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Native Belongings and Institutional Values at the Oregon Historical Society, Then and Now

REFLECTION ESSAY

by Nicole Yasuhara

IN SARAH KEYES'S ARTICLE in this issue of the *Oregon Historical Quarterly*, "From Stories to Salt Cairns: Uncovering Indigenous Influence in the Formative Years of the Oregon Historical Society, 1898–1905," the author examines some of the people and methods behind early collecting efforts by the Oregon Historical Society (OHS). Keyes asserts that Euro-Americans' colonization of the state of Oregon — acts that involved oppressing Native people, exerting ownership on lands by force and aggression, and attempting (though failing) to control Native culture — also included conscious and subconscious efforts by OHS staff to include Native voices in their process of acquisition.

As Deputy Museum Director at the Oregon Historical Society, my main responsibility is safeguarding the institution's three-dimensional cultural resources. It is a difficult responsibility and an honor. Ensuring

that the people of Oregon's material culture is preserved and safeguarded for present and future generations to research, view, and learn from is paramount. Caring for the physical items through established museum standards, such as cataloging and using preservation-focused storage and handling protocols, is relatively straightforward, but the task of delineating and safeguarding the information we have about each object has proven extremely difficult.

Over the past 120 years, practitioners have cast aside many aspects of caring for the OHS museum collection, perhaps due to budget shortfalls, lack of properly trained collection staff, the absence of legal and ethical guidelines that currently inform our work, or simply poor follow-through on good intentions. The connections between early OHS staff and people of Native ancestry that Keyes discusses therefore have

GEORGE HIMES served as the Oregon Historical Society's (OHS) first curator for over forty years. Here he stands with a Chinookan canoe outside OHS, then located in the Tourney Building at Taylor and 2nd streets in about 1915. The canoe and paddles have been in OHS's collection for over one hundred years and are now on display in its permanent exhibit, Experience Oregon.

not always been documented within museum collection records. Keyes states: "For OHS practitioners, Native Americans and people of mixed heritage such as [Silas B.] Smith and [Louis] Labonte were important sources of historical and geographic knowledge. Their participation in the process of establishing OHS complicates our understanding of the history of the institution's founding."¹

Yet this participation that Keyes describes has often been lost due to the elevation of Euro-American over Native history. A search of the museum collection database for the name "Silas B. Smith," for instance,

yields two results — a bed frame and a tablespoon donated by him in 1899 and 1900, respectively. Neither database record indicates Native relations or history; nor do they detail Smith's accomplishments or relationship to OHS. The acquisition was whitewashed of Native context and personal history on its inclusion in the museum collection. Without incorporating historical research such as Keyes's into museum records, Smith's Clatsop ancestry would be lost to researchers of the museum collection, and the layered history behind the items would remain unknown. The record for the bed contains prove-

THIS BED FRAME once belonged to Silas B. Smith, who donated it to the Oregon Historical Society in 1900. The bed originally belonged to his father, Solomon Howard Smith. Silas Smith's mother Celiast was the daughter of Clatsop chief Coboway, and Smith played a key role in documenting Clatsop traditions during the nineteenth century.

nance information that hides Native connections:

Made in the state of New York and first owned by Hamilton Campbell and wife who brought it to Oregon via Cape Horn. Left New York October 9, 1839, and arrived at Oregon City May 21, 1840. Was purchased later by Solomon Howard Smith of Clatsop Creek, Clatsop County Oregon. Later sold to his son Silas B. Smith.²

According to his gravestone, Silas B. Smith's father, Solomon Howard Smith, was one of Oregon's first

schoolteachers, a "Pioneer, missionary, mill right, farmer, merchant, state senator and his wife Helen [was] born Celiast, Princess daughter of Coboway, Chief of the Clatsops."³ Hamilton Campbell was, among other roles, once superintendent at Chemeketa Indian School, one possible connection between the two men, explaining the sale of the bed.⁴ Adding this information to the object record, along with greater details about Silas B. Smith's Clatsop heritage, has enriched and created a more vivid, connected

object history that does not obscure Native connections.

Whatever the intentions of OHS's early practitioners in collecting information on Native history and culture, much remains hidden or lost in the data that the OHS museum currently contains. Quite possibly, historians such as George Himes did not foresee the distant future, when their reign over the halls of the institution would end. The information they gathered about their sources, their friends, and the objects' histories was taken for granted — occasionally never even written down.

They also may never have imagined that the institution — once housed in Portland's City Hall and then a storefront on Southwest Second Avenue, where each object was displayed and its history probably recounted from memory — would swell to over 80,000 three-dimensional items *in addition* to the massive holdings of the OHS research library. They were too focused on the past to think about the future.

