

# William Cameron Townsend

*by Calvin T. Hibbard, Townsend Archives Editor*

1896-1982

Stimulator of linguistic research among ethnic minorities and champion of their cultural dignity



"Not since the third century has there been a man like Cameron Townsend who attempted so much, and saw so many dreams realized in his lifetime," declared Kenneth L. Pike, Nobel Peace Prize Nominee. He called them "dreams" but they were more in the order of hard-nosed intentions. One objective was to stimulate the study of every single minority language in the world not yet analyzed or recorded. Another was to enable every people, wherever they were, to establish and control their own communal identities. Townsend saw tremendous progress toward accomplishing both goals in his lifetime. What follows is only a keyhole glimpse into the story.

As for the first "dream," the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL), which Townsend founded, has in the last half of the 20th century published academic materials describing and analyzing 1,724 languages and is currently working on 1,053 others. As for the second, to Townsend equally as important as the first, he with his colleagues worked vigorously with appropriate local governmental and educational agencies to help all these peoples acquire self-esteem, dignity, and national identity.



Townsend's contribution to the academic community and his encouragement to members of small ethnic groups to understand their own personal worth cannot be measured. The world of science along with multiplied segments of humanity owe great gratitude to Townsend.

Townsend's life was as diverse as the programs he advanced and the organizations he founded. For instance, he insisted that members of SIL should be ready to serve others scientifically, materially, and spiritually. From early in his career Townsend was personally committed to each of these three areas of involvement. It is not sufficient, he argued, that a person should be interested in serving people unless he has that scientific preparation which will make his contribution relevant and effective. Service based on a foundation of scientific investigation, he held, is more likely to have a permanent impact than service motivated by high ideals but without a thorough understanding of the people being served.

Of special importance, he maintained, is a careful study of a people's language and, by means of that language, an acquired insight into their aspirations and goals. But a scientific study in which the investigator is interested merely in amassing data about the people studied and not in helping them reach worthy goals may have some value to the scientific world, but it will have ignored human values. Townsend affirmed that scientific knowledge should be used as a means for offering developing people the *resource of choice* for bettering their daily lives. Additionally, he taught that unless a minority people can adjust to their place in the changing world and, with economic assistance, learn something of the acquired wisdom of humankind, these people may sink into apathy or despair.



Crucial to a well-rounded program for minority-language groups, Townsend believed, is the spiritual component. Natural religion, defined as man's seeking for an integrating explanation of his life and world, indicates that all people have deep, unfulfilled spiritual needs. An adequate effort to serve minority-language communities, he believed, must take cognizance of this spiritual dimension. It may not be convenient for some individuals or for a government to be involved in such matters, but for a private organization it is appropriate. It can devote itself to the tasks of scientific investigation and at the same time to practical service and to spiritual orientation. This three-phased objective molded Townsend's career.



Townsend was born in California in 1896. When he was 21 and studying at Occidental College, he felt the need for getting involved in spiritual work among Central American people. Choosing as his touchstone the greatest document of Western culture, the Bible (the basis of his own spiritual orientation), Townsend went to Central America to make available this historic volume to the people there. As he mingled with the large Indian population, he saw the need for work along scientific and practical lines in addition to the spiritual. Accordingly he and his wife Elvira settled among the Cakchiquel Indians of Guatemala. They applied themselves vigorously to the task of learning this unwritten language. In 1926 Townsend made a structural analysis of the Cakchiquel verb system and became one of the first men in the world to succeed in analyzing a complicated

vernacular language system in reference to its own structure. Before him, most who had attempted to analyze American Indian languages had, because of their European background, tried to force their analyses into the Latin mold. Townsend's work was commended by the late Professor Edward Sapir, one of the world's great linguists, who taught that every language should be described in terms of its own structure. Some of Townsend's work on the Cakchiquel verb system was published under the title "Comparaciones Morfológicas entre Cakchiquel y Náhuatl" in *Investigaciones Lingüísticas* (1937, no.4).

As Townsend learned of the existence of other languages of the Mayan family, he began to contemplate intensive studies to compare grammar structures and phonological systems of those tongues for the purpose of reconstructing their antecedent common language. Later this affected his direction of the work of SIL.

