

PRESS RELEASES

Planning exhibits for The Museum at Warm Springs

How does a small, close knit community whose history goes back nearly 150 years plan a museum that will teach its children about their cultural heritage and attract, educate, and entertain tourists at the same time?

When the Tribal Council of Oregon's Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs first asked this question in the 1970s, their concerns were focused on community issues. Tribal elders, who embodied the teachings that had sustained the Warm Springs, Wasco, and Paiute people for thousands of years, were growing older. Young people who were educated in schools run by the dominant culture and influenced by television and other media found many things upon which to focus besides tradition. Perhaps most importantly, several generations of adults had spent their youth virtually imprisoned in the Indian boarding school system, which was designed to eradicate Native American culture where Indian languages were forbidden, and traditional clot hint, and braids were replaced by uniforms and haircuts.

According to Dilbert Frank former board president of the Museum at Warm Springs. the most important reason for building the museum was to ensure that young people would gain a deep understanding of the basis of Indian sovereignty. Because England's colonial representatives had signed treaties with Indian tribes and the United States government had followed suit precedent for American Indian nationhood was established. "Indian country" is more than an expression it is a legal term that recognizes claims to original ownership and autonomy that predate Euramerican settlement. Lands were not sold to the conquering nation; they were ceded.

The Warm Springs and Wasco tribes ceded 10 million acres in central Oregon to the United States when they signed the Treaty of 1855 at The Dalles, By the terms of that treaty, these Tribes reserved a small part of their original lands. These lands became the Warm Springs Reservation. Some twenty years later. a group of Paiute prisoners of war; who were being held at a fort in Washington State, asked to be relocated to the Warm Springs Reservation; their descendants have lived there ever since. Thus, the three Tribes — Warm Springs, Wasco, and Paiute make up the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs.

The relationship of the American Indian people to the federal government is to their lives and hopes. Certain rights guaranteed by the Treaty of 1855, such as access to traditional fishing sites both on and off reservation, have had far-reaching effects for the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs. Take the case of Celilo Falls. Just east of The Dalles, the Columbia River once narrowed precipitously, squeezing itself between gigantic rocks. Salmon by the millions hurled themselves upstream, here at the site of the greatest freshwater fishery in North America. For more than 8,000 years, Celilo Falls was "the great mart of all this country," as William Clark described it in 1805. Then in 1954, the unthinkable became reality. The Dallas Dam. a project of the Bonneville Power Administration, went into operation, and the rocks of Celilo Falls disappeared under the backed-up waters of the now-tamed Columbia.

The Museum at Warm Springs is itself part of the energetic and farsighted response by the Confederated Tribes to this economic and cultural catastrophe. The Tribes received \$4 million in reparation payments for the loss of the fishery (a paltry sum in

compensation for a total and perpetual loss of means of subsistence). However, the community showed that it had an admirable quality: a determination to act for the good of all. Rather than divide the windfall payment among enrolled members, it was decided to commission an economic development study to recommend investments in the future of the Confederated Tribes.

A team from Oregon State University conducted the study and made many recommendations. Not all of the recommendations were followed. For instance, the Tribes decided not to build a ski resort on spectacular, wild Mount Jefferson, as one single example. But within a twenty-year period, the Confederated Tribes built a destination resort, Kah-Nee-Ta, that became one of Oregon's jewels. They also bought a lumber mill on the reservation from its Euramerican owners. In addition, the Tribes established a tribal corporation in which all enrolled tribal members are shareholders who, receive regular dividend checks.

Museum Beginnings

With this orientation toward enterprise, the idea of a museum took hold. It was decided that the museum should have these goals: to preserve a representative sampling of a rich and thriving traditional culture; to teach young people in the history and precepts of Indian sovereignty; and to serve as a window onto reservation life and tradition for neighbors and tourists alike.

