

Songs for Asking

Perspectives on Traditional Culture Among Nevada Indians

By Nicholas CP Vrooman

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Paiute singer Manuel "Popeye" McCloud



Beaded baskets by Rebecca Eagle Lambert

FOREWORD

Despite their small numbers—between one and two percent of the state’s population—Nevada’s Indian people have a strong and distinctive identity, and one that has a much higher profile than the numbers alone would indicate. This is testimony largely to the continuity and distinctiveness of their culture, for that is what makes Native Americans unique.

The original tribes of Nevada include the Northern Paiute, Western Shoshone, Southern Paiute and Washoe. Before non-Indians arrived, they lived in small family bands and moved during the year to where seasonal foods and supplies could be gathered. With the arrival of Europeans they were gradually forced onto smaller and smaller pieces of land and shifted from a subsistence to a wage economy. Today there are 25 tribal governments, about evenly divided in number between town colonies and larger reservations all across the state, from Las Vegas to McDermitt and Dresslerville to Duckwater. Some are incredibly remote, and some are in the heart of urban downtowns. All the governments are represented on the Inter-Tribal Council, a statewide organization. There is also a growing urban Indian population (particularly in Las Vegas) made up of members of tribes from other places and a significant number of inter-tribal marriages and people with mixed tribal heritages. The large rural reservations still have an economy based largely in ranching and farming, while Indians in cities and small towns work in every occupation imaginable.

The Nevada State Council on the Arts (NSCA) has been noticing a growing interest in cultural activities on the state’s reservations and colonies, and in urban Indian communities, and wanted to find out if indeed this was the case. Our mandate requires us to serve all of Nevada’s people and we felt that the state’s first residents were perhaps not getting their due, so we wanted to learn as

much as we could about the state of culture in Indian Country, and how we could help it thrive and grow. We did not want to arrive on the reservation with a plan in place—“we’re from the government and we’re here to help you”—but instead wanted to ask the people what they felt they needed and what would best help them accomplish their goals and dreams. So with funding from the National Endowment for the Arts Folk and Traditional Arts program we undertook a survey and needs assessment of the state’s Indian people and communities, and this report is the result of that process.

NSCA’s mission is “to enrich the cultural life of the state through leadership that preserves, supports, strengthens and makes accessible excellence in the arts to all Nevadans.” That mission is carried out through pursuit of three goals: to enhance the environment in which the artist’s work and contribution is valued and supported; to encourage and support diverse organizations which produce, present and promote excellence in the arts; and to increase access to excellence and diversity in the arts. In this



Marie Ellison and Ione Allen, Stillwater

project we dealt primarily with traditional arts, those that are strongly identified with a tribal heritage and have been passed down over generations, but we realize that there are many Indian people who work in contemporary forms as well, or include strong traditional elements in their contemporary work. We also took a very broad view of “art” to include many forms of creative expression, including crafts, music, dance, stories, beliefs, architecture and even traditional foods and medicines.

The arts are the soul of a people, and our job at the NSCA is to help individuals and communities express that soul as they see fit, and to share it with a wider audience if they desire. We welcome feedback and comments on this initiative, and hope this is only the beginning of a fruitful partnership to honor Nevada’s native tribes and artists, and support the continuity of a rich culture that contributes so much to Nevada’s unique identity.

*Andrea Graham
Folk Arts Program Director
Nevada State Council on the Arts*



Hand games at the Fallon powwow



Shoshone basketmaker Lilly Sanchez



Duckwater elders

Songs for Asking: Perspectives on Traditional Culture Among Nevada Indians

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*Willow corrals at
McDermitt*

Preface

This report is one person's understanding, from an experienced eye and in partnership with both the Nevada State Council on the Arts and the Nevada tribes, entrusted to make an overview assessment of, and recommendations and strategies for strengthening, the current state of traditional cultural affairs among the

Great Basin tribes of Nevada. This work is to assist the Nevada State Council on the Arts in addressing the needs of Nevada's Indian communities. Fieldwork for this project took place between the spring and autumn of 1996 throughout Nevada.

Introduction

The Nevada State Council on the Arts (NSCA) is a state agency with legislated responsibility "to enrich the cultural life of the state through leadership that preserves, supports, strengthens, and makes accessible excellence in the arts to all Nevadans." To achieve its mission, the agency offers programs and services that include grants for individuals and non-profit organizations, fellowships for individual artists, and an apprenticeship program in the traditional arts, as well as technical assistance for a full range of community arts development.

There is a high degree of change affecting Nevada in various realms such as the environment, global cultural tourism, Indian affairs, booming urban areas, threats to rural communities, and the arts. This is a great time to come to terms with and articulate Nevada's cultural identity—it's a matter of protecting that which is most valued about our society. Authenticity and integrity are key to this strategy, and traditional arts hold a central role in this work. Within this philosophy, the traditional arts of our state's unique and tribal communities hold special significance.

In 1995 NSCA applied for and received funds from the National Endowment for the Arts, a federal agency, to conduct a statewide Native Traditional Arts Survey.

