Floyd G. Lounsbury
1914–1998

BIOGRAPHICAL *Memoirs*

A Biographical Memoir by
Clifford Abbott

NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES

FLOYD GLENN **LOUNSBURY**

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By Clifford Abbott

Floyd Lounsbury came from humble beginnings. Born in Stevens Point, Wisconsin, he spent his childhood on a small dairy farm in the village of Sherry with his parents, John Glenn Lounsbury and Anna Louise Jorgensen Lounsbury. The farm family struggled, and Floyd developed the resourcefulness—with sustenance, the land, and farm equipment—that was needed to survive. He had an elementary education in Sherry (population 69 in 1923) and a secondary education in three different high schools, as the family moved in search of better opportunities.

Lounsbury benefited from some excellent teachers who sparked his interests in mathematics and languages, and he made heavy use of public libraries and museums when he had access. He enrolled at the University of Wisconsin–Madison in 1932 and took nearly a decade to complete his undergraduate program. Throughout the depression economic necessities had interrupted his academic career, but the extended period also allowed him to come in contact with a wider array of scholars (linguists W. Freeman Twaddell, Martin Joos, Einar Haugen, Myles Dillon, and R. M. S. Heffner and anthropologists Ralph Linton, William D. Howells, Wendell C. Bennett, H. Scudder Mekeel, and Morris Swadesh) and it allowed him perhaps a more thoughtful and measured approach to undergraduate education than he might have had otherwise. Lounsbury majored in mathematics but also studied languages, primarily German but also Latin, Greek, Scandinavian languages, and Old Irish, along with phonetics, phonology, philology, and emerging theories of structuralist linguistics.

Swadesh, who was at the University of Wisconsin between 1937 and 1939, stimulated Lounsbury's lifelong interest in indigenous languages. Swadesh lobbied for a Works Progress Administration project to employ speakers of the Oneida language in a community just outside Green Bay, Wisconsin, to document their own language and culture. For the resulting Oneida Language and Folklore Project, which ran from 1938 to 1941, Swadesh recruited Lounsbury to help train about a dozen Oneida speakers in

a phonemic transcription. Those speakers were then to collect language samples and cultural stories from other members of the community. When Swadesh left Wisconsin just after the project began, he arranged for Lounsbury, still an undergraduate, to become the director ("foreman" in WPA terms) for the project.

Lounsbury developed close relationships with the Oneidas (they corrupted his last name to "lunchberry" and used the Oneida word for "lunch" to give him an Oneida name) and showed the resourcefulness that characterized his earlier life. He modified a typewriter by filing off parts of some keys so that the needed phonetic symbols could be typed. He formatted texts with carbon copies so that the pages could be cut into word slips for lexicographical work. He managed to get hold of a bunch of unmarked cardboard that could be folded into shoeboxes to house the word slips. He arranged the transportation for a singing society to travel to studios in Madison to make recordings of their culturally important songs. And he organized shows with Oneida-language skits to raise money, along with donated paper from a local paper mill, in order to publish collections of those songs in the transcription, which was on its way to becoming the standard orthography for the language. In all, more than 800 texts were amassed and they have become an important and much-used collection for the community. More than 40 years later, Oneida speakers would make audio records from these WPA texts; and, later still, many of the records would be digitized and made available to wider audiences in online digital collections.

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This project ended just before Lounsbury graduated in 1941 with a B.A. in mathematics, but it clearly provided the basis for his further study. He was appointed research assistant in anthropology at the University of Wisconsin–Madison and meanwhile worked on an M.A. degree. This appointment allowed him to do some fieldwork in Oklahoma on Cherokee, a language distantly related to Oneida, and on other languages. He had largely completed his master's thesis on Oneida phonology when World War II intervened. The degree was officially awarded after the war, in 1946.

Lounsbury spent the war years in the U.S. Army Air Force as a master-sergeant meteorologist and was stationed for a time in Brazil, where he learned Portuguese and made contact with several indigenous groups. In 1950 he returned to Brazil with recording equipment to document several indigenous languages (Terena and Bororo and to a lesser extent Umotina, Guarani, and Bakairi). After the war he had had opportunities to continue a career in meteorology with Pan American Airways, but he chose instead to accept a Rockefeller grant to continue his education. Lounsbury spent 1946 to 1949 in a doctoral program in anthropology at Yale under the guidance of Bernard Bloch (chair of linguistics) and Cornelius Osgood (chair of anthropology). He first imagined a thesis on comparative Iroquoian, addressing the linguistic family that contains Oneida and Cherokee, but he narrowed this topic to word structure in Oneida—principally the verb, the most complex and important word class. The dissertation was titled "Iroquoian Morphology" and was later published in 1953 as *Oneida Verb Morphology.* To this day, the work remains the scholar's bible for the basic structure and terminology of Iroquoian languages.

