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Sandra Littletree & Charlene Krise

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The Squaxin Island Museum Library and Research Center: A Report from the Field of Tribal Libraries and Museums

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ABSTRACT

Tribal museums and the libraries that serve them are spaces where tribes can not only preserve their history and culture for tribal citizens and visitors, but also function as spaces where the community can learn together, build relationships, and incorporate ancestral knowledge into their daily lives. In this paper, we discuss the broad issues of tribal museums and the role tribal libraries play in communities. We then introduce readers to the difficult history that started the Squaxin Island Museum Library and Research Center (MLRC), and how the Squaxin museum and library work together under one roof, intentionally blurring the boundaries between the museum and library to create a holistic and relational experience for the community that incorporates Indigenous ways of knowing and learning. We tell the story of the Squaxin Island MLRC and examine the role of the library in this cultural hub, including the ways the tribe has taken control over their story through a self-publishing project. The article concludes with reflections on the future of the MLRC and a reflection on how the library incorporates Indigenous ways of knowing in a museum setting.

Keywords: Tribal libraries, Tribal museums, Indigenous librarianship, Indigenous ways of knowing

INTRODUCTION

Located near the tribal headquarters, between Shelton and Olympia in Washington, is the Squaxin Island Museum Library and Research Center (MLRC). Serving as a community hub and an eco-museum, the MLRC tells the story of the People of the Water, also known as the Squaxin Island tribe, through a series of exhibits and displays, as well as a library and collection of family heirlooms, photos, and oral histories. The story of the MLRC is the story of a tribe's resilience as they encountered generations of settler colonial land theft, attempted epistemicide, and acts of violence. But, more importantly, the story of the MLRC is rooted in the Squaxin Island people's enduring relationship to land, water, ceremony, language, and sacred history, in addition to their long-held values of respect, reciprocity, and continuous teaching and learning. Brought together,

these stories create a tapestry, or a woven blanket, that has become the museum, library, and research center at Squaxin Island.

Like many other tribal museums and cultural centers, the MLRC offers a place to preserve the history and culture for tribal members while simultaneously providing education to the public to address misconceptions and stereotypes. Working against the problematic and often painful history of Native American representation in non-tribal museums, tribal museums have been described as places of healing and nation building (Lonetree, 2012) and places of social change (Erikson, 2002). The MLRC, like many other tribal museums and cultural centers in the United States, was created in response to the need for provide accurate representation of the community's history, contemporary issues, and tribal priorities. It was from the deepest conflict and pain that the Squaxin Island Museum was conceived. But it is from the long-held teachings of respect and reciprocity that sustains the museum and library.

In this paper, we begin by discussing the broad issues of tribal museums and the role tribal libraries play in communities. We then introduce readers to the difficult history that started the museum, as well as the focus on the library within the Squaxin Island Museum Library and Research Center (MLRC). We tell the story of the Squaxin Island MLRC and examine the role of the library in this cultural hub, including the ways the tribe has taken control over their story through a self-publishing project. The article concludes with reflections on the future of the MLRC and a reflection on how the library incorporates Indigenous ways of knowing in a museum setting.

BACKGROUND: TRIBAL MUSEUMS AND TRIBAL LIBRARIES

For many years, representation of Native American people in museums, libraries, and archives was a result of the colonial collection of Indigenous knowledge and artifacts that were meant to represent so-called “vanishing” peoples once they disappeared from the landscape (Fuller and Fabricius, 1992). Native people and their expressions of knowledge were relegated to being the objects on display rather than being the ones designing exhibits and curating collections to serve their own community. The colonial legacies of museums, libraries, and archives in Native American communities has been challenging to overcome. Fortunately, this practice is being countered by the growing number of museums, libraries, and archives that are under the direction of tribal nations, many of which have emerged since the civil rights movement and the subsequent era of Indian self-determination (Littletree, 2018; Lonetree, 2012; Fuller and Fabricius, 1992).

Tribal museums, as tribally determined spaces, create spaces for healing and accountability to Indigenous communities, which mainstream museums often do not (Lonetree, 2012). Tribal museums and the libraries that serve them are spaces where tribes can not only preserve their history and culture for tribal citizens and visitors, but also function as places where the community can learn together, build relationships, and incorporate ancestral knowledge into their daily lives. The term “museum” is often interchanged with the term “cultural center” or “research center” in many communities. Described in the context of the Makah Cultural and Research Center by Erikson (2002), using both “museum” and “cultural center” or “research center” indicates the “dual purpose [of] preserving living culture and educating the public” (p. 174).

