

Archives and the Museum: Building Bridges at the Sam Noble Oklahoma Museum of Natural History

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It was a busy fall afternoon in 2002. Dr. Mary Linn, the newly appointed assistant curator of the Native American Languages department (NAL), and I, her graduate assistant, had been entertaining a flow of visitors to our offices on the second floor of the Sam Noble Oklahoma Museum of Natural History (SNOMNH). They came to admire the rows of newly arrived archival boxes now filling our once empty shelves and to ask, in varying degrees of gentle ribbing and genuine interest, when we would be filling them. One of our guests, himself a curator in one of the more “scientific” departments of the museum, asked when we were expecting our specimen jars to arrive. We laughed at his (not quite original) joke and promised to let him know as soon as they came in. In a museum of natural history dedicated to the collection and preservation of dinosaurs, frogs, and insects, scholars interested in the collection and preservation of human history—especially human languages—can seem out of place. Our efforts are often imagined to be simplistic ‘jar’-ings of language. They are not well understood and therefore not always appreciated. Still, nearly two years after opening, the relationship between the NAL and the museum it calls home is great. Both sides have benefited from the connection and both look forward to many more years of association.

There are a number of reasons that archives and museums should be considered natural partners. Both are concerned with the development and preservation of knowledge. Both seek to provide public (in varying degrees) access to collections. Archival efforts are a part of museum work if only in the documentation of collection accession and provenance. Archives can be found in museums of every

size, from the large Smithsonian Institute to small local museums, such as the Daughters of the Utah Pioneers Museum in Salt Lake City, where an impressive collection of pioneer histories has been assembled by a century's worth of club members.

In spite of these relationships and commonalities, the enormous power of language collections tied to material collections in a museum setting does not seem to have been fully realized. Archives within museums have been overlooked and underused. I offer the story of the Native American Languages department hoping that this recent joining of material and linguistic artifacts will inspire further developments in the use of language in museum collections. Although the NAL's purposes are primarily linguistic, the efforts made by Dr. Linn and others to define this space as a preserve for living language arts in a material collection should be of value to anyone interested in the joining of aural, oral and material artifacts.

In creating this department, the NAL curatorial staff, along with other curators and administrators in the museum, have explored the relationships between archives and museum; between linguistic and material culture; between living languages of living people and collectable, preservable language arts of people present and past. Our explorations have led us to a new view of the museum and archival collections. These are not just collections of materials or words; they are collections of relationships. It is between the people whom we study and the people whom we teach that the NAL collection exists, and it is through the museum setting that many of those relationships are made and kept.

History and Background

The Sam Noble Oklahoma Museum of Natural History is located on the campus of the University of Oklahoma in Norman. The museum's beautiful, state-of-the-art facility opened in May 2000. World-famous paleontology and ethnographic collections provide exhibits that draw a steady stream of visitors into the building. The museum houses sixteen departments, including herpetology, ichthyology, minerals, paleontology, and mammalogy. The aim of the museum is to explore the history of the natural world—including the history of human beings in

that world. To that end, departments of archaeology and ethnology are also housed in the building. It was because of these departments that the museum was considered the appropriate location for a department dedicated to the collection and study of Native American language.

The origins of the NAL are found in a proposal made jointly by the Oklahoma Museum of Natural History (now the SNOMNH) and the Department of Anthropology at the University of Oklahoma. This proposal, presented in 1996, suggested the inclusion of a Research Center for American Indian Languages as part of the campus of the soon-to-be-constructed SNOMNH. The research center would have been housed in its own building adjacent to the museum. It would have boasted a large staff, including a full-time curator, administrative personnel, computer and audiovisual technicians, five language instructors, an editorial staff, secretaries, an outreach specialist and more than fifteen graduate and post-doctoral appointments every year. The Research Center for American Indian Languages was to have focused on seven objectives, namely, research, education, outreach, archives, interpretation, publication and multimedia production. This proposed center would have been an impressive and much needed weapon in the fight against epidemic language loss in native communities. The realities of university budget allocations meant that the proposed center was not approved.

Six years after the original proposal, Dr. Mary Linn walked into an empty office in the museum and began the process of turning ambitious dreams into reality. The autonomous Research Center was now the Native American Languages department with one half-time curator (Dr. Linn also holds a half-time appointment in the anthropology department) and a graduate student with a one-year, non-renewable appointment. It was a daunting beginning. As Dr. Linn's graduate assistant, I enjoyed a unique perspective of the NAL's first year. The objectives of the proposal were still our objectives, but instead of a building we had an office with no desks and no shelves, instead of a research center we were a museum department with no collection at all. What followed was an intense effort at self-definition. If we were not there in the museum to stuff words into jars, what were we there for? How could we fulfill those stated objectives with limited resources and while fulfilling the needs of our host? How could we take advantage of our position in the museum to bring those objectives about?

