

INFORMATION NEEDS AND SERVICES OF NATIVE AMERICANS

by Lotsee Patterson

INTRODUCTION

This conference provides a perfect opportunity to share with you the status of tribal libraries, to summarize information needs identified by Native Americans, to point out some things that are happening, and to explore the future of library services to Native Americans. Or, to put it another way, during the context of this talk I will review the past, ponder the present and predict the future.

First, to provide a framework for my remarks, I should say that the 1990 census listed some 1,878,285 people in the U.S. that claimed to be American Indians. About one half of that number currently live on Indian land -- either reservations, allotted lands or in Alaskan villages. There are about 512 Federally recognized tribes. The census gives 542 tribes, but that number includes state recognized tribes and non-Federally recognized groups.

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Tribal libraries began appearing on reservations as early as 1958 when the Colorado River Tribal Council established their library. The nucleus of some tribal libraries began in the 1960s when Vista volunteers gathered small collections of books and wetted the appetites of reservation residents for a library. St. Regis Akwesasne Mohawks in New York State and the Shoshone-Bannocks on the Fort Hall Idaho reservation initiated efforts to establish libraries in the early 1960s also.

The 1970s saw the influx of federal dollars in the form of grants for library research, demonstration and training projects on reservations. A number of tribal libraries that still exist today began under these special

programs. In 1977 the New York Legislature enacted a law which provided permanent support for Indian libraries, allowing them to become full members of public library systems. Since that time, nearly two million dollars has gone to support four libraries serving Indian people in that state. New York is the only state which has this kind of legislation.

The 1980s saw improvements in reservation libraries throughout the country, primarily as an effect of the 1979 White House Conference resolutions addressing the issue of library services to American Indians. These resolutions become the basis for Title IV of the Library Services and Construction Act when it was revised and extended in 1984.

This Title provided money to tribes for development of tribal library services. Knowing tribes would need assistance, the U.S. Department of Education contracted with the University of Oklahoma in 1985 to operate a center to provide training and assistance to these newly developing tribal libraries. This center, called TRAILS — Training and Assistance for Indian Library Services — was funded for only sixteen members but during this time it provided much needed assistance to tribes throughout the United States and helped many tribes get their libraries started.

CURRENT STATUS

The current status of libraries on reservations today is that approximately 200 of the 500 or so tribes and Alaskan Native Villages have libraries. Most of them struggle to survive. Testimony before Congressional Hearings, material gathered in surveys and statements made at the Native American Pre-White House Conference identify major problems tribes have in trying to sustain library services on their reservations.

Four major problems are:

1. Lack of funding
2. Lack of trained personnel
3. Lack of relevant materials
4. Lack of an agency that can coordinate, provide leadership, planning, training and a myriad of other functions at the Na-

tional level to develop library and information services for Native Americans.

INFORMATION NEEDS

The information needs of Native Americans are very much the same as in any other small or rural library. Materials are needed to support educational activities of K-12 students, adults taking college courses and those tribal members who use library resources for their own educational and recreational interests.

Information needs assessments and studies conducted by the National Indian Education Association, the National Commission on Libraries and Information Science, and two White House Conferences on Libraries and Information Services give clear indications as to what Indian people think is important for them to know or to have available. Data collected in the 1971-72 NEA study revealed problems with discrimination, unemployment, poverty, economic development and personal and group identity. Among the information needs identified by tribal members as having high importance were those dealing with employment, vocational training, legal and civil rights, health, and information about service agencies that could help Indian people. Indian history, particularly local tribal history and culture, and native languages were also ranked as strong interests. The two most significant areas of informational needs from the two-decades-old study can be summarized as those providing problem-solving knowledge and those dealing with cultural heritage.

In many instances, material dealing with a tribe's cultural heritage does not exist, or, material that does exist is so inaccurate as to not be useful. Therefore, to have it may mean it needs to be produced in its original form by the tribe. This may include either video or audio taping of traditional storytellers. The story could be told both in English and the native language. Tribal history may be recorded in the form of oral histories. Materials in the native language (with English translation) may need to be produced. In fact, some tribal libraries have become as much a tribal cultural center as they are a library, containing artifacts, art, crafts, language materials, music, and

anything else that may help retain the culture and customs of that tribe. The library becomes a focal point for teaching and preserving the local history.