As Keyes establishes, the founders and early leaders of OHS, along with the community they served, were intensely interested in the Native people of the land where they lived. Within the OHS museum collection, there are approximately 5,200 Native belongings, a large portion of which were acquired from OHS's inception through the first half of the twentieth century. Even at the time of collection by OHS, many of these belongings were stripped of their history — how

were they collected? From whom? In one diary entry Keyes describes, for example, Himes wrote that "he visited W.H. Garrett and 'secured a fine lot of arrow points, a few spear points, beads, bracelets, etc, besides mortars and pestles, sinkers, war clubs'."⁵ By negligently omitting information about how Garrett had obtained the items and from whom, the collector, Himes, and his colleagues were guilty of doing exactly what Keyes accuses historical societies in the eastern United States of doing: "practitioners created imbalanced collections of materials that continue to challenge historians working to tell inclusive stories of the past."⁶ Keyes later acquiesces that one reason for the lack of information regarding items collected from Native people in Oregon is that some "donated objects were likely stolen."⁷ Additionally, power structures between pioneer collectors and their Native sources undoubtedly caused imbalanced transactions. These oppressive collecting practices ensured that important information on Native context could not and did not accompany the belonging on its acquisition.

Keyes states that "OHS and other western historical societies had opportunities to create stronger, richer archives than those of the East," and yet, in many ways, they failed.⁸ The advantage of the "proximity of the past" as Keyes describes it, was wasted by not documenting for future generations the Native presence in both relationships and object histo-

ries.⁹ While I agree with Keyes's thesis that Oregon offers an example of a specific, complex version of Turner's frontier thesis, early founders and historians at OHS nevertheless created barriers to achieving OHS's current mission to "advance knowledge and inspire curiosity about all the people, places, and events that have shaped Oregon."¹⁰

So, where do we go from here? How do we confront and begin to address the inherently colonial practices of early collecting institutions, including OHS? There are many ways, all of which are inspiring a revision of the OHS museum's collection policies.

One of our first changes is in the use of language. Terms commonly and thoughtlessly used within museums include *collection* and *artifact*. Historian Amy Lonetree (Ho-Chunk) describes nineteenth-century collectors' searching for tangible Native culture as "in a race against time . . . engaged in 'salvage anthropology' to collect the so-called last vestiges of a dying race."¹¹ By "collecting artifacts" they were grasping to capture a moment in time they thought was nearing an end. We are left with items like these, described by Keyes: "photographs of Jennie and Silas at the Lewis and Clark salt works . . . link[ing] authority of place with Native knowledge."¹² The "artifacts" in museum collections are tangible evidence of a culture, but without Native voice they are one-dimensional like the photo — both require more information, more context.

"Privileging Indigenous voices and perspectives, challenging stereo-

types that have dominated museum representations of the past," are acts Lonetree describes as those that can help start to decolonize museums.¹³ Replacing "collection" with "cultural resources" and "artifact" with "belonging," for example, are possible ways to "indigenize" — that is, to generate healing around Native issues and, optimistically, around related trauma — the work of museums and historical societies.¹⁴ During a recent visit to OHS, members of local Tribes educated staff about why the word *artifact*, which we had been using to refer to a belonging housed with us, did not adequately honor the item's cultural importance, including that it continues to have presence with related belongings outside the museum's walls. Referring to items with Native histories and origins as "belongings" as opposed to "artifacts" reminds people that those items had and continue to have a personal connection to real people, both past and present. They are not remnants of salvage anthropology. Land acknowledgments, wherein institutions like OHS make public recognitions of the ancestral and ongoing Native connection to place, represent another use of language to recognize Native culture and power.

But change must grow from deeply personal ideological shifts in which practitioners recognize our own privilege and utilize an inclusion and equity lens in our everyday lives.¹⁵ From this personal evolution, institutional policy and protocol overhauls will naturally follow. Historical organizations are at a cultural crossroads, where diversity,

OHS Museum 1165

ANOTHER OBJECT Silas B. Smith donated to the Oregon Historical Society between 1899 and 1900 is this tablespoon. According to Oregon Historical Society museum records, the spoon belonged to Lt. Hudson of the *USS Peacock*.

equity, accessibility, and inclusion (DEAI) principles are elevated to top import within strategic planning initiatives (including at OHS), grant and other funding opportunities, and public opinion. Do we — at OHS and more broadly, in our community, state, nation, and world — want to maintain the status quo of the past century-plus or be a part of the sea change?