The purpose of the survey was to:

- visit each reservation and community to gather information on existing cultural activities, programs and services;
- identify and document artists and culture bearers with photographs and taped conversations for the Folklife Archive at the NSCA;
- discuss with tribal leaders, culture bearers, artists, and the community at large the state of cultural activity, levels and kinds of support, and needs for protecting and encouraging the cultural health of Native communities; and
- publish an illustrated report with a summary of findings; recommendations for mechanisms to better serve traditional arts and organizations; an inventory of American Indian cultural organizations and activities; and a list of NSCA grants and resources for First Peoples artists and programs.

This report serves to address the initial goals as outlined in the grant proposal. We recognize that the time frame of this broad-based overview allowed for but a cursory taking of the cultural pulse of Nevada's Indian country. This work has its limits, given resources and time available. Indeed, deeper relationships need to be

formed. Still, because the survey included a full cross-section of the culture area, happened within a defined period of time, with a cohesive strategy of approach and focused goals, and because certain primary voices of tribal leadership are represented, it offers a valid record of a time and place within Nevada tribal cultural history. So, while we believe this project does hold value, we do present these findings with a caution. Given the short period of a few months within Indian country, and not knowing the tribal languages that would surely have offered many deeper insights, especially from elders,



Shoshone beadworker Angie McGarva and her daughter Canika

there is a barrier of ignorance within this work that makes whatever conclusions are drawn truly only impressions. We claim no definitive position. Our hope is to further understanding and discussion.

Conversations with 38 tribal leaders and members were tape recorded, and there were many more people who deferred from recorded or any other form of documentation, though of course we were pleased for the conversation. The same holds true for photographing people and places. Conversations happened in tribal

offices, private homes, public houses, on the streets, and in the fields. All of the voices offered many serious, insightful, and often profound perceptions, and their ideas have been incorporated in this report.

The NSCA has worked to recognize and support a number of Native artists and culture bearers over the thirty years of its institutional existence, largely through the Folk Arts Apprenticeship Program—over half (26 of 46) of all masters and



Washoe basketmaker Theresa Jackson

apprentices in the nine-year life of the program have been First Peoples. But the agency has long known that the need for a closer relationship with the tribes and communities has been wanting. Up until now, we believe, the limited existing relationship between the tribes and NSCA is a consequence of our not knowing each other very well. There has been limited access on both sides of the cultural equation until just recently.

The agency believes there is more cultural equity to be gained by all rural and community-based society in the state, and significantly so with the tribes. The Nevada State Council on the Arts desires to attain ever greater levels of cultural support for all the state's citizenry, and this is the primary reasoning behind the project which this writing seeks to address.

Full transcriptions of recorded conversations, photographs, and field journal notes, as well as a listing of Nevada tribal artists, are on file at the NSCA Folklife Archive in Carson City.

The Nevada State Council on the Arts sincerely hopes these efforts will evolve into a higher appreciation for, a fuller understanding of, and closer working relationship with, the tribes, bands, colonies, and communities of Native Nevada.

The Given

Distinctive tribal cultural identity is found in the arts, crafts, designs, dances, songs, stories, beliefs, rituals, ceremonies, foodways, and

architecture specific to the diversity of groups within Nevada's Great Basin tribes.

What the People Said

My observations and conclusions are based on what I heard from Indian people all over Nevada. I will therefore begin with a sampling of comments made during our conversations, in their own words.

"We don't have a formal program that works to pass on traditional culture."

"We are losing our traditional culture very fast."

"Pottery and basketmaking, which we were once good at, is now a lost art. There is just one woman left who knows how to do it."

"Beadwork is a strong traditional craft among our people. The most traditional form is the mesh cape."

"The tribe used to make its living doing beadwork for the railroad passengers who'd stop on their way through. That market is long gone, replaced by nothing, so skills and knowledge of arts and crafts has little viability."

"Most people who do work for the tribe do it on a volunteer basis. They don't know where the access points are for cultural resources or assistance, and they don't have the skills to write proposals or deal with institutions if they did."

"A major factor of what is or isn't done on the reservation, including cultural work, is the priorities of the council. The political situation has not identified cultural retention as a priority."



*Leather
carving by
Spider Teller,
Duck Valley*

"There is a strong desire to perpetuate the existing traditional knowledge of the few elders, but they don't really know how to go about devising cultural programs on a formal basis."

"We need to identify a group within the tribe to lead the movement to protect and encourage our culture."

"What human and monetary resources there are for cultural things all goes to dealing with the NPS (National Park Service) on historic preservation and sites. The rules and regulations and resources have us doing that, and we can't get beyond that to deal with what is left of the living culture."

"What seniors we have, though few, are quite active with skills, but there is no apprenticing going on."

"Nobody, really, in the mid-generation has the solid skills or knowledge."

"If something is going to be done, it needs to happen within the next two to three years. This would require a major infusion of resources and leadership. Otherwise, we will become a different people."

"We could use a cultural heritage documentation and archiving workshop."

