



THE HARVARD PROJECT ON AMERICAN INDIAN ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

John F. Kennedy School of Government • Harvard University

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Southwest Oregon Research Project Coquille Indian Tribe (North Bend, Oregon)

Contact:

10 Coachman Drive, Eugene, OR 97405

Tel: (541) 346-5525 Fax: (541) 343-1759

Website: <http://libweb.uoregon.edu/speccoll/>

In 1995, the Coquille Indian Tribe established the Southwest Oregon Research Project (SWORP) to recover historical, anthropological, military, and government documents relating to the Tribe and surrounding Indian nations. These documents were potlatched in two gift-giving ceremonies to forty-four different tribes and are now locally accessible at tribal libraries and at a central archive at the University of Oregon. Through SWORP, the Coquille have helped themselves and others rewrite and interpret tribal histories, develop innovative partnerships, improve tribal governmental performance, and strengthen tribal sovereignty.

Like many Indian nations of western Oregon, the Coquille Indian Tribe endured a long struggle to gain federal recognition and secure title to a tribal homeland. Although the Coquille and the US federal government signed two treaties in the 1850s, Congress never ratified them. Encroachment by non-Indians followed, and it was not until the 1940s that the Coquille were able to gain a degree of redress in the US Court of Claims, which awarded several coastal Oregon tribes financial compensation for lands taken. Progress, however, was short-lived. In 1954, House Concurrent Resolution 108 terminated the Tribe's legal relationship with the federal government, and the Coquille were forced to begin their struggles anew. The continuing battles for federal recognition and land rights were complicated by the fact that tribal citizens' testimonies were largely disqualified in court and Congressional hearings as "hearsay." In fact, the Coquille's eventual recognition by the US Congress in 1989 was the result not of tribal elders' testimonies, but of the "credible" testimony and writings of non-Native anthropologists, linguists, and ethnohistorians.

Regrettably, many Indian nations face similar demands to produce "credible," "paper proof" of tribal ancestry or land ownership. Matters are made worse by the fact that there are substantial obstacles to undertaking the archival research necessary to produce such proof. These include educational barriers, a lack of scholarly support, and a dearth of economic means – all of which can force Native nations into further reliance on outsiders for evidence of their claims. Upon the restoration of the Coquille Tribe's status, the Coquille Tribal Council and elders made a commitment to reduce this dependency upon external sources for cultural and political self-determination and survival. They decided to recapture their own history.

In 1995, in collaboration with the University of Oregon and the Smithsonian Institution, the Coquille Indian Tribe established the Southwest Oregon Research Project (SWORP) to recover historical, anthropological, military, and government documents relating to the Coquille and neighboring tribes. That year, a small group of SWORP scholars from the Coquille Tribe and the University of Oregon identified and photocopied sixty thousand pages

of relevant materials from the Smithsonian Institution's National Anthropological Archives and the National Archives in Washington, DC. This collection contained important information about the cultures, languages, and histories of western Oregon and northern California tribes during the early settlement period of the Oregon Territory. In the summer of 1998, a second team of SWORP scholars—including members of the Coquille, Grand Ronde, Siletz, and Coos Tribes—returned to the Archives and recovered an additional fifty thousand pages of materials, including allotment records, treaties, and military documents.

Recognizing that these archival materials belonged in the hands of people who could use them, SWORP launched a dissemination effort. To ensure the broad availability of its research to Native communities in the region, SWORP worked with the University of Oregon to house the archives in the University's Special Collections. In the spring of 1997, SWORP held a potlatch (a traditional gift-giving ceremony) to distribute copies of its collection to seven tribal libraries. SWORP distributed archival materials to a total of forty-four tribes at a second potlatch in 2001, an event in which over four hundred guests participated. Each gifting of the archived materials forwards SWORP's goal of making "paper proof" of tribal histories and cultures readily available to Indian nations.

SWORP's collection and distribution efforts continue. For example, SWORP scholars are currently targeting other archival collections, including those found at the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology at Harvard University, the Bancroft Library at the University of California at Berkeley, the Hudson Bay Archives in Winnipeg, Canada, and Russia's Museum of Ethnology in St. Petersburg, which might hold resources that complement the existing collection. With regard to distribution, the Coquille Tribe has made the existing collection more accessible through the production of a creative multi-indexed inventory, which cross-references the vast collection by geographic places, dates, tribal and cultural affiliations, document titles, document types, author names, and brief subject descriptions. Using the inventory, researchers can locate specific SWORP holdings with greater ease.

At first glance, SWORP might be viewed as a purely academic endeavor. In reality, however, SWORP is a dynamic, multi-faceted project that has generated a diverse array of academic, community, and governmental benefits. A professor of anthropology at the University of Oregon has called SWORP a project of "cultural repatriation mandated by common sense." Indeed, several significant Project successes demonstrate the Coquille Tribe's wisdom in initiating such an endeavor.