The San Diego Museum of Man is one organization I am watching closely for inspiration. Its staff has drafted and implemented several new policies to decolonize the cultural resources at

their museum. Their guiding principles are “Truth telling and accountability; Rethinking ownership; Organizational culture shift supported by systems and policy; [and] Indigenous Representation.”¹⁶

OHS has begun to embody another important principle: transparency. We are having difficult conversations within and without our organization, including this one. We are beginning truth-telling and accepting responsibility for addressing oppression and colonization within our organization and community.

OHS WORKED WITH Native stakeholders to advise on the development of sections of its permanent exhibit, Experience Oregon, which opened in February 2019. The nine federally recognized Tribes of Oregon contributed their own creation stories and were instrumental in guiding the incorporation of Native experience throughout the exhibit.

I believe that the future of museum collections is in rethinking what is meant by ownership. Repatriation policies that go above and beyond laws such as the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAG-PRA) will be among the most difficult to convince organizational stakeholders to accept. Seemingly noble reasons to keep Native belongings within colonial institutions such as museums (for education, public access, and safeguarding, for example) do not address the generational trauma that these belongings can both remind Native communities of and continue to cause. In addition to repatriation under NAG-PRA of the belongings in our care, we also advise prospective donors to first

offer Native belongings to associated tribal museums or communities. I hope we continue to scrutinize what “ownership” means to OHS and expand our policies to reflect a more just and humane treatment of objects currently in our care.

I believe that OHS is undergoing a critical shift in our focus and vision, as seen in our current strategic plan, and that this shift increases equity, cultural humility, and inclusion.¹⁷ As time passes, my hope is that this new perspective will not require an outline to explain but is clearly seen in our policies, board and staff diversity, programs, and products.

OHS is addressing Native representation, but we can do more. Keyes

briefly discusses OHS's new permanent exhibit, Experience Oregon, which opened in 2019. The design and content-creation process included a stakeholder committee with teachers, volunteers, Tribal representation, and individuals from minority-led organizations. With that project and others, we must use clear and thoughtful dialog with communities to redress past trauma. We must accept that our own frameworks, timelines, and expectations cannot be privileged over another's. It may be that Native and other

communities do not want to partner, share information, or compromise. This can be extremely frustrating work, but will also be rewarding and fulfilling.

OHS was borne of the Oregon Pioneer Association, and in many ways, we remain a pioneer museum. Let us pioneer our own new frontiers — a community and organization focused on diversity, equity, accessibility, and inclusion. Rather than, as our OHS forbearers did, focusing on the past, we instead must use the past to create a more just future.

NOTES

1. Sarah Keyes, "From Stories to Salt Cairns: Uncovering Indigenous Influence in the Formative Years of the Oregon Historical Society, 1898–1905," *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 121:2 (Summer 2020): 186–211.

2. Object record, Oregon Historical Society Museum, 66–341.

3. See "Solomon Howard Smith," *Find a Grave*, <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/6614927/solomon-howard-smith> (accessed April 30, 2020).

4. "Hamilton Campbell," *Find a Grave*, <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/71501554/hamilton-campbell> (accessed May 6, 2020).

5. Keyes, "From Stories to Salt Cairns," 198.

6. *Ibid.*, 190.

7. *Ibid.*, 199.

8. *Ibid.*, 195.

9. *Ibid.*, 207–208.

10. "Mission and Vision," Oregon Historical Society, <https://ohs.org/about-us/mission-and-vision.cfm> (accessed May 6, 2020).

11. Amy Lonetree, *Decolonizing Museums: Representing Native America in National and*

Tribal Museums (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 10.

12. Keyes, "From Stories to Salt Cairns," 207.

13. Lonetree, *Decolonizing Museums*, 171.

14. Deana Dartt and Nancy Judd, "Decolonize and indigenize now! Toward culturally informed, relevant, and sensitive museum practice" (Presented at Oregon Museums Association 2019 Annual Conference, Grant County Regional Airport, John Day, Oregon, September 16, 2019).

15. For more information on equity lenses, see The Nonprofit Association of Oregon, *Equity & Inclusion Lens Guide*, 2019, <https://nonprofitoregon.org/sites/default/files/NAO-Equity-Lens-Guide-2019.pdf> (accessed April 30, 2020).

16. See "Decolonizing Initiatives," *San Diego Museum of Man*, <https://www.museumofman.org/decolonizing-initiatives/> (accessed April 30, 2020).

17. See "Strategic Plan," *Oregon Historical Society*, <https://ohs.org/about-us/strategic-plan.cfm> (accessed April 30, 2020).