"Medicinal plants are still used by a few people."

"Our funerary rites are perhaps the strongest living expression of our traditional culture."

"There is a tenuous arts community, but it needs direction and assistance."

"We need a centralized work area for artists to create; it should be well organized, and respect for tools and work process needs to be taught."



Tribal mural at Walker River Reservation

“We need tools and supplies; we need a place where tools and supplies can be centrally located.”

“We need a place to consolidate all cultural information on the individual tribal groups, i.e. a place where artists have access to cultural information materials to draw upon for their work.”

“We need a place where training of tribal people in the arts can occur.”

“We need a place where others (outsiders) can gain current and accurate information on Nevada tribal arts, i.e. Nevada Indian Cultural Information Clearinghouse and Exchange.”

“We need a place where cultural performance arts and ceremonies can take place.”

All of this “need expression” is pointed toward the reality that if Nevada’s Great Basin tribes are to develop economic stability via arts and culture, fundamental dilemmas of arts education and production must be addressed.

What I Learned

- The most significant understanding, thus far, is that Nevada Indians don’t want any imposed idea of what their culture should be. They know for themselves what they want, and what needs to be done. If anything, they want comparatively few dollars to apply their ideas, but no outside imposition on the status of their affairs.

- It’s important to note that while tribal leaders recognize that arts and crafts are a big part of what gives Indians, as a whole, identity, the support and attention given them takes a back seat to the basic needs of human services. Tribes, for the most part, don’t have the money to do it all. Or they don’t have the people who are knowledgeable about and can administer cultural programs. It would only take a few outside resources to make something happen.

The overall recognition at this point is that Indian people know what they need to do, but to take that step is just beyond their current resources or expertise. It requires creativity to devise new organization mechanisms to attend to the cultural affairs of a society whose old ways have been broken down. It’s hard. And even though they may desire to set up cultural programs, they are bound to do the thing for which they are able to receive resources—and those things are determined by the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) and other federal programs. So the cultural aspects of contemporary Indian society remain untended. What they need is easy to attend to, it just requires leadership and some dedicated resources.

- While strolling the lobby of the Duckwater tribal office I got reading the bulletin board, where I found two items of note. The first: on July 12th the tribe sponsored a Youth Group dance, organized by its substance abuse program (which means the woman in charge of the program did most of the work—single individuals are whole programs in Indian Country). Everyone was invited. What



Ida Mae Valdez and Lillius Richardson gathering buckberries in Mason Valley

was enlightening, and confirmed later in my conversation with the tribal chairman, was that this was a tribal social dance, but now it is organized and happens under the auspices of a governmental program attached to youth and

substance abuse. On one hand, an old way has found a new form and new purpose. On the other, the traditional social structure is being supplanted by the determinants of governmental funding. And there is a secondary aspect to the event—the kind of dance they are doing is “northern style,” not the indigenous Great Basin style. The old way has been replaced with a pan-Indian solution to youth problems of identity. This became a recurring theme in my travels around Nevada.

The second item on the bulletin board was a broadside that said “Are you interested in selling your native arts and crafts items? Judy Pierce with the White Pine County Museum is interested in buying your crafts to sell in the WPC Museum, Ely, NV. If interested call Judy at 702-289-4710 or 702-235-7985.” While I was in Ely the day before, the folks there at the colony said there was no market for any craft work, so not much was being done. And here in Duckwater there’s a call for work, from back in Ely. But nobody here, either, is taking up the call. So my feeling is that the connections aren’t being made, work isn’t being done, or the market is not right. The older women who have the knowledge and skills are no longer active due to their age and the demands



Washoe elder JoAnn Martinez roasting pine nuts



Martha Dick of Owyhe with her grandso

begin to think of 4-H, or summer camps, or after school clubs, as models.

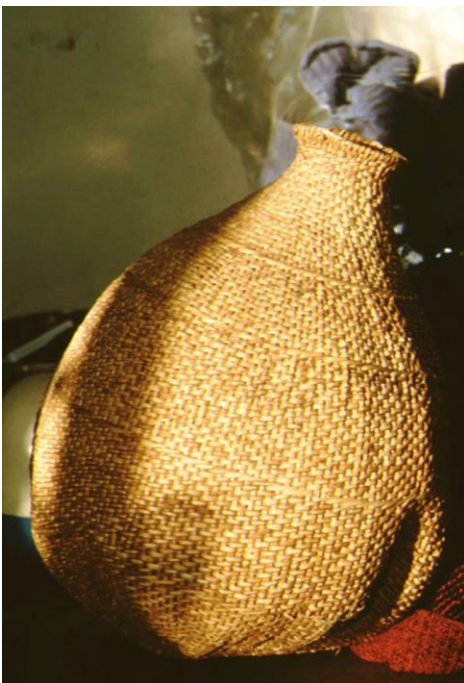
- A pervasive notion is that many elders feel caught between the old and new ways. They believe the young people are not interested, and don’t ask respectfully, for the exchange of cultural knowledge to occur: it’s the young people’s place to ask, not the elders’ to go to the young. And when they have tried, the young don’t have the commitment of mind or heart to invest the kind of energy, time, and discipline required of them to truly gain the necessary

knowledge and skills.

