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Archives and Native American Genealogy: A Researcher's Perspective, Part 2

Meg Miner, ed., *Illinois Wesleyan University*



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Archives and Native American Genealogy: A Researcher's Perspective, Part 2

By Meg Miner, Illinois Wesleyan University

Editor's Note: This is the second of a two-part interview with Barbara Madison, speaker at the University of Michigan's School of Information conference "Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Archives and the Ethics of Memory Construction."¹ The first part appeared in the October 2008 issue of the *MAC Newsletter*.

Miner: In your talk at the conference, you mentioned the buildings and tools of archival collections are intimidating to Native American researchers. Would you elaborate?

Madison: In Michigan, many of the native peoples researching in institutions live in rural areas where they are accustomed to small buildings. The monoliths we call archives and libraries can be very overwhelming to a first-time researcher, whether they are Native American or not. After working up the gumption to drive to a large city, brave the parking, and figure out where they should go in the building, many first-time researchers feel that once they get to the desk where you sit, you are all knowing and will immediately point them to the materials they need.

When providing assistance for people of Native American backgrounds who may be researching their own history and genealogy, archivists should reconsider the standard interview process as the best course for helping this kind of patron. Standing in a large room in front of a desk is intimidating. Budget cuts have all but eliminated any time to sit down in a quiet place and do an interview (the process once used in many archives). Perhaps we could craft a strategy to both welcome and educate native researchers as to what records you have and how those records may be of help to them.

Be aware that some native people have more than a little anger, hostility, and frustration with an uncaring government. Try to give ownership to patrons: "It's your state taxes that pay for this. I am your employee. What can I do to help you with your research?"

Miner: Someone at the conference brought up the difficulties in researching when inconsistencies of terminology are found across collections. Has this influenced your work?

Madison: Terminology can be inconsistent and difficult. How are the various books, indexes, finding aids, on-line catalogs, and documents listed in your institution? Have you used the politically correct term for Indian in some of your indices and catalogs? Do you suggest to the patron that they look under the word Indian, Native American, North American Indian, Anishinabeeg, Ottawa or Odawa, Chippewa or Ojibway when using your collections?

Miner: Another idea brought up at the conference was letting people's stories and histories remain in the communities that created them. Given your point about institutions being intimidating to Native American researchers, what do you think of the idea that collections could remain organic and follow the paths that have existed for centuries in cultures with oral history traditions? What do you think about digitizing these collections?

Madison: Do I think that collections of people's stories and oral histories should remain in the communities that created them? That is a great idea, but I also believe that copies should be placed in a second location for safe keeping. My experience has been that most oral histories are

not transcribed because it is expensive. If transcribed, the researcher can read along with the voice or can read it without the tape. In Michigan, Wayne State University and the Michigan Oral History Association are in partnership and provide a free on-line Michigan Oral History Database at <http://michiganoha.org/>.

Oral histories and other primary documents can be found in tribal archives as well as major research centers. When placing copies in centers it is best to find a home which offers assurance for their preservation as well as for their usage. I am in the process of finding a future home for my materials, and high on my requirement list is an established institution that has a long history of continued archival practices.

Miner: You also mentioned texts you've had difficulty locating. Would you explain what you meant?

Madison: I have heard many archivists discuss that there is not a great effort to collect mid- and late-twentieth century documents as they believe that this information will be posted by living descendants on the Internet, and therefore no great effort needs to be expended to collect that material in institutions. I thoroughly disagree for many reasons too numerous to list here. In my travels, I have seen many institutions that concentrate on WWI, WWII, and perhaps the women's movement of the twentieth century. Where are the materials regarding the Indian reorganization movement in the 1930s? What about the stories of making quilts during the wars, or the stories of gathering pods for materials for making life jackets? Then there are the long-term fishing and

hunting rights issues. Some of these are controversial topics, but they still need attention to be preserved for the future.

Miner: So the main point here isn't just Indian-related material, but the idea that collecting "recent" documentary history doesn't seem to be as much of a concern in some places.

Madison: It is difficult to say when one document is Indian and another is not when many Indian communities are located in areas of non Indian communities, and the two attend church together, attend school together, play ball together, volunteer for military service, and marry into each others' cultures. So if records are not being collected that contain stories of Indian culture as it may relate to the overall community, then there is a gap in collections in that time period in my opinion.

Miner: What else do you think we can do to collect native records for the future?

Madison: If your institution is in a state where there are large numbers of Native Americans per the census, explore what types of records you could collect to help users. In order to add to collections, perhaps creative plans for partnerships with some of the tribes could be brainstormed and then shared at conferences.

Miner: Is there anything else you'd like to add about how collection managers can effectively help researchers find native records?

Madison: People who conduct native ancestry research in your institutions expect to be helped. If you think you are not able to help them, perhaps you need to collect some finding aids from other collections that would help. Perhaps you could have a few sites on the Internet that might offer some direction. When seeking information of one's native ancestors, it is no different than doing non Indian genealogy. As holders and experienced users of documents, I would think you would know if you are being effective in helping the researcher. Did the researcher get a big smile when using documents you provided? Did the researcher seem to understand what the records were and how they might help them? Did the researchers spend a long time researching or did they leave fairly soon? Did they thank you for your help?

Conclusion

I hope MAC members who serve Native American communities will find Madison's perspectives helpful in becoming involved in outreach and collecting efforts that are inclusive of this group. Readers may contact Barbara Madison at 616-361-1722.

Notes

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