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 Japanese 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 continued 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 arrived 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 concerning 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 fairly 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 conversations. I never met anyone whom he described as a friend, nor remember his talking about friends, and in general he impressed 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 darting 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 <u>did work</u>, 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 (<u>pace</u> 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 <u>did</u> 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 *-<u>ak</u>," 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,

well so much the better. I quickly learned, as Shafer had be-
fore me, that WPA funds were for people, not things. So we
scrounged for everything -- and Marie erased paper -- as Shafer
had performed prodigious feats in obtaining the necessary source
materials for the Project. Finally the day came when all the
paper had been erased, and I then put Marie to work at a job in
which her language facility would be of some help, probably
copying entries from some French source, thus affording her pro-
per status in the extended family.

Next to her in the photograph, fourth from the left, is
"Smiddie," whose lack of formal education was especially in evi-
dence. As I recall, he worked mainly with the typists (none
shown in the photograph), serving as a proofreader of sorts, a
function which he carried out much better than one would have
anticipated.

Finally, the sixth from the left in the photo is "Doc," a
man of sufficient bearing to have gained that title, and possibly
college-educated to some extent. (I believe that none of us
pressed him for details of his education.) He had been ensconced
as the reigning Tibetan expert on the Project, and actually knew
how to transcribe Tibetan. Shafer had used him primarily in
working with Tibetan dialects, and he reacted to questions in
other areas like a true expert - "Please, ask! I do Tibetan."
"Doc" also had attained a kind of minimal status as a linguist,
although well below that reached by Walters. Doc had a penchant
for turning up cognate pairs involving English words like "hare"
and "hair" -- i.e. if a word meant "hare" in Language A, and
"hair" in Language B, they were potential cognates, if they bore
some similarity in phonetic appearance. Walters had been assigned
by Shafer to comb such nits as this out of the system -- and there
were lots and lots of nits and nuts and bolts and the like, many
entered carefully onto "official" Project papers, to be expunged
finally by Shafer himself, or later by me.

As I have said, not everyone connected with the Project was
in the photograph, which probably dates from 1938 or 1939. "Rosie."
our Burmese expert, somehow didn't make it for the picture, al-
though he was the unofficial "PR man" of the Project as well as
its preeminent Burmese expert. He had no visible qualifications
for either function, but was inordinately proud of his ability to
transcribe Burmese, which he would carry out with a grand flourish.
letter by letter. He also fancied himself as a comparativist, but
was never officially entrusted with this function since he was
given to straightforward comparisons by broad categories, matching
"rat" and "horse" (animals), "toe" and "esophagus" (body-parts)
with nary a question. (No, this never affected me, in case any
of you are wondering!) Only once did I see Rosie at a loss for
words. He had, without our advice or consent, committed our Pro-
ject "spelling team" to a challenge on radio to the champion
spelling team of the University, the prize being ten silver dollars.
The sponsors accepted the challenge on the theory, no doubt, that
any group representing the "Sino-Tibetan Philology Project" ought

to be able to spell well, at the very least. The big night
finally came, and we went to the radio station across the bay
in Frisco -- Walters, myself, and three non-spellers (Rosie,
Smiddie, and Doc). We were introduced to the radio audience
in grandiose terms, something like "one of the most gifted
spelling teams of all time." Rosie, leading off, was asked
"an easy one -- just to warm you up -- FRIEND." Walters and
I looked at each other as Rosie spelled out the expected
"F-R-E-I-N-D," then at the face of the MC as a look of utter
astonishment spread over it, to be followed by one of disgust.
Rosie couldn't think of a word to say at that moment, but later
explained he had had "an off night -- like the best of us."
Walters and I upheld the honor of the Project, however, by
spelling down the other team and gaining the ten silver dollars,
which sufficed to provide for an evening of debauchery for the
five of us. (Debauchery was much cheaper in those days.)

