

Tribal and Reservation Libraries

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Of the more than 300 federally recognized tribes in the lower 48 states and the more than 200 Alaska Native Villages, it is not known how many have libraries. In 1999, the Institute of Museum and Library Services made Basic Grant awards to 205 tribes and villages, or to less than one-half of those eligible. Libraries on these reservations and villages vary widely. In fact, one might ask the question, "What constitutes a library?" Some tribal reservation libraries that will fit a generally accepted view of a "library" in that they have a designated facility with an obvious collection of materials and some staff but in other situations perhaps only a few shelves holding donated material may exist as a form of library. Each tribe has its own story to tell about its library, how it came into existence, who was responsible and how it struggles to survive. But, one thing is clear, tribal libraries are slowly developing in both numbers and size.

Tribal libraries, those located on reservations and controlled by the tribe, pueblo, village or native group, have been a development of the last quarter of the past century. Prior to the influx of federal monies made available during the early 1970s very few tribes had made any attempt to establish library services. Some reservations were served by bookmobiles from the state or regional libraries. This was often not a very desirable means of library service due to long distances, bad roads, extreme weather and the overall expense of operation.

Much credit for the development of reservation libraries can be given to the passage of federal legislation, specifically Title IV of the Library Services and Construction Act (LSCA) which set aside monies for Native American and Alaskan Native libraries on or near, reservations. A direct outcome of the White House Conference on Libraries and Information Service this legislation assures some funds are available to tribes for their libraries' operation. Prior to the influx of federal monies made available through this legislation very few tribes had made any attempt to establish library services. Since that time however, approximately one-half of the more than 300 tribes in the lower 48 states have attained some degree of library and information services on their reservation. The situation of Alaska is somewhat different and is not addressed in this paper.

Another milestone occurred in the mid-1970s which had an enabling effect on tribes' abilities to develop libraries was the passage of the *Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act*. This federal legislation encouraged self-governance by enabling tribes to contract with the Bureau of Indian Affairs to manage their own affairs. In planning and prioritizing their needs, tribes often listed a library among their priorities. Gradually gaining control over their own budgets, a number of tribes set aside monies for library operations.

It must be added that in past years, the National Commission on Libraries and Information Science has taken the lead nationally in championing tribal libraries on reservations. The commission has made site visits, held hearings throughout the country and issued reports based on first hand observations and testimony. The most recent of these is one entitled, *Pathways to Excellence: A Report on Improving Library and Information Services for Native American Peoples*. Released in December 1992, it was accompanied by a smaller summary report by the same title. Both reports listed ten major challenges to be considered for, "...all concerned in order to initiate a process for dramatically improving library and information services for Native Americans." However, to date, no federal legislation has addressed these issues.

Tribal Library Initiatives

Tribal libraries have slowly developed since the early 1970s and today a number of them are providing a high level of information services on reservations. Always faced with a shortage of funds, librarians have been creative in finding ways to expand the library collections and services. Some examples of reservation libraries and the services and activities they provide are given below.

The largest reservation in the United States is the Navajo Nation with more than 200,000 members. The Navajo Nation Library System, a division of the Navajo Division of Education, serves the Nation's headquarters with an archival, legal and reference collection. This library was established in 1941 as a volunteer library operated by the Window Rock Homemakers Club which in 1975 turned control of the library over to the Navajo Nation. Housed in a spacious, new building in Window Rock Arizona, the capital of the Navajo Nation, its stated purpose is, "...to provide educational, cultural and informational materials and services to all residents of the Navajo Nation." Its special collections include extensive audio recordings, Navajo Land Claims documents, the Correll collection which contains information on Navajo culture and history from the 1600s to the late 1970s and a Native American music collection. The reservation is located in three states and includes 110 Chapter Houses, centers which are dispersed around the reservation to serve tribal members at remote locations. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation

recently provided computers for some Chapter Houses; however, not all of the houses have electricity, a slight impediment to full implementation of online services.

The Mashantucket Pequot Indian Reservation in Ledyard Connecticut began their library in 1970 with an emphasis on a special research collection comprising primary and secondary sources used in their ethno-history project. One of their goals has been and continues to be the accumulation of information on the region's native cultures and making this information available to researchers.

While most tribal libraries provide basic library services, the focus for a number of them involves language programs. Across Indian Country, tribal members are trying to regain lost, or nearly lost, languages—their own. The libraries assist through a variety of efforts including, for example, Cochiti Pueblo in New Mexico, which forbid any language except their own to be spoken in the library during an extended period of time during the summer when they offer language immersion classes. In Santa Clara, Pueblo elders are invited to tell stories in their own language to Pueblo children throughout the year as a means of encouraging language retention.

A review of recent *Institute of Museum and Library Services'* Native American Library Services Enhancement Grant Awards reveals that basic library needs are still a priority as a number of the awardees were funded for projects to automate card catalogs, develop online catalogs and expand collections. Other projects requested funds for training staff and the community to effectively use electronic resources, to upgrade computer hardware and software, to convert tribal archives to a digital format, to improve access to electronic resources and to preserve tribal language.