While still pursuing his doctoral degree Lounsbury began teaching, first with a linguistics introduction for anthropologists. After receiving his Ph.D. in 1949 he accepted an appointment to the Department of Anthropology and remained at Yale until his retirement in 1979. He served as assistant professor until 1955, associate professor until 1961, professor until 1969, Reuben Post Halleck Professor of Anthropology until 1973, and finally Sterling Professor of Anthropology. He also received the Wilbur Cross Medal of the Yale Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, the school's highest honor bestowed on its alumni, in 1971. Beyond Yale he taught four times for the summer Linguistic Institute of the Linguistic Society of America at the Universities of Michigan, Chicago, and Washington. He also continued fieldwork on most of the Iroquoian languages.

Through directing dissertations at Yale, presenting regularly at the annual Conference on Iroquoian Research, and working with many others, Lounsbury mentored a whole generation of scholars of Iroquoian languages, among them Wallace Chafe, Paul Postal, Marianne Mithun, Hanni Woodbury, William Cook, Bryan Gick, Clifford Abbott, Karin Michelson, Gunther Michelson, John Beatty, Nancy Bonvillain, Michael Foster, Blair Rudes, and Janine Scancarelli. Whether in classes, conferences, workshops, or personal conversation, he was always generous and insightful with a prodigious memory for detail and a wide-ranging curiosity.

Iroquoian linguistics was not, however, Lounsbury's only—nor even, for large chunks of time, his main—academic focus. He did work in acoustic phonetics and speech recognition at Haskins Laboratory; he refined new ways to teach linguistics, particularly with respect to field methods; he critiqued lexicostatistics and glottochronology; he wrote on the psychology of language; and he published on the history of anthropology. He was clearly one of the most sought-after and influential anthropological linguists of his time.

Lounsbury had been trained in the framework of structuralism, and his analysis of language exploited that framework meticulously, but structuralism before him had not been particularly illuminating in semantics. He always enjoyed working on puzzles, and applying structuralist techniques to semantic problems intrigued him. An early presentation before the Yale Linguistics Club in 1951, "Componential Analysis of a Lexical Set," set off a long program on the analysis of kinship systems. That presentation eventually became the groundbreaking "A Semantic Analysis of the Pawnee Kinship Usage," published in *Language* in 1956. The idea that meaning could be analyzed in semantic components, analogous to the structuralist approach to sound as phonetic features, became the method for understanding a wide array of cultural phenomena. Lounsbury demonstrated the utility in a number of diverse kinship systems, and other scholars (Harold Conklin, William Sturtevant, Charles Frake, Paul Friedrich, and Harold Scheffler, among many others) applied the idea to other areas of cultural analysis.

In the 1950s Lounsbury became interested in Mayan hieroglyphs. The exact origin of this interest may not be knowable, but his interests in language, meteorology, climate, astronomy, and calendars point to a plausible pathway. He studied current Mayan languages and read about the decipherment of several Old World writing systems (including Sumerian cuneiform), and this led him to become an early proponent of Yuri Knorozov's belief that the Mayan script had a strong grounding in the representation of sound as much as of meaning. Lounsbury argued that the way to decipher the hieroglyphs was at least in part through a careful analysis of the sounds of the modern language to reconstruct earlier sounds. Incidentally, in a little known report to the New York State Legislature in 1960, he used a very similar methodology to analyze place names in the Champlain Valley. Several positions allowed him to work on the Mayan decipherment puzzles: as fellow at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences in 1963–64; as senior research scholar at Dumbarton Oaks in 1973–74 and 1977–78; and as senior fellow of the Advisory Committee for Pre-Columbian Research from 1978–1992. Eventually, his studies on Mayan decipherment broadened to Mayan number systems, calendars, and astronomy.

Lounsbury was elected to the National Academy of Sciences in 1969, to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 1976, and to the American Philosophical Society (the home for his papers) in 1987. The Cayuga Historical Society of Auburn, New York, awarded him the Cornplanter Medal for Iroquoian Research in 1972. Harvard University gave him the Tatiana Proskouriakoff Award for distinction in Mesoamerican research in 1993. The University of Pennsylvania bestowed an honorary LL.D. on him in 1987, and the American Anthropological Association chose him to be the Distinguished Lecturer for its 1990 annual meeting.

Later in his life, Lounsbury turned more attention back to where he began—the Oneida language. He worked on a computer program to generate the complex forms of the Oneida verb, and his final publication was a collaborative work on the Oneida creation story. It was based on a text he had collected many years earlier from an Oneida elder, Demus Elm. He later worked on the translation with another Oneida, Harvey Antone, and collaborated with a younger scholar, Bryan Gick, on an innovative presentation format.

Those who knew Lounsbury recall his humble humanity, his generous spirit, and his formidable intellect. He set a model of an academic life to which many others have aspired. He died on May 14, 1998, and was survived by his wife, linguist Masako Yokoyama Lounsbury, his sister Elva Lounsbury, and his daughter, Ruth Ozeki Lounsbury, a filmmaker and author whose first novel showed shadows of her father in one of its characters.

THIS MEMOIR DRAWS HEAVILY ON THE FOLLOWING OBITUARIES:

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