For many elders, it’s over with. They’re resigned. And they are of an age where they can no longer go out and collect the materials and do the work themselves. They’ve stopped or, as they say, retired, from the endeavor. It’s sort of sad. It’s tough for them to talk about.

- I was talking with a woman from Yomba about trying to make sense of the whole Great Basin experience for Indians. What was the single most overarching condition that affected all aspects of cultural life? She, too, had been trying to figure it out. We came to the realization, confirming for each other, that the true reason for the state of cultural affairs was based on the population sizes of the individual bands, the number of people.

Nevada traditional lifeways have lasted longer here than in most areas of the United States because of the isolation and sparseness of the population. However, as a consequence of that same small population, and because of the increased velocity of change the



Willow water jug by Emma Bobb, Yomba

of creative work, and the younger ones haven’t picked up the skills. I’m talking mainly about baskets and buckskin; some beadwork is there, but much of it is small, simple pieces. This applies throughout the state.

- Tribes have tried to bring cultural

elements into the school curriculum, but with many of the art forms, such as basketmaking or tanning, the structures and timing of daily school scheduling, and the overloads that already exist, don’t allow for true learning to take place. What we need are blocks of time for immersion into the traditional culture. I

automobile and electronic age has brought to these incredibly remote areas, the loss of elders has a higher impact on the overall maintenance of traditional community knowledge. When only a few elders in a small community know the traditions, the loss of even one is a major blow. The lack of depth of human cultural resources poses a great peril.

When one person, a culture bearer, dies on the Northern Plains, for example, there are seven others to continue. When one dies here, it's the end. Bands here are 54 people, or 90, 150, 200, contrasted with tribes that have 7,000, 12,000 or even 3,000 elsewhere. The numbers here make the attrition happen more quickly. It's simple mathematics. No matter the desire or intent, the circumstance dictates that the loss is here and now. It's the numbers that are working against the people. This fact does relieve somewhat the pressure and the guilt felt by tribal leadership over the loss of a cultural continuum. Of course there are other factors that contribute to the changes, but in the end it is the numbers that largely determine the future of traditional cultural knowledge and skills. Unless, that is, a conscious effort is made to redirect the forces at play.

- In Nevada there is an amazingly acute sense of being Indian. Yet the contemporary mode of identity-building for Indians now has its own pop culture. That is all that young people have to connect with, in the face of the dismantling of traditional social structures and the diminishing effect of elders in their lives. The elders and the youth have no social mechanism to be seriously involved in each other's lives. We are beginning to realize the long term critical effect of reservation life that has been imposed on tribal society.

The issue of a growing "pan-Indian" culture—a sort of generic image of Indianness made up of combined elements from many distinct tribal traditions—is pervasive. The most notable characteristic of pan-Indianism is the same thing that makes American popular culture so overpowering to regional and ethnic distinctiveness: it is what is most accessible. The

generalized information and literature on these programs has, as with the broader society, been developed by market forces in a way suited to wide application at the lowest common denominator.

Going to pow-wows and learning broad-based generic culture programs in Title V and substance abuse

curriculum is easier than spending the time and money on the elders. It seems also that the money, federal and otherwise, to support cultural activities is partially responsible for bringing in outside talent to talk about Indian pride. The criteria for funding, to a great degree, determines what the programming is. Often there is a roster of teachers, and only those on the roster may be used; this can be very limiting. The net result is that youth are growing up relating to a national, popular image of "Indian" identity, rather than one of local tribally-specific identity. This is a true conundrum because any form of Indian identity is better than none, yet it leads to the sacrifice of local culture. If only the time and money were spent directly on pairing the youth with their elders, we would have a

more coherent, distinct cultural identity on the local, tribal, community level.

There is a striving for identity almost palpable. But what's happening in Indian Country is really no different than anywhere else. All of us are being forced through moves beyond our control to change who we are—and not always in ways to our liking. Because of the structure of modern life, people of all backgrounds are being stripped of their own heritage and community-based lives. This is especially clear in looking at Native Americans—the Indian community is the "miner's canary" of society as a whole, the warning call that we are in imminent danger of cultural loss and devastating community destabilization.

- Plains-style pow wows are a very recent introduction in Nevada, and another example of this new pan-Indian social form. Fandangos are the traditional form of social gathering and dance in this area, and they do still occur on some local levels. Because it is a



Norma Williams and Stacy Gibbs smoking buckskin in Schurz

relatively recent addition to the Nevada scene, the whole production of pow wows is elementary compared with similar events on the Northern Plains, where the form originated. The regalia is for the most part pretty simple. Some women wear traditional Paiute-style mesh collars, but all the rest is Northern Plains style. The arts and crafts at pow wows are mostly Southwestern Navajo style. Most of the arts and crafts are trinkets and not museum quality work. There is some nice beadwork made by Nevada tribes, but the finest basketry and buckskin work rarely appears for sale at pow wows.

