



ABOVE: An assortment of sally bags. RIGHT TOP: More vibrant colored sally bags. MIDDLE RIGHT: Rock bowls, used for cooking by filling with heated rocks and two-thirds water. Food was cooked directly in the water. BOTTOM RIGHT: Intricately beaded "Pathlpas," ceremonial hats for women.

Behind the scenes

Museum at Warm Springs provides a safe place for artifacts

Photos and story by Shannon Keaveny

In a dimly lit room, with lights pointed towards the ceiling, Museum at Warm Springs Curator Natalie Kirk turns a rotating door-handle and a hallway lined with shelves opens up. "These are the cornhusk bags," she says. A glimpse into the vault reveals an assortment of elaborate baskets of different sizes donated or sold to the museum mostly by tribal members in the last ten years. When the shelves are closed, damaging light is blocked out. When they are opened, the light is minimized and indirect. Another attached room contains a file cabinet with long narrow drawers donated by contractor Steve Anderson. As Kirk slides the drawer open, more treasures are unveiled. Long necklaces made from white shells, carefully interspersed with shots of colored beads – yellow, blue and green – are carefully lined parallel to each other. Each Wampum necklace is tagged appropriately.

"About 90 percent of our artifacts come from tribal members," Kirk assesses. "We're unique because we buy directly from our tribal members through the accession process," she says of the museum's vast collection. The museum houses over 5,000 artifacts from the Warm Springs, Wasco and Paiute tribes. The artifacts range from Wampum shell necklaces to willow huckleberry baskets, cornhusk bags to cedar baskets and vibrantly-colored beaded buckskin dresses. "That could be a conservative number," says Kirk of the amount of artifacts. "Many items can be split into several artifacts, but come in as one." For instance, traditional regalia may come in as an outfit that includes a hat, moccasins, accessories and a dress. Artifacts are purchased annually by a Warm Springs Accession Committee that includes Emily Waheneka, Gladys Jim and Maxine Switzler. The group appraises objects and comes up with a price. As elders, they also provide their historical account of an item. Kirk also utilizes the group to ask questions about items, which are chosen for purchase according to their workmanship, age and stability. Impossible to exhibit all at once, the artifacts are stored in a special room with ideal conditions to maximize their preservation. Chosen artifacts are rotated out to the permanent museum exhibit a few times a year for the public to see. Upon return, tribal heirlooms are put in a freezer to kill any bugs or molds

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Natalie Kirk
Curator, Museum at Warm Springs

picked up on the way. Artifacts remain at about 0 degrees for up to three days. Bug traps are put near shelves to ensure that moths, mites or larvae don't infest the artifacts. "We try to eliminate anything that will eat away or contribute to the decay of an artifact," Kirk says. As curator, she is the human influence ensuring artifacts are stored properly. Currently, the artifacts are being overhauled and updated with the latest preservation techniques. The museum has developed a system based on a Smithsonian Institute methodology. The system includes an accession number with notes about the item. Curators are trained to find solutions to problems. Ideally, each artifact needs to be its own unit, says Kirk. She points out a huckleberry basket with a small plastic bag attached. Enclosed in the bag is a dried huckleberry as old as the basket itself. Baskets and other artifacts are cleaned minimally. "We don't want to wash the history off items," says Kirk.

Artifacts shouldn't be rubbed. Kirk handles them with white gloves. They are placed on the shelf systematically and spaced so as to provide proper ventilation. "They need to be easily accessible, identified, and overall there needs to be a sense that the piece is stabilized," explains Kirk. "My main objective is to not handle the object but to create support and stabilize the pieces," she explains further. Kirk uses conservation materials according to the products' needs. She uses her professional knowledge, acquired through Smithsonian workshops and practice, to decide what each artifact needs. "I improvise," she says of her work. Part of that improvisation is making larger hangers for the buckskin dresses. Kirk understands that on the current standard-size padded hanger, tension in the shoulders could mount from lack of support. The result could be that beads start popping off in the shoulder area after many years of stress. To counteract that possibility, Kirk

designs a padded hanger two feet wide, eliminating any tension in the shoulders. She is in the process of making hangers for each individual dress now. In other hallways, baskets sit delicately on a foam coil covered in a fabric. Kirk creates the coil according to the size of each basket. All information about an item is recorded in a computer program called Past Perfect software. Details such as bead size, the family the object came from, colors, design, what the handle is made from, and if there is lining, are recorded. Once in the computer system, entering the accession number will display all information about the item, including a scanned photo. Kirk says if the museum had ample funds and time, the project could be completed in five years. But with limitations on time and money, Kirk estimates the project will be finished in about 10 years. Each item takes about half a day to properly register, in order to create an ideal setting that achieves the long-term goal of the museum's preservation project. Until then, a system has been set up where all items are stable. Kirk, who started off in the Museum's gift shop, enjoys coming to work each day. "I feel good about working here and knowing that I am not harming the objects. I have learned a lot about the tribes." Kirk welcomes tribal members to stop by the museum when they have time to take a look at the artifacts or even to volunteer.