Jim Canary reaches into the pocket of his flannel shirt and fishes out the three-inch tap-root of a Tibetan bush called re-lcags-pa. The root looks like a twig from an oak tree but has a darker, almost black bark. Canary has peeled off a quarter-inch strip of the bark from around the midsection of the root to reveal a creamy white interior. "Feel this," he says.

The pith is woody and fibrous but also as soft as a well-worn page in a much loved book. Re-lcags-pa root, which is known to Western botanists as Stellera chamaejasme, was once used by Tibetans to make a paper of high quality—soft, resilient, and conducive to printing. Nowadays, though, the old traditions have all but died out in Tibet, and only a few wizened old men remember how to transform the root into a sheet of paper.

To Canary, book and paper conservator at the Lilly Library on the Bloomington campus, this loss of heritage is lamentable and, he hopes, reversible. He and four other Americans are seeking to revive native traditions of papermaking in the Himalayas by introducing the papermaking virtues of re-lcags-pa to a new generation of Tibetans.

Last year, when Canary and his friends (the group calls itself Paper Road) traveled to Lhasa they were not quite sure what they would find. They had read travelers’ accounts of paper-making in Tibet before 1949, and they had some old black-and-white photographs of Tibetan women holding paper moulds. But no one knew who the women were or where they came from.

To find the answers to these questions, Paper Road set off for Nyemo, historically an important center for Tibetan papermaking. Many Tibetans were on the road that day, making a pilgrimage to honor Buddha’s birthday, which happened to coincide with Canary’s trip. As the group got closer to its destination, they decided to stop and ask the pilgrims whether they had ever seen any of the paper moulds pictured in Canary’s black-and-white photos.

The very first person the group spoke to was an old man. His eyes lit up as he pointed at himself and said, “Sure, I’ve seen those kinds of moulds before. I use them myself to make paper.” Stunned by the man’s revelation, Paper Road quickly accepted his invitation to follow him home for a cup of tea and a demonstration of hand papermaking.

As it turned out, the old man, whose name “Skog Khog” is meant to sound like the cry of an eagle, had taught his sons and grandsons the ancient art of making paper out of the root re-lcags-pa.

Canary carefully documented each step of the process and brought home many samples of both the root and the paper made from it. Paper experts at the Smithsonian Institution, the Library of Congress, and the New York Museum have all expressed interest in seeing the revival of handmade Tibetan paper.

Inspired by the good fortune they encountered on their first effort to trace Tibetan papermaking traditions, Canary and his friends have worked continuously over the last year to raise funds for another trip to Tibet. The group is planning to host a papermaking workshop in Lhasa this coming August. And, they’ve already invited Skog Khog to teach his craft to a new group of Tibetans who will be able to carry on the age-old tradition.

In the old days, Skog Khog used to pay his taxes to the Tibetan theocracy not with money but with paper. Tibetan Buddhists used the paper to print sacred writings. Today, the monks are Skog Khog’s biggest customers, and they have agreed to come to Lhasa to attend Paper Road’s papermaking workshop.

Paper Road is designing some paper products which can be made by the Tibetans using both re-lcags-pa and fibers from trash left behind by tourists. The group hopes that the new Tibetan papermakers will one day be able to sell their paper wares in the West.

In the meantime, Canary is busy with fund-raising. He figures that the August trip to Tibet will cost his group upwards of US$45,000.

How a small group of people are restoring the native papermaking traditions of the world’s highest country

Lilly Library conservator Jim Canary
shows off the logo of the “Paper Road.”

— J. W.