

In Memoriam William “Bill” Bright, 1928-2006

Bill Bright, perhaps the most prominent academic student of place names in the United States, passed away Oct.15, 2006, in Louisville, Colorado.

Bill was born in 1928 in Oxnard, California. He entered UC-Berkeley in 1945, after graduating from high school at the age of 16. He initially planned to major in pre-med, but became interested in Spanish – an interest he would continue to follow throughout his life. This led him to summer school in 1947 in Mexico City, where he then became interested in the Nahuatl (Aztec) language as well – another interest which he would pursue through the rest of his life. Returning to UC-Berkeley, he did an independent major in the then-nascent field of linguistics, and in 1949 began fieldwork on the Karuk language – an association which continued throughout his life.

After a stint in the army from 1952-54, working in military intelligence, he returned to Berkeley to complete his PhD in 1955. He then went to India for two years on a Rockefeller Foundation Fellowship, and developed an interest in the languages and cultures of South Asia which – yet again – would remain important to him throughout his career. Bill Bright was not someone who simply moved from one subject to the next; rather he was constantly adding more and more interests and areas of expertise throughout his life, accumulating an incredible store of knowledge and wisdom (and human contacts and relationships) which came to serve him well in many areas, especially in the complex study of place names.

He became a professor of linguistics at UCLA in 1959, where he remained until retirement. During his time there, he edited the most prestigious journal in his field, *Language*, for over twenty years, and served as president of the Linguistic Society of America in 1989. He published literally hundreds of

different books, articles, and reviews during that time. Of most interest to readers of *Names*, he was instrumental in bringing increased linguistic rigor to the field of place name studies, particularly with regards to foreign and Native American languages. As much as anyone, he helped convert the field from an area dominated by local historians, geographers, and folklorists to one in which the highest standards of linguistic accuracy are to be expected. His own publications on the place names of California (1998) and Colorado (1993, 2004) are the standard reference works on those states. In addition, his numerous reviews of other such place name studies helped to elevate and maintain the standard of linguistic accuracy in the field. His career culminated in the publication in 2004 of *Native American Place Names of the United States*. This work brings together for the first time names from throughout the country, derived from hundred of different languages and dialects. It was a monumental undertaking, and will be the necessary point of departure for all future work in this area.

Bill also worked extensively on the place names of Mexico, relying on his knowledge of Spanish, Nahuatl, and other Uto-Aztec languages. He was still collaborating on that work nearly up until the time of his death. Indeed, Bill kept working on virtually everything which interested him as long as he was physically able to do so, despite often debilitating physical pain. Even after receiving a diagnosis of incurable brain cancer, he continued working with the Karuk Tribe on their updated dictionary, and with his Mexican collaborators. The last time I saw him, before he went into the hospice in Louisville, was in late September. When I arrived at his house, he said that for the first time he felt truly depressed due to his illness. This was not, however, because of the illness itself or the prognosis for his own life, but because he had been obliged to call California and Mexico to tell those working with him that he simply could not continue. He was deeply devoted to his work, and also to the people he worked

with, and felt deeply pained to no longer be able to contribute. Similarly, he had taken on the responsibility of organizing the Council of Geographic Names Authorities (COGNA) conference in Boulder for October, 2006. When he had to withdraw from that work, he again felt apologetic for not being able to continue. I believe these personal anecdotes are important because they reveal not only Bill's dedication as an academic to the field of place names and linguistics more generally, but also his concern for the many people whose lives he touched. He was an extraordinary networker, and was involved with many people outside of academia as well as in. His important contributions to COGNA over the years since 1995 are one example, and his service on the Colorado Board of Geographic Names for over a decade is another. To cite another instance of this, Bill was an academic expert on the world's writing systems, but he also tutored local immigrants in Boulder in English language and especially literacy, and found great joy in this. This past fall, Bill also became the first ever honorary member of the Karuk tribe, by an act of the Karuk Tribal Council. His Karuk name, by the way, was *uhyanapatánvaanich*, meaning "little word asker."

Bill's interest in people and the social implications of language and linguistics showed up in his many publications on sociological and anthropological topics. This was the case with his place names work as well. Recent publications covered such topics as the toponymy of the Lewis and Clark expedition, the issue of the word "squaw" in place names, from both a linguistic and a social perspective, and the question of what exactly is a "place name," in an article which examined cross-cultural biases and perspectives about naming forms and practices. The breadth of his knowledge and the warmth of his personality will be greatly missed by all scholars and students of language and of naming.