

Tribe's Culture Department Connects Members With Their Heritage, Past

■ Preserving for and sharing with future generations is the goal.

By Peta Tinda

The Grand Ronde Tribes' Cultural Resources Department does many things — from returning sacred objects from museums, to protection of cultural sites to educating the membership about their family and Tribal history. But the most important thing the program does, said Tribal member and Program Manager June Olson, is to provide a direct connection for Tribal members to their Native heritage.

"We do this in a variety of ways," explained Olson. "Our focus has been collecting and returning everything we know was of value - artifacts, photos, documents, knowledge of the people and Elders. These have all been focal points of our attention."

When the Tribe's Culture Department was formed in 1995, its primary goal was to facilitate the return of artifacts and objects from universities, museums and archival institutions.

At the height of the 19th century, because of international preoccupation with race and racial classification, museums around the world gathered enormous collections of Native artifacts and information. Through the department's work at reclamation, many significant local artifacts and documents have been returned, such as Tribal heirlooms and tape recordings of Tribal ancestors, which are vital to preserving the oral tradition.

"It's important for us to have that information in our possession," said Olson.

Now that they have collected and returned a lot of that material, the goal is to provide access to Tribal members so they can share that knowledge, either to educate, or to teach it to their children.

An ambitious project is in the works to scan and catalog all of the department's material and put it on the Internet, no small task considering the thousands of documents and artifacts in the department's care.

"We want to create a web-link so that anyone with access to a computer can access us, either in the United States or around the world," she said.

The site is expected to be up and running in as little as 12 months.

Another of the department's responsibilities is to establish a dialogue with local communities.

"We do a lot of public awareness for state and public communities and we also extend this to the membership," said Olson. The department has been doing more exhibits, like the one showcasing Grand Ronde basketry at the Mission Mill Museum in Salem and there are also plans to put up an interpretive display at Spirit Mountain Casino.

Further plans include recreating a turn of the century village site at Fort Yamhill in Grand Ronde. The department hopes to enlist the aid of Tribal members and Elders with the project.

Protection, both of cultural objects and sites, is always high on the list of the department's priori-

ties.

"We have a collection of many different things, artifacts, site information, tapes of old power songs," said Olson. "We also have a lot of sacred objects that we have retrieved over time."

Traditionally, Olson said, those songs and prayers were owned by the family and passed on to the descendants. Now many of those same songs are in the program's care. The question, Olson said, is who owns those songs?



Photo by Peta Tinda

The Grand Ronde Tribal Cultural Resources Department is charged with the responsibility of preserving, protecting, and teaching the Tribes' Native heritage. Since 1995, the department has worked to gather and disseminate ancestral knowledge to Tribal members. A display of traditional baskets at the Mission Mill in Salem is part of the department's effort to increase understanding of Native Americans. The small basket at right is a very old example of traditional basketry, while the one next to it, with its vase-like shape, represents the influence of settlers.

"Do we have the right to share that material?" she said. "Eventually we need those songs to pass on as part of our revitalization effort. That said, the protocols surrounding sacred objects need to be honored."

There are strict rules in place when it comes to the handling of sacred objects or ancestors' remains. This requires the cultural specialists to be aware of the spiritual significance of the objects or songs they work with, many of which are sacred. Many taboos accompany sacred objects. For instance, some power songs can only be sung in the winter. With many objects it is considered disrespectful to photograph them or even have them out in the wrong setting. Places must be properly purified before certain objects are to be used.

Many Tribes believe that the mishandling or disrespect of such objects can bring sickness or misfortune to a person or their family. The Cultural Department takes the utmost care to treat all objects with the proper respect and appropriate consideration.

The protection of culturally significant sites is another of the department's priorities. There are literally thousands of sites under the department's protection, all of which need to be mapped, documented and cataloged, as well as protected from construction projects and looting. The location of cultural sites is not made public to lessen the risk of looting. Looting of sites occurs to such an extent that laws have been enacted to curb it.

"A lot of folks don't realize it, but it is against the law, on public or private land, to dig for artifacts," said Olson. "Such things are better left where their ancestor dropped it. Then the place and the artifact become that much more significant."

If there is a situation like a construction project, where the destruction of the site is unavoidable, then the department agrees to let qualified archaeologists excavate the site under the scrutiny of trained Tribal site monitors, who make sure that if and when remains or burial items are found, that they are reburied in a good way, at an appropriate place.

"In all other situations," said Olson. "Our policy is to leave things where the ancestor left them."

Another element in the Cultural Department's mission is the education of Tribal members about who their ancestors were and the things they did. Prior to the department, Tribal members had no way of accessing their history and no place to go for that information. The termination of the Tribe in 1954 left Tribal members without the traditional village and Elder based way of learning.

"Now," said Olson, "you have a lot of Tribal members interested not only in acquiring information, but involved."

Many more people are participating in cultural activities coordinated in part by the department — like Chinuk class and basketry and moccasin classes.

"This is great for us because our efforts at revitalization are multiplied, as are our efforts to work towards common goals," she said.

The final component in a successful Cultural Department, said Olson, is balance.

"We have to be very careful weighing out traditional values and ways with the practicality of what's happening today," she said. "Much of it is highly sensitive and the results affect not only our Tribe, but all other Oregon Tribes as well. We need to be sure we do the right thing."

The success of the department's efforts, said Olson, will be measured in the Tribes' children. If they have a strong sense of identity and a good understanding of Tribal history and culture, then the department will have succeeded.

"Our purpose is to perpetuate things down to future generations. We are all going to glean some knowledge along the way, but ultimately it's what we pass on. I know the ancestors wanted that, too."

BASKET EXHIBIT IN SALEM



A Record of Change: Western Oregon Basketry

The Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde in partnership with the Mission Mill Museum are hosting an exhibit of baskets from both collections entitled, **AA Record of Change: Western Oregon Basketry**. @ Basketry has forever been an integral component of Native life.

Located in the gallery at the Mission Mill Museum in Salem, **AA Record of Change: Western Oregon Basketry** runs from February 7th to April 17th. Admission is FREE to Grand Ronde Tribal members. Grand Ronde weavers Connie Graves and Sam Henny will be teaching weekend workshops. Connie Graves will teach **ANative American Baskets: Juncus Basket Basics** on Saturday, April 5

from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. (\$45 for Members; \$50 for Non-Members). Sam Henny will teach **ASongs of the Basket-Weaving with Hemp and Yarn** on Saturday, April 12 from 9:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. (\$65 for Members; \$70 for Non-Members) and **ASongs of the Basket: Intermediate** on Saturday, April 19 from 9:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. (\$65 for Members; \$70 for Non-Members). For more information, please visit www.missionmill.org or contact Tracy Stroud at tracys@missionmill.org or call -503-585-7012.

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