

RUTH KELLETT ROBERTS

1885 - 1967

Not infrequently in the history of their discipline, anthropologists have been rendered invaluable assistance by non-professionals who, on occasion, have displayed remarkable insights, talents, and professionalism. Such an individual was Ruth Kellett Roberts.

Less frequently have these individuals been given their just rewards or professional recognition by those who have benefited from their acquaintance and counsel. Some anthropologists have been fair, even quite generous, in paying due credit to native informants, such as to the Yurok Robert Spott, or the Papago Juan Dolores. Yet few have had occasion to honor the efforts of the non-native informant. On this occasion, several ethnologists and humanists concerned with the American Indian join me in commemorating Mrs. Roberts, who died at Crescent City, California, on November 15, 1967.

Mrs. Roberts epitomized the best attributes of a long-standing American tradition, the dedicated historian of local Indian life. During her lifelong association with the Indians of northwestern California, she watched the steady disintegration of native culture, and she determined to do all she could to preserve a record of the Indians she knew. She had no anthropological training, but her contact with Dr. Kroeber and other scholars led her to deepen her knowledge of the Indians. The Indians knew her and trusted her (Richard Gould).

Over a span of more than fifty years of acquaintance with the acculturating natives of northwestern California¹ and their numerous problems, Mrs. Roberts assisted ethnological researchers throughout most of the history of their systematic field study of local Indian ethnography. She was notably useful and vital in the ethnological rediscovery of this region in the last five to ten years of her life.

Mrs. Roberts did not boast of any exhaustive, impractical knowledge of the totality of local Indian ethnography in an intellectual

vein. And she was not a native. Rather, the primary skills which she brought to bear were her intelligence, intellectual honesty and gentility, all of unimpeachable, high calibre, and the consequent trust and confidence which all Indians placed in her. Yet her practical command of ethnography, extending even to the most obscure technological trait, was surprising and pleasing to one accustomed to whites, even those who worked as faithfully and tirelessly as she did for Indian rights and betterment, who knew little or nothing about Indian life per se. Mrs. Roberts had a way of issuing even the most trivial fact coupled with a captivating anecdote which placed it in human context. It was a delightful contagion we suspect she must have picked up from many years association with old Indians, who rarely ever set out a fact without a tale to go with it!

Beginning in 1915, Mrs. Roberts, her husband, the Comptroller for the Klamath River Packers Association,² and son spent half the year on the lower Klamath River of northwestern California, formerly the domain of the Yurok. Their son made the early friendship of Robert Spott, adopted son of the last, great charismatic leader of the river mouth Yurok,³ Captain Spott (d. 1914). Roberts, in turn, was adopted as his son and as far as we know was the last to be formally trained and initiated as a high class Yurok man. From these early years on, the Roberts family also made the acquaintance of numerous scientific visitors to the region, including A. L. Kroeber, T. T. Waterman, S. A. Barrett, and many others.

It was many years after hearing a great deal about Ruth Roberts from my husband, Alfred Kroeber, and from Robert and Alice Spott, that I actually met her, and I regret that I saw her only a few times altogether.

Kroeber became acquainted with the Roberts family through the widow of Captain Spott, Peykah, in 1915...Ruth and Peykah were already warm friends.

In later years, both in Kroeber's references to anything "on the River" and in Robert Spott's, Ruth Roberts came into them. I knew that she was most helpful to Kroeber and that her life was much involved with the Spotts...

It is some measure of the person and the quality of those friendships that it was only when I met her that I realized that I had been wholly vague as to whether she was Yurok or white... (Theodora Kroeber).

During the Depression, Mrs. Roberts and her family were absent from the River. But even in those difficult times, when they themselves felt grave financial difficulty, at that great distance, they kept up their contacts with Indians, and Mrs. Roberts continued the waging of battles for Indian aid and rights. While the Roberts family was in the Bay area for those many intervening years (1935-1955), their home in Piedmont was opened as a refuge and training center for Indian youth. They provided a channel for domestic and other employment opportunities, for education, for pan-Indian social life, and for a general broadening to alleviate the economic hardships brought about by the whites' systematic destruction of the Indian's old way of life. Mr. and Mrs. Roberts returned north in 1955 to Crescent City, where Mrs. Roberts single-handedly assembled one of the most remarkable local Indian museum collections in the State, with notably fine basketry. There she was Curator of the Del Norte County Historical Society Museum, and worked tirelessly to the very week of her death.

