

**Increasing Awareness for the Indigenous in the 21st century:
The creation of an Ojibwe Digital Archive**

Benjamin P. Fletcher

**2008–2009 Penn Humanities Forum
Undergraduate Mellon Research Fellowship**

This fellowship project is a digitally based endeavor that at its center aims to increase awareness for Native American tribes. More specifically, I intend to show that conducting research in the Humanities field, compounded with multimedia technology, can strengthen scholarship in myriad ways. By conducting research along ethical lines and in accordance with an Ojibwe Medicine Man, the aim of my project was to create a digital exhibit that enables the Ojibwe to have sovereignty over their own stories.

The Ojibwe Project seeks to create one of the most sophisticated digital archives ever devoted to an indigenous culture. The aims are multi-tiered, but at the core they are to strengthen scholarship in the humanities field and to present the digital information in a respectful and enlightening format. Perhaps of greatest importance is that the information be transferred from the Ojibwe perspective rather than from the more common Anthropological format. This project will hopefully impact not just the digital humanities by training Penn students to use digital scholarship technology, but will also reach Ojibwe Indian K-16 students in northern Minnesota.

II. Background:

The Ojibwe Project stems from Dr. Timothy Powell who began working in 2006 to increase awareness for Native American culture on Penn's campus. Dr. Powell applied for but did not receive a National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) grant that called for the construction of a digital archive entitled *Gibagadinamaagoom* ("*To Strengthen, To Grant Authority, To Bring to Life*): *An Ojibwe Digital Archive*. However, the creation of a website, www.gibagadinamaagoom.info/ did take place and Dr. Powell partnered with White Earth Tribal College, Fond du Lac Tribal College, Itasca Community College, the

Leech Lake Ojibwe Tribal Museum and Interpretive Center, Mille Lacs Indian Museum, Penn Museum, Minnesota Historical Society, and American Indian Library Association to do so. In the spring of 2007, Dr. Powell founded Digital Partnerships with Indian Communities (DPIC). DPIC's current focus is on maintaining the Ojibwe digital archive database, which as Dr. Powell notes, is "the first database ever built based on the epistemological principles of Native American religion."¹

The current website contains three digital exhibitions entitled "Ask the Elders," "Virtual Museum," and "Ojibwe Cosmology."² It is in the exhibit "Ask the Elders" that my digital exhibit will be placed. It will be exhibited alongside other footage of Sacred Pipe Carrier, Larry Aitken from the Leech Lake Ojibwe reservation. Footage of Mr. Aitken playing a drum and singing in Ojibwe is an example of the collection of film images collected on the website. Some of these recordings are the first of their kind ever to be recorded by ethnographers.

III. Personal Background:

My good fortune at having grown up in New Mexico has allowed for great exposure to Native American culture via unusual conduits. Chief among them is the sport of long distance running which is traditional to many Native tribes.

By using running as a medium and working with a non-profit organization Wings of America, I was able to volunteer for a rewarding cause. Wings is an organization that uses the tradition of running as a catalyst to empower American Indian youth to take pride in themselves and their cultural identity. More specifically, their goal is to increase self esteem, health,

¹ Powell, Dr. Timothy, personal conversations with author, spring 2008.

² <http://www.gibagdinamaagoom.info/>

leadership, and to enhance the quality of life among Native youth.³ While volunteering for Wings, my responsibilities included planning and organizing summer camp opportunities for Southwestern Native Americans and facilitation workshops for their coaches. These facilitation workshops incorporated training for counselors to use their Native language. Part of this workshop is focused at preserving tribal languages and doing so through coaches has been especially successful.

My personal experience as a cross country runner has been invaluable. Over the last five years, by running with Native Americans in their territory, on their paths, and on their dirt and land, I have gained an understanding of tribal systems of knowledge. This entrée-via-running has given me a vastly different perspective than someone who spends a few months researching Native American spiritual rituals or pottery making. For instance, watching Native Americans avoid destruction of plant life while on running trails has taught me about environmental stewardship in an atypical way.

My work-study experience also provided great insight into the Native American experience; working on behalf of Digital Partnerships with Indigenous Communities (DPIC) to digitize Ojibwe media.

Such experiences have shaped my educational goals and worldview. I have taken classes on Native American ecology and religious studies at the University of California at Santa Barbara before transferring to Penn. While at Penn, I have taken a class on Native American Tribes and most currently this semester a class on Native American film and literature and debasing stereotypes. This is but a small window into my interest in Native American cultures.

IV. Involvement:

³ <http://www.wingsofamerica.org>

When I came to Penn I was fortunate enough to be asked by Dr. Powell to become involved with the Ojibwe project and the Penn Museum. Upon arriving, I was shocked at finding that at such a prestigious university as Penn there are no Native American faculty on campus, no Native languages are offered, and that Native American students are the most underrepresented group on campus. Any courses that are offered are found in the Anthropology Museum and seemingly only reinforce the declension narrative, that being that Native Americans are shown to be in decline as a culture, or that Native culture is something of the past.

Thus, it was frustration in part that led me to want to change what I saw as grave injustices occurring at Penn. I therefore became involved with the Ojibwe project. My background in digital humanities being very limited, learning how to use digital technology allowed for great growth in this arena of my scholarship. Dr. Powell and I found it fitting for me to be allowed to create the first ever student digital exhibit on Ojibwe cosmology by creating a digital archive on the history and importance of birch bark to Ojibwe culture. Knowing very little of Algonquin speaking peoples and with my principle interests lying in southwestern cultures, I embarked on research of the Ojibwe with no prior knowledge.

