Where it all began: memories of Robert Shafer
and the "Sino-Tibetan Linguistics Project"
Berkeley 1939-40

by

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I first met Robert Shafer in the winter of 1938-39, after I had gone to Berkeley to assume supervision of the "Sino-Tibetan Philology Project." I had been invited by Professor A. L. Kroeber, at the time the dominant figure in American anthropology, to take over where Shafer had left off, completing the work of the project. Kroeber was under the erroneous impression that I was a master of Oriental languages, hence his apparent delight when I readily consented to leaving my doctoral (anthropology) program at Harvard for the Berkeley scene. I had other -- largely extraneous -- reasons for wanting to be on the Berkeley campus, so I eagerly accepted the offer and set off for Berkeley in the late fall of 1938.

Shafer was not in town when I arrived and I had to fend for myself. Kroeber greeted me with much warmth and even enthusiasm, and naturally took me around to the Project offices at the first opportunity. Being an impostor of sorts, I felt some trepidation on this first visit. Apparently I carried it off well enough, though, since I have reason to believe that Kroeber never became aware of the deception -- nor Shafer later.

The Project was located in a small frame house (see photo) near the campus, with work being carried out in two or three large rooms, as I recall. Kroeber had assured me that everything was shipshape, and that in view of my extensive knowledge of the field there should be no problem about completing the Project. Knowing that the second part of this proposition was fallacious, I was hoping that the first part would hit the mark, but my first visit to the Project dispelled that notion also. I was confronted by what appeared to be mountains of linguistic data in all shapes and forms: dictionaries, articles (some torn out of journals, others offprinted or xeroxed), and a vast array of papers, much of it covered with what I quickly came to recognize as the Shafer scrawl -- firm enough and fairly legible. (JAM informs me that much of it is still to be found in the margins of books in the Berkeley library.) There were piles of papers everywhere, on the floor as well as on tables, but hardly any appeared to be other than the roughest kind of "working paper." Shipshape it was not. Organized, maybe, but only in the sense that any of Shafer's productions were ever organized. Shafer himself, I was later to learn, took a certain pride in his ability to "organize" materials, but certainly for me, at that small crisis in my academic life, all was a monstrous mess that left me utterly dismayed. I strongly considered simply telling Kroeber to go find himself another whipping boy -- but then, as I have said, there were compelling reasons for me to stay on campus. So I smiled as brightly as possible under the circumstances, assured Kroeber that everything was under control, and set about seeing what I might be able to salvage from the wreckage (as I saw it).
It wasn't easy -- especially for an impostor! At that
time, despite my spurious reputation, I had only a mediocre
knowledge of Chinese, an even poorer acquaintance with Japan-
ese and a smattering of Vietnamese, having worked on the
language earlier that year (1938) in Hanoi. But I hadn't the
slightest scrap of knowledge about Thai, Tibetan, Burmese or
the like. I remember Kroeber escorting me about the Project
offices, waving at various mountains of material here and
there, and ending up with expressions such as, "But of course
you know all that, Benedict." A worker came up to us with a
question about Burmese transcription. Having never gazed
upon Burmese before, I was rather taken aback at this, but I
did come up with a quick, arbitrary response (luckily I had
been given a choice, say, between k- and kh-), and we contin-
ued on our journey of inspection. I simply should have packed
my bags and left Berkeley. But I decided to stay, to go along
with the unwitting deception. I managed to bluff my newly
acquired staff, who had been "set up" for it by the reputation
that had preceded me to Berkeley, by working frenetically,
often long into the night after the staff had left, acquiring
sufficient mastery of these "other" languages for carrying on
comparative linguistic work. By the time that Shafer had ar-
ived on the scene, a matter of a few months, I had become a
complete "expert" on Oriental languages, willing to discuss
anything from Tibetan a-chung to Burmese auk-myit.

Shafer never really filled me in on the details concern-
ing his leaving the Project, nor his subsequent return to
Berkeley, nor do I recall any comments from Kroeber on the
subject. One of the stories had him inheriting a large sum
of money from a deceased uncle, but he never appeared well
off, even by the modest standards of a scholar. He spent a
good deal of time around Berkeley, hovering about the Project
in the manner of a midwife about an expectant mother. The
Himalayish volumes had been completed or were in the final
stages of typing, and the Tibetan materials were also in fair-
ly good shape, so that Shafer was able to give these volumes
his last, loving touches. We spent a considerable amount of
time together, often along with Don Walters, the senior (and
only) "linguist" on the Project staff, mostly in the Project
offices or in nearby lunchrooms. The talk was largely "shop
talk" with an admixture of politics.

I never really got acquainted with Shafer on any personal
basis, and his private life hardly ever entered into our con-
versations. I never met anyone whom he described as a friend,
nor remember his talking about friends, and in general he im-
pressed me as an isolated person in many ways. He was amiable
enough, however, and highly verbal, talking in rather staccato
fashion, very intent in manner, with flashing brown eyes dart-
ing ceaselessly about. He walked in a brisk manner, much like
one might encounter around a political clubhouse, and I was pleasantly surprised to discover that the staff actually did work, mostly to please Shafer, the father figure (or was he only an older brother figure?). They had been trained to do specific things, and took a special pride in their "specialties." I do not recall all the details, or all the names, but I do remember the people, as I look at them now in the photograph.

The two Chinese, at least one of whom was a Lee, formed their own little Chinese clique within the extended family, much as our Sinologist brethren constitute a distinct grouping within our great Sino-Tibetan family (pace everyone). They were well trained, but unfortunately as laundrymen rather than Sinologists -- as in the Army, WPA assignments did not necessarily match the individuals' backgrounds! They did know Chinese characters -- at least some of them -- and this gave them a certain allure for Shafer, who never really got into this arcane field of study. I never quite understood just what their function on the Project was. Shafer seemed to be groping toward a comparative study of Chinese dialects, anticipating later developments in this area, and I believe that these two workers might have been developing Cantonese materials for this aspect of the Project. My knowledge of characters, rather better than theirs, gave me a special relationship to them, but I was never able to satisfy myself as to just what they were up to on the Project -- and Shafer, if he knew, never revealed the secret to me. They did keep busy enough, mostly producing what passed for Chinese calligraphy, and I quickly learned that it was better to be discreet about pressing my workers for details.

The second person from the left, a tall and rather taciturn man by the name of Frank or Henry (I think), also remained something of an enigma for me. He talked in a grave manner about various aspects of the Project, and perhaps was better educated than the average worker (that would be high school graduate), but I'm not sure that he was ever really trained for any specific function. As I remember, I had him "looking for" various things for me, from among the mountainous piles of papers littering the offices, and I believe that Shafer had used him a good deal as someone to talk to -- Shafer tended to have unidirectional conversations -- so it can be seen that the man served some valuable functions.

The third person from the left is Marie, a pleasant French housewife. When I arrived on the Project she was busy erasing paper. Shafer had a tendency to mark up piles of paper with headings, e.g. "East Himalayish Final *=ak," intended for tables but frequently left with just headings. The goal of any WPA project was to hire people, and if anything useful (a road leading from Podunk to Podunk Corners, park benches for the elderly in Paducah, Sino-Tibetan Philology) came of it,