

# Inside the National Anthropological Archives

## An Interview with Robert Leopold

*This interview with National Anthropological Archives Director Robert Leopold traces the institutional history of the NAA from 1879 to the present, and details the growth of the collections housed there. The NAA is the official repository for the AAA.*

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ANTHROPOLOGY NEWS

### AN: What is the background and mission of the National Anthropological Archives?

**Robert Leopold:** The National Anthropological Archives' (NAA) roots begin with the ethnological work of John Wesley Powell and his colleagues at the Smithsonian Institution Bureau of American Ethnology (BAE) between 1879 and 1964. BAE was founded to preserve the photographs and maps produced by the US Great Western Surveys, but Powell's passion was anthropological fieldwork. He engaged many of the earliest anthropologists, archaeologists and linguists working in the US—Franz Boas, Frank Hamilton Cushing, Jesse Walter Fewkes, Alice Fletcher, Cosmo and Victor Mindeleff, and John and Matilda Cox Stevenson—whose materials formed the core of our early holdings. Hundreds of scientists, missionaries, frontier army officers and gentlemen scholars who were in touch with native peoples also sent materials to the Smithsonian. Within years, the BAE archive, as it was already called, contained thousands of unique manuscripts and an extraordinary collection of ethnographic photographs. I think it's interesting that our profession's first archive preceded the creation of the National Archives by more than 50 years.

In 1968, the BAE archive was renamed the NAA. Bill Sturtevant, one of the BAE's last employees, recognized the need to preserve materials with a broader geographical focus. Although North American materials remain one of the collection's strengths, for the past 40 years the NAA has collected and preserved anthropological materials that document cultures from around the world.

The contemporary NAA also documents the development of the discipline. In our archives, you'll find grant proposals, lectures and class notes, professional correspondence, and letters from the field, along with Cushing's shopping

lists for his travels to Zuni—even some wonderful recipes. In 1972, our archives became the official AAA repository, and we also maintain the records and history of more than two dozen anthropological associations and AAA sections, including the American Ethnological Society, the Society for Medical Anthropology, the Society for Historical Archaeology, and the American Association of Physical Anthropologists.

### AN: If I were walking through the archives, what would I see?

**RL:** Most researchers see only the reading room and offices, but across the hall is an environmentally controlled area where we store our collections. You'll find about a mile and a half of shelves holding materials arranged by source, collector or donor. As you walk down Aisle 9, for example, you'll see John Murra's papers alongside those of Freddy de Laguna, Carol Kramer, Ruth Bunzel, archaeologist Glynn Isaac, biological anthropologist Frank Spencer, and filmmaker Timothy Asch.

You'll also find about 635,000 photographs, in formats ranging from glass-plate negatives and albumin prints to color slides and TIFF images, created during fieldwork, scientific expeditions, and in Washington DC portrait studios when delegations of native peoples visited the capital. Alongside our photographs, we have more than

**RL:** We are committed to making our collections as accessible as possible, but we also honor anthropologists' confidentiality agreements. Because of changing ethical perceptions, we occasionally impose access restrictions that exceed what an anthropologist originally proposed. For example, we restrict medical records; documents pertaining to children; and anything that could conceivably harm the people with whom an ethnographer conducted research. Virtually all these restrictions are temporary, in effect during the anthropologist's or informant's lifetime. I think George M Foster is the only person who outlived a 50-year restriction. We should all be that lucky.

### AN: What is a typical day like at the NAA?

**RL:** I spend a lot of time speaking to anthropologists about their field notes, helping donors pack their collections, cataloging materials to make them more accessible, and raising public awareness about the value of preserving the anthropological record. You'd be surprised how few anthropologists think about the disposition of their field notes. On average, the NAA acquires six to eight major collections a year. When you consider that there are more than 15,000 US anthropologists and that perhaps 500 retire each year, only a portion of the anthropological record has been preserved.

I let anthropologists know that there is great value in preserving their research materials. Sometimes, though, I don't speak with an anthropologist (or their spouse or children) until it's too late. I can't tell you how many times families

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While the excitement of archival discovery may be especially poignant for descendants of the communities whose materials we hold, it is no less exciting for scholars when they find something for which they have been patiently searching for years.

21,000 works of art, including late-19th-century Japanese and Korean maps and prints, Red Cloud's eyewitness account of the Battle of the Little Big Horn, Sitting Bull's pictographic autobiography, and a Kuna map of the universe.

In 2010, construction of our cold-storage film vault will be complete, which will allow us to safely preserve still images and eight million feet of moving images at subzero temperatures. That should extend the life of our color film collection by about 20,000 years. You could call it cryogenics for anthropology.

### AN: You said that some collections are restricted, but I thought the NAA was a public repository?

have told me that they threw away file cabinets of "stuff" because the scholar had already published a monograph. And yet anthropologists typically publish a limited portion of their research documentation. Who wouldn't want to see complete field notes produced by an anthropologist who worked in their area 50 or 100 years earlier? That's exactly the material that the NAA preserves.