There were others, all Shafer people, although none so
colorful as Rosie. Walters, who was taking a Master's in his-
tory at the University, was a key part of the Project. Shafer
had trained him to carry out comparative work at a fairly high
level, and I continued in this tradition, using him especially
for the Bodo-Garo (Barish) volume preparation. This volume,
which is (for me) the most satisfactory in the whole STL series,
owes much to Walters, who actually served as a second linguist,
although he was always very modest about his ability and prob-
ably would have refused to accept the designation. He remained
primarily an historian in his interests, and turned down sug-
gestions made by me -- and by Shafer before me -- that he take
formal linguistic training and go into the field.

The Project was also fortunate in having the services of
two first-rate typists, able to set up on the special Project
typewriters (I wonder how Shafer ever came by them!) the com-
plicated tables fed to them by Shafer -- and in the mad trans-
cription that was "official" on the Project (see below). One
of these typists, a man of about 30, had spent some time travel-
ing about the Far East with a companion, a man of about the same
age, and they both had been hired on the Project some time before
I got there. They both had got into TM, or the equivalent of the
time, and the typist would prepare himself each morning by sitting
cross-legged upon a stool for an hour or so, in deep meditation,
before doing any typing at all. He would more than make up for
this loss of time, however, with a fantastic display of typing
each day. I have never seen his like since, and I wish he would
interrupt his meditations, wherever he is, and come back to do
some more typing for me! His friend, the "intellectual" member
of the twosome, carried out his own research on the Project, and
I never quite knew what he was up to. He left in a jealous rage
one day after his friend had got himself married.

I have spent some time on the Project staff because they constituted, as it were, extensions of the Master himself. They were all beautiful people (you can ignore my attempts at description if there is any discrepancy) and they made the Project go. But Shafer was the heart of it. I have described the manic pace at which he worked -- until his death, I daresay. I should now write something about how he worked, his methods, his ways of handling material. Some may wonder about this, saying, "Whaddya mean, methods?" Shafer has been called "disorganized" or words to that effect (in reviews here and there). Actually, he was too organized, it has often seemed to me, in looking back on it. He had adapted a mad (I believe originally French) transcription system precisely because it was completely logical and "organized." Little did it matter to Shafer that so many of the common sound units with which he was working came out festooned with otiose diacritics, like so much phonetic bric-a-brac! The most common vowel symbol in the sources (mostly older ones by non-linguists), for example, was a, often probably for ə, especially in unstressed or prefixial syllables. This comes out ê , and the pages of the early (pre-Benedict) volumes of STL are literally covered with ê, and the like.

Shafer was too organized here to be practical. For me, the product of an (ultimately) Yankee background in which "resourceful" was the highest word of praise that one could utter about a man, this transcription was almost criminally stupid, and I probably told Shafer so in about those words. (I was given to plain talk in those early days.) But he would hear none of it, countering to the effect that I was the stupid one, unable to see the beauties of a logical transcription. But Shafer was a great scrounger, as I have said, and that is a good Yankee trait, so that I was able to overlook his sins of transcription -- but I did throw the whole system out in the later STL volumes, a crime for which Shafer probably never really forgave me.

In the area of classification, also, Shafer was very fond of setting up all sorts of hierarchical systems, with much attention to arbitrary suffixes and to historical names, hence terms such as "Daic" (the root is reconstructed with initial *d-, whence "Tai" or "Thai"). I felt (and still feel) that it is preferable (i.e., more practical) to operate with "nuclei" or the like (as in the Conspectus), but Shafer saw this as a chaotic approach and we would often argue about the point.

Shafer was also methodical (and traditional) in approaching the task of reconstructing PTB or PST, working from the local groupings, even dialects, to broader and broader supergroupings. He made a stab (JAOS articles) at setting up a vocalic system for PST, but it is clear that he regarded this as very provisional, and he contented himself with trying to work out certain "correspondences," with suggestions that the ultimate system would be much more complex, with three-vowel clusters, etc. Like all

Tibeto-Burman scholars who had preceded him (and many since), he was markedly Tibetocentric, spending endless time mulling over Tibetan dialects. I soon got the impression that little was to be gained from this Tibetobsessionalism, hence I set about working out a framework of some sort, for PST as well as PTB, with a consideration also of Karen (largely ignored by Shafer). Shafer never really approved of this change in emphasis, preferring to continue along conventional lines. He would never have approved of "teleo-reconstruction," having been extremely critical of Simon's attempt at a direct comparison of Tibetan with Chinese.