As he progressed with the scientific side of the work, however, he began to develop the cultural and practical implications of his dream. He devised an alphabet for the Cakchiquel language adapted as far as possible to the alphabet of Spanish, the national language. He developed a special technique for teaching people to read, called the Psychophonemic Method, and made primers embodying his technique. This was an innovation designed to teach people to read using only a small proportion of the alphabet in the early lessons and gradually introducing other letters.



In order to publish these primer materials Townsend started a small printing establishment. To teach reading he instituted literacy campaigns for adults as well as for children in cooperation with local educators. He founded several schools for Indian children, was instrumental in setting up a small medical clinic and a coffee cooperative, helped construct small dams for irrigation, and introduced improved seed and farming methods.

As for the spiritual phase of the work, Townsend and gifted Cakchiquel co-translators laboriously translated the New Testament into the Cakchiquel language. As small study groups developed, they found in the pages of the translated New Testament a counterbalance to the encroaching industrial world with its inevitable secularism.

It was during the second decade of this kind of work, in 1931, that the outstanding Mexican educator, Professor Moisés Sáenz, providentially learned of Townsend's three-phased program while traveling in Guatemala. He visited the schools Townsend had founded, talked with the children and parents, saw with favor the positive impact upon the culture, and invited Townsend to Mexico to do the same kind of work there.



The pressure of the work in Guatemala did not allow him to accept Prof. Sáenz' invitation at that time. Thereafter, Townsend became ill with tuberculosis and was forced to return to California. But as his health improved, he made plans for further work in Latin America. He went to Mexico to survey the possibilities for undertaking the program that Prof. Sáenz



had proposed. He was convinced, however, that one man by himself could make little headway among Mexico's 50 minority language groups. (It is now known that the 20 language families of Mexico may actually include 150-200 language variants.) Despite the Great Depression in the United States Townsend dared start a training school to recruit and prepare young men and women to work with him. Accordingly, the summer of 1934 found him, along with a Cakchiquel lad and three students, in an abandoned farmhouse in Arkansas: this was the first session of the Summer Institute of Linguistics! The students received experience in primitive living and learned to survive in the outback of the Ozarks. They sat on donated nail kegs. Their linguistic theory was derived from Townsend's work on the Cakchiquel language and the Cakchiquel young man was an invaluable asset for putting theory into practice.

As noted, three students attended the first session; the next year five came. That year there were classes in phonetics to teach techniques for recognizing and writing previously unknown sounds and for devising alphabets that would accurately reflect the sound system of the language being studied and as far as possible resemble the national orthography. American Indian language structures were contrasted with those of Indo-European languages. Townsend's Psychophonemic Method of teaching reading was formalized. A sympathetic understanding of minority peoples and cultures was stressed.

That autumn (1935) Townsend and his wife, Elvira, with several of the students went to Mexico to undertake their new work. The Townsends settled in a tiny Aztec (Náhuatl) village, a two-hour mountain drive from Mexico City. In addition to the enthusiastic support of



Prof. Moisés Sáenz, Dr. Mariano Silva y Aceves, formerly Rector of the National University of Mexico and then Director of the Mexican Institute of Linguistic Investigation, encouraged Townsend in the academic phases of the program. The Secretary of Labor, Lic. Genaro Vásquez, intensely interested in a cultural program for the Indians, had his department publish Townsend's primers for teaching Aztecs to read.



The President of Mexico, General Lázaro Cárdenas, learned that the Townsends were living in an impoverished Aztec village and visited them there. He was curious about Townsend's linguistic efforts and the Náhuatl primers he had developed, but he was especially enthusiastic over the projects of practical help which the Townsends had already started. President Cárdenas quickly saw the need for adding this specialized help to the government's program of education in Indian areas. He invited Townsend to bring all the personnel he could to study the unwritten

languages of Mexico and to teach the people following Townsend's practical patterns.

With this encouragement, the Townsends recruited more young people in the United States and returned to Mexico the following fall (1936) with a larger group of students. In pairs, the students scattered to isolated villages of Mexico to start the prodigious task of learning hitherto unwritten languages. Meanwhile, in the tiny Aztec village of Tetelcingo where the Townsends worked, the program of practical help was broadened to include planting an orange grove and adding women's sewing classes to the government's elementary school in the village. All was carried forward with the cooperation of Cárdenas-prompted government officials.

Townsend had a deep respect for the people among whom he worked in Latin America for over 60 years. He enjoyed being with them and listening to their opinions. Almost from the start he had friends from all strata of society: he knew 42 heads of state, scores of cabinet members, scientists, educators, wealthy, poor, Catholics, Evangelicals, Communists. He loved and sought to serve them all.

