

150 YEARS OF NATIVE AMERICAN RESEARCH AT THE SMITHSONIAN

by JoAllyn Archambault and William C. Sturtevant

[**Editor's Note:** Preserving the past for the future has always been an important mission of the Smithsonian Institution. Within this, Native Americans have held a special place from the beginning as contributors and users of knowledge. The Smithsonian, a great repository of cultural, social, and biological information, has often assisted tribal groups in preserving, strengthening, and renewing knowledge of their own culture and history. In turn, native people have been actively involved in major contributions to the research goals of the Institution. In honor of the Smithsonian's 150th anniversary celebration, *AnthroNotes* presents a short overview of the Department of Anthropology's ethnological and archaeological research on the peoples and cultures of the Americas and native participation in these endeavors.]

The Smithsonian Institution was founded by legislation signed August 10, 1846. Almost immediately it became the leading supporter of anthropological research in America. The first Secretary, Joseph Henry, instituted a series of publications called *Smithsonian Contributions to Knowledge* to record "new discoveries in science." Among the earliest volumes was a report on Indian mounds in the Eastern United States, which demonstrated that they had been built by prehistoric Indian societies, not by some unknown non-Indian civilization as many scholars thought. Other reports based on investigations of prehistoric and living Indian societies soon followed. Along with the published reports, the Institution began to acquire a vast collection of manuscript descriptions and recordings of Indian cultures and languages. The U.S. National Museum served as the repository for contemporary and archaeological Native American collections and works of art. Many of these collections were gathered by Smithsonian staff members and other people, including Native

Americans, and are preserved for exhibition and especially for study to benefit all peoples.

Native American research and the Smithsonian grew rapidly, especially after the founding in 1879 of the Smithsonian's Bureau of America Ethnology (BAE), a research unit independent of the U.S. National Museum that specialized in Native American studies, particularly in ethnology and linguistics. The research of the BAE was preserved and disseminated in several ways. The BAE itself archived the manuscript and photographic results of research. The objects collected by the BAE as documents on both living and prehistoric Indian cultures were preserved by the Museum. The BAE published more than 250 volumes describing Native American cultures, languages, prehistory, and history. Much of the information recorded in these volumes and a great deal of the data preserved in manuscripts and photographs archived by the BAE are documented nowhere else. Without active collecting much of this material would have been lost forever as Indian cultures, societies, and languages underwent rapid changes.



In 1965, the staff and archives of the BAE were merged with the museum's Department of Anthropology, whose primary emphasis was then on archaeology and physical anthropology. Today, the Department continues to focus on Native American studies alongside interests in the peoples and cultures of Asia, Africa, Oceania, and South America, and involves all subdisciplines of anthropology (ethnology, linguistics, archaeology, physical anthropology).

Indian Participation

Research and publication on American Indian languages, literatures, history, and social relations depend on contributions by the people who are the bearers of the cultures. To record, analyze, and describe a language, a literature, a traditional history, a religion, or a system of social relations

requires the cooperation and the active assistance of those who speak the language and possess the knowledge and beliefs that are recorded. In some cases, Native Americans write the information and organize it for publication. In other cases they explain to others who serve as recorders and analysts. Archaeology and physical anthropology are less dependent on the active participation of Native Americans although their insight has proven beneficial. The Smithsonian anthropological staff, from its early days, has included distinguished Indian scholars, among the most important being Francis LaFlesche (Omaha) and J.N.B. Hewitt (Tuscarora). Many other Indians were important correspondents and contributors, although not staff members. Among these were Andrew John (Seneca), Phoebe Maddux (Karak), James Murie (Pawnee), Whewa (Zuni), George Bushotter (Sioux), George Washington Grayson (Creek), George Hunt (Tlingit-Kwakiutl), John Squint Eyes (Cheyenne), George Sword (Lakota), Alfred Kiyana (Mesquakie), Henry Tate (Tsimshian), William Jones (Fox), Isabel Meadows (Costanoan), and Seth Newhouse (Mohawk). Scores of individual members of tribes in all parts of North America have contributed knowledge and information that was recorded by Smithsonian staff members and other contributors to the Smithsonian archives and publications. The Department of Anthropology's staff currently includes two archaeologists of Indian ancestry, and the ethnologist director of its American Indian Program is an enrolled member of the Standing Rock Sioux tribe.