Actually, Shafer was basically conservative at heart, as shown by his papers on such distinct groups as Nahali, Li, and Miao-Yao. True, he did turn out a few "wild" things indicating possible connections of Sino-Tibetan with one or another group of Amerindian languages. But even here he was following in the path of a fairly well-known linguist (Sapir!). He continued to plug along with Tai as one of the ST groups, despite an apparently growing uncertainty about the matter, never accepting the suggestion that Tai is basically related to Austronesian, this again reflecting a fundamental spirit of conservatism on his part. As for details of his comparative work, here too he was extremely conservative in approach, admitting very few semantic shifts and expressing a negative view of my published opinion that more leeway should be allowed in semantics than in phonology when making these broader comparisons. I point this out because of what seems to have become a widespread view that Shafer was a "wild" linguist in some sense, possibly because he was a pioneer in the field.

His conservatism perhaps was mainly responsible for his not accepting a fully phonemic approach, along with an insistence upon literal transcriptions, e.g. the writing of Thai (Siamese) medial oo as "əʔə", the idea that Written Burmese ui was somehow phonetically [ui], and that á (with the glottalized auk-myit accent) was a "short a." Shafer also refused even to consider Karlgren's reconstructions for Archaic Chinese -- again an indication of his basic conservatism -- but in all fairness I should add that when the Grammata Serica first came out, and I had George Trager (then at Yale) take a look at it, he quickly pronounced it a "non-language."

Haudricourt, in his review of the Conspectus, has described Shafer's approach as "analytical," as contrasted with mine as "synthesizing," but I feel that this misses the mark, the difference lying primarily in the way we approach the problem -- the conservative vs. the radical, if you will: the working up to a framework, dialect by dialect and language by language, as opposed to the setting up of a series of provisional frameworks, then working within these frameworks to modify them as need be. (This accounts for many of the "contra Benedict's" in Benedict.) Shafer

and I often discussed this basic difference in approach, and
even the irony, as we both saw it, in the circumstance that
he, the outsider and anti-academician, was actually the con-
servative one while I, a member of the academic élite (Shafer's
point of view!), was the radical one. Shafer simply thought
I was unsound, I suppose, an opinion that has clung to me in
certain circles over the years.

What more can I write about Shafer? He was the explorer,
the pioneer, venturing ever further and further into virgin
fields. Wolfenden had come by that way some years before, it
is true, but he had been looking for rather different things.
They were the first whom we can fairly label "Tibeto-Burmanists,"
each having left the Tibetan "nest" and flown to distant ranges.
In a still broader context, Shafer surely is to be regarded as
the first "Sino-Tibetanist" ever, without the need for qualific-
ation. He had an idea -- a seemingly preposterous idea -- that
if given the opportunity he would be able to train a group of
WPA workers sufficiently to enable them to collect meaningful
data on languages as esoteric as Tibetan, Burmese, and Chinese.

It is very probable that only one scholar in the world in
a position to sponsor such a project would have done so. By
some quirk of fate Shafer got to this scholar, Professor Kroeber,
and convinced him that the project was practicable. Kroeber
never really discussed this aspect of the Project with me in
any detail, but I soon learned that he was a fervent believer
in "mass" research One of his dicta, which I have never for-
gotten, went like this: Never do anything yourself which you
can get someone else to do for you. He was not being Machia-
vellian here, but was simply pointing out that there are levels
of research, and that one shouldn't work at lower than his true
level (an argument which generations of graduate students have
been using with their wives). Kroeber did admit one day, however,
when I was complaining about the "impossibility" of completing
the Project, that he had been pushing the method to the limits
when he accepted Shafer's proposal. He also remarked that a
thing isn't "fun" unless it is difficult.

I think that Shafer also felt that way about his work. He
gave his life to it, and I can't imagine his ever having any
regrets. He made it possible for me to go even deeper into un-
trodden areas, and for all of us to go our separate ways in
this still primeval wonderland of Tibeto-Birmanica and Sino-
Tibetica. His goals were monumental, but they fitted the man,
and few have lived to find so large a measure of achievement.
May we all fare so well!

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