it because the Indians left no written language. He hopes to make tapes and also to acquire a vocabulary of phonetically spelled words.

"Course 16 To Receive New Building

The four-story Hood Building at Massachusetts Avenue and Albany Street has been bought by MIT and is being demolished to make way for a new educational facility.

Present plans call for the new building to be a one-story structure containing laboratories and classrooms for the Department of Aeronautics and Astronautics. The site is next door to the 68 Albany Street headquarters of the Department's Instrumentation Laboratory.

The Hood building, built in the early 1900's, served for many years as an ice cream plant. The federal government acquired the building in 1946, and it was used by MIT scientists for government-sponsored research until 1952. A private firm took over in 1952 and the firm occupied the building until 1958. The building has been vacant since then and was acquired by the General Services Administration for disposition when it was declared surplus to government needs.

The GSA turned the building over to the Department of Health, Education and Welfare which, in turn, deeded the property to MIT with the proviso that the property be used for educational purposes. MIT is paying for the demolition.

If you have an advanced degree, let's talk some more.

You'll be part of a 3500-person facility responsible for R&D on America's lunar, planetary, and interplanetary explorations. If you come to Caltech's Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena, California, you'll find the finest technical facilities in the world—the library with 125,000 technical documents, the most sophisticated computers, space simulators, acres of laboratory space, and about three support people for every one of you. And you'll be working with the finest scientific minds in the country. If you want to think hard for a living, you should think hard about coming to JPL.