I spent last Sunday at Priscilla Reining's house packing up her professional papers with her eldest son. Priscilla conducted fieldwork among the Ojibwe, as a student at Chicago, and later worked with the Haya in Tanzania. Priscilla was the first anthropologist to study HIV transmission in Africa and she also conducted research on arid

### Resources

National Anthropological Archives  
[www.nmnh.si.edu/naa](http://www.nmnh.si.edu/naa)

FAQ: Donating Collections to the NAA  
[www.nmnh.si.edu/naa/faq.htm](http://www.nmnh.si.edu/naa/faq.htm)

Chaco Digital Initiative  
[www.chacoarchive.org](http://www.chacoarchive.org)

Protocols for Native American Archival Materials  
[www.firstarchivistscircle.org/protocols.htm](http://www.firstarchivistscircle.org/protocols.htm)

Rosetta Project  
[www.rosettaproject.org](http://www.rosettaproject.org)



Betty Nixon (Kiowa) holding a photograph of her grandmother, Mary Buffalo, one of Weston La Barre's informants. Photo courtesy Stephanie Ogeneski, 2006

regions of West Africa and on population dynamics in the US. I'm sure that researchers from several disciplines will use her primary documentation.

**AN:** *What sort of materials is the NAA placing online?*

**RL:** The NAA has produced 85,000 high-resolution digital images. We recently digitized thousands of historic archaeological photographs of Chaco Canyon, in collaboration with the Chaco Digital Initiative at the University of Virginia. With the Museum of the Cherokee Indian, we produced digital surrogates for more than 8,000 pages of Cherokee-language documentation, including ethnobotanical materials; songs and musical transcriptions; lists of Cherokee place names; and early maps and censuses. Still, not everything in our archive should automatically be available online. We recently collaborated with native archivists, librarians and other anthropologists on the Protocols for Native American Archival Materials to address how we navigate ethical issues in granting access to archived materials.

**AN:** *What about field notes that are born-digital?*

**RL:** Most of the current research documentation is born-digital. However, making these electronic files available online is often more challenging than their analog counterparts. One issue is preserving their integrity and authenticity. I had my first glimpse of this problem when we received Frank Dubinskas's field notes about ten years ago, on Zip disks. Dubinskas conducted a study of manufacturing engineering management at Apple Computer and wrote his field notes with a now-obsolete word-processing application. Displaying these materials online takes more preparation than simply uploading them to a DSpace repository. A second issue is that anthropologi-

cal field notes circulate farther and faster online than in print and have a greater chance of losing their original context and meaning. Rights-management tools provide one way to address this issue, so that scholars and the communities they work with can share (or choose not to share) the cultural documentation they produce. You'll find tools like these at the Archive of the Indigenous Languages of Latin America, the Rosetta Project and the Mukurtu Wumpurrarni-kari Archive, among others.

**AN:** *Besides anthropologists, who visits the archives?*

**RL:** Anthropologists are our primary patrons, but indigenous scholars researching their own cultural heritage are also frequent visitors. Ethnographic and archaeological materials in the archives are regularly used for claims relating to Native sovereignty, land and mineral rights. The language documentation in our archives, much of which was collected in the mid- to late 19th century, is widely used for language revitalization projects. We also serve historians, filmmakers, photo historians, geographers, ethnobotanists and exhibit developers.

**AN:** *Sometimes you sound as if the people who created these collections are still living and breathing in your archives.*

**RL:** Their work is certainly alive. Visitors to the NAA can view the faces and hear the voices of individuals who appeared in early anthropological monographs and can encounter the raw history of the discipline head-on. There's joy, and occasionally tears, when visitors discover photographs and sound recordings of their relatives, as they frequently do. While the excitement of archival discovery may be especially poignant for descendants of the communities whose materials we hold, it is no less exciting for scholars when they find something for which they have been patiently searching for years.

**AN:** *When did you become director of the NAA?*

**RL:** I've been around the National Museum of Natural History since 1988, when I received a predoctoral fellowship to write my dissertation on the Loma of Liberia. I fell in love with the museum and worked as an assistant to the curators of African ethnology for several years. In 1996, I became an archivist, primarily to create online exhibits and work on other electronic projects, and in 2004, I became the NAA director. I can't imagine a more fascinating and fulfilling place to work. ☐

*Robert Leopold is the director of the National Anthropological Archives and Human Studies Film Archives at the Smithsonian Institution, co-chair of the Council for the Preservation of Anthropological Records (CoPAR), and adjunct professor in the museum studies program at George Washington University. Anthropologists who wish to donate their professional papers to the NAA can write to him at [leopold@si.edu](mailto:leopold@si.edu).*

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