One current project of the Department is the 20-volume *Handbook of North American Indians*, an encyclopedia summarizing knowledge of the cultures, history, and human biology of all the tribes of the continent. Indians have been active in planning this reference work and in writing many chapters; three of the volumes have Indian editors. Since 1978, ten volumes have been published, and the rest are in active preparation.



J.N.B. Hewitt (Tuscarora), ethnologist on staff of BAE, with Andrew John (Seneca), a consultant to the Smithsonian and former president of the Seneca Nation in New York, with a group of visiting Canadian Iroquois. Rear, left to right, William Sandy (Cayuga), Hewitt, Alexander Hill (Onondaga), John; front, left to right, William Henry Fishcarrier (Cayuga), Robert David (Cayuga). Photograph by DeLancey Gill at the Smithsonian, Dec. 1901.

Past and Present Research

Smithsonian anthropologists were prominent pioneers advocating Indian rights and respect for Indian cultures and languages and have remained so. "Anthropologists were among the few who felt that Indian cultures had any value in the late 19th century" says JoAllyn Archambault (Standing Rock Sioux), who directs the American Indian Program of the Department of Anthropology. "They felt that Indian lives and culture had meaning. That is why they wanted to document and save the information and images of our people. And they saved them for future generations of every race."

Anthropologists learned from Indian people and tried, quite successfully, to pass on to others what they learned about the richness and variety of Indian cultures, the complexity and sophistication of Indian thought and belief, the great antiquity of Indian settlement of the Americas, and the thousands of years of inventions and adjustments to the environment. They have continually reminded those

who came later how much is owed to their Indian predecessors, and how much was unjustly taken from them.

One of the first Smithsonian anthropologists was Frank Hamilton Cushing, who lived at Zuni Pueblo in New Mexico for four years in the early 1880s. Learning the language, he was adopted by Palowahtiwa, the Zuni governor, and given a ritual position in the Pueblo. Cushing pioneered the anthropological method of participant observation that was reinvented elsewhere in the present century. After he had compiled a valuable record of Zuni culture, he was recalled to Washington because he had defended the Pueblo against illegal taking of its lands by a politically well-connected outsider.

About the same time another Smithsonian anthropologist, James Mooney, began long-term study of the Eastern Cherokee, recording their historical struggle to remain in their homeland. He collected native curing formulas written in Sequoyah's syllabary and studied the ballgames and other features of Cherokee culture. In the 1890s he conducted a first-hand study of the new Ghost Dance in the West, interviewing Wovoka, the founding prophet. Mooney demonstrated the religious nature of the movement in an attempt to convince the U.S. government that it posed no military threat. He then began an extensive study of Kiowa heraldry (manifested in designs on shields and tipis) in Indian Territory, which he soon was forced to give up as a result of his activities defending participants in the Native American Church.

Working in Washington, D.C. in the latter half of the 19th century, C.C. Royce compiled a detailed study of Indian lands lost throughout the country. The maps he prepared, published by the Smithsonian, served some 50 years later as the fundamental evidence by which Indian tribes were recompensed via hearings held by the Indian Claims Commission.

The first scientifically-based and accepted classification of the historical relationships of North

American native languages was published in 1891 under the direction of J.W. Powell, the founder and first chief of the Bureau of American Ethnology. Much of the evidence for that classification is preserved in the Department's archives; some of it is irreplaceable data on languages that have ceased to be spoken.

In the mid-20th century, Smithsonian ethnologist John C. Ewers wrote the standard text used in Blackfeet Indian schools to teach Blackfeet history. Ewers attributes the success of his research to the Blackfeet elders, born in the middle of the last century, who passed on their knowledge to him.