It was during one of the visits of President Cárdenas to their village that an Aztec said of Townsend, "He treats us just like he does the President. If President Cárdenas comes, he leaves his dinner to talk with him. If one of us comes, he leaves his dinner to talk with us, too."

Based on nearly 15 years of contact with President Cárdenas, Townsend wrote a biography of this renowned statesman. He greatly admired the general and reasoned that the story of his life would be an inspiration to many and could promote understanding between nations. The biography was published in 1952. After Cárdenas' death in 1970, Townsend expanded his biography, still the only full-length biography in English of this eminent Mexican leader. President Ramon Magsaysay of the Philippines patterned his people-oriented government on the principles which he found in the 1952 edition of the biography.



In 1944 the SIL work in Mexico was well under way with trained personnel. But in the fall of that year Townsend was called to California by his wife's illness and subsequent death. Hurt, but not incapacitated, he returned to Mexico and began laying plans for responding to an invitation from the government of Peru to begin work in that country. In 1946 he married Elaine Mielke, a former supervisor of special education in Chicago, and a few weeks later the two of them led a group of 20 young SIL linguists and support personnel to begin work in the eastern rain forests of that land where some 40 indigenous groups were scattered over thousands of square miles of jungle. Most villages were accessible only by river. These people spoke languages that had never been analyzed or written.



After a six-week survey of the topography by air and by river, Townsend and his colleagues set about solving the enormous logistical problems posed by this vast inhospitable jungle. First a centrally located supply hub had to be carved out of the jungle. They settled on the shoreline of a lake named Yarinacocha. It would also serve as an ethnolinguistic study center. At first the problems seemed insurmountable, but help

began to come from friends in the United States, Mexico, and Europe. To solve the problem of transport, civic groups and friends donated small float planes so the linguists could be flown to remote villages. Most notable was the gift of a twin-engine Catalina flying boat, the "Moisés Sáenz," a gift of Mexican friends to the Peruvian government for the work of SIL. For twenty years this amphibious plane, honoring the Mexican educator who invited Townsend to Mexico, flew thousands of miles in Peru's Amazonia.

As results from the linguistic studies became available, the Peruvian government, at Townsend's suggestion, set up a specialized school at Yarinacocha to train gifted Indians as teachers. They would teach basic education first in their native languages and, progressively, in Spanish. Small, single-engine float planes and the "Moisés Sáenz" were used to bring teacher candidates to Yarinacocha from widely scattered and



isolated streams of the jungle. The program continues to this date with a Peruvian director and Peruvian educators who teach in Spanish. A bridge to the vernacular languages is supplied by SIL linguists who supplement the instruction by translating difficult parts of the lectures and some text materials into those languages to ensure comprehension. Once the students are satisfactorily trained, the government, through its specially created bilingual education system, appoints them to be official school teachers in their villages, paying them rural schoolteacher salaries.



Another of Townsend's dreams was to promote international goodwill. Airplane donations were one effective way of doing this. Through persistent visitation and encouragement Townsend persuaded leading citizens and officials of various cities in the United States to donate small, high-performance, short-takeoff-and-landing (STOL) aircraft to a number of countries where SIL worked. Each plane was presented to the ambassador of the receiving country by the mayor of the donating city. These

ceremonies became occasions for heightening international friendships and publicizing common goals.

Meanwhile, the work of training young people continued. SIL linguists, working on several hundred previously unwritten languages, gained the attention of sectors of the academic world in many countries. By 1942 universities in the United States had become interested in SIL's growing expertise. That year the University of Oklahoma invited SIL to give courses on its campus as an affiliate of its linguistics department. In 1952, at the invitation of the University of North Dakota, SIL summer courses were offered there as well, and eventually at the University of Washington in Seattle, the University of Texas at Arlington, and the University of Oregon in Eugene. Other SIL courses were established in Australia, Brazil, Canada, England, France, Germany, Japan, Mexico, New Zealand, the Republic of South Africa, and Singapore (later moved to Darwin, Australia). Also partnership undergraduate training programs, staffed by SIL members, were established at three Christian schools: BIOLA, Houghton, and Moody. In addition, national training programs have been established in most of the countries where SIL works. The majority of these training programs are still in operation. Close to 40,000 students, representing many countries and organizations, had, by the close of the 20th century, received linguistic training at SIL courses.