Mrs. Roberts will be sorely missed...Her genteel, but persuasive, approach is no more easily duplicated than her broad command of local history, both European and Indian... To her Indian friends, there can, of course, be no equal. Each elderly Yurok seemed, most personally, to speak of her in the same way: "She was my friend." One lady said of a project which Mrs. Roberts did not finish, the only one of her attempts at the preservation of Indian history which she left incomplete: "But who will do it now?" (Arnold Pilling).

Mrs. Roberts unabashedly utilized her many and prominent social contacts to the benefit of Indian friends, in a wholly unself-conscious and unpatronizing manner. She once influenced the Commonwealth Club of San Francisco to invite Robert Spott as their annual prominent speaker. Spott, in ceremonial Jump Dance regalia, addressed and impressed the body, presenting the scope of Indian problems with intelligence and seasoned oratory, his great gift.

Long before I met Mrs. Roberts, nearly twenty years ago, I was aware of her. She was a legendary person, though I knew not her name. I had even referred to her in lectures on culture change. Those who were familiar with the details of Yurok culture history in the first half of the 20th century knew that there had been a society lady from Piedmont, who had for years arranged for young Yurok women to work in Piedmont homes...That legend was Mrs. Roberts. Shortly after 1915, she began her one-woman battle for California Indian rights, using as one of her approaches this exposure of Yurok young ladies to the wealthy homes of the East Bay of the San Francisco area. In 1927, she worked also for the law to guarantee California Indians the right to vote (Arnold Pilling).

Those professionals exist who will accomodate eulogistic prose which aims without human sentiment or wavering at the narrow mark of professional reputation and capacities, and who will dismiss or even scorn as irrelevant or unprofessional any human or humanistic concern in their estimation of individual worth. So much for the insecurity of our professionals. What Mrs. Roberts accomplished that would--or will--be recorded as a professional, literary testament is small indeed.

Mrs. Roberts occasionally published short articles for travel magazines in order to attract attention to local Indian history and problems. Other than a brief article, "Conservation as practiced by the Indians of the Klamath River,"⁴ I know of nothing she left to purely academic posterity. Yet she possessed a set of notes, taken during long years of friendship with the last prominent Yurok leaders, Robert and Alice Spott, which would be the envy of any ethnologist pursuing Yurok ethnography.⁵ Mrs. Roberts wrote almost the entirety of the Indian section which she instigated in the monthly Historical Society Bulletin, which she edited. She was constantly urged to write more, but modesty and a faithful commitment to the imminent exigencies of Indian problems and promotion, and Museum and Historical Society work, intervened.

I know anthropologists who have spent years with one or similar tribes and believe they have learned much, and who have tirelessly pumped out one bibliographical item after another on that one tribe or its close congeners. But I have never known one who could as facilely enliven a culture in the ears and eyes of school children and adults alike in

the manner which Ruth Roberts did so effortlessly in her work at the Museum, her arrangement of collections and her lectures on them.

In times when it would have been easy to blame society's ills on the corruption and wastage of the upper classes into which she was born, Mrs. Roberts' modest and prudent example shone through with wisdom and ease that would startle a person of this generation, one prone to think his lot in participating in gloomy times unimaginable to a person of that generation. Possessed of a truly novel spirit of noblesse oblige, Mrs. Roberts calmly and courageously took up causes which would otherwise have amounted to costly ruptures in the social fabric into which she was interwoven.

Hardly arrived at Requa, where canneries were located at the Klamath River's mouth, Mrs. Roberts was a naïve city girl, a proper graduate of Mills College, and about to be educated. She had never even heard profanity, she told me years later, let alone seen grown men fist-fighting in a drunken pay-day brawl in the provincial streets. Almost at once, due to her instantaneous friendship with Indians, she was upbraided by a biddy hen of the local socio-moral establishment, who, it turns out, wrote the "Society" notes for the provincial pretenders:

"Why, Mrs. Roberts!" exploded the Society journalist, "that woman you call your friend has had several illegitimate children, furthermore, by NO-GOOD whites!"

