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Archives and Native American Genealogy: A Researcher's Perspective

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Archives and Native American Genealogy: A Researcher's Perspective

By Meg Miner, Illinois Wesleyan University

Editor's Note: This is the first of a two-part article. The second part will appear in the next issue of the *MAC Newsletter*.

In May 2008, the University of Michigan's School of Information held the conference "Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Archives and the Ethics of Memory Construction." An excerpt from the conference Web site provides this rationale for organizing the meeting:

Despite claims to impartiality, archival responsibilities are increasingly being seen as having broader social significances beyond records curation and management of the institutions where they are kept. This is especially true in the context of the burgeoning interdisciplinary field of memory studies and the recognition that archives play a critical memory construction role, as well as within the context of wide-ranging social and legal systems where archives are highlighted in connection with human rights and social justice imperatives. An exploration of the ethical responsibilities and dilemmas of archivists and the archives, as active shapers of societal memory, demands concentrated examination.¹

This event brought eight speakers from the U.S. and abroad together with archivists from the U.S. and Canada in a symposium-like setting for an examination of the ways we engage with ethical considerations in our everyday work. The conference speakers included people who create and use archives and people who are affected by archivists' decisions. One of the speakers works in the Midwest and agreed to share her perspectives on her work with the MAC community.

Barbara Madison is a Michigan-based Native American research and genealogy consultant. She is a past president of the Michigan Genealogical Council and a board member of the Federation of Genealogical Societies. She has provided training and technical assistance at programs sponsored by the Michigan Commission on Indian Affairs and conducted workshops and

seminars on the methods and procedures of researching native ancestry. Since 1992, many tribes in Michigan and across the country who seek Federal recognition have retained her as a consultant to train and assist in preparing their base rolls and family histories.

Madison has presented workshops on appropriate and useful methods for conducting interviews in Native American communities and in interviewing individuals. Workshop sessions include segments on how to research the genealogy of Native American ancestors; how to research federal, state, and local government records; how to research the history of tribes and individual tribal members; and how to use and prepare the materials located as a result of that research.

Madison's conference presentation included comments about her experiences as a researcher in archives and her work on Native American communities' documentary and oral histories. The following interview was conducted via telephone and E-mail during the summer of 2008.

Miner: Please tell us about the work you do.

Madison: My work involves researching Native American genealogies and histories and varies in scope from day to day. For example, in the last six months I've worked with attorneys on a membership case in Washington state, prepared and completed a membership audit for a Michigan tribe, documented the Indian ancestors for a Michigan family reunion this summer, as well as conducted research for an author who is interested in learning more about the history and family genealogy of a Nishinabe family.

And there are always cases for individuals or individual families who wish to raise their Degree of Indian Blood (DIB) so they may join a tribe or be eligible for a tuition waiver to attend college. I am also working with an author who is preparing a book on Indians who served in the Civil War and wants to know which tribe or band they belonged to and who their families were.

In March I spoke at a Michigan genealogical society on what kind of Indian records were available and the importance of the events at the creation of these records. Historically, when a treaty was made between the United States and the various tribes and bands, there were articles written into the treaty documents setting out the terms of the treaties. While carrying out the treaty articles, there was correspondence between the two nations, council meetings, and

petitions from the tribes, land lists prepared for allotment purposes, and annuity lists of members generated, to name a few of the documents. Understanding the when, why, and how of these various tribal records' creation can be very helpful in understanding them in whatever context you may wish to use them.

Miner: How long have you been doing this?

Madison: I spent many years doing non-Indian genealogical research that included teaching beginning, intermediate, and advanced courses in genealogy, but did not begin working with tribes until the early 1990s, when I became the genealogical consultant to a statewide organization in Michigan called the Confederated Historic Tribes Inc., or CHTI, as we referred to it. This was an organization of Michigan tribes who were working on federal reaffirmation of their bands, legislatively or through the petition process.

Miner: Has the direction of your work changed since you began?

Madison: In the beginning most of my work focused on helping the tribes set up their enrollment offices, which included training the enrollment staff, the enrollment committees or commissions, as well as the tribal councils. Later, I began to locate and copy Indian documents specific to their bands so the enrollment offices would have an archives or library they could use as reference tools on a day-to-day basis. Even later, the need for training tribal judges to hear membership/enrollment cases in their tribal courts evolved and I began training in that direction.