Defining Steps

To begin, it was important that we establish ourselves as a part of the museum and not merely something appended to it. Dr. Linn describes the purpose of the NAL in terms of the larger goals of the museum. The purpose of SNOMNH is, she explains, to collect the Natural History of the state of Oklahoma and beyond. The departments of the museum work both to explore and to preserve the natural environment. Exploring humankind in the environment is one important aspect of that work. Just as the museum contributes in surmounting immediate environmental issues, the NAL contributes in the effort to maintain human diversity. This connection between the natural and human world is imperfect. The focus on Native American culture in the museum can seem to imply that only indigenous Americans are a part of natural history—not quite human enough or cultured enough to be included in the campus art and history museums featuring their non-native counterparts. This unfortunate implication may be the result of still-felt bias, but today it should be taken to reflect institutional history and the realities of limited space and resources rather than the worldview of those who are responsible for these collections.

Priorities

At this early stage in the NAL's existence, some of the original center objectives were beyond our reach. Having found a definition that places us firmly in the circle of museum rationales, it was essential that we decide which of our seven objectives we could reasonably engage in given our limited space and staff. Publication and multimedia production, for instance, will have to wait for greater resources and a trained staff. In the meantime, because of support and services available through the existing museum infrastructure, the NAL has initiated noteworthy projects in research, education, outreach and archiving. It is useful to recognize that many of these objectives overlap in ways that allow us to make progress in several while focusing attention on one. Community outreach, for instance, includes providing access to language resources that are only made available through our archival efforts. These outreach efforts have been closely tied with

our educational programs. It is the teachers and students of Native American languages who are most interested to see the NAL come into being and who have made the most active use of its resources.

Encompassing these specific objectives is a desire to become a true center. Looking at the seven objectives we find that each one is already being undertaken somewhere in Oklahoma today. In community classrooms, tribal headquarters, public schools and university campuses, even in individual homes, languages are being taught, collected, and excitingly presented in both print and audio-visual media. Networks of teachers have already been established. Our purpose is not to take charge of these valuable efforts, but rather to become a place where these disparate streams of activity can flow together. We hope to become a central exchange where ideas are born, experiences are shared, and new efforts are encouraged. In the original proposal the Research Center was described as "a place where the activities of scholars and community members can intersect and develop mutually beneficial relationships." In this effort, NAL is cautious not to assume more than its fair share of authority; it seeks to be a resource for the people of Oklahoma. The NAL hopes to know every Native language teacher in the state; have resources for teaching and learning readily available; and provide a place for traditions and innovations to be gathered and shared.

Projects

Any efforts to make these goals reality would be monumentally more difficult were it not for the support of the museum. The combination of museum and archives is most useful when the needs and resources of each are combined to the benefit of both. As we work to forward the mission of the museum and increase its value to our community, the museum gives resources that make it possible for the NAL to engage language preservation work in rather impressive ways.

The first large project undertaken by NAL was a Native American Youth Language Fair, modeled after the large fair sponsored by the Indigenous Language Institute in Sante Fe, New Mexico. SNOMNH hosted the first language fair on April 8, 2003, only nine months after

our arrival in that empty office. Over 300 visitors, including students, teachers, parents and tribal elders participated in the event. At the fair, students from preschool age to high school showed off their budding language skills and interacted with other students engaged in the same pursuit. From the tiny Muskogee Creek boy who spoke a long list of Creek vocabulary while nervously knocking his side with his miniature bow, to the drum circle composed of teenaged boys, to the high school students who presented humorous high school encounters in Kiowa—each student or group had the opportunity to show that their language has not disappeared completely. These young learners are the hope we have that these languages will continue to live. That hope made this complicated fair worth the effort it took to coordinate, plan and present. It was our location in the museum that made such an ambitious undertaking possible in the first year of the NAL's existence. Hours of effort from Dr. Linn, myself, and an enthusiastic but sometimes unrealistic board were guided and augmented by the tireless labors of the education staff, programs directors, and exhibits department. In the end our fair was a success only because we had available the museum's facilities, expertise, and personnel.