In my experience of working with tribes to develop libraries on their reservations, I found simply asking the question "What do you want in your library?" gave me very good, instant information needs data. For example, when asked that question at Santa Clara Pueblo, an elder replied "theses and dissertations." He explained:

People are always coming out here studying us. They ask us questions. We tell them what they want to know; we give them our time, then they go away and write their dissertations and their theses. But we never know what they write. We want copies of their studies so we can see what they write about us. We want our young people to see what others say about us.

He added, "We want the State Statutes and Codes so we can see what they say — we want to see for ourselves and not have to ask somebody, 'What does the law say?'"

In Santo Domingo Pueblo they told me they wanted documents that dealt with their boundaries. Their borders have been in dispute since the Spanish came into their territory in the 1500s and divided up their land.

Other information often requested was material on alcoholism, child care, health (rate of diabetes) — all vital information for survival. All of these tribal people knew exactly what they wanted and they knew the value of having information resources available.

Other material libraries on reservations should include are: tribal records, treaties, business records, financial program reports, research studies, land transactions, copies of tribal newsletters, tribal chairman's papers, tribal council minutes, and relevant reports. In fact, most tribal libraries are probably a combination library/archives/records center, and maybe even a museum.

Identifying information needs is important but so is identifying the needs of the library as an operational unit on reservations. This too, has been documented in surveys and studies mentioned earlier. The 1978 White

House Conference on Libraries and Information Services and the one held in 1991 both contained powerful resolutions on the need for library services for Native Americans. The recently completed three-year study by the National Commission on Libraries and Information Science to assess the need for library and information studies has revealed strong support by Native People for library services.

FUTURE OF NATIVE AMERICAN LIBRARY SERVICES

So, what is the future of library services to this segment of the population? The future is both frightening and exciting. Frightening because without certain events moving forward some of the gains of the past 20 years may be lost. Exciting because we stand on the edge of potentiality. Technology combined with public awareness offers the potential to bring library services, materials and resources to Indian people in numbers and ways that only a few years ago would have been impossible.

Access to resources beyond the reservation boundary is now a reality with computers, modems and networks linked to online databases and catalogs of CD-ROMs. Training for staff can be accomplished through distance education delivered by cable TV, satellite or compressed interactive video. Fax machines, optical scanning devices, full text CD-ROMs, etc. can provide instant resources for patrons in the smallest libraries.

Publications in native languages may become commonplace due to the recent passage (October 1992) of the Native American Language Act, which encourages and provides funds for such activities. Language can be preserved and taught using Hypercard and interactive video.

Acquisitions or access to tribal documents, photographs, and other important materials held in the Nation's major repositories will be possible. The planners of the Smithsonian's new Museum of the American Indian are already putting in place mechanisms which will permit tribal museums and libraries to obtain information and images via computers. For example, if a patron in Acoma wanted to see the design of one of the thousands of Acoma pots held in the Smithsonian collections, all she would have to do is have the object scanned, using an optical scanning device in Washington,

and transmitted electronically to a computer screen in Acoma. The object can be viewed from any angle, turned, tilted, and studied. I suppose the next step is to use virtual reality so one could "feel" the pot. In fact, the plan is to put all collected objects into a databank where their images can be retrieved at will by anyone.

Resource sharing can be accomplished by having the reservation libraries networked with each other and to other libraries.

These things are possible, but I told you I was frightened. I'm frightened because there are significant barriers that can keep them from becoming reality for many Indian tribes. Adequate funding has always been and remains the major hurdle to overcome. Another is leadership – who, or what agency, is going to take the responsibility to assure that advanced technologies will be utilized to advantage across the Nation's Indian reservations? Whose job is it to provide the technical assistance and training that is necessary for Native People to manage tribal libraries/archives? How do we get culturally relevant material published? These are unresolved issues for which I have no immediate solution. I am confident, however, that they will be resolved, but most of all, I am sure of one thing:

The future will be better than the past – it has to be!

Subetu

(This is enough — Comanche)

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