As membership issues evolved in many tribes, the tribes retained me to do membership reviews or audits for the tribal councils, as well as workshops to educate tribal members. In some cases, I might be asked for advice as a third party when there are constitutional and ordinance changes regarding membership.

After an applicant is accepted by the Enrollment Commission, some tribes, not all, put the applicant list and any "issues" before the Tribal Council to be voted as a "yes" or a "no."

The enrollment officer, the enrollment commission, and the tribal council have rules and regulations to follow in the form of a constitution and ordinances that clarify the tribal bylaws or

constitution. Federal tribes are sovereign nations and their membership process is similar to the U.S. citizenship application process.

From time to time, tribes may wish to change their constitution. This normally takes a very long time, involving many steps and processes, and requires a vote by their membership. More common might be a change in the ordinances that clarify the membership criteria in the constitution. That's when I might be called upon to advise what effects any changes might bring to the overall membership ordinances for future generations.

Miner: What got you interested in this work?

Madison: I have always enjoyed the thrill of the hunt in doing genealogical and historical research, and the challenges in locating and researching Native records is like no other research I've ever encountered. After all these years, it's still quite the high feeling when I locate a document that solves a problem. There are few people in the field, which makes me feel I'm breaking new research ground for future researchers.

Miner: Who funds your research?

Madison: In the very beginning, most of my contracts came from the tribes through grants. I worked for many unrecognized tribes who received government grants to work on some of their membership projects and historical backgrounds. This research is required during the recognition process. For any of these grants, the tribes applied through a variety of government departments. As some of those same tribes became federally recognized and had income from tribal businesses, the tribes would contract with me. I do a very small portion of work for Native American families wishing to join a tribe or to raise their DIB to enable children or grandchildren a high enough blood certification to meet tribal criteria for membership. Occasionally I am retained to work on litigation cases. As a free agent, I enjoy many fun days to travel and seek out more records to fill in gaps in my collection. In those cases, I sort of hire myself.

Miner: What kinds of institutions hold the archived collections you work with?

Madison: Many people seem to think that Native American research is one-stop shopping or a single research trip. Unfortunately, that is not the case and one should be prepared to visit a multitude of research facilities. My research journeys have taken me to the National Archives, NARA regional archives, state archives, state libraries, large metropolitan libraries, small village libraries, church repositories, private collections, and university collections. Sometimes individuals have materials that were handed down to them and they have marvelous information, but these individuals would not consider their treasures as collections.

This kind of research requires a lot of patience and my suggestion is that for every hour you spend in the library or archives, you should spend an hour at home charting out your genealogical or historical material. Additionally, plan on an hour of time making detailed notes for your research trip and use them as a check-off list. Then before you hit the archives or library, you will already have one to two hours invested in background analysis. When you are prepared and focused your success rate should be very high.

Miner: At the Ethics of Memory conference, you mentioned having a personal library to draw on for resources. Tell us about the collections you've personally acquired over the years.

Madison: During the process of my work and research activities, I have acquired copies of various Indian documents and created a research file. I do not collect original documents, but make photocopies or digital copies from my camera. Specifically, over the last 15 years I have made a concentrated effort to collect all the "Indian" materials I could find that deal with the treaty-making process, focusing on those records that deal with the genealogies and histories of the tribal members. These records have been discovered in a variety of places to include materials from other professionals and institutions, Indian payrolls or annuities, Indian allotments, census records, base rolls, maps, church records, newspaper articles, vital records of Michigan and the Great Lakes, as well as New England materials.

For the past eight years, my partner and I have been scanning, transcribing, and indexing these records in our spare time. Although many people believe there are few Native American records to be found, we have so many that the task of indexing seems extremely daunting.

Miner: What do you hope to do with the index eventually?

Madison: In most instances, the scanned and transcribed documents have been hyperlinked to the database, so when you click on the indexed subject there is a choice to either see the transcribed page or the original page in the old handwriting, which is often difficult for the inexperienced person to read. Currently we have several databases where we have kept the Great Lakes tribal material separate. Completing this is our retirement project and we have not decided what avenue the future will bring. I have been in discussions with some major libraries that would like the material available on their Web sites.

Notes

1. For complete conference information, as well as biographical information and abstracts for other speakers, visit <http://www.memoryethics.org/>.