

10,000-page Indian Tsimshian manuscript found

A major find in the field of linguistics occurred last week when a long-forgotten manuscript recording Tsimshian Indian legends was discovered buried in a New York University.

The 10,000-page manuscript includes more than 250 texts with such titles as "The Myth of a Prince who became an Eagle," "How the Ancient Chiefs Warred Years Ago," and "Customs and Beliefs."

The manuscript, which was

translated into both English and phonetic Tsimshian in the 19-30's by William Reynon, was discovered in New York City's Columbia University. Reynon was a Canadian scholar of Tsimshian heritage.

"This is a major find," said Dr. Mike Krauss, a professor of linguistics at the Alaska Native Language Center at the University of Alaska. "There is probably no other Native nationality that has so much written down by one of their own people."

Dr. Krauss says Beynon spoke fluent Tsimshian and recorded historic material collected from various sources, including the noted Franz Boas.

Because the Tsimshians have no written language, Beynon wrote the language phonetically, using a method devised by Boas. Then on the next page line, he translated the Indian into literal English. On a third line, he wrote in standard English.

Thus, Dr. Krauss said, each

line of manuscript is recorded in three ways, a system that preserves the integrity of the original material and also provides a ready interpretation and a reference for the translation.

Led by an Anglican minister William Duncan, the Tsimshians migrated to Metlakatla from British Columbia in 1887. Father Duncan discouraged the Tsimshians from celebrating their past and many of their legends subsequently have been forgotten.

Aware of the trend, Beynon recorded the legends and sent them to Boas at Columbia. But both Beynon and Boas died in the 1940s and the manuscript, like the legends, was forgotten.

As renewed interest in Native cultures developed over the past decade elderly Tsimshians who remembered Beynon began wondering what happened to the manuscript.

He said the manuscript was well-preserved although written on poor quality paper.