Libraries that operate within tribal museums are not well documented. Previous publications have showcased museums owned and operated by tribal nations such as Zuni Pueblo (Isaac, 2007), Makah (Erikson, 2002), and the Mashantucket Pequot (Bodinger de Uriarte, 2007),

yet few of these discuss a public library as part of their services. The Mashantucket library and research center is described as “an important resource for building a scholarly profile for research on and narratives about the Mashantucket Pequots” (Bodinger de Urarte, 2007, p. 106). Lonetree’s (2012) work, like many other publications on this topic (e.g. Cobb, 2005; Wali and Collins, 2023), focus primarily on exhibition development, exhibit texts, and museum practices, with a focus on “decolonizing” museum practices, particularly mainstream museums.

Authors have noted a “blurring of boundaries between and among these types of agencies [libraries, museums, and archives],” (Martin, 2011, p. xv) yet little is published about how these agencies work together under one roof, or how these agencies might intentionally blur the boundaries between the museum and library to create a more holistic and relational experience for the community that incorporates Indigenous ways of knowing and learning.

THE ORIGIN STORY OF THE MLRC

The MLRC started as a vision, a dream of elders to tell the story of The People of the Water and to ensure that the teachings of ancestors would have a special place in the community. As people of the water since time immemorial, the Squaxin people were taught to be literate in how to “read” the natural world by watching, listening, and observing their surroundings to survive and thrive in the ecosystem of the southern Salish Sea. With strong teachings of respect and reciprocity, the Squaxin ancestors were a wealthy nation of people known for having large Potlatches and being great gift givers, always having good food, big houses, and good medicine to share. They were known as great hosts to business traders who traveled great distances. When the early fur traders, pioneers, land surveyors, and U.S. military entered their territory, the Squaxin people were hospitable and shared knowledge with newcomers on how to live with the natural resources of their ancestral lands, lands that encompass the seven inlets of the southern Puget Sound.

Like many Native American Nations, the Squaxin Island people endured displacement and disruption of their lives when waves of settlers began to make unwarranted claims to land and waterways in the mid-1800s. The Medicine Creek Treaty of 1854 was entered into by negotiations between recognized sovereign nations of the southern Puget Sound and the US Government, and within two years it became the law of the land. As signers of the 1854 treaty, the Squaxin Island Tribe exchanged thousands of acres of land with the understanding that they would be able to continue to provide for the tribal families as their ancestors had from time immemorial. This meant having access to food, medicine, resources, and self-governance.

However, changes in the treaty language relocated the land base of the Squaxin people to a small island, creating a dark time in the history of the people. In comparison to the expansive reaches of their original homeland, the island did not have enough resources to sustain the families, making it difficult to continue practicing the customs and ceremonies that are connected to the natural world. Additionally, the small island had no creeks or streams for fresh water, and no pharmaceutical lands for medicine or food, causing further agony. Tribal members, living under the stipulations of the treaty, had to become outlaws to harvest salmon in their traditional territories. Slowly, tribal members began settling off the island so that by the 1950s, only a handful of people lived on the island. Furthermore, federal termination of Indian tribes, which occurred between 1953-1968, targeted Squaxin Island as a potential tribe to be terminated. Fortunately, the Tribe was able to prove through documentation the continuity of Tribal governance of the people and retained the status of a treaty tribe with reserved rights.

In 1974, tribes of the Puget Sound, including those who signed the Medicine Creek Treaty of 1854, won a court battle when the Boldt Decision reaffirmed the reserved treaty rights to half of the harvestable salmon. Although it was a victory for Squaxin Island and the other tribes, others outside of the tribes did not readily accept this decision. The decision created an intensity of racial hatred led by non-Indians and sport fisher people, and the target was the Tribal people who exercised treaty rights of salmon fishing in ancestral waters. The Squaxin Tribal people were subjected to having guns pointed at them with demands that they leave. They also heard the ricochet of bullets meant for them and listened to threatening words such as, “the only good Indian is a dead Indian” and had vehicles/boats/nets/gear damaged. This is what was happening during the time called the Fish Wars during the 1960s and 1970s.

The MLRC started as a vision of Squaxin Tribal Elders who focused on rising above the racism that they experienced following the Boldt Decision of 1974. They envisioned a museum for people of all nationalities to be educated on the cultural history of the Squaxin people. They dreamed of a place to house family heirlooms and artifacts, and to become a community center where people could learn about the tribe’s history, identity, and customs through exhibits and collections of published and curated documents and materials. The current director of the MLRC, and co-author of this article, Charlene Krise, worked for years interviewing elders to make a record of the tribal heritage of the Squaxin people. Under her guidance, the dreams of the elders took shape through the establishment of the MLRC as an ecomuseum, a museum where the past, present and future are incorporated with community values through exhibits and galleries (Davis, 1999).

