

In Appreciation of Henry Farmer Dobyns, 3 July 1925 to 22 June 2009

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The American Society for Ethnohistory lost one of its founding members this year. Henry Farmer Dobyns—Hank, as his friends and colleagues knew him—had a long and distinguished career as an anthropologist and ethnohistorian, dedicating nearly six decades to documenting the dismal record of disenfranchisement and mistreatment of Indians in North and South America, always in the spirit of respect and in service of Indian sovereignty. His career spanned the development of ethnohistory as a discipline in itself.

Hank was raised in Arizona, where he grew up in proximity to several Indian reservations and observed the injustices and discrimination against indigenous people who had been forced into settlements along with traditional enemies only half a century earlier. His interest in anthropology began early. Following service in the U.S. Army during World War II, he finished his undergraduate studies and began graduate work in anthropology at the University of Arizona. He was an instructor at Cornell University's Arizona-based Field Laboratory from 1949 to 1952 and began to publish in the field as a master's student.¹ Hank abhorred the embedded structures of institutionalized racism against Indians in the Southwest and fought them in his work.

Dobyns was an applied anthropologist committed to careful field work and exhaustive archival research. His massive 702-page M.A. thesis analyzing Pai Ceramics was an early example of applied archaeology put to service of tribal interests.² Much of the information in this thesis was used in the Hualapai Indian hearings before the Indian Claims Commission in 1946 and in support of the landmark U.S. Supreme Court case.³

In pursuit of this case, the legal defense team led by Felix S. Cohen retained Dobyns and archeologist Robert Euler as expert witnesses. Fred

Mahone, a Hualapai activist who had engaged in a decades-long pursuit of Hualapai rights to return to the Peach Springs area near the Colorado River (and who had been characterized by one BIA official as being of a “bolshevik mindset” in 1927), led Dobyms and Euler to sites related to oral history passed on by tribal elders, which served as material evidence of Hualapai settlement.⁴ Dobyms and Euler triangulated oral tradition with archeological evidence and ethnographies, newspapers, military records, and other correspondence to support Hualapai claims with evidence acceptable in the U.S. court system. This battle was waged against the legal arguments of the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railroad that called the Hualapai a “dying race” and their claims “completely ridiculous.”⁵ The landmark case, decided in favor of the Hualapai, established precedent for the use of ethno-historical evidence to support oral tradition of territorial claims “from time immemorial.”

Dobyms communicated with other anthropologists, archeologists, and historians who had served as expert witnesses for other tribes, and they came together in 1954 as the American Indian Ethnohistoric Conference (which would become in 1966 the American Society for Ethnohistory) and launched the journal *Ethnohistory*. Dobyms was the organization’s councilor in 1965, 1966, and 1968 and secretary-treasurer in 1969–70; in 1977 he served as president.

Dobyms’s doctoral dissertation, *A Religious Festival* (Cornell, 1953), documented precontact roots of regional festivals associated with the festival committee system at Wa:k village, on the San Xavier Indian Reservation south of Tucson, and the Fiesta de San Francisco Xavier in Magdalena, Sonora, Mexico.⁶ While reviewing parish archives in Sonora, Dobyms realized the extent of the unequal burden of mortality from epidemic diseases among native peoples. Telling the story of indigenous depopulation as part of their disenfranchisement would become a theme throughout his career.

Dobyms was a committed applied anthropologist. In 1960 he became research coordinator of the ongoing Cornell-Peru Project (1952–68), a multidisciplinary development project “to bring the indigenous population into the 20th century and integrate them into the market economy and Peruvian society.”⁷ From 1962 to 1966, Dobyms served as coordinator of the Comparative Studies of Cultural Change program before becoming associate director of the Cornell-Peru Project. On the death of Allan R. Holmberg in 1966, he became director of the project.⁸ Recent literature interrogating the Vicos Project has not been particularly kind in its assessment of the underlying Cold War-era democratization hypothesis of Harold Lasswell that was being tested in Peru.⁹ In response, I think Hank would have argued, as would Holmberg, that it would be “unethical *not* to utilize what we know” to resolve problems identified by the community itself—particularly when

the community is silenced, disenfranchised, and oppressed by a colonial and national heritage that has systematically excluded them.¹⁰