- The Indian Days parade down Maine Street in Fallon is a wholly different matter from the imported form of the pow wow. It is a fine, strong showing of the vitality of Indian culture in the state. The regalia is turned out in colors, the vehicles dressed to the hilt, and there are exceptional floats. Baskets are hung all about



Float in the Fallon Indian Rodeo parade

the vehicles, in great quantity. This is a very confident showing of Indian culture to be experienced in Nevada. Interestingly, it is a mixture of Indian, cowboy, and pioneer cultures—this is a concerted effort toward community building and reconciliation.

It takes a congregation of Indians from all over the Basin to amass the numbers large enough to express a strong identity. No one tribal group has the strength of numbers to pull this off. It is truly a showing of commonness of identity, bridging the distances, to coalesce as one. When all the relationships, all the relatives, gather as one, the heart of the culture can be seen as very much alive and beating.

- Some of the tribes are in a situation of exceptional opportunity. The Wells Council, for example, has a particular vision for its band. This group is very interested in making advances for its people. They are in a position to really take advantage of their place at the crossroads of highways 80 and 93. They want to work with the municipal government, and they

want to use culture as an economic vehicle, while concurrently reinforcing traditional teachings. They have a plan for a living history center, they just need the resources and technical assistance to carry it out.

- Many of those with artistic inclinations are often caught in between not having the qualitative skills and discipline of their forbears in traditional crafts, and not being schooled in the ways of contemporary arts either. So they are left with a hodgepodge of images and works that don't fit within either form. Much of what is being produced is of a quality that can not survive in the marketplace. This is the Generation X of Indian Country—close enough to feel the blood



Tsosie Nordwall learning to carve a stone pipe

memory and ache for the reality of the not-so-distant past, yet separated from it by language, ceremony, and skills. That loss is not replaced by anything that allows emotions or meanings to be brought forth into the contemporary world via artistic creation.

- Many tribal people are still struggling with issues of pride and self-worth. These are fundamental to notions of identity, both personal and cultural. The legacy of boarding schools and the reservation system often result in low self-esteem, and the consequent hampering of expression of a strong identity. It can be overwhelming. Knowing this makes the situation sadder, thereby affecting pride and esteem even more, and the weakening of the state of cultural identity is again compounded. Yet it is exactly a strong sense of cultural identity that reinforces high self-esteem. Truly, a cultural catch-22. I begin to feel the need for a cultural 911, an emergency number to call in this crisis situation.

- My son Hans Little Eagle was with me at an encampment at Rock Creek. He went up to Corbin Harney, Western Shoshone cultural and spiritual leader, offered tobacco, and told him of his purpose. Hans wanted to pray for his mother. What Corbin said was a lesson to all. He told Hans that it was important for youth to seek knowledge and make peace with the world, to make offerings and promises to those we love,

both within our spirits and the life around us, to be respectful of all that's gone before us, for that is why we today came to be. The world will soon belong to him and those of his age. The lessons of the land belong to all children, Indian or not, and the work of all adults is to help the youth make their peace—and, yes, he might go up to the cave and speak his prayers. The world will be a better place for it.

- Based in an ancient tribal knowing, Corbin offered an ecumenical voice that speaks to a very contemporary need. We are truly all related, and our youth embody our hopes for a better future. Encouraging our young is the highest of priorities. Children ran free throughout the encampment we attended. That deep ceremonial time has become part and parcel of who they now are. For another generation, the ceremonial way will live on through them.

A Summary of the Situation

There are a few aspects of the field survey that need to be summarized. These points represent areas of critical concern and ideas for addressing very real problems facing contemporary indigenous culture within Nevada.

- Pan-Indianism and Inter-tribalism are on the rise, while specific tribal cultural distinctiveness and diversity is waning. The stability of tribal identity is dependent on maintaining cultural diversity and uniqueness. Issues of tribal sovereignty are bound up within this dilemma.
- Fundamentally, there is a window of between two to three years, and five to ten years (the range varies slightly for each tribe) to attend to traditional cultural conservation. After that time, tribal distinctiveness and diversity will primarily be a matter of historical legacy, rather than living traditions. Local Indian society will become more fully part of a broad, national American Indian identity.
- The knowledge and skills that give form to cultural identity live within the elders of each tribe. The various tribal situations have more or less strength of cultural identity depending on the existing human resources of their elders.
- Some traditional social structures and behavior patterns persist, especially among the elder generation. However, many traditional social structures for perpetuating tribal cultural knowledge have disappeared, and no new structures have replaced the old. A result of this is a break in communication between the youth and the elders, and a consequent loss of the traditional patterns of passing on cultural knowledge.
- A circumstance specific to Great Basin culture within Nevada is the lack of depth of existing human resources and cultural knowledge because of the very small populations of each tribal community. This condition exacerbates the nature of, and critical timing for, cultural conservation.