Groundbreaking for the Squaxin Island Museum Library and Research Center occurred in 1999 and the doors of the plank house-style building opened to the public in November of 2002. The MLRC operates under this mission statement:

The Squaxin Island Museum Library and Research Center (MLRC) is dedicated to the education, preservation, study, and exhibition of the life, languages, literature, history, and traditional skills of the Squaxin People; the MLRC works in collaboration with the Squaxin Community and other Native Peoples in protecting and reaffirming traditions and beliefs, encouraging contemporary artistic expression, and empowering the Indigenous voice; ensuring that the knowledge of our ancestors, past, present, and future will survive and flourish for present and future generations.

The MLRC tells the story of the People of the Water in a large open space known as the Hall of Seven Inlets—a physical representation of the seven original watersheds of Squaxin homelands. The Hall of Seven Inlets is a permanent exhibit consisting of a series of seven 12-foot by 14-foot murals (or panels) that make up the central exhibit. The MLRC offers public exhibits, classes, lectures, and cultural activities for the Squaxin community that includes drum/dance rehearsal and Squaxin language learning. The MLRC takes an active role in numerous community events throughout the year, including the annual Tribal Canoe Journey, assisting tribal members who become involved with this Pacific Northwestern event. In collaboration with the tribal community, the MLRC offers expertise to other tribes, colleges and universities, and to local and state government officials on the historical knowledge of Squaxin.

THE MUSEUM LIBRARY

Housed within the museum is the library dedicated to the collection, preservation and access of published and unpublished written materials, reference materials, photos, and other associated archives that pertain to the culture of the seven original bands of the Squaxin Island Tribe and the Puget Sound region. Open to the public, the library supports the overall mission of the MLRC by serving the research needs of the community and scholars through its collections. The non-circulating book and manuscript collection fits on eight bookcases and contains nearly 900 contemporary and rare, hard-to-find books of northwest tribal history, as well as a selection of tribal newsletters, tribal council minutes, and resolutions. Staffed by a director, assistant director, assistant curator, and tourism assistant, the MLRC's previous librarian retired during the COVID-19 pandemic and has not been replaced. Limited shelf space, as well as limited expertise among the current staff in library collection management, makes growth of the library difficult currently. However, the library continues to update its rare books specific to Native American cultures, Coast Salish art, sovereignty of tribes in the Pacific Northwest, biographies of important figures in tribal history, reference materials, fiction, Northwest and South Puget Sound Native books, periodicals, and other materials. The library staff take great care in purchasing books and adding donated books to the collection.

The book collection, combined with the archival and photographic collections (held in a separate, secure area of the MLRC) gives the MLRC the resources to help tribal members and other interested parties to create a definitive profile of the history of the Squaxin Island Tribe. Tribal members have used the collection for researching family names, plant identification, traditional food recipes, and ceremonial places and songs. The library previously offered public access computers for visitors, which were used for completing job applications, online research, writing papers, and more. The library's primary audience are k-12 students, local college and university students, artists, and others doing research on Northwest Native American topics or South Puget Sound Indigenous issues. The library currently uses the Dewey Decimal system and is considering alternative ways of organizing the material to reflect the subjects of the MLRC and community needs.

The library's collection of books is located within the main Hall of the Seven Inlets, with no barriers between the bookshelves and the other features of the museum, including the large wall panels/murals, exhibits of baskets and other artifacts, and storytelling circle. In fact, many of the books are browsed by tourists and visitors as one stop on their tour through the MLRC. The Squaxin Island Canoe Family hosts a Cultural Night--often using the MLRC's storytelling circle, adjacent to the library and museum exhibits--inviting the Squaxin community to share songs, dances, practice language, and enjoy a communal meal. The facility was intentionally designed to bring the museum and library into a single space, mirroring tribal ways of teaching and learning that is holistic and relational. Using an Indigenous perspective on the ways we learn about the world, the physical layout of the public library placed within the museum hall resembles the ways Indigenous people have been developing their ways of knowing since time immemorial—through relationships, observing, and storywork (Archibald, 2008).

A PEOPLE'S HISTORY OF THE SEVEN INLETS: STEH-CHASS

Like many tribal nations, the Squaxin tribe endured years of non-tribal authors writing about and interpreting their history and culture. A recent publication project seeks to establish the Squaxin tribe as their own authority on their history and culture. In 2017, the MLRC published a 12-page educational resource *Upon These Waters: Selections from A People's History of Our Seven Inlets*, followed by a longer 35-page resource *A People's History of the Seven Inlets: Steh-Chass*, which trace the history of the tribe, beginning since time immemorial through contemporary times. Both publications, written with the extensive use of library resources, cover major historical events such as epidemics, the Medicine Creek Treaty of 1854, the aftermath of the treaty, the fight for fishing rights, and Indian boarding schools. Weaving together oral histories, photos, historic letters, traditional stories, as well as archeological evidence and academic publications from the library collection, the resources clearly establish Squaxin's long-term care of the lands and waters of the southern Puget Sound. Written by the MLRC Director, Charlene Krise, along with contributions from local tribal members, the resources give readers a glimpse into who the Squaxin Island people are. The library was an essential resource for the authors of the book to verify timelines and quotes used in the book, in addition to serving as a comfortable place to meet to listen and record oral histories used in the book. When the book was published, the library served as the preferred location for book signing and celebration.