Mrs. Roberts found herself at a crucial crossroads, but her reply was characteristically calm and intelligent: "Yes, I know. But she has raised and loved every one of them. And, if I am not mistaken, the father of at least one of them is your brother-in-law."

Needless to say, the intimate knowledge of Indian "affairs" which she acquired and masterfully collocated has made Mrs. Roberts of inestimable aid to anthropologists surveying the social structure of the historic period. Alongside the payroll records in her husband's company safe, Mrs. Roberts cheerfully preserved the tender records of the Indian underground community: birth records, deeds and land titles, and other valuables entrusted to her keeping by Indians. This trust permitted her to open doors to inquiry which otherwise would have remained shut.

An introduction from Mrs. Roberts opened doors. The Indians of northwest California are probably more open and friendly than Indians in other areas, but they, like so many, still have a lingering and well-founded distrust of whites. Mrs. Roberts overcame this distrust through long hours of impartial efforts to settle land claims and other disputes, through her friendly visits to elderly Indians, and through her care and display of Indian artifacts...It was Mrs. Roberts' drive and devotion to Indian traditions that led to the excellent reconstruction of a Yurok Indian dwelling-house at the site of Requa [Yurok rek^woi--Ed.], near the mouth of the Klamath River (Richard Gould).

Her knowledge and contacts penetrated social and personal barriers which few professionals have ever been successful in approaching. Thus she was invaluable to all of us. She was ever a gracious and helpful hostess when visited by us. She was always able to provide more informants, on a wide range of topics, than one could feasibly use at the moment; and, almost without exception, Mrs. Roberts was accurate in her estimation of both their character and competence in any given field in which the investigator needed to inquire.

I personally recall having tried, at first with great difficulty, to open up an old Tolowa man to inquiry on a delicate subject: white massacres of his fellow tribesmen in the early historic period. Here was an embittered old man, otherwise friendly to his own, who had effectively refused to so much as speak to whites for at least three or four decades, likely longer. Then, the mere mention of Mrs. Roberts' name as a mutual friend gained another and quite useful informant.

Despite her class and accumulating years, Mrs. Roberts always threw herself into social work, as eloquent lobbyist in Sacramento or ad hoc midwife at Requa, without that toilsome, martyrial gloom of Christian stereotypy that characterized many of her position. She was raised a staunch Presbyterian, and was once instructed in suspicion of her cousin, a Methodist(!). Her thoroughgoing conviction of the basic worthiness of all Mankind, and her observation of Yurok spirituality tempered any potential, to us unimaginable, inclination towards smugness. She never fought for Indian rights and betterment with that self-righteous pity and underlying contempt for the unfortunate common enough to reformists.

The cruel and neglectful manner in which so many white men have treated these conquered peoples appalled her over half a century ago, and she spent the greater part of her life trying to rectify these injustices.

To understand the Indians, she often lived with them. She fought for legislation to allow them to live on some of the land on which they and their forefathers were born. She helped provide them with the basic necessities of life. She respected them. She believed in human dignity (Helen Williams⁶).

She fought for people she knew personally and intimately and she observed at first hand urgencies of the human condition which others either intellectualized or bemoaned with the crocodile tears of the exploiting class. Still, she never surrendered her rational scrutiny or compromised her intellectual honesty to accommodate facile generality or excess of sentimentalism. Often pondering tales of Indian witchcraft, treachery and murder heard from Indian lips, Mrs. Roberts, perhaps giving the local whites the benefit of the doubt they did not deserve, would philosophically conclude: "Well, the Indians here never were as badly mistreated by the whites as they were by each other." Perhaps the whites were less imaginative.

