

Up-and-Comers: News for Student and New Archivists

Assistant Editor: Meredith Lowe, The iSchool at the University of Wisconsin–Madison.

Contact Meredith at mclowe@wisc.edu if you would like to guest author a column or have a good idea to share.

Mukurtu: Ethically Minded and Socially Empowering Digital Archiving

By Erin F. H. Hughes, Mukurtu Hub Manager, WiLS



I was born to be a Badger. My grandfather was a professor in the School of Education at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, and both my parents are graduates. I earned dual undergraduate degrees from the University of Wisconsin–Madison in art history with a

concentration in material culture, and in fine arts with a concentration in painting. After I graduated, to no one's surprise, I began searching for jobs in the museum and archives field. I found a job as a curator at the Evanston History Center (EHC) in Evanston, Illinois. The EHC is located in the historic home of former vice president Charles Gates Dawes. The center interprets the life and works of Dawes; his wife, Caro; and their children, as well as the history of the city of Evanston. Working at the EHC was an incredibly rewarding experience. It is a small institution run by a few incredibly talented staff members and offering a lot of opportunities to do new and varied projects. I was able to curate exhibits, do preventative conservation, manage collection procedures and policies, work on projects related to the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA), assist in the research room and archives, digitize collection items, manage the website, work with social media outlets, and conduct research for interpretation of the house. It was an incredible opportunity.



Hughes gives a tour of the EHC collection storage.

Two particular projects fueled my desire to expand my knowledge and education in archives and records management. One was putting together a tour that interpreted the lives of the Dawes family's domestic staff. The goal of the project was to broaden interest in the museum to a wider demographic. Many house museums, like the EHC, are criticized for telling a selective and biased history. They almost exclusively highlight the work and accomplishments of privileged, Caucasian men. I always questioned the underrepresentation of women and house staff in house museums, which are awash instead in the biographical details of great men's lives, despite the fact that the domestic space was the women's sphere. Every historic site had the opportunity for better interpretation. Until recently, most archival institutions neglected to collect the papers of women and nonmajority groups, failing to provide accurate representations of people and events in history. A seed had been planted and a desire to learn more about archival institutions and information access started growing in me.

Not long after I completed the staff tour, I found out that the EHC had received a NAGPRA Consultation grant from the National Park Service US Department of the Interior. The EHC housed many indigenous materials that had been donated to the collection at the turn of the century and had been collected by Dawes himself. NAGPRA is a federal law that passed in 1990. It provides a process for museums to return certain indigenous cultural materials to lineal descendants, culturally affiliated Indian tribes, and Native Hawaiian organizations. The act requires federal agencies and institutions that receive federal funding to follow NAGPRA regulations. This project was difficult to be involved in, but it was also one of the most rewarding and eye-opening experiences. During these consultations with area tribal representatives, I began to understand that NAGPRA required changes in social attitudes toward native peoples by the museum community and the public at large! Returning cultural and religious items is one of the many necessary ways to mend relationships between native communities and collecting institutions. This deepened my desire to understand how museums, archives, and libraries could

better serve underrepresented populations. Museums and archives had essentially erased the lives of indigenous peoples. Institutions needed to make a shift to include indigenous voices, but in culturally relevant and ethically minded ways. This required improved dialogue between indigenous communities and museums, and building long-term, respectful, and meaningful relationships.

Not long after the NAGPRA grant wrapped up, and after lots of encouragement from one of my mentors, who was also a colleague, I decided to go to graduate school. I was accepted to the University of Wisconsin–Madison’s iSchool. I went back to school for several reasons. I wanted to broaden my knowledge of the archival and information field. I also wanted to further contribute to the information world by helping care for, preserve, and share archival, library, and museum collections. I saw the potential for them to be used to empower their communities, act as informers and educators, and be places of dialogue and social engagement.

In the spring of 2016, I had the opportunity to take the Tribal Libraries, Archives, and Museums (TLAM) course at the iSchool, taught by Omar Poler. This fantastic class is a huge asset to the program. The TLAM class was very different from the other classes I had taken at the iSchool. It encouraged conversation in a safe environment, challenging us to confront our own ignorance and assumptions about tribal communities, and learning the qualities necessary for working in and with diverse communities. In TLAM I first heard about Mukurtu CMS.

Mukurtu (MOOK-oo-too) CMS is a free, open-source content management system developed by the Center for Digital Curation and Scholarship at Washington State University. It supports the unique needs of indigenous libraries, archives, and museums as they seek to preserve and share their digital heritage. Mukurtu CMS is a grassroots project aiming to empower communities to manage, share, and exchange their digital heritage in culturally relevant and ethically minded ways.

Mukurtu’s design and structure are based on appropriate circulation, display, and sharing of cultural materials and knowledge. The name *Mukurtu* comes from the Australian Waramungu language and means “dilly bag.” A dilly bag is a safekeeping place for sacred materials. Elders keep and protect these materials as part of their obligation to care for their communities, relatives, places, and ancestors.

Community involvement is key to Mukurtu. It allows for local-protocol-driven access and circulation of content and metadata in a way that each community defines. The platform is completely configurable and customizable to the cultural, social, and linguistic needs of any size of community, library, archive, or museum.

Mukurtu is an incredible resource that fills many gaps that currently exist within most content management systems. More important, especially to me, it benefits and considers underrepresented populations, and it introduced me

(Continued on page 30)

Mukurtu project partners with Washington State University faculty and staff



(Continued from page 29)

to new concepts regarding open access and information freedom. As information professionals, we need to take into account what Mukurtu's founder, Kim Christen, describes as the "cultural logics of many groups who view improper reuse and redistribution of their materials as possibly damaging to their cultural practices or traditional knowledge systems."¹

In February, several months before graduating from the iSchool, I accepted a job as the hub manager, working collaboratively with WiLS (Wisconsin Library Services) and the iSchool on an IMLS National Leadership Grant awarded to Washington State University. The grant, Mukurtu Hubs and Spokes: A Sustainable National Platform for Digital Community Archiving, establishes regional Mukurtu training and outreach centers around the country. The Mukurtu Midwest Hub provides Mukurtu support and training to tribal and nontribal archives, libraries, and museums in Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Michigan.

Mukurtu is an exciting development! It tackles the challenge of how to define access to digital collections by using collaboration and cultural sensitivity. The ability to apply cultural protocols to materials and the knowledge surrounding the materials has been missing from the information technology landscape, until now. I'm incredibly excited to be part of the IMLS grant project, to be working so closely with Mukurtu, and to be part of a larger conversation on open access and information freedom. This job is truly a dream come true. It is giving me the opportunity to help empower indigenous communities and lets me discuss how museums, archives, and libraries can better serve these communities.

Note

1. Kimberly Christen, "Does Information Really Want to Be Free? Indigenous Knowledge Systems and the Question of Openness," *International Journal of Communication* 6 (2012): 2875.

**HOLLINGER
METAL EDGE**
Archival Storage Materials

Don't let price determine the products you want.
We will beat all competitor's prices.

hollingermetalede.com 1-800-862-2228 1-800-634-0491