- The special skills and knowledge that comprise the traditional cultural identity of the tribes and communities, as found in the arts, are integrally related to the natural cyclical time of the local ecosystem. Most attempts to bring the traditional arts into the linear time structure of contemporary society, which also pervades Indian Country, have been less than successful. Bridging the two time structures, and finding a new meeting ground for elders and youth, pose the two largest challenges facing the perpetuation of traditional cultural identity.
- Because of the utilitarian nature of most traditional arts, they have always served the dual purpose of giving form to distinct tribal identity and



Washoe basketmakers Theresa Jackson, Norma Smokey and Sue Coleman

determining a significant element of economic viability. Reinvigorating the traditional arts has the potential to once again serve both these ends. The dilemma will come in figuring out how to translate the older values of exchange to the new commodity-based capital marketplace.

- Political realities and environmental change contribute greatly to both the loss of access to and the actual loss of many resources necessary for traditional cultural pursuits. For example, at Stillwater the people

don't have access to the Naval Air Station where jackrabbits are most plentiful and at Battle Mountain the jackrabbits are mostly all gone. In both cases, the production of rabbit blankets, the nets for capturing rabbits, and all associative songs and practices are close to forgotten arts. Access to abundant, healthy willows for basketmaking is also becoming a problem because of the privatization of land, exponentially increasing development, and use of pesticides.

- There is some political will, however limited, within the federal, state, and local arenas that desires

to assist tribes in the maintenance of certain facets of traditional life. The effectiveness of this will is hindered and diminished by three primary factors: criteria for funding are determined by non-tribal entities; there is little, if any, cooperative strategy to synergize resources among funders; and few tribes have cohesive long-range plans for dealing with cultural conservation or the staff with knowledge of the access point and the skills to develop plans and proposals for funding.

Philosophy of Solutions

I wonder where the Great Basin tribes fit into the larger scope of tribes within this nation. They hold a critical place in defining the nature of the movement to uphold indigenous lifeways in this new era we enter. If tribal lifeways can survive here we have a model, a living legacy, of how to continue in the future in this place. The relationship between the Great Basin tribes and the lifeways of the casino culture, which is such a close neighbor, yet the polar opposite of local indigenous life, stands as a microcosm of contemporary culture world-wide.

I think again of the meeting at Yomba, and the 'numbers factor' hard at play on traditional culture in Nevada. There is a need to deal with that circumstance if there is to be a future for indigenous lifeways. There needs to be a rethinking of the dilemma, framing the question as an attainable solution rather than an insurmountable problem.

An answer, I believe, can be found in the ancient social design of what it meant of old to have "tribes" here. I've heard it before, but now I hear it anew in relation to this problem. The various reservations and colonies are now static places on the map. These configurations state that this band is here, that band is there. The process of separation of what was historically and traditionally a fluid exchange and constant ranging of territories and kinship has distorted the social order and the mechanisms that maintained the old lifeways.

On the informal level the old system remains. People are, as of old, related all over Indian Country. We need to remember that the individual reservations and colonies are units of a larger tribal whole. Tribes are made up of bands. And all the bands and all the tribes are interrelated.

So the exchange system of old needs to be reinvigorated, and the sense of isolation diminished in individual communities. This attitudinal change can renew that sense of the whole, of tribal life being larger than the sum of its individual reservation, colony, and community parts. Sharing cultural resources can reinforce confidence and identity, and overcome those internal disputes, founded in poverty, that hinder forward-looking, healthy growth.

With this wide network as a viable, working social dynamic things can change. When, say, Emma Bobb may no longer be with the Yomba as the sole basketmaker, the Yomba do not, therefore, become culturally bereft. There are other living cultural resources

within the greater Shoshone Tribe that can continue to serve as standard bearers of the lifeways that give distinct identity to the people. What the bands, tribes, and organizational representatives need to do is devise new mechanisms that allow free movement of those with the knowledge and skills to those places that need invigoration. The free range and cultural exchange that used to occur, that reinforced cultural



Shoshone basketmaker Emma Bobb of Yomba

knowledge and skills, needs to be re-instituted. And it

The Next Step: A Gathering

We suggest a gathering of all principal groups to discuss the issues, priorities, assessments, recommendations, and strategies of attending to the state of cultural affairs in Indian Country. There seems to be a consensus among tribal leadership that this might be worthwhile. The convening needs to be framed as a good thing, and necessary for all involved. All—and by all I mean non-Indians as well—benefit from the reinforcement and perpetuation of the indigenous knowledge and skills of this specific land, at this critical time in human history, not only Indian history.

There need to be represented at this convening the band leaders, tribal leaders, Inter-Tribal Council, Bureau of Indian Affairs, Nevada Indian Commission, Nevada State Council on the Arts, the Nevada State Museum System, the State Historic Preservation Office, Nevada Humanities Committee, Nevada Commission on Tourism, Bureau of Land Management, United States Forest Service, the US



Navajo weaver Kim Ortiz of Las Vegas

military, state and federal parks, county and local governments, state legislators, representatives of other Native cultural organizations from the western region, and most importantly the cultural and spiritual leaders of the tribes, and the individual culture bearers and artisans. All the people and organizations who have influence on and control over the cultural affairs of tribal life. A gathering such as this could facilitate great strides in short time—a critical factor. Without a coordinated effort and unified front, all acting in

requires an economic investment.

the interest of the greater good, we will have, I believe, less than the needed results.