By developing the SWORP collections, the Coquille Tribe has enhanced its own ability, as well as that of other Indian nations, to define and defend tribal culture and history. The vast array of SWORP documents has encouraged scholars to revisit, from an indigenous perspective, histories and ethnographies that have delimited Indian cultures. As a result, they have produced more historically accurate and culturally conscious educational curricula and research projects. In fact, since 1995, the SWORP archive has been a primary resource for eight Ph.D. dissertations and six Masters theses in anthropology, linguistics, history, and musicology. Native American graduate students produced seven of these works. Interest in the SWORP archives also is inspiring a new—and growing—group of Native scholars. In 1995, there was only one Indian graduate student in the University of Oregon's Department of Anthropology, while today there are five, with a total of eight since SWORP's initiation. These scholars are in a position to help refocus the field of anthropology, which has an unfortunate history of emphasizing the racial and cultural inferiority of indigenous peoples. In addition to encouraging individual scholars, the SWORP collection has inspired an annual Culture Preservation Conference as well as a journal, *Changing Landscapes*. The SWORP potlatches have resulted in a documentary film, *A Gift of History: The Potlatch Returns*, and a

second film is now in production. SWORP reclaims and reincorporates intellectual property that indisputably belongs in the region, empowering the Coquille and other tribes to reevaluate and defend against the portrayals of Indian cultures that have influenced their identities and sovereignty.

In order to give the Coquille and other tribes in the region control over their histories and cultural representation, SWORP's leadership forged fruitful partnerships with other organizations and institutions. The Smithsonian Institution, whose archives are open and freely accessible to the public, sponsored SWORP's first trip to Washington, DC, to retrieve archival documents and continues to serve as a resource to SWORP staff. The University of Oregon houses the SWORP archive, provides a pool of graduate students who maintain and expand the archive, and has hosted the SWORP potlatches. As a result of these partnerships, SWORP has spent a total of \$177,000 (or little more than \$1.60 per page of archived material) over its seven-year existence. These partnerships help ensure SWORP's sustainability and have spawned a string of related innovations, supporting projects, and achievements. For instance, SWORP was the impetus for the University of Oregon to build a longhouse on campus and to extend in-state tuition to student applicants from any tribe with historical ties to the State of Oregon. In its 125th anniversary celebration, the University heralded SWORP as one of its top 125 achievements. SWORP also has led to the creation of a collaborative curriculum development project wherein the Tribe, the University, and the Smithsonian are working together to produce, distribute, and implement "tribe specific" Native American curricula in Oregon public schools.

Gifting the SWORP materials through potlatches has allowed the Coquille Tribe to establish similarly productive relationships with surrounding Indian nations. The significance of these potlatches is tremendous: Not only have they reunited for the first time tribes that were widely dispersed during the 1850s era of removal, but they also have rekindled an ancient tradition. In addition to these cultural and political benefits, the practice of gifting has practical benefits. SWORP archives, provided by the Coquille to their tribal neighbors at Coos Bay, serve as the foundation for the emerging Coos Bay tribal library and have generated goodwill among these two Indian nations. Several tribes are using SWORP documents in their efforts to gain federal recognition; for example, the Coquille recently gave the Chinook Tribe twelve maps that document its ancestral homelands. At the same time, the gifts are beginning to be reflected back to the Coquille. SWORP directors recently received a completely digitized version of the SWORP archives from the Smith River Rancheria (California), which worked in conjunction with the Center for Indian Community Development at Humboldt State University to make the archives electronically accessible. The Smith River Rancheria's gift also included digital copies of its own archival documents, many of which complement the SWORP collections.

In addition to these successes, SWORP plays a critical role in improving the Coquille Tribe's governmental performance and enhancing the Tribe's presence and influence in the region. Using maps from the SWORP collection, Coquille tribal employees have developed a mapping system that enables tribal departments to protect archaeological and cultural sites while making development decisions. Specifically, they are now able to determine—at a moment's notice—whether sites in question are sacred or of historical significance. Additionally, in cooperation with the Coos County Planning Commission, the Coquille Tribe's cultural resource managers have added 141 new sites to the county's inventories—sites previously not protected by the Oregon State Historical Preservation Office—and helped the county devise a buffering system that protects the confidential location of these sites. Not only does SWORP allow the Tribe to make more informed development and conservation decisions, but it also allows the Tribe to assign appropriate place names. The "Osprey Weir

Site” is now called “Ni-Les-Tun-Tene” on the Coos County Map of Cultural, Natural, Geologic, and Botanical Resources. In a recent issue of the Oregon Historical Quarterly, scholars using SWORP documents were able to attribute the word “Oregon” to a mispronounced Cree word describing an oil-laden fish that was traded throughout the Pacific Northwest.

SWORP is a low-cost, high-benefit, and easily transferable endeavor that exemplifies and advances tribal self-determination. Through SWORP, the Coquille have empowered themselves and other Indian nations in the Northwest by recovering “paper proof” of their history and culture that complements the oral traditions and memories of their elders. This effort has enhanced cultural education, resulted in valuable institutional partnerships, improved intertribal relations, rekindled community traditions, and strengthened the tribal government’s ability to function as a self-determined sovereign.

Lessons:

- Indian nations can use historical archives to define and defend their own culture and history, to address misperceptions and misunderstandings, to produce educational and cultural curricula, to foster Native scholarship, and to inform policy decisions.
- Large-scale research efforts often require strategic partnerships to bear the burdens of organizing, producing, and maintaining information. Tribes seeking to develop archival collections can look to academic institutions, museums, libraries, nonprofit organizations, and other tribes to identify shared interests and comparative advantages. These partnerships can expand the pool of technical, archival, and historical knowledge at a tribe’s disposal and help spread costs.
- Information is expensive to organize but usually inexpensive to reproduce. Sharing information with other tribes, non-Indian governments, and other groups (for example, schools) can build goodwill, increase understanding between people, and facilitate productive government-to-government relationships.

79 John F. Kennedy Street • Cambridge, Massachusetts 02138
telephone: (617) 495-1480 • facsimile: (617) 496-3900
website: www.hks.harvard.edu/hpaied