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SAN JOSE, Calif. - When Jose Guzman died in 1934, the ancient Bay Area language called Chochenyo died with him. Or so it was thought.

But the language can be heard again, in bits and pieces, in local homes. With the help of university linguists, Guzman's descendants are working to recreate Chochenyo and teach it to their children.

"If we learn the language, it will bring us closer to our culture," said 16-year-old Alison Symonds of Fremont, a member of the Ohlone-Muwekma tribe. "We once had a big culture."

Through songs, flash cards, puzzles and bingo games, a committee of the tribe's elder women lead lessons for about two dozen kids, ages 4 to 16. They meet for pizza parties and birthdays; this month the youngsters sang their first-ever translation of holiday songs.

"It hasn't been spoken in 75 years," said Michele Sanchez of Hayward, a member of the tribe's language committee. "Our goal is to learn it again."

She never heard it as a child; her grandmother, raised at the orphanage at the Mission San Jose convent, wasn't allowed to speak Chochenyo and so couldn't pass it on.

Chochenyo was once spoken by thousands throughout much of the East and South Bay, until the region fell under the influence of the Spanish-speaking Franciscan missionaries with the founding of Mission San Jose in 1797. The name of the tribe, Muwekma, translates as "the people."

The language was suppressed, part of a larger effort to assimilate American Indians at missions and boarding schools. Some members were punished for speaking the language; others died from disease or homicide.

It was well on its way toward extinction when Guzman met Stanford-educated anthropologist John Peabody Harrington, field linguist for the Smithsonian's Bureau of American Ethnology.

Guzman and his companion Maria de los Angeles Colos were members of a small group called the Verona Band, who worked on the Pleasanton estate built by George and Phoebe Apperson Hearst and lived in Sunol in the 1920s.

They were the last fluent speakers of Chochenyo, according to San Jose State University archaeologist Alan Leventhal.

Harrington recorded Guzman's voice on a wax cylinder. He also took extensive notes.

Guzman sang stories that had been passed down through generations of his family. He recited verb tenses. He used specific vocabulary, such as words for "rabbit skin" or "sweetheart," according to Sanchez.

And he described everyday customs that offer insights into the culture, such as "Stir the acorn mush," "The women are carrying tule on their backs," and "Go get your horse so we can go hunt for meat." Shortly after the visit, Guzman died.

Guzman's voice has since been preserved on tape and a CD.

The project was part of Harrington's near-obsessive mission to find and record the last speakers of American Indian tongues. He knew that many of the 250 languages once spoken in what is now the United States were disappearing.

But Harrington's work proved impenetrable to subsequent linguists. For years it languished in massive, dirty and disorganized files.

His notes on Chochenyo were found after his death by the Smithsonian's Catherine Callaghan in a folder identified only as "Choch." Callaghan took the hand-written field notes and turned them into preliminary teaching materials, including a dictionary.

They have since been supplemented by a few other discoveries, such as a copy of the Lord's Prayer in Chochenyo.

Guzman's voice was translated in 2001 by University of California-Berkeley grad student Jon Rodney, using the Callaghan materials. In 2003, UC-Berkeley professor Juliette Blevins was hired by the tribe to provide language lessons.

The scant archival material means that the Chochenyo revitalization faces significant challenges, such as accurate pronunciation. There also are gaps in the lexicon.

"There's not a lot," said Sanchez, who has learned the orthographic symbols used by linguists. "There were once 15,000 words; we know only 1,500 to 2,000. There are holes in it."

To complicate matters, there were huge regional differences in the language, with variants in San Jose, Niles and San Lorenzo. It was related to at least seven other American Indian languages of mid-coastal California. Linguists say the region's highly varied ecology encouraged great linguistic diversity.

The Bay Area's Muwekma are not alone in their revitalization effort. Similar efforts are under way for the Mohawk language of Northern New York; Wampanoag, an Algonquin language of Massachusetts; and Choctaw, native to Mississippi. These tribes all look to native Hawaiian, re-established in 1984 and flourishing within small tribes today, for inspiration.

The 425 members of the present-day Muwekma tribe, which comprises all of the known surviving American Indian lineages native to the region, are striving to win federal recognition. Among many other things, recognition would provide funding to expand their language lessons. They currently must pay for professors' time and materials out of their own pockets, a big constraint.

As they learn, they cherish the fuzzy but fluent recording of Guzman's voice. He left a bridge between their past and future, they say.

"The language speaks to who we are, where we come from and how we identify ourselves as a people," said Rosemary Cambra of Fremont, tribal chair.

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