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# Survey, Understanding, and Ethical Stewardship of Indigenous Collections: A Case Study

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Running Head: Survey, Understanding, and Ethical Stewardship (40 characters)

## *Abstract*

*The Aboriginal and Torres Islander Protocols for Libraries, Archives, and Information Sources, the Protocols for Native American Archival Materials, and other directives provide invaluable direction for professionals concerned with ethical stewardship of collections with Indigenous content, however, a fundamental challenge remains: how do we establish sufficient understanding of Indigenous content in our collections to initiate the dialogue of shared stewardship? We describe a survey of a university manuscript collection for Indigenous content and its unanticipated challenges and changes to our understanding of the collection. We conclude that the process of surveying the collection for Indigenous content is itself integral to ethical stewardship.*

*Keywords: Indigenous, Native American, Ethics, Intellectual Control, Manuscripts*

## INTRODUCTION

Many have criticized museums, archives, and libraries for injustices arising from the ownership, neglect, mishandling, and inappropriate display of Indigenous materials (e.g., Grose 1996; Christen, 2011; Bacon, 2011-2012; Lonetree, 2012). Museums, archives, and libraries also preserve and provide access to such materials, and those who aspire to be ethical stewards are essential parties to any remedy. Moreover, librarians and archivists strive to afford access to collections, and many of us feel an acute obligation where collections contain the long-neglected, suppressed, or dismissed voices of Indigenous peoples. In recent years, Indigenous and non-Indigenous archivists, librarians, and curators have developed protocols for the ethical handling of Indigenous materials, including the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Protocols for Libraries, Archives, and Information Sources, and the Protocols for Native American Archival

Materials (PNAAM). These guidelines counsel close working relationships with Indigenous peoples to determine best practices, including appropriate handling and access. They emphasize mutual obligation, shared responsibility, and communication (ATSILIRN 2012; First Archivists Circle 2007).

These are invaluable tools. Yet as one of the architects of PNAAM acknowledged and anticipated a decade ago, acting on these recommendations is a dynamic process (Underhill 2006). PNAAM and other protocols presume a deep understanding of collections: yet despite all that had been preserved and processed at the University of Arizona Libraries Special Collections, our knowledge of our collections gave us pause. We believed materials remained unidentified and their significance unappreciated. We thought the description in catalog records and finding aids likely was wanting. Like most institutions, we represent a substantial degree of intellectual control through finding aids and catalog records but these never occasion or manifest a complete understanding of a collection. Might a close examination reveal offensive materials and sacred or secret knowledge? Might it identify relevant, interesting, and valuable information for tribes and individual tribal members? The materials in our care spoke to numerous Indigenous peoples. Their number and diversity would make for many and varied conversations. Before anything else, we needed to better understand our holdings. How else might collaboration even begin? How else might, as PNAAM advocates, we undertake “Meaningful consultation and concurrence ... essential to establishing mutually beneficial practices and trust” (First Archivists Circle 2007)? How would tribal collaborators be able to explore collections and offer review and insight if we could not point them in appropriate directions?

We believed a wide-ranging survey of our manuscript collections would provide the knowledge of our collections necessary to build on our desire for ethical stewardship. The size of

our collections and the diversity of peoples included made it difficult to imagine starting small as some suggest (Joffrion and Fernández 2015, 212). We believed a survey would need to be extensive if not exhaustive to afford the basis for further discussion with any willing tribal partners. We also anticipated that a better understanding of processed collections might assist us with future processing efforts and make viable collaboration at a much earlier point in our efforts to preserve and afford access to Indigenous materials.

In 2014-2015, time, resources, and expertise led us to undertake and complete a survey in nine months. An earlier effort to survey manuscript collections for Indigenous content had been undertaken at the University of Arizona Libraries Special Collections a decade earlier. While it had made progress that prior survey remained incomplete. This case study describes our renewed survey: its scope and methods, process, findings, and its potential utility for others interested in the ethical handling of Indigenous collections. It also describes how the experience of surveying led us to several insights about the challenges of ethical stewardship and the practical predicates of meaningful collaboration.

### SURVEY: SCOPE AND METHODS

Our survey focused on Arizona's Indigenous peoples. This scope reflected both our collection's strengths and provided a meaningful limit. There were two exceptions. We included the Zuni, who have lands in present-day Arizona but maintain their political seat in New Mexico, and the Seri of Sonora, Mexico, a people of strong interest at the University of Arizona and subject of an extensive collection. These were not necessarily political entities; they were ethnicities.