Other resources available to the NAL through the museum include computer technicians, the knowledge and experience of museum curators, and the assistance of a collections manager. The museum will soon have a full time conservator on staff. The shared knowledge of so many experts in collections development and management can only be beneficial to a small, newly-formed archive. Established advertising networks combined with a steady flow of patrons visiting the museum's well-loved dinosaur and Native American exhibit halls serve to make the outreach efforts of the department less difficult than they might otherwise be.

Prospects

After nearly two years in existence, NAL is quickly growing into the valuable resource center it set out to be. The second annual Native American Youth Language Fair will be held at SNOMNH in April 2004. Attendance is expected to increase and the board is looking forward to expanding even further in the years to come. The museum, recognizing

the value of this program, has allowed for the hiring of a staff member whose job it is to direct the planning and organization of the fair. In addition to the language fair, Dr. Linn has been able to oversee the expansion of both the NAL collection and its available equipment. In the past year the NAL has acquired a portable recording studio; improved digital copying software and hardware; and an advanced CD reader that will make it possible to keep the collection in peak condition. Linn is working with the Creek Nation to make the NAL a permanent repository for valuable Creek recordings. In return NAL will become a permanent partner with the Creek Nation providing archival training, access to approved researchers, and house archival materials. A similar partnership with the Absentee Shawnee will not include storage of documents in the museum, but will enable the Absentee Shawnee to create and maintain a high-quality archives of their own. Linn is also seeking to become a backup repository for linguistic research conducted by National Science Foundation Grantees. These recent and future additions to the NAL collections suggest the importance this archives will have for linguistic and ethnological researchers in the future, as well as to the Native communities in Oklahoma.

There are difficulties that remain. I have left Oklahoma to continue my education. Dr. Linn has the help of student assistants as well as the new language fair hire, but she continues to work without the help of a curatorial assistant. To some degree this is because many of those who curate within the museum fail to understand what the needs of a linguistic curator are. This is certainly not simply stuffing words into jars. Linn is responsible for the collection and cataloguing of items that must often be transcribed, translated, digitized, cleaned and indexed. The simple act of indexing recordings can take hours. Each additional step increases the time needed exponentially. A recently opened linguistic exhibit features a videotaped interview with a Cheyenne elder. It took three hours to prepare a translation of the three-minute interview for the exhibit. The collection and storage projects in the pipeline suggest that Linn's office will be inundated long before she has the help needed to manage a full collection. Another problem arises from the fact that the museum does not allow easy access to collections outside of public exhibits. As an archives, the NAL does much of its work one on one with individuals or groups who are seeking linguistic

resources. A new website should help many interested patrons gain access to NAL collections without having to face the challenge of getting physical access, but the question of easy access continues to be an obstacle.

In spite of remaining challenges the future of NAL looks bright. A new museum director has returned to the idea of a free-standing Research Center. One day the good work that Mary Linn and the museum staff have begun may be continued by the body of specialists described in the original research center proposal. Until that day there is every reason to believe that this marriage between archives and museum will continue to be a success. How do we measure that success? Certainly the success of NAL programs such as the language fair should be considered. Also the growing collection—especially the important cooperation between Native groups and NAL that it represents—is indicative of success.

In each of these measures of success an essential element is the atmosphere of cooperation between museum and archives, between Native peoples and the academic institution. It is these cooperative relationships that represent the greatest success of the NAL. The structure of the museum enables and encourages Dr. Linn in her bridge-building efforts. It is through friends made and relationships built that the NAL department will succeed or fail. At the NAL, to be an archives in a museum setting means to be a bit of everything. We provide a place for valuable written documents as well as for fragile, irreplaceable recordings. We seek out the newest pedagogical materials and the brightest new thinkers.

We also archive relationships. Onto our shelves go the good will and honest efforts of men and women from the home university. We put the passionate labors of small town language teachers side by side with brilliant masterpieces of language description and analysis. We fit in the children who work so hard to keep their heritages alive and the elders who only hope to leave behind them the gifts that they received before.

At the Native American Languages department of the Sam Noble Oklahoma Museum of Natural History the work is, of necessity, exploring new meanings in the definitions of both museums and archives. The NAL challenges the limits of both in the hope that from

both it may find the tools it needs to become the center it hopes to be. When it succeeds, the words collected on its shelves (whether in jars or not) will not stay quietly in place. No, they will leap from our archival boxes straight into the hearts and off the tongues of the people to whom they belong. And when they are spoken, we all will have become heirs to the best our natural environment can offer.