

DONALD LELAND

David F. Aberle
1918-2004



David Friend Aberle, 85, distinguished cultural anthropologist, died September 23, 2004 in Vancouver, British Columbia. He was Professor Emeritus of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia. During his long career Aberle contributed significantly to a number of areas of anthropology including kinship and social organization, economics, religion and the study of social movements, historical and lexical reconstruction, and psychological anthropology. His major ethnographic work was among the Navajo of northern Arizona and New Mexico, where he did conventional ethnography, theoretically sophisticated cultural anthropology, and applied anthropology. He was also an accomplished comparativist.

Born in St. Paul, Minnesota on November 23, 1918 Dave grew up and attended school there. He attended Harvard College, majoring in English literature. He received the Sohler Prize for the best honours thesis in English in 1940, was elected to Phi Beta Kappa and received his B.A. in 1940, graduating *summa cum laude*.

As was common at the time, Dave did little undergraduate coursework in anthropology, but at the suggestion of the prominent Harvard anthropologist Clyde Kluckhohn he had attended three summer field schools associated with the University of New Mexico. His field school experiences led to his lifelong love for the American southwest.

Dave was initially interested in psychoanalysis and its application to anthropological data and in the fall of 1940 he entered the graduate program in anthropology at Columbia University, chosen because of its prominence in culture and personality studies. Dave's graduate work was interrupted by a stint in the U.S. Army during World War II. He spent three and a half years in the Army, much of this time he did psychological testing, interviewed patients, and was chief clerk of an Army outpatient psychiatric service — experience that usefully complemented his anthropological interest in culture and personality. After discharge from the Army Dave returned to Columbia and completed his dissertation in the Fall of 1947. It was published as *The Psychosocial Analysis of a Hopi Life-History* (1951). Ruth Benedict chaired Dave's dissertation committee.

Dave held teaching appointments at Harvard, Johns Hopkins, Michigan, Brandeis, Oregon, and beginning in 1967 and continuing until his retirement in 1983 he was at the University of British Columbia. He was also a Fellow at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences in 1955/56 and a Visiting Professor at Manchester in 1960/61. In 1986 he was elected to the Royal Society of Canada. Significant recognition by his anthropological peers include being asked to give the 1980 Distinguished Lecture of the Southwestern Anthropological Association and the 1987 Distinguished Lecture of the American Anthropological Association.

In 1954 David met the anthropologist Kathleen Gough (elected to the Royal Society of Canada in 1988). They married in 1955. Although their geographic interests were different (India and Southeast Asia as opposed to the American Southwest), they shared common anthropological interests in kinship and social movements and common concerns for social justice. In their son Stephen's words, "They remained inescapably, sometimes tumultuously, always lovingly married until Kathleen's death in 1990."

Most of Dave's early research, publication, and reputation was in the area of what was then known as culture and personality studies. By the early 1960s he became simultaneously disenchanted with the direction in which psychological anthropology (as it was coming to be known) was moving and more involved in other research areas.

Dave regarded as his most significant and representative publications the books *The Peyote Religion among the Navaho* (1966 and subsequent editions) and *Lexical Reconstruction: the Case of the Proto-Athapaskan Kinship System* (1974, jointly authored with Isidore Dyen).

The research reported in *The Peyote Religion* . . . began as a piece of applied anthropology at the behest of the Bureau of Indian Affairs who were concerned about the use of peyote on the Navajo Reservation by members of the Native American Church and about the strong opposition to this expressed by many Navajo who were not peyotists. Dave's research on Navajo peyotists led him to conclude that they were sincerely practising a genuine religion and that the use of peyote in ceremonies was an integral part of this religion which deserved protection as a matter of freedom of religion. He acted as an expert witness on this subject on many occasions. Navajo members of the NAC regard his research and testimony as having played a significant role in their eventually obtaining the freedom to practise their beliefs legally.

In more academic terms *The Peyote Religion* . . . is a major contribution to the analysis of religious movements. Fruitfully employing a relative deprivation approach it reveals much about the relations among political context, economic forces, and the causes of a religious movement. The sections of the book containing descriptions and analyses of ceremonies and beliefs are also masterful examples of both the ethnographer's art and science.

Athapaskan is a North American Indian language family whose members are scattered from Alaska to Arizona, with many members in Canada. Father Morice and Diamond Jenness were among the significant figures in Canada who did important work on Athapaskan language and culture. Navajo is one of the Athapaskan languages found in the southwestern United States. While at the University of British Columbia Dave supervised the theses and dissertations of a number of graduate students working on topics relating to Canadian Athapaskan speakers. His own major research effort involving Canadian Athapaskan materials in a large way was *Lexical Reconstruction* . . . which sought to reconstruct the kinship system of the proto-Athapaskan speech community.

Lexical Reconstruction . . . represents the fruits of a nearly twenty year collaboration between Aberle and the linguist Isidore Dyen. Their starting point was the technical advances that Dyen made in historical linguistics. Dave's specific contribution, aside from his knowledge of comparative Athapaskan culture and his expertise in kinship, was to use Dyen's new methods as a basis for a method of using kinship-term patterns as bases for inferences about kinship organization, which was much more rigorous and much less subjective than earlier methods employed in attempts at the historical reconstruction of kinship organization. The book also offers a wealth of material and insights for comparative Athapaskanists and has significant general implications about the origins of matriliney.

No account of Dave's life can ignore his concern for social justice. His role in the struggles of Navajo peyotists for religious freedom has already been mentioned. Encounters with anti-Semitism during his youth affected him profoundly and left him with a determined, lifelong abhorrence for all forms of prejudice and injustice. He struggled for peace, tolerance and social justice throughout his life, in many places and contexts. He and his wife Kathleen were active in the movements for civil rights and against the cold war and the war in Vietnam in the United States during the 1950s and '60s, continuing that work after the family's move to Canada in 1967. He continued to struggle for peace and justice and against racism, anti-Semitism, and homophobia throughout his life.

He struggled with pluck and good humour against a progressively debilitating Parkinsonian condition during the last years of his life.

He is survived by his son Stephen and daughter-in-law Kathryn Aberle, his grandchildren Ben and Rachel, two nephews and a niece, and a circle of beloved Navajo friends, many of whom formed his Navajo family.

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(Author's title given as of the time of writing)