Arizona's federally-recognized tribes include peoples comprised of disparate nations: e.g., the Colorado River Indian Tribes are composed of Mohave, Chemehuevi, Hopi, and Diné (Navajo). Others include discrete political entities for people of the same ethnicity: e.g., the Fort McDowell

Yavapai Nation, the Yavapai-Apache Nation, and the Yavapai-Prescott Indian Tribe. Our collections included materials before the reservation era, and the composition of Arizona's federally-recognized tribal entities changed over time. Ethnicity seemed the best way to search and collate. In the end, our survey encompassed Akimel O'odham, Apache, Chemehuevi, Cocopah, Diné, Havasupai, Hopi, Hualapai, Maricopa, Mohave, Paiute, Quechan, Seri, Tohono O'odham, Yaqui, Yavapai, and Zuni.

From the beginning of our survey we aspired to record its results in several forms: a guide to collections with seventeen accounts of related materials, one for each ethnicity included in the survey; seventeen accompanying spreadsheets; proposals for projects identified during survey; and notes recorded throughout the survey. Survey notes and spreadsheets supported the creation of our principal project deliverable: a brief guide to Indigenous content we might share with anyone. The guide was intended to stand as a discrete work available to anyone to better understand the scope and nature of Indigenous materials across our collections. At the end of our survey, we assembled 355 single-spaced pages of deliverables, comprised of a brief guide, spreadsheets, project descriptions, and original notes.

We confined our survey to processed manuscript collections so we might use catalog records and online finding aids to identify content for review. All processed collections had catalog records. Most had online finding aids. Many of those without finding aids were one-item collections adequately described by a MARC record. Our well-organized and accessible photograph collections, such as the Arizona, Southwest, and Borderlands Photograph Collection, and our separate audio-visual materials seemed suited to discrete studies at a later date. As collections in our modest backlog continue to be processed, future resurvey would be necessary but not overwhelming. Nor did it seem desirable to delay the survey for processing.

To identify relevant collections and content, we searched our catalog and finding aids using the often numerous and varied ethnonyms associated with each people. We were acutely aware that deprecated or even offensive ethnonyms would be present in the collections, and therefore necessarily part of our search. Likewise, we were aware of problems with the prescriptions of Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH). These many variations, however, proved invaluable for full-text search in Arizona Archives Online (AAO). AAO also facilitated a search for related or even complementary collections at other Arizona institutions. In our initial excitement about the scope and reach of search AAO afforded we contemplated an additional report on related collections at other participating Arizona repositories. Later, we realized our premises and experience suggested those charged with the care of these collections were best suited to conduct their own surveys. Our process might best serve as an example. Nevertheless, we were curious about the potential for collaboration, especially in those instances where we might work concertedly with other institutions and Indigenous stakeholders on matters and materials of common interest.

As we identified each potential collection, relevant containers were pulled and reviewed. If the content warranted, we took notes to describe it. Initially, we described content on an item-by-item basis; it soon became apparent this was an unnecessary and untenable level of description. Our notetaking after that confined itself largely to folder-level description highlighting notable content. In a few instances relevant content was already well-described and additional efforts would have been superfluous: e.g., AZ 132 Papers of Berard Haile, representing a lifetime of linguistic research chiefly amongst the Diné, and AZ 375 Hubbell Trading Post Records, with its 252 linear feet of records closely associated with Diné art, culture, and enterprise. Our notes also served as the basis for brief descriptions in spreadsheets. We

imagined one spreadsheet for each of the peoples surveyed for a total of seventeen discrete spreadsheets. We also considered the creation of a single comprehensive spreadsheet, collating all notes on a collection-by-collection, container-by-container basis.

We also sought to understand the volume of relevant materials, identify preservation challenges, and to identify voices of tribal communities in our archival record. We followed a simple, straightforward method: we counted each folder's relevant leaves and pages and totaled them by container and collection. We noted challenges of size or format. Volume and condition might inform digitization, particularly when it might facilitate preservation. We were not intent on exact figures. We sampled a handful of collections to estimate size. Several dozen fragile gouache paintings lacking appropriate protection, which were provided custom enclosures during this process, proved to be the only materials we encountered with immediate preservation needs. We also planned to describe briefly for ourselves any likely projects which presented themselves. It became apparent, for example, that several distinct bodies of materials were ready for more focused collaboration and digitization. A nearly complete run of *Smoke Signals*, a Colorado River Indian Tribes tribal newspaper held in a single OCLC member collection – the University of Arizona – proved to be but one of almost a dozen prospective projects identified.