Always a bit of an iconoclast, Dobyns conducted ethnohistorical research in Peru at a time when the predominant analytical lens of anthropology—functionalism, and later, structuralism—tended to dehistoricize indigenous continuities and/or claims. His research in Peru led him to consider the hemispheric impact of pandemic diseases that decimated indigenous peoples in the Americas. In 1966 Dobyns published his seminal work, “Estimating Aboriginal American Population: An Appraisal of Techniques with a New Hemispheric Estimate” in *Current Anthropology*. His abstract contains the argument that galvanized the academic world and shaped most discussions of native demographics since then: “A hemisphere-wide historic depopulation ratio of 20 to 1 is postulated. Applying it to more or less well-established historic Indian nadir populations suggests that the New World was inhabited by approximately 90,000,000 persons immediately prior to discovery.”¹¹

Dobyns’s postulate was met with considerable denial—particularly for North America. His estimate of 9–12 million north of Mexico challenged scholars working with Mooney’s and Kroeber’s estimates of pre-contact population (1,152,950 and 900,000, respectively) north of the Rio Grande.¹² Not only did his estimate call into question previous population estimates, it also called into question the legality of U.S. claims to much of its territory. It contradicted the national myth of North American frontiersmen creating a new nation out of an edenic (and empty) wilderness. It forced a confrontation with a prevailing and comfortable idea that, while there may have been some unfortunate incidents along the way with rebellious Indians, this was but a footnote in North American history. It also called into question the “Black Legend” of the Spanish Conquest, which cast the colonists of South America as more brutal than those of North America.

Dobyns returned to the U.S. to teach at the University of Kentucky. In 1979–80 he went to the Newberry Library as a research fellow in the new D’Arcy McNickle Center for the History of the American Indian. After an interim of one year, Dobyns returned to the Newberry Library in 1981 to direct the two-year Native American Historic Demography Project, sponsored by the National Endowment for Humanities (NEH). His research focused on three areas: the Upper Mississippi River (Mandan, Hidatsa, Arikara), the northern Rio Grande (Pueblo), and Eastern North America (Timucuan). He studied chronicles of early Spanish explorations, archeological records, and other historical documents to construct a historical chronology of epidemics that swept through populations with no acquired immunity, which he argued led to a demographic collapse even before sustained European contact. He argued that epidemics were the likely cause of

abandonment of Puebloan villages in 1595 and 1620, and documented epidemics of bubonic plague in 1630, measles in 1635, and smallpox in 1640.¹³ *Their Number Become Thinned*, the results of his research on Timucuan depopulation, met with mixed reviews, though subsequent research has lent more evidence and validity to his estimates.¹⁴

In 1983 Dobyns directed an NEH Seminar on Native American Historical Demography at the Newberry Library, which brought together a group of younger scholars using ethnohistorical methods to document the demographic decline of native peoples in the Americas. Many of those participants have gone on to create an important body of work that documents the hemispheric demographic collapse from epidemic diseases.¹⁵ Dobyns returned annually to the Newberry Library to collaborate with Professor Lawana Trout, director of the popular NEH Summer Institutes on Native History and Literature in the 1980s and 1990s.¹⁶

From the 1980s onward Dobyns conducted extensive archival research as expert witness for the Gila River Pima in their litigation concerning water rights. As senior researcher at the Bureau of Applied Research in Anthropology, University of Arizona, Dobyns conducted research for the National Park Service, tracking the route of the 1829 Armijo Expedition between Santa Fe and Los Angeles and documenting the history of settlers from northern Mexico who accompanied Juan Batista de Anza to San Francisco Bay in 1776.

A generous and devoted teacher, Dobyns was instrumental in shaping the careers of many scholars in ethnohistory, anthropology, and archeology. He taught and conducted research at various academic institutions, including Arizona State Museum, Cornell University, University of Florida at Gainesville, University of Kentucky, Prescott College, University of Wisconsin-Parkside, University of Oklahoma, and University of Arizona.

Dobyns's publications in historic epidemiology and demography still place him among the "high counters" for North America, but there can be no doubt that his work provoked an important paradigm shift in scholarship on Indian America, North and South (see Appendix). Considerable research in the past four decades shows that his estimate was closer to reality than could be imagined in 1966. Hank's influence and support nurtured some of the most important ethnohistorical research of North and Latin America to be published in the last two decades. It took over four decades, but his contributions are now part of the national conversation—especially since the publication of *1491: New Revelations of the Americas before Columbus*,¹⁷ the best-seller that relies heavily on his research. The public gets it now—a lot of people lived here before, and it was *their* land. That's what Hank said all along.

Notes

This article relies heavily on contributions from Richard Stoffle, Helen Hornbeck Tanner, and Lawana Trout.

