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A Digital Partnership: Penn Museum and Ojibwe Tribal Historians

Abstract

In January 2007, the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) awarded a grant to the Penn Museum in collaboration with tribal historians and language teachers from the White Earth, Leech Lake, and Fond du Lac bands of the Ojibwe Nation in northern Minnesota. This partnership—entitled *Gi Bugadin-a-maa Goom* (Ojibwe: “To Sanction, to Give Authority, to Bring to Life”)—offers an exciting glimpse into how digital technology can be utilized to benefit the Museum and Ojibwe communities on equal terms.

Disciplines

Digital Humanities | Indigenous Studies | Museum Studies | Religion | United States History

A Digital Partnership

PENN MUSEUM
AND OJIBWE
TRIBAL
HISTORIANS

BY TIM POWELL
AND LARRY AITKEN

IN JANUARY 2007, the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) awarded a grant to the Penn Museum in collaboration with tribal historians and language teachers from the White Earth, Leech Lake, and Fond du Lac bands of the Ojibwe Nation in northern Minnesota. This partnership—entitled *Gi Bugadin-a-maa Goom* (Ojibwe: “To

Sanction, to Give Authority, to Bring to Life”)—offers an exciting glimpse into how digital technology can be utilized to benefit the Museum and Ojibwe communities on equal terms.

This venture into the Digital Age began when Tim Powell, Interim Director of the Center for Native American Studies at Penn, invited Professor Larry Aitken, a tribal historian of the Leech Lake band and Director of the American Indian Studies

program at Itasca Community College (Minnesota), to come to Penn to perform a Sacred Pipe Ceremony in the Museum’s courtyard. Aitken was accompanied by David McDonald, Director of DMcD Productions, who subsequently produced a video, *Weweni* (“Be Careful”), and a website, *Madwewe Dewe’igan* (“A Drum Speaks”) documenting Aitken’s interactions with the Museum’s collections.

The website (<http://www.boozhoo.net>), designed in close consultation with Ojibwe advisors, situates a single drum from the Penn Museum’s collection within an Ojibwe symbolic system that associates distinct colors with each of the four cardinal directions (east, north, south, and west). The interactive qualities of the website—the viewer has the ability to turn the drum 360 degrees and to navigate through symbolic space—encourages viewers to see this artifact from the perspective of a tribal historian trained in traditional teachings that date back hundreds, perhaps thousands, of years. Narrated by Aitken, a master storyteller, the video invites the viewer to move beyond the perception that the drum is simply a dusty artifact and to see it instead as an animate being capable of telling stories to those who know how to speak the language of the drum.

“In a sense, what we do, whenever we hit the drum, is to awaken [it] . . . ceremonially,” says Aitken. Gesturing toward the artifacts displayed around him, Aitken explains that by striking the drum we alert the “objects that are here: Attention birch bark vessels! We’re about to talk. They’re all listening and they’re all going to give you the breadth of their knowledge that they stored away for eons of time because nobody asked correctly.”

Four video clips, labeled in both Ojibwe and English, allow the Museum’s audience to experience Ojibwe oral tradition first hand. In accordance with Ojibwe cosmology, one begins with *Nimaa-maa aki* (“Mother Earth”) in the east. Here, in a short clip, Aitken explains how to pronounce the

Larry Aitken views objects from the Penn Museum’s Ojibwe collection.



Ojibwe word for drum, *dewe'igan*, and situates the drum in relation to a creation story that transports the viewer to the beginning of time.

“They say that the first sound ever in the beginning was . . . the sound of the drum . . . the beat of Mother Earth. When you first heard the drum it was the heart starting on this earth and that’s why the old ones say . . . *dewe'igan goshkozinow aki*, which means ‘the drum awakens the earth,’ *Nimaa-maa aki*, our Mother Earth.”

The second video, *manoomin nagamon* (“Wild Rice Song”), shows Aitken playing the drum and singing a song he had been taught while harvesting wild rice (ricing) as a young boy. In the third clip, *biindaa-koojige* (“Offer Tobacco”), Aitken offers tobacco to the drum to thank it for sharing the song. And finally, in *Niimi'idii-nagamon* (“Dance Song”), a video of a powwow demonstrates how drums continue to play a central role in Ojibwe country today.

In addition to presenting the Ojibwe point of view, the display has intrinsic anthropological value. Thomas Venum observes, “The earliest collectors of Ojibway song, such as Frederick R. Burton and Frances Densmore, failed to record any ricing songs per se, and it seems none has been collected since” . . . until now.

The *Madwewe Dewe'igan* website is just one small piece of the much larger *Gi Bugadin-a-maa Goom* digital archive. The partnership includes Itasca Community College, White Earth Tribal and Community College, Fond du Lac Tribal and Community College, the University of Minnesota, Duluth, the University of Pennsylvania Libraries’ Schoenberg Center for Electronic Text and Images, and the Penn Museum. The Co-PIs on the NEH project—Nyleta Belgarde (Dean, White Earth Tribal and Community College) and Barbara McDonald (Dean, Itasca Community College)—have provided outstanding leadership, building bridges across what, just a generation ago, seemed to be insurmountable cultural divides.

Ongoing projects include a history of the creation of the White Earth Reservation, which will juxtapose historical documents with digital video of the brilliant White Earth tribal historian Andy Favorite interpreting the documents from an Ojibwe perspective. Dan Jones, a gifted and highly respected language-carrier from the Fond du Lac Reservation, is developing a program to teach the Ojibwe language using stories that demonstrate how etymological studies of the Ojibwe language can teach students about the tribe’s history and philosophy.

Larry Aitken wears ceremonial attire during the Itasca Community College powwow.



“It’s about time,” Aitken noted during his visit to the Museum, “that we return to those objects that have been kept for us so we can learn from them and appreciate each other as partners. I want to take back as an ambassador for our people the lesson I learned here Digital imaging is that new thing that can invigorate and enliven and inspire knowledge and wisdom and learning. I’m so honored to be in a museum that’s alive. I’ve been to a lot of dead museums in my life where [we’re told] ‘Don’t touch. Don’t open that up. This is ours.’ And it really wasn’t; they either stole it or bought it for way less than it’s worth now I think what we’re about here [is that] we’re going to unwrap some of these things and digitally image some of these things and take them back to our people All of these things we have in the Museum are alive. With our great care and respect they can come alive again for our people and teach them that this is a learning place.” 🏠

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LARRY AITKEN, a tribal historian of the Leech Lake band of the Ojibwe, is Director of the American Indian Studies program at Itasca Community College (Minnesota).

For Further Reading

Johnson, Basil. *Ojibway Ceremonies*. Lincoln, NB: University of Nebraska Press, 1990.

Peacock, Thomas, and Marlene Wisuri. *Ojibwe Waasa Inaabidaa: We Look in All Directions*. Afton, MN: Afton Historical Society Press, 2002.

Vennum, Thomas. *Wild Rice and the Ojibway People*. St. Paul, MN: Minnesota Historical Society, 1988.



Left, Larry Aitken performs a Sacred Pipe Ceremony in the Penn Museum’s courtyard, January 2007. Below, Larry Aitken offers the Sacred Pipe Ceremony to the Above World.