The Tribes first needed to build a collection. After many years of having their artifacts considered merely as derivatives of the material culture of the Columbia Plateau, the objects that formed the basis for the collections had begun to receive more respect for their intrinsic worth. Hemp and cornhusk root bag's. beaded bags, Sally bags, Klickitat baskets, and other traditional art forms that now are recognized as original and unique served as the foundation for the collection. On the Warm Springs Reservation, many families own spectacular collections of regalia and keepsakes, and numerous artists are deeply engaged in weaving, beading, and other traditional arts.

There were difficulties, however, On many reservations, a new form of cultural predator had begun to threaten communities' ability to hold on to their own objects. These predators — artifact brokers traveling in Winnebagos — would, and still do, stop at isolated homesteads and offer ready cash for priceless family heirlooms. Often, these individuals prey on people who are old or sick — people who have no concept of what a basket or a bag can fetch the broker in a gallery in Santa Fe.

The Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs committed significant tribal moneys to establish an alternative to native peoples who were taken in by this practice. The museum let it be known that it would purchase artifacts at a fair price. In turn, the museum promised that the object would become part of a collection that was owned in perpetuity by the community. Acquisitions are currently managed by the museum's staff, in cooperation with an accessions committee made up of elders from the three Tribes. Since the program began in 1974, approximately \$900,000 has been expanded, and the collection now totals 2,500 artifacts.

In 1989, the museum hired its first director, Dr. Duane King, who had previously managed the creation and startup of a museum for the Cherokee Nation in North Carolina. King lost no time raising money and opening bids for the Warm Springs

museum's architecture and exhibit design. A Portland exhibit design firm, Formations Inc., was selected, along with Portland-based Stastny & Burke Architecture.

Planning and Designing

The key staff of the design firm had experience working on Native American exhibit projects. Company president Craig Kerger had designed "A Time Of Gathering," an exhibit celebrating American Indian heritage in Washington State, which was developed by the Burke Museum and planned by a committee representing nearly forty Washington tribes. Alice Parman, exhibit planner, had been closely involved with Chicago's Field when it recreated a Pawnee earth lodge. Later, with the help of Native American consultants, she helped to organize a series of traveling exhibits on traditional Native American cultures of Oregon for the University of Oregon Museum of Natural History.

Despite their backgrounds, neither Parman nor Kerger was prepared for the experience of planning an 7,500 square foot permanent exhibit on an American Indian reservation. The degree of participation and widespread involvement, the seriousness with which all concerned dealt with the project, the painstaking review of word choices, images, artifacts, and a host of other details demonstrated how important this museum would be to the people of Warm Springs.

The planning process, which was still going on as tile installation commenced, was intense and focused, yet open-ended. If someone took a second look and had a question about the plan, or if another person saw the script for the first time and raised concerns, the design staff saw to it that it was never too late to make revisions. Toward the end of the design development phase, an agreed-upon sign-off process ensured that subsequent changes would be paid for by the client; until then, much of what was on paper was viewed as provisional. Yet in the long run, the bulk of the plans, script, object, and image selections underwent little change. The planning process consisted of a wealth of closely considered details.

Garnering Community Support

The design team worked with a broad cross-section of groups and individuals. These included ad-hoc gatherings of elders recruited by museum staff, the museum's Board and Accessions Committee, the Tribal Council, the Culture and Heritage Committee, and the staff of the Culture and Heritage Department, editors of Spilyay Tymoo, the tribal newspaper, and staff members of a variety of tribal departments including Natural Resources, Warm Springs Forest Product Industries, and many others. Throughout the planning process, liaison between the design staff and tribal members was facilitated by a single contact person on the museum staff. This arrangement ensured project continuity and mutual responsiveness between designer and client.

Groundbreaking was a landmark event that proved that the project had over-whelming community support. On a sunny June morning in 1990, it appeared as though every member of the reservation had gathered at the museum site. A horse parade honored those who had passed on; and horses mid riders were arrayed in such splendid regalia as an eagle-feather headdress and a wolf-skin cape. Bringing up the rear of the parade was a pickup truck. In its bed, seated on folding chairs, were three women elders, well known in the Warm Springs community as "The Three Sisters." Cameras were put away during a one-hour washat service. The Three Sisters, well over ninety

years old, stood throughout the service and sang, with clear, ringing voices, the ancient songs of their people.