Some of the issues to be raised and solutions to be pursued at such a gathering might include:

- surveying and documenting of individual artists, groups and cultural organizations
- training tribal members to document and preserve their own culture
- access to natural resources, such as willows for basketry or rabbits for food and clothing
- access to traditional spiritual sites
- the passing of traditions to future generations, and the need to include children in the planning of cultural programs
- the development of educational programs for school children and the general public
- marketing and presentation of Indian crafts and performing arts as an economic development tool, whether at pow wows and arts markets, or through mail order and Internet marketing
- development of cultural tourism initiatives under the control of tribes and tribal members
- development of cultural facilities such as tribal museums and cultural centers
- development of cultural resource offices and staff positions within the tribal government
- formal agreements with other government agencies regarding land and resource use
- information on all the financial and other resources available for cultural development and programs in Indian Country
- possible development of a statewide coordinated system of cultural grantmaking to tribes and cultural organizations, using funds from a number of agencies.

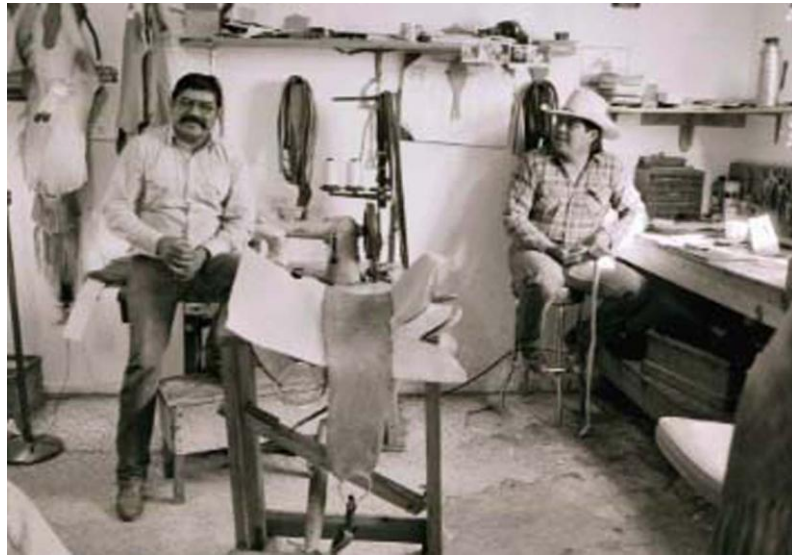
One of the most important functions of such a statewide gathering would be an opportunity for artists of all tribes to meet, share their knowledge and skills, discuss common problems and successes, and begin making the connections that could revive the old networks. Several states, including California and Washington, have started associations of Native



Rebecca Eagle Lambert with one of her beaded baskets

American basketmakers that allow continuing cooperative pursuit of common interests, and representatives of those groups could be invited to meet with Nevada artists to present their organizational models.

The importance of all of this is expressed in the voice of Corbin Harney, reconfirming the notion that the knowledge and skills specific to all the bioregions



Saddlemaker Spider Teller in his Owyhee shop with Ira Walk

that comprise the earth are critical to the survival of our species in the future. When the artificial contemporary “society of the spectacle” breaks down, even partially—and it will happen—the lifeways that have been refined over millennia will become once again vital to survival. It has happened before, and it will again. Living in direct relationship with the organic resources of the earth remains the fundamental way of survival. This is a knowledge base we can ill afford to lose, for all our sakes.

Another concept that Corbin puts forth states that what happens is really beyond us all. There is a greater order that will determine the course of things. There is an arrogance and presumptuousness to think any of us is so crucial in making a difference. In order for anything of true value to happen, all must be just right. We can position ourselves with the best of intentions and to the best of our abilities, but without the right timing, or the right questions being asked, or the right songs being sung, the right respect shown, it will not happen. It will only happen if and when the special timing arises, and we are poised for that moment, are asking the proper questions, and are singing the songs of respect and offering, that the people may receive the teachings of the unified nature of existence.

The range of tribal circumstances that exists here is amazingly diverse. There are haves and have-nots, politically, economically, and culturally, and they’re all tied together. There needs to be an ethic of “we are nothing until the least among us are okay.” It has to be a fundamental principle at the foundation of all we do. And certain tribes, as with certain agencies, will have to supply the lion’s share of the work and resources.

Our role as cultural specialists operating under the auspices of government is to work in the service of the traditional cultural movement that is poised to arise. We can play a useful function in this movement: to coordinate the many and diverse governmental units that have some sort of interest in and influence on “Indian Country,” and convene a “summit” on the topic and the attending issues, in partnership with the tribes and the Inter-Tribal Council of Nevada.