## DISCUSSION

Our survey represented an effort to address a depth of knowledge presumed – and a step elided – in calls for ethical stewardship of Indigenous collections. But our experience also demonstrated how the examination of content was a still more challenging process than our initial naïve faith in a single, definitive survey initially led us to believe. As we soon learned, our survey as a whole proved a work in progress. It remains so. Our experiences informed our process and we adjusted our work, practices, and expectations. After nine months, we had gained insight into the

survey and the challenges others might encounter. Surveying is an ongoing, recurring process. It is humbling. It is also essential to beginning conversations with Indigenous peoples about collections they may find germane on a variety of different fronts. Surveying and coming to some understanding of what we hold in our collections is an integral part of the ethical stewardship of Indigenous materials.

Our survey also shifted the balance of concerns in our eyes and affords the basis for a still broader conversation about the utility and power of archives. We recognized surveying alone would not resolve concerns over ethical handling of materials. Surveying was a predicate. The survey would enable us to identify, describe, and discuss collections and their contents with appropriate tribal stakeholders and representatives. Initially, we sought to identify culturally-sensitive materials and anticipated the greatest challenges with those collections with ethnographic content. We encountered few *prima facie* compromises of Indigenous cultural or intellectual property rights, but we're not the experts; the communities are. A handful of collections were directly concerned with Indigenous knowledge. At the same time, the survey of seventeen cultures led us to recognize we were apt to overlook information, record, or images of import or simply misunderstand or fail to appreciate their significance. We knew we could not identify all materials of potential concern or those where esoteric knowledge might inform handling and access. But awareness meant we stood a far better chance of making just such a connection.

Similarly, surveying led us to better understand the distinction between secret and sacred knowledge and the offensive. As the Aboriginal and Torres Islander Protocols for Libraries, Archives, and Information Sources explains, secret, sacred, and sensitive information is a subset of Indigenous cultural and intellectual property. Offensive materials are “racist, sexist,

derogatory, abusive or offensively wrong. Many examples are of a historical nature, but some are contemporary. Libraries, archives and information services have a responsibility to preserve and make accessible the documentary record but must also respond appropriately to the existence of offensive materials.” (ATSILIRN 2012) Where we had begun with a concern for stewardship sensitive to cultural privacy or cultural and intellectual property, we had found little that represented, at first glance, a case for such concern. We found much more which presented an account of the political experience of communities and the voices therein as well as the colonial nature of our archives. These were records which reflected distinct perspectives, full of surprises and the means for understanding a different political history – an archive exploration and conversation might prove helpful to the assertion of tribal sovereignty, history, and perspectives on the past, present, and future collective experience. We have long understood colonial record-keeping makes for vast if tendentious records of colonized peoples. It shapes what we record and what we retain of a record. It suppresses and silences voices. It can also afford us with a sometimes surprising record. The presence and extent of powerful voices, notably in congressional collections, changed our perspective and reinforced the importance of the survey.

One might object that we were surveying and discovering materials not actually within the scope of concern of various protocols, which are principally concerned with culturally-sensitive materials. Again, it becomes apparent from a reading of the protocols that there is an assumption these collections or collections with such content are known to librarians and archivists. And there’s the rub. A retrospective survey is essential even to determine whether or not such content appears in some collections; we can readily identify collections likely to be challenged. It is the collections where content is unknown which represent both challenges and opportunities. Surveying may develop a greater understanding of materials which are not

necessarily sensitive but likely germane or even crucial to the collective life of Indigenous peoples. Opportunities for exchange and trust-building can extend well beyond the sacred or esoteric to other dimensions of Indigenous experiences.

As we conducted our survey, we soon learned our searches might have several iterations as knowledge about sources and subjects accumulated. Congressional collections, where the granularity of description presents challenges in discerning the nature and scope of materials, afford an excellent example. In time, phrases used in folder descriptions like “San Carlos Mineral Strip” – the heading for correspondence on the conflict which ensued as some 10,000 acres of tribal lands previously open to non-Indian ranchers for grazing leases were closed – could become as important as “Apache” for identifying potential voices from the community. Ethnonyms were a place to begin searches, but would not be the end. Notes became more extensive than originally anticipated. Spreadsheets simplified. We winnowed an anticipated set of attributes to something much more discrete: call number, collection, container, leaves and pages, summary, significance, and additional description of unusual circumstances of format or condition or points of concern, such as notes on intellectual property. This last consideration evolved as a concern with intellectual property gave way to a greater concern with cultural privacy (Mathiesen 2012), and as we realized identification of materials of concern would come through subsequent collaboration with concerned stakeholders.

Our notes also came to record connections between resources and potential future research for scholars. Connections abounded. Whole areas – such as congressional collections – came into view as sources for extensive and varied inquiry. Even as the survey continued, our reference service and outreach altered – informally at first, and formally after that. Conversations with researchers, University of Arizona faculty and students, and colleagues elsewhere led us to

new perspectives on collections and their research potential as the survey progressed. Subsequent conversations altered our understanding of what we accomplished and made the brief guide we delivered just a part of the resources we might share with researchers; spreadsheets and notes might also prove invaluable to researchers with specific interests and through their use might provide us with still more insights. In time, the utility of affording researchers access to the resource guide, spreadsheets, and notes became apparent, especially as we invited researchers to use these materials.