In another ceremony, a line of men formed on the museum's graveled foundation and arranged themselves by age, with Warm Springs Chief Delvis Heath first in line. As drums were beaten and songs were sung, the men and boys moved around the future perimeter of the museum in big sideways jumps — not once, but many times, showing their strength and their determination to honor and bless this undertaking.

The study model of the museum was displayed so that everyone present could see the shape of the design; and community members were invited to pose for family pictures that would eventually take a prominent place in the new museum.

The feast afterward was open to all. As everyone in attendance feasted on salmon, members, of the tribal community mingled with state and local government officials and with special guests from the Smithsonian Institution, the National Museum of the American Indian, and the Institute of American Indian Arts. The Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs, in keeping with their consciousness of themselves as a sovereign people, engage in constant, multi-faceted diplomacy.

As chief exhibit designer for the project, Kerger was privileged to spend a long evening in the company of The Three Sisters, hearing stories and precepts rarely shared outside the community. Throughout the project, he was befriended and given special teaching by other elders as well.

The effect [of our working closely together] on the design was profound," said Kerger. "The choice of colors, the creation of certain shapes and design motifs — as well as the storyline and its integration with images and objects — all have been molded by the teachings of these elders, who generously shared their knowledge and time with me."

The architectural firm also found creative ways to involve, and excite the Warm Springs tribal community. The staff set up a focused studio environment, called a design charrette, and invited the opinions and suggestions of all the people of Warm Springs. Dozens of people responded with comments, adding to the sense of informed ownership that has characterized the building of the museum.

Onward and Upward

The Museum at Warm Springs is located on Highway 26, the main route to Portland that is also the reservation's arterial highway. As work progressed on the building, tribal members and travelers alike watched the future museum take shape. An article in *The Oregonian* showed the design staff making life masks of community members to be transformed into the features of mannequins. Other stories featured donors that were involved with the project. The study model and a prospectus brochure prepared by the architects proved to be important fund raising tools.

The museum at Warm Springs opened in March 1993. Its exhibits trace a culture whose origins lie in time immemorial, whose history traces achievement despite many obstacles, and whose people today strive to balance their economic well-being with traditional values. For the professionals associated with the planning process, participation in the development of this landmark museum was an unforgettable and

deeply rewarding experience. For the members of the community, they now share a sense of ownership and pride in a museum that was built to preserve precious artifacts and educate visitors about Native American culture.

The Museum at Warm Springs Today

Since its opening in March of 1993, The Museum At Warm Springs has garnered numerous awards for both its architectural splendor and state of the art exhibitry. The Stastny & Burke designed facility received a Merit Award of Excellence from the American Institute of Architects. Jon Krakauer, writing in Architectural Digest stated that "The Museum At Warm Springs is many things, not least of which is a striking piece of architecture — a 25,000 square foot structure that packs an emotional wallop all too seldom felt in contemporary public buildings." 'Formations' exhibitry received an Award of Merit from AASIH and our introductory film "According to The Earth" placed second in the MUSE awards for AAM in 1994. James Nason, Curator of New World Ethnology at the Burke Museum in Seattle in a review in American Anthropologist stated that the Museum has "...technically one of the best unified exhibition plans in any museum in America. While The New York Times focused on what Formations accomplished through their meetings with Tribal elders. "Storytelling, the heart of Indian life, takes place on a grand scale at The Museum.

The Museum At Warm Springs Is a success because the architects and exhibit designers took the time to learn about the tribal culture and, more importantly, what the people at Warm Springs wished to say about themselves. They succeeded in creating a museum that is part of the culture and the landscape. It is a museum from the community about the community.

Michael Hammond, Ph.D., is the executive director of The Museum At Warm Springs.