

# The Unwitting Lexicologist

PROFESSOR **SARAH THOMASON** NEVER SUSPECTED HER LIFE'S WORK WOULD BE TO RECORD AN ENDANGERED NATIVE LANGUAGE BEFORE IT IS LOST FOREVER

by Renè Wheaton

**EACH SUMMER**, Sarah Grey Thomason heads to the Flathead reservation in northwestern Montana to meet with elders of the Salish and Pend d'Oreille tribes to expand and fine-tune the dictionary she's been working on for many years.

And every winter she knows some of those elders will die, taking with them pieces of a language that once helped direct Lewis and Clark on their historic expedition, but is now quickly becoming a piece of history itself.

Thomason, an LSA professor of linguistics, has been studying the Salish-Pend d'Oreille language for 30 years.

"I always say that I will understand the language thoroughly in 150 years," she jokes.

Compiling a dictionary wasn't Thomason's initial goal, but it's evolved into her life's work. "I wanted to find out more about how Native American languages in the northwest had influenced each other over thousands of years," she says. "I thought to do that I should really understand one of those language families."

The Salish-Pend d'Oreille ancestral language in northwestern Montana, where Thomason's family spent their summers, was the perfect candidate. So perfect, in fact, that it beguiled her.

"I was hooked on the language," she says. As a

linguist, I really like consonants. Salish has 38 consonants, some very rare in the world's languages."

Unfortunately, the language has more consonants than it has fluent speakers. The great majority of Salish and Pend d'Oreille tribal members, numbering more than 6,000, do not speak their ancestral language. Thomason has been working with the fewer than 30 fluent speakers to record the language before it is forever lost.

Early on, her recording sessions with the Native speakers were less directed toward a dictionary and more ad-hoc.

"I tried grammar lessons and those sank like a stone," she recalls. "I analyzed texts—some Salish with a bit of translation—and the Native speakers seemed to like those. But when I started working on the dictionary they became very enthusiastic."

Historically, the U.S. government's assimilation policies, including the Indian Appropriation Act (1882) and the American Citizenship Act (1924), encouraged the Salish and Pend d'Oreille to only speak English—one of the main reasons there are so few fluent Native speakers today. Still, many young people have a growing interest in the language that was spoken by their ancestors. For their sake, Thomason feels a sense of urgency to complete her work, and pressure to get it right.

"I probably have around 10,000 words," she says. "But I know it's full of mistakes. I've been trying to work toward correcting those mistakes, and then we'll discover more words. I finally want to get the dictionary published, but I don't know how anyone ever completes one of these things. I know it will always have mistakes in it."

Despite that frustrating fact, Thomason labors on.

"I love my work," she says. ■

Native Americans dancing in full traditional dress, circa 1921, on the Flathead Indian Reservation, Montana.