In fact, the ongoing nature of a survey suits the continuing nature of the collaborative relationships many librarians and archivists now seek with Indigenous peoples. Our survey was a step toward gaining a better understanding essential to initiating relationships. Surveying and mutual exploration of collections to better understand content and perspectives, to discharge the mutual obligations envisioned by the protocols, would continue. There was no reason not to begin for fear of being unfinished – or even for not having as much control as one might want. The survey deepened our humility and readied us for future challenges and opportunities. Being incomplete, unfinished, and uncertain was not a failure – it was part of the joy and the opportunity these legacies afforded.

Our survey was an enormous step toward a more ethical stewardship of materials related to Indigenous peoples. Over the course of nine months, our perspectives changed and knowledge grew: we spoke with greater confidence about collections and their contents; we identified new sources, some in unexpected places; we became comfortable with the eternal nature of the survey. The number of collections with relevant materials and their volume struck us forcefully. As extensive as our survey had been, we were well aware not all materials related to Arizona's tribal peoples had been identified, much less examined or understood. Surveying would

necessarily be a continuing process, one integral to a larger, ongoing enterprise of ethical stewardship. Nor was there any reason to wait to share our results. As our process made plain, the survey is incomplete, subject to error, or reflects only holdings accessible at a moment in time. It also affords the opportunity for discovery, insight, and vastly improved understanding of invaluable resources.

Much of what we found in our collections were the observations of outsiders, many non-Indians. Indigenous voices were present, too, representing a diversity of perspectives and a variety of positions. Voices speak from a context, one informed by history, experience, and cosmology. They may misapprehend, misunderstand, and perhaps even offend. Making such voices accessible affords the diversity essential to understanding a complex, varied, and common past. Librarians and archivists strive to preserve and provide access to just such diversity. And an astonishing wealth of information – especially divergent tribal voices – appeared in several of our modern congressional collections. Archivists have identified specific congressional manuscript collections as valuable for the study of Indigenous histories (e.g., Kosmerick 1999a and 1999b) but not considered the dynamics which might make many such collections invaluable for Indigenous histories and voices.

Covering the period from the late 1950s to the mid-1990s, the papers of Stewart L. Udall, Morris K. Udall, and Dennis DeConcini provide a wealth of resources. Twice elected to the House, Stewart L. Udall later served as Interior Secretary under President John F. Kennedy and President Lyndon B. Johnson and oversaw federal Indian policy and the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA). Morris K. Udall and Dennis DeConcini, who served in the House and Senate, respectively, held positions on committees concerned with federal Indian policy, and Udall chaired the House committee. All three men, as members of the Arizona congressional

delegation, took a keen interest in tribal affairs of their home state, as well as federal Indian policy. Their papers are a catchment of opinion, argument, and positions on policy and politics entwined with tribal affairs. They document concerted tribal efforts to assert sovereignty and exercise self-determination as tribes built the infrastructure of modern tribal governments. What emerges in these collections is a working relationship between Congress and the tribes where sovereignty and self-determination became a given, one which, while not always at the fore of the minds of elected representatives and subject to exception or expedient neglect, were understood as a fact of modern American political life.

Congressional collections proved an amazing resource for the histories and voices of Indigenous peoples, and we believe their potential for understanding the modern and contemporary experiences of Indigenous peoples cannot be underestimated. While these resources do not likely contain materials of a sacred or secret nature, or raise questions of intellectual and cultural property, they afford access to voices and perspectives of Indigenous peoples and others concerned with issues in which tribal people were involved. There are reasons to believe we will find a rich record like the one in our congressional collections in other archives.

## CONCLUSION

We began with a desire to incorporate insights from PNAAM and other recommendations on the handling of Indigenous resources but realized productive working relationships would first require greater understanding of our collections. We never believed our survey would be definitive, but we were surprised to discover not only how much we would learn in the process but also to understand the process as itself without end. We understood our collections more thoroughly, better understood their potential for research and future scholarship, and had

developed a nuanced understanding of the tension between our professional disposition to access and ethical handling of all collections. And we recognized surveying would be a recurrent process and an integral part of ethical stewardship. We look forward to embarking on working relationships with the Indigenous stakeholders whose histories and cultures are represented in our collections. We believed our enhanced understanding, humbled perspective, and excitement at the significance of what we have but glimpsed in our collections will make us better stewards and better partners. We were making progress. We had work to do.

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