The growing numbers of SIL linguistic and support personnel have enabled SIL to expand its work into many countries. The SIL staff is composed of approximately 5,000 members from more than 40 home countries. Over 70 countries are represented by the 1,576 languages that SIL people are studying, usually at the invitation of the government, a university, or a minority-language community, often under the terms of a cooperative cultural contract. Results from their studies are constantly appearing in print. The most recent bibliographic database of SIL includes over 27,373 entries, 21,512 of which relate to 1,724 specific languages (5,861 of the entries are more general and do not relate to a particular language). A little over half of the entries are vernacular works published in minority languages for speakers and readers of these languages. The other half are scholarly books and articles authored or edited by or with SIL members.





Included in the SIL Bibliography are three significant items which reflect a fulfillment of Townsend's lifelong intention of reconstructing language families. The first is a University of Pennsylvania dissertation by Dr. Robert Longacre of SIL on Proto-Mixtecan. One reviewer said this "belongs to the class composed of Bloomfield's Algonquian and perhaps nothing else." The second is Dr. Sarah Gudchinsky's dissertation on the reconstruction of Proto-Popotecan, the parent language of both the Mixtecan and Popolocan language families of Mexico. The third, a University of Pennsylvania dissertation by Dr. Calvin Rensch on Proto-Otomanguean, is thought to be a milestone in the science of comparative linguistics.

One who was mentored by Townsend was Dr. Richard S. Pittman. In 1951, continuing Townsend's vision, he published a modest catalog of the world's languages, *The Ethnologue*, which has continued to grow in quantity and quality. The 14th edition, over 1,000 pages, will be published by SIL in 2000. It lists 6,809 languages spoken in the world today. The volume attempts to bring together the best information available on those languages including detailed data such as their location, number of speakers, and variant names. Since 1996 it has also been on the Internet, and is consulted by thousands of computer users every day, both scholars and the general public.

Townsend taught classes in linguistics at the two oldest universities of the Western hemisphere, the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México and the Universidad Nacional Mayor de San Marcos of Peru. In 1966 a doctorate, *honoris causa*, was conferred upon him by the University of San Marcos. In addition, he received decorations from five Latin American governments. In 1972 Townsend was proclaimed "Benefactor of the Linguistically Isolated Populations of America" by the Seventh Inter-American Indian Congress. This document is signed by H.E. Dr. Galo Plaza, Secretary General of the Organization of American States.

Townsend was for many years interested in the geographical area of the Caucasus in the then-USSR, a territory unique in its great diversity of languages. Under the auspices of the USSR Academy of Sciences Townsend and his wife, Elaine, traveled throughout that region as well as several others. Their travels included many visits to educational and linguistic institutions and were the basis for Townsend's book *They Found A Common Language* (published in 1972 by Harper & Row, New York, later published in Spanish by the Secretariat of Education of Mexico). Townsend's long experience in bilingual education in Guatemala, Mexico and South America won him wide recognition and respect as evidenced by his invitation to address the UNESCO Congress on Bilingual Education in October 1972 in Turkmenia, Central Asia. As a result of his optimistic presentation there, the President of Pakistan invited the Townsends to visit his country the following year as official guests of his government for the purpose of consulting with educators regarding the difficult problems they face because of multilingualism.



In retrospect, it hardly needs emphasizing that during his long career Townsend was not one to sit in an office. He was usually out among the workers where the action was. He made his home in Guatemala from 1917 to 1934, in Mexico from 1935 to 1946, in Peru from 1946 to 1963, and in Colombia from 1963 to 1968. After 1968 he and his wife made eleven trips to the then-USSR from their home in North Carolina.

Yet somehow he found time to write. As has been mentioned, his first book was his 1952 biography of General Lázaro Cárdenas of Mexico. This book describes the great social changes which took place during Cárdenas' regime as president. It was Townsend's involvement in social development which inspired his writing endeavors. His booklets, such as his 86-page "The Truth About Mexico's Oil" (1940), treat more popular issues; he also wrote many articles for the press. His other writings are listed in the bibliography which follows.

Townsend was an extraordinary combination of the idealist and the down-to-earth social worker--a mixture which sometimes amazed his friends and confounded his opponents. He was successful according to his declared purposes and those achievements brought him international acclaim. This success he attributed not to himself but to the power of God to whom he constantly looked for strength in the face of world needs too vast for puny man.



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July 2000

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