Today, many Tzotzil Indians in Chiapas are producing a literature in their own language, thanks to the literacy program of the Chiapas Writers' Cooperative encouraged and assisted by Smithsonian anthropologist Robert M. Laughlin. Laughlin has devoted 30 years to research in Chiapas, publishing two massive dictionaries of the Tzotzil language. These provide important evidence used in the decipherment of ancient Maya inscriptions that is revealing the history of this Native American civilization. He has also published several volumes of native literature in Tzotzil as well as in English translation.

Ives Goddard recently published *Native Writings in Massachusetts*, two large volumes that contain all known writings in their own language by its speakers, together with new translations into English and annotations on the grammar and vocabulary. This language, extinct since about 1826, was spoken by the ancestors of the present day Wampanoag Indians of Mashpee and Gay Head.

William C. Sturtevant, general editor of the *Handbook of North American Indians*, researched the cultures and history of the Florida Seminoles and New York Senecas and has over the years provided expert testimony in defense of Indian land rights and in support of federal recognition of Indian tribes. The testimony of Smithsonian anthropologists, behind the scenes and in formal hearings before the courts and Congressional

committees, often has proven helpful to Indian communities. Smithsonian anthropologists, known as objective, knowledgeable authorities on Indian history and Indian cultures, have frequently been called on.

The Arctic Studies Center, established in the Department in 1988 by William Fitzhugh, is an extension of research begun in the 1860s in Alaska and the western part of Arctic and Subarctic Canada. Other early Smithsonian research, both ethnological and archaeological, was carried out among Indians and Inuit in the eastern Arctic. The new Center is involved in research, education, and training of native peoples and the coordination of activities with other government agencies. Fellowships and internships in Arctic and Subarctic studies are available to native individuals. Before the establishment of the Center, Fitzhugh organized major exhibitions of Arctic native cultures at the Smithsonian, which then travelled to other locations, including cities in Alaska. A special version was sent to rural locations making available to Alaskan natives aspects of their own history. Assistance to native museums is a continuing interest of the Arctic Studies Center.

The National Anthropological Archives is the repository for manuscript records on Native American and other cultures and languages, for many thousands of historical still photographs of American Indian subjects (except the photographs of objects in the Smithsonian collections), and for the papers of Indian and anthropological organizations. The core of the Archives are the records and photographs collected by the former Bureau of American Ethnology and the museum department since its beginnings.

The Human Studies Film Archives collects and documents ethnographic moving picture film and video records. It also serves as a clearinghouse for Native American film and video produced by other organizations and makes films and videos available to Indian communities.

The American Indian Program

The American Indian Program of the Department of Anthropology was founded in 1986 to coordinate and increase Native American involvement with the Department. The Program provides outreach to Indian communities and individuals, making the Department more accessible to native people. It encourages research, collection of contemporary Indian objects, exhibitions, and public programming by and about native people. It has initiated numerous programs with reservation based community colleges, tribal museums, tribal education departments and elder groups. Fellows in the American Indian Program are very diverse in age, experience, background, and interest. Their projects have been equally diverse ranging from film research to object collection research by artists to inform their art making. The results of their projects are now used in various community activities in urban and reservation areas. Most recently a group from the Coquille reservation in Oregon found thousands of pages of relevant materials in Washington, had them copied, and has deposited the copies in a local archives where they can be used by tribal members for their own personal research. Several tribes have obtained language materials from the National Anthropological Archives for use in their language programs. Others have used historical photographs to enhance exhibits created for their tribal museums. The Program provides technical assistance to tribal museums and cultural programs upon request.

In July 1997, the Department of Anthropology will celebrate its 100th anniversary, looking back with pride on the Department's many contributions. At the same time, the Department is embracing the future, as the field of anthropology continues to change and with these changes emerge new relationships with Native peoples.

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