Mrs. Roberts' deportment was typically modest and reflective, even in a presence in which she was indisputably the authority. Only when prepared did she offer her opinions, or her vast knowledge and experience. The dignity of her bearing rang true, and was utterly lacking in pettiness or false pride. She was often, in front of our very eyes, taken advantage of by Indian and white alike, and knew it. Her wisdom and detached spirit, so very zen in appearance, overpowered any inclination on our part to protest. Her exemplary life demonstrated the great potential of how fruitfully both the interaction with and objective study of human behavior might be combined. The anthropologist who, as Conrad described Lord Jim, "craved anonymity," and shrank from subjecting his intuitions and convictions to the human test was probably mortified by her sparkling objectivity and intellectual sensibilities at once combined with a sense of utter, humanistic involvement.⁷

Often I was easily disheartened by her woeful tales and tribulations, and, missing for a moment the spark of her sublime and inalienable optimism, I would ask her why she did not let me take her "home" to the Bay area. In good, practical form, Mrs. Roberts would remind me that all the people she once had known in and out of her Piedmont home (which Jack London and his cronies had built on weekends) were dead or departed. "Besides," she would remark, "there is still so much that needs to be done here."

Dale Valory
University of California,
Berkeley

TRIBUTES TO RUTH KELLETT ROBERTS

I am grateful to have known her, even a little. I am sure her life was full of good deeds done, but it was the friendship she gave which made her so special: it was absolute, unsentimental, always discriminating. Her affection for these Yurok friends, her respect for them and their ways, her pride and pleasure in them were among the good things of this earth, and they are good to recall on a dark day.

Theodora Kroeber
Berkeley

I was deeply saddened by the news of the death of Mrs. Roberts...Ethnologists, archaeologists, and linguists had long made it a habit to call on her...and she was unstinting in her efforts to give them whatever assistance they needed. I first made her acquaintance in the summer of 1966 and she went with me to call on a number of Yurok Indians, all of whom were helpful to me in my linguistic studies. Her last words to me were, "Hurry back! I won't be here to help much longer."

Mary R. Haas
Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences
Stanford, California

I can still recall my first visit to the Indian Shaker Church at Smith River, California. Mrs. Roberts patiently introduced me to the people there, carefully indicating afterwards the factions and stresses within the community. In my studies there later this information proved invaluable in keeping a balanced view of the situation and avoiding unnecessary friction. Mrs. Roberts was always generous with her advice and help in this way, and many scholars as well as Indians and relatives will mourn her passing.

Richard A. Gould
American Museum of Natural History
New York City

During the fall of 1967, Mrs. Ruth Roberts was of invaluable aid to my wife and me in the early stages of our field work on changes in Yurok law...My pleasant association with Mrs. Roberts was not terminated by the onset of her final illness. She continued her role as a warm and highly-informative local historian and ethnographer until a few hours before her death...My debt to Mrs. Roberts remains great.

Like the great departed singers and dancers of the Yurok and Hupa ceremonies, each was unique. Each had his own style. The old Yurok cry in memory of a great performer.

Arnold R. Pilling
Wayne State University
Detroit, Michigan

NOTES

¹ These tribes included the Yurok and Wiyot (of the Macro-Algonquian Phylum), the Tolowa and Hupa (of the Athapaskan family), and the Karok (Hokan Phylum).

² Until the closing of the Klamath to commercial fishing in 1935. This action of the Federal Government (provoked, it is believed, by would-be utilities monopolists) plunged the Indians, already feeling the hardship of the Depression but still employed and eating, into greater despair and near-starvation circumstances.

³ Cf. Robert Spott and A. L. Kroeber, "Yurok narratives," University of California Publications in American Archaeology and Ethnology 35:143-156 (1942).

⁴ California Fish and Game Bulletin 18.4:(October, 1932)283-298.

⁵ These notes are now in the possession of her son, Harry Kellett Roberts, of Sebastopol, California.

⁶ Mrs. Williams, now of Crescent City, California, is Mrs. Roberts' successor as editor of the Historical Society Bulletin, and was a close friend in the last year of her life (quoted from the Del Norte County Historical Society Bulletin, November 28, 1967, p. 2).

⁷ I regret that limitations of time and space prohibited the printing of parts or the whole of contributions to the memorial, which were kindly contributed by Mrs. Francesca Fryer of Redding, California, and Dr. Arnold Pilling. I am indebted to the contributors to this memorial for their thoughtful consideration and co-operation.