Conclusion

The purpose of this writing, and the function to be served by the action suggested, is to gather critical information on the current situation, develop the necessary and appropriate relationships among tribes and other agencies, create program designs and organizational structures appropriate to Indian communities, and prepare high-quality fund-raising proposals to enlist the cooperative support of the agencies and institutions that can financially assist in the implementation of the major social and cultural change which the tribes of Nevada desire.



Landscape near Duckwater

Cautionary Tales

There are just two more short lessons I would like to put forth, which have to do with how the Nevada State Council on the Arts wants to proceed from here, and how we all need to think about the future. The first comes from Corbin Harney of Battle Mountain; the other, from Antoinette Cavanaugh of Duck Valley, Vice-Principal of Spring Creek High School near Elko.

Corbin says, "All the living things on this planet, the native people throughout the world always work with them. In order for us to have our strength and them to have their strength, we have to work together. This is the way Indian people have worked for thousands of years. We always ask the living thing to work with us, that we may continue our life. We don't just look at a thing out there and think it's going to continue. It don't work that way. We work with the Voice, that tells us what is right and wrong. They're listening, the living things, to it, the Voice, at the same time. Because the Creator put us here together. We have to support one another. Work together.

"You don't have to go out there and live the old way. What you have to do, the main thing, is that you have to ask, or give, to receive something good. You have to ask for it. If you don't ask for it, you don't receive nothing. You have to give something. And there are respectful ways to ask. We have to sing the songs for everything in this life we wish to receive.

"If we want something bad enough, the songs for asking will come back. Already, some people know the songs, but they don't want to sing them, because we're shameful people to begin with, right from the beginning. We're like the Coyote, for one. Exactly like the Coyote. Something going on, the Coyote makes three circles around you, around camp, before he comes in, and sit down and listen to you. Maybe he'll say one word, maybe just two words, at the beginning of his talk. Maybe next time he'll talk a little bit more. After a while he's a man, a person, whatever, he'll be the one to make all the noise, have the Voice. That's the way Coyote is.

That's the way we are, as Indian people. We don't say, I do this, I do that, I know this, I know that. We're humble like that, even though we know all about it.



Corbin Harney

properly. And it will come to you. And Indian people are the same way. You have to ask us. You have to come three times, show us you are sincere. We have to know you are true. And you will receive what you ask for."

And so we must heed this advice, if we truly desire to behave as we say we do. Once is not enough. This effort of the NSCA is a second circling of camp. Our first time was with the Folk Arts Apprenticeship program. Our next circling is before us.

Now, says Antoinette, "Let me give you my viewpoint on what I think we need to perpetuate the cultures of the distinctive groups in Nevada. My philosophy is that the children don't need to be spoon fed. What they need is to buy into a program that is structured to meet what they say are their needs.

"You can come in, tribal people can come in, and can say these are the areas we need to build on to reestablish our traditional culture, our art, to perpetuate

"People are funny. We're just like an animal. Animal just sit there and listen what you have to say. But that guy'll have to ask if he wants to learn something. That's why all the living things out there, our medicines, our foods, have to listen to us before they give themselves to us, really give. The songs are the same way. If you want to pick up songs from the rock, you have to ask rock. And so forth. The songs for asking can come back. He'll talk to you if you ask



Antoinette Cavanaugh

our culture and our belief structure. It doesn't work like that. We need to go to the kids and say, what is it about your culture that you want to learn the most about. And start there. And that might be something the tribal people, the government leaders of the tribe, they have already pinpointed. But I think the kids need to buy into what it is this is all about. Their voice needs to be heard.

"They might say I want to learn about baskets, and the stories behind them. What are the legends that come with that? Why is it the basket's made the way it is? Why was basketry so crucial to Great Basin Indians? They may not come out and say it that way. They may not even know that they are Great Basin Indians. But they need to know why it was crucial. We can go on and say, well, you need to understand the significance behind the beadwork, the story. You need to understand why it's so important to cure hides. Why it was important then.

"And we can pinpoint those things, and identify those who might be good teachers in those areas. But kids need to be part of that decision-making process. If you try and force feed them, it's not going to work. It

will not work. So we can say these are the values in learning your tradition—they won't buy into it. You have to say, what are the values in your tradition that you want to learn, and how can we help you learn them. They can handle this. They are smarter than we think. They comprehend more than we know."

Within this understanding is the key to the asking. It is probably the most important song of asking to be sung. It is all with our children. If we don't ask them properly, we will not receive that which we desire, the perpetuation of distinctive traditional lifeways.

This work, going about the state, talking with tribal leaders and elders, is only half the effort that needs to be accomplished if we are sincere. There needs to be another round, the third circling of camp, to ask the children what is important, and how they want to be treated. If we do not frame our concerns and knowledge in a way that is acceptable to them, we have lost all chance of furthering that which we feel is vitally important. This is the ultimate lesson, and the great challenge before us.



Washoe basketmaker Florine Conway



Rene Aguilar and Madelina Henry making Washoe acorn biscuits

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Andrea Graham

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Nicholas Vrooman

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Landscape near Walker River