Historically, the Ojibwe are one of the largest American Indian tribes in the U.S. They have land claims throughout Minnesota, across to Michigan and into parts of Canada. They are also known as the Anishinaabe, Chippewa, and Ojibwa people. My project was focused on the importance of birch bark from the perspective of a Leech Lake Piper Carrier, Larry Aitken.

In my research I found that birch bark serves many purposes in both historic and contemporary Ojibwe society. The digital archive I created contains footage of Mr. Aitken speaking on birch bark in burial customs. In my scholarly research I found that the Ojibwe place

extreme importance on birch bark for burial purposes. Anthropologist Frances Densmore states that “over a grave there were spread sheets of birch bark”⁴. This research was interesting due to the two different cultures from where I obtained the information. What I feel is of great importance is that, unlike common practice, I chose to present the information from the Ojibwe perspective rather than from the ethnographic Anthropological view.

V. Goals and Purpose:

The project is many things, but at its center it is the creation and upkeep of a website dedicated to the preservation and celebration of Ojibwe Spirituality in agreement with the teachings of Larry Aitken. The website also proves to be interactive in its approach to teach about native culture. One can click on a set of predetermined questions and view the video response given by Larry. This is important because the answers come directly from Larry, an Ojibwe Indian and not an Anthropologist. As more footage is edited, there is a greater ability to generate more information within the website. Additionally, the objects viewed are all from the Penn Museum. These are objects that people from all over the world will be able to view via the internet. Thus, the website increases access for those unable to visit the Penn Museum.

IA. Scholarly View:

This project allows the University to embark on the crucial steps in progressing from the current theoretical approach to the practical use of digital technologies. By allowing the use of digital technology in the classroom, the University is allowing for a greater ability to generate information across a larger medium. What is learned daily in the classroom is no longer as

⁴ Frances Densmore, Chippewa Customs, 75.

limited due to the increase of media available. This project lays the foundation for improved scholarship in the digital humanities.

Secondly, I envision that this digital exhibit and website will serve as a model for future Penn and Ojibwe students. It can lay the groundwork for new courses to be offered at Penn and to teach students how they can make and edit films, and how technology can be better integrated into the School of Arts and Sciences to train students for the digital age.

Thirdly, I envision that with respect to President Amy Guttmann's vision as outlined in the Penn Compact of increasing access, this project will increase students' access to Native American elders like Larry Aitken and make Penn students feel that they can connect and interact with different cultures, like the Ojibwe. Additionally and more importantly, this project can be used to help recruit more Native American students and faculty to Penn, which is of vital importance to making Penn a thriving and diverse environment. Penn can prove its commitment to its students by showing that its students are involved with the interaction and exchange between cultures via different conduits like digital scholarship. Moreover, this project should allow students to be able to engage locally by assisting in the curation of digital exhibits that will be used in the near future for the Ojibwe Quiz Bowl, an activity aimed at involving hundreds of Ojibwe high school students to preserve their culture and revitalize their tribe.

IB. Personal Goals:

On the surface, the possibilities of a digital exhibit are to reach a wider audience with access to Anthropological objects. While I personally feel that objects such as the ones in the Penn Museum should be repatriated, the digital exhibits do offer the possibility for others to learn about indigenous cultures. More importantly, the medium of film allows for a sovereignty

of storytelling and the idea that these stories are from the Native American perspective. This not only allows for a different epistemological way of being, of thinking and viewing the world, but it also moves Native Americans away from the declension narrative that is a constant in the dialogue of Native Americans. It instead recognizes that Native Americans are here, alive, and are thriving. My goal is to show that Native Americans are advanced and independent thinkers capable of defining their own culture and life ways by their own standard. This is important because one truly gets the Native American perspective with these exhibits. We are also privy to what Native Americans themselves choose to share and what they deem appropriate. This project allows for indigenous cultures to be the experts on themselves.

Due to years of genocide and misunderstanding, a great deal of cultural distrust has developed between Native Americans and what is often called “American” culture. As Vine Deloria Jr states, “Five centuries ago the Anglo and Native American world-views clashed, five centuries later they still have not reconciled.”⁵ Disputes over land, sovereignty, and basic human rights loom large in the dialogue between Native Americans and Anglos. In our common land, we do not often see a common vision.

It is my hope that as a Mellon fellow this project allowed me to be able to take part in helping to bridge the gap between the two worlds; to work toward joining them as one. History has all too often been marked by jingoism and mistrust; I feel the future must be built on the deliberate pursuit of trust. The Ojibwe Digital Archive could help as a first step among many to work with Penn to help create pathways that will connect and integrate different cultures.

⁵ *In the Light of Reverence*, DVD, Christopher McLeod and Melinda Maynor ([Bullfrog Films, Native American Public Telecommunications](#), 2001).

Bibliography

1. Densmore, Frances. "Chippewa Customs. Smithsonian Institution, Bureau of American Ethnography Bulletin 86: 75
2. Powell, Dr. Timothy. Personal conversations, Spring 2008.
3. <http://wingsofamerica.org>
4. <http://gibagadinamaagoom.info>
5. *In the Light of Reverence*, DVD, Christopher McLeod and Melinda Maynor (Bullfrog Films, Native American Public Telecommunications, 2001).