

Thoughts on the song “Torchbearers”

By Nancy Treser-Osgood '80, Director of Alumni Relations

In 1991 I was approached by a Native American student from the Class of 1993 with concerns about the song “Torchbearers.” She approached me as a fellow Native American (albeit from different tribes) and voiced her thoughts on this song. She was upset that the College would condone the singing of a song that she felt was disrespectful of our heritage.

The Pomona College Magazine Winter 2001 issue had a short article on “Torchbearers” entitled “The Ghost in the Song.” In this piece it is posited that the writers of the song (Professor Frank P. Brackett and student David P. Barrows) “may have been among the first non-Native Americans to witness the riveting circle dance that was the centerpiece of the 1890 Ghost Dance movement among tribes of the West and Plains. The Cahuilla refrain they heard was incorporated into a hastily written College song, *Ghost Dance*, that proved popular on campus.”

(n.b. the lyrics to *Ghost Dance* appear below)

Ghost dance up on Indian Hill
Right near Pomona, Near Pomona.
Indian maids and warriors still
Flit round Pomona, Round Pomona.
Sigh for the learning they never sought
Harmony Hall and battles fought
And for the pop they never bought
Down at Pomona, At Pomona
He ne Terratoma, ne terratoma

Down they danced with one accord.
Down to Pomona.
Spake their shadowy chief and lord,
“We’re at Pomona;
Here’s the campus, here’s the spot,
Where the Seniors once turned out,
Where they made things just red hot,
Here at Pomona.”

We’ve got the brawn and the brains as well,
So says Pomona,
That’s what history e’er will tell
Of our Pomona.
All ghosts who care what the year will bring,
Join your hands and dance in a ring.

And for the dear old college sing, "Long live, Pomona."

(Continuing to quote from the Pomona College Magazine article)

"When *Ghost Dance* was rewritten in 1930 and renamed *Torchbearers*, only the refrain was kept from the original lyrics. Although *Torchbearers* opens with a deep, vocalized drumbeat, one of the features that differentiated the 1890 Ghost Dance from other native dances was that it was not usually accompanied by drumming. Brackett's account mentions only a rattle, and Barrows' memories do not refer to accompaniment.

(n.b., the lyrics of *Torchbearers* by Ramsay L. Harris appear below)

Drumbeats roll'd o'er the silence profound,
Far above Pomona, above Pomona.
Chanting braves making echoes resound
Far above Pomona, above Pomona.
Garb'd all in feathers, each ghostly frame
Loom'd 'gainst the embers while soft there came
Borne through the gloom like a feather of flame:
"He ne terra toma, ne terra toma."

Southland slopes in their sunlit repose
Lie around Pomona, around Pomona.
Soft winds breathing of poppy and rose
Sigh around Pomona, around Pomona.
Stern was the promise our fathers knew,
Pine-clad ranges of misted blue.
Scent of the sagebrush and yucca that grew
High around Pomona, around Pomona.
"He ne terra toma, ne terra toma."

Ours be the faith of the builders whose dreams
Rais'd our fair Pomona, our fair Pomona.
Bear we the torch of their honor whose gleam
Blaz'd o'er fair Pomona, o'er fair Pomona.
Where bleak and barren the sagebrush roll'd
Rise green orchards of fruited gold,
Glory to those who with vision of old
Gaz'd o'er fair Pomona, o'er fair Pomona.
"He ne terra toma, ne terra toma."

(Continuing to quote from the Pomona College Magazine article)

What does the refrain *He ne terra-toma* mean? Neither Brackett nor Barrows was familiar with the Cahuilla language at the time, and neither mentions a possible meaning in their accounts of the dance. Few native speakers of Cahuilla remain today; one tribe member who grew up with a bilingual vocabulary said she could not identify the meaning.

Absent the precise pronunciation and context, a definitive translation may never be possible, but a 1979 Cahuilla dictionary may offer clues. According to the dictionary, the term *henew* means to get mad, and *tuman* means to attack in surprise. No listed word has a pronunciation approximating that of *terra*.

Brackett and Barrows believed they were witnessing a war dance, and presumably were aware that the phrase they brought back to the College could have a combative tone. But one irony of the Ghost Dance was that although celebrants sometimes evoked past battles, and wore ochre paint associated with war—stoking fear among white settlers—the shaman who inspired the dance stressed nonviolence and racial harmony.”

(This concludes the quoting of the Pomona College Magazine article)

In another article in that same issue of the magazine, the song is further explored:

Torchbearers, the song many consider to be Pomona's most beloved, also is the one with the deepest and most sensitive history.

When Frank P. Brackett, professor of astronomy, and David P. Barrows, then a student at a preparatory school affiliated with the College, observed a ceremonial dance of the Cahuilla tribe in 1890 or 1891 near present-day Idyllwild, California, in the San Jacinto Mountains, they were struck by its solemn power. After they returned to the campus, Barrows sang the dance's haunting refrain—*He ne terra-toma*—at a Halloween celebration, and others took it up. It was incorporated into a College song called *Ghost Dance*, with lyrics that Brackett later dismissed in his book, *Granite and Sagebrush*, as "rather silly."

Brackett described what he and Barrows had seen as "an ancient war dance," but his account conforms closely to descriptions, illustrations and photographs of the Ghost Dance movement filed in the 1890s by anthropologist James Mooney with the Smithsonian Institution's Bureau of American Ethnology.

The Ghost Dance was a unifying religious movement that was inspired by a shaman of the Northern Paiute, cousins of the Cahuilla, and quickly spread to tribes from Southern California to South Dakota. The movement peaked in 1890, about the same time Brackett and Barrows visited the Cahuilla. The Ghost Dance prophet claimed to have received a revelation promising freedom, harmony and the restoration of old traditions to the indigenous peoples. Tribes adapted the prophecies to their own cultures, and some envisioned the earth swallowing up white settlements and restoring nature's bounty. As the movement intensified, white settlers and federal government officials became alarmed, leading to a massacre of Lakota Sioux Ghost Dance followers at Wounded Knee, South Dakota, in December 1890.

In 1930, Ramsay L. Harris, a member of Pomona's English Department who wrote songs as a hobby, polished *Ghost Dance* and rewrote the lyrics for a Founders' Day celebration. The revised song, retaining the *He ne terra-toma* refrain, was renamed *Torchbearers*. Harris's lyrics are much more solemn and earnest in tone than the original words, and in their celebration of nature and the preservation of revered traditions, are somewhat similar to translations of several tribes' imagistic Ghost Dance songs.

Although it has been a favorite of generations of Pomonans, the College's best-known song is not immune to controversy. One recent ensemble member of Native American ethnicity was deeply offended by *Torchbearers* and refused to sing it.

But it is the emotional reactions produced by such songs that are also the source of their enduring hold on hearts and minds. At their best, the songs have served as a social focus, a unifying element, and a means of honoring College tradition, in much the same way the 1890 Ghost Dance served Native Americans. During and after World War II, for the soldiers from Pomona, the chance to get together and sing the College songs nurtured a sense of belonging and connection at a time when it was gravely needed.