

Chinook Language

Kahta mika? Klashe nika.
How are you? I'm fine.
Ikta okoke kopa Boston wawa?
How do you say that in english?

For seven years, Uvic linguistics doctoral student Dave Robertson studies Chinuk Wawa, a pidgin language based on the old Chinookan languages of the lower Columbia River region. Chinuk or chinook was the dominant language from the California-Oregon border to the Alaska panhandle in the 19th century. The missionaries had to learn it for their communication with the First Nation People.

For example, the facility Father Demers had discovered for Indian languages was serving him well. In less than a year he could converse in Chinook and several local dialects sufficiently well to preach the Gospel, translate prayers and compose hymns. Later would follow a Chinook dictionary, a prayer book, a hymn book... (Ref. French Presence in Victoria 1843 – 1991, Green J., Lapprand M., Moreau G., Ricard G., publication L'Association Historique Francophone de Victoria, C.-B., 1991 p. 40)

The following letter (signed by Joseph Signay, bishop of Québec) shows the interest of the church in converting aborigines, in lessening immoral standards of Christians and in stressing the importance of education. <<...In order to make yourselves sooner useful to the natives of the country where you are sent, you will apply yourselves, as sons as you arrive, to the study of the Indian languages, and will endeavor to reduce them to regular principles, so as to be able to publish a grammar after some years of residence there ... You will take particular care of the Christian education of children, establishing for that purpose, schools and catechism classes in all the villages which you will have the occasion to visit.>> (Ref. A Century of Service, a history of the Sisters of Saint Ann and their contribution to education in British Columbia, the Yukon and Alaska, Edith E. Brown, S.S.A., PH.D. second printing 1999 by The Sisters of Saint Ann. p.19)

In 1859 arrived Sister Marie-de-la-Providence (Mary Ellen McTucker) ... she undertook the task of training the Sisters in teaching English while she worked at learning Chinook. (ref. French Presence in Victoria 1843 – 1991, Green J., Lapprand M., Moreau G., Ricard G., publication L'Association Historique Francophone de Victoria, C.-B., 1991 p. 52)