- 1 See Robert Manson Bunker, *First Look at Strangers* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1959).
- 2 Henry F. Dobyns, *Prehistoric Indian Occupation within the Eastern Area of the Yuman Complex: A Study in Applied Archaeology* (New York, 1974).
- 3 *United States v. Santa Fe Railroad Company* 314 U.S.339 (Supreme Court 1941).
- 4 Christian W. McMillan, *Making Indian Law: The Hualapai Land Case and the Birth of Ethnohistory* (New Haven, CT, 2007), 72.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 156.
- 6 See Dobyns, “Do-It-Yourself Religion,” in *Pilgrimage in Latin America*, ed. N. Ross Crumrine and E. Alan Morinis (New York, 1991), 53–70.
- 7 See Cornell-Peru Web site: instruct.i.cit.cornell.edu/courses/vicosperu/vicos-site/cornellperu_page_1.htm (accessed 7 February 2010).
- 8 Cornell University Library’s Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections holds Dobyns’s papers from the 1960s.
- 9 See, for example, Priscilla Archibald, *Imagining Modernity in the Andes* (Lewisburg, PA, 2010).
- 10 Paul L. Doughty “Learn from the Past, Be Involved in the Future,” Malinowski Award lecture, 2005, *Human Organization* 64(2005): 310.
- 11 Henry F. Dobyns “Estimating Aboriginal American Population: An Appraisal of Techniques with a New Hemispheric Estimate,” *Current Anthropology* 7 (1966): 395.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 397.
- 13 *Meeting Ground* [newsletter of the D’Arcy McNickle Center for the History of the American Indian], no. 9, Winter 1981, 7.
- 14 Henry F. Dobyns and William R. Swagerty, *Their Number Become Thinned: Native American Population Dynamics in Eastern North America* (Knoxville, TN, 1983).
- 15 Participants included Noble David Cook, Russell Thornton, W. George Lovell, Robert Jackson, Michael Trimble, John Moore, Pamela Bunte, Richard Stoffle, Robert Grumet, and Shepard Krech.
- 16 It should come as no surprise that Dobyns; Helen Hornbeck Tanner, director of the *Atlas of Great Lakes Indian History* (Norman, OK, 1987) and another expert witness for tribes in the Midwest; Fritz (Francis) Jennings, author of *The Invasion of America: Indian, Colonialism, and the Cant of Conquest* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1974); and Trout, whose tenures at the Newberry Library coincided, enjoyed a camaraderie. In those years there were many spirited and speculative discussions over black bean soup at the Drake Hotel.
- 17 Charles C. Mann, *1491: New Revelations of the Americas before Columbus* (New York, 2005).

Appendix

Throughout his career, Dobyns insisted on careful archival accuracy in research and field notes. His publications cover North American and Latin

American topics in English and in Spanish. Some of his more important works include those listed below. He also published dozens of articles, seven in *Ethnohistory*, and he was general editor with Robert Euler and author or coauthor of five of the thirty volumes of the Indian Tribal Series. These volumes are also listed below.

His unpublished work in reports written for contract engagements is extensive, and unfortunately much of it is proprietary.

Professional recognitions include the first Malinowski Award, Society for Applied Anthropology, 1951; National Science Foundation fellowship, 1956–57; Social Science Research Council fellowship, 1959; corecipient of the Anisfield-Wolf award, *Saturday Review*, 1968, and the Stoner Award, Arizona Archaeological and Historical Society, 1990.

Selected Works (in order of publication year)

Papagos in the Cotton Fields, microfiche (Tucson, 1951).

The Ghost Dance of 1889 among the Pai Indians of Northwestern Arizona (Prescott, AZ, 1967).

Waubesa Yuma's People: The Comparative Socio-political Structure of the Pai Indians of Arizona, with Robert C. Euler (Prescott, AZ, 1970).

Peasants, Power, and Applied Social Change: Vicos as a Model, with Paul L. Doughty and Harold D. Laswell (Beverly Hills, CA, 1971).

Peru, a Cultural History, with Paul L. Doughty (New York, 1976).

Spanish Colonial Tucson: A Demographic History (Tucson, AZ, 1976).

Indians of the Southwest: A Critical Bibliography (Bloomington, IN, 1980)

From Fire to Flood: Historic Human Destruction of Sonoran Desert Riverine Oases (Socorro, NM, 1981)

The Pima-Maricopa (New York, 1989)

Indian Tribal Series (Phoenix, 1971–76):

The Apache People (1971).

The Havasupai People, with Robert Euler (1971).

The Hopi People, with Robert C. Euler (1971).

The Navajo People, with Robert Euler (1972).

The Papago People, Dobyns and Robert C. Euler, scientific eds.; John F. Griffin, gen. ed. (1972).

The Mescalero Apache People, Dobyns and Robert C. Euler, scientific eds.; John F. Griffin, gen. ed. (1973).

The Walapai People (1976).