Issues

Many of the issues faced by reservation libraries are the perennial ones including obtaining sufficient operational funds, high staff turn over, lack of trained personnel, inadequate facilities, and other fundamental needs. These are continual challenges to tribes that have libraries and are often insurmountable to those who want to establish one.

A more contemporary issue surfacing is one bearing a more legalistic approach, that of intellectual property. This is an issue arising worldwide among indigenous people. An Australian document states, "Intellectual property laws deal inadequately with indigenous peoples' information. Although there has been extensive discussion of issues in relation to artwork and heritage materials, there has been curiously little said about the ownership of cultural and intellectual property in published and archival materials." Native people are seeking to reclaim what they rightfully believe is theirs including, I might add, photographs many of which are in archival collections

around the world. Weary of the many misrepresentations of themselves as well as the concern for published material that contains information that is taken out of context or misconstrued some have taken steps to assure protection of their cultural and intellectual property.

In 1993, the Working Group on Indigenous Populations of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights drafted a declaration on the rights of indigenous peoples which emphasized the importance of respecting indigenous peoples' right to control their own knowledge and traditions. Among the draft articles in the declaration is one which states, "Intellectual peoples have the right to practice and revitalize their cultural traditions and customs. This includes the right to maintain, protect and develop the past, present and future manifestations of their cultures, such as archaeological and historical sites, artifacts, designs, ceremonies, technologies and visual and performing arts and literature, religious and spiritual property taken without their free and informed consent or in violation of their laws, traditions and customs."

The above statements are two examples of declarations that have appeared in recent years. There is substantial, on-going discussion among native people focused on regaining primary rights of ownership of their culture. Under copyright law, the creator of intellectual property holds all rights to reproduce, distribute, publish, change, produce derivative works, and spin-off products. If strictly adhered to, where would this leave the many publications, not to mention T-shirts and posters, that have taken a story or a design belonging to a tribe, a Pueblo, or an Alaskan village? Not only is this a question of copyright, it is one that brings into question appropriate moral and ethical behavior. Native people are beginning to challenge authors, publishers and libraries, which hold materials regarded by native peoples as their cultural property, to recognize primary cultural and intellectual property rights of indigenous people.

Trends

Acquisition of computers, software and access to the Internet has brought significant changes to tribal libraries but in many cases tribal libraries would not have these resources without the assistance of Gates Foundation grants to make these purchases. The ability to maintain equipment, upgrade software and hardware and even to continue providing Internet service may be difficult for some libraries with small budgets. However, the implementation of Internet access has created an increasing number of new users in these libraries and tribal officials will be under pressure to provide funding to continue this service.

Also aiding the situation on some reservations is access to information available through multiple databases now being purchased from vendors by state library agencies and made available to libraries throughout their state

through licensing agreements. This brings a whole new realm of information to local libraries. On their own, most tribal libraries would never be able to afford these services.

In one state, New Mexico, the state library has supported the reservation libraries not only through training and small financial allocations, it has taken leadership in approaching the state legislature for special appropriations designated for tribal libraries. Successful lobbying has resulted in significant sums of money being appropriated from state money to fund initiatives beneficial to tribal libraries. More recently, following a two-year effort and intensive lobbying by the state's Native American Librarians Special Interest Group (NALSIG) and the state librarian, the legislature appropriated a large sum of money which will be used as seed money for an endowment set up to benefit the state's tribal libraries.

Perhaps the most promising trend in tribal library development is that of the emergence of tribal college libraries. In the last 25 years, tribally-controlled colleges have grown from the first chartered by the Navajo Nation in 1968 to 24 in 2000. Each of them have a library and the pressure imposed by accreditation requirements assure that they receive an annual budget sufficient to support staff, have an appropriately educated librarian and that materials adequate to support the college's curriculum be added to the collection. In 1994, the federal government granted these colleges land grant status which made them eligible for an annual appropriation from Congress. They serve the reservation as a public library. With educated personnel, stable funding and an annual acquisition budget these tribal college libraries are setting the pace for reservation libraries.

SUMMARY

In January 2000, the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), which began administering the Native American Library Services program in 1997 (formerly administered by the U.S. Department of Education) convened a meeting to discuss activities of the Native American grant program. Attendees, all of whom have had some involvement with tribal library issues, were invited to comment on the program.

The biggest need for tribal libraries identified by those present was a stable source of funding. Education and training for library staff were also named as a high level of need.

Participants also expressed the belief that grants should be available to establish a library.

IMLS staff reported that severe communication problems have frequently limited the effectiveness of the Native American program. This is not news to those of us who have worked with tribes. Communication both from tribal

people to those who might be of service to them and communication from agencies and individuals to tribes may be the third major obstacle to developing tribal libraries—right behind a stable funding source and training. It will take time, thought, a little know-how and people who care to continue to improve tribal libraries.

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