Written in the acknowledgements section of *A People's History of the Seven Inlets* is this statement establishing the Squaxin Island Museum Library, and Research Center as an authority on the tribe's history:

The Squaxin Island Tribe is the sole authority of its cultural knowledge, which outside writers have attempted to interpret. Many of these works have been cited in [*A People's History of the Seven Inlets: Steh-Chass*]. While helpful, some of these works may contain misrepresentations. For the unabridged, authoritative history of the Squaxin Island Tribe, please visit the Squaxin Island Museum, Library, and Research Center.

The longer publication, *A People's History*, is freely available for visitors of the MLRC to take home a physical copy, and both publications are available as digital resources on the museum website. The publications also serve to supplement the information provided in the museum exhibits and the resources found in the library and research center. The books are also meant to provide a written and easily accessible introduction to the tribe written by the authorities on the topic: the Squaxin people themselves.

THE FUTURE OF THE MUSEUM LIBRARY

Realizing that technology is the future and must be utilized as an integral energy for moving forward, the library is working to update its digital services to include e-books through a collaboration with the local public library. The library recognizes that smart phones placed information easily into the hands of children and students. To harness this new form of engagement, the library is working on reinventing how to continue to provide digital resources as

a unique tribal library while continuing to build a vital and current collection. In addition, the library is working on finding modern methods of recording oral histories of Squaxin people.

DISCUSSION

Having a public library as part of the tribal museum reflects the ways the tribe embraces multiple ways of knowing and learning. In brief, Indigenous ways of knowing are “based on observing and living in an Indigenous way, communicating lessons and insights by talking story, singing, and teaching—doing what anthropologists call the oral tradition—and by weaving, carving, making pottery, designing and building edifices, making art, fashion tools and weapons, growing and creating medicine, designing calendars and other measures of eras” (Littletree, Belarde-Lewis, & Duarte, 2020, p. 416). As a way of gaining knowledge about the world around them, the Squaxin people engaging with ancestral knowledge have been taught to be literate in how to “read” the natural world by watching, listening, and observing their surroundings. Haida authors Sara Florence Davidson and her father Robert Davidson describe this as “potlatch as pedagogy” in which learning occurs through the hosting of potlatches and feasts. They write, “learning emerges from strong relationships, authentic experiences, and from curiosity; learning occurs through observation, contribution, and recognizing and encouraging strengths; learning honours the power of the mind, our history and our stories, as well as spirituality and protocol” (Davidson & Davidson, 2018, p. 68).

The library, situated physically within the plank-style longhouse museum building, offers the community a way to read and listen to stories about the tribe and the region while surrounded by the words, photos, and art of tribal members that have been incorporated into exhibits. Additionally, comfortable couches and a storytelling space in the MLRC recreates familial ways of engaging with stories, songs, and teaching.

With books and materials carefully selected by the MLRC staff, the library offers visitors a chance to engage with materials they trust to help tell their story. By self-publishing the resources, *A People’s History of the Seven Inlets*, and *Once Upon These Waters*, and by making them freely available to the community through the MLRC, the tribe has taken control of their narrative that has previously been dominated by outsiders.

CONCLUSION

In this article, we have addressed how the library is supporting the MLRC’s goal of ensuring the knowledge of the Squaxin ancestors will survive and flourish for present and future generations. Through written collections written and published by outsiders, as well as through their own publication and archival and photo collection, the library embodies a philosophy of Indigenous learning.

The MLRC is one example of how a sovereign tribal nation in the Pacific Northwest region of the United States has created a museum, library, and research center that supports tribal and public information and cultural needs. As a beacon of light after the tribe experienced dark times, the tribe has kept their ancestral knowledge alive with the support of the MLRC.

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Sandra Littletree (Diné/Eastern Shoshone) is an enrolled member of the Navajo Nation and an Assistant Professor in the Information School at the University of Washington in Seattle. Building on her research on the history of tribal libraries, her research interests lie at the intersections of Indigenous systems of knowledge and the library and information science field.

Charlene Krise, an enrolled tribal member of the Squaxin Island Tribe, has served her people in different capacities all the while sharing the cultural knowledge and history of the Squaxin Island people. A previous Tribal Council Member, Charlene has been a volunteer on numerous boards, committees, commissions and is currently the Executive Director for the Squaxin Island Tribe Museum Library Research Center (MLRC).