Patrick Austin

English 494A

Field Trip Reflections: Special Collections

14 January, 2018

I will briefly recount a few reflections on our class visit to the University’s Special Collections on January 10th.

As to the experience itself, I enjoyed seeing an area of the Knowledge Center I had walked by many times but about which I knew very little in more depth. My current and past majors had never required me to do the kind of research which the Special Collections enable for students of Nevada history, and alas I’m unlikely to do such research in the future. All the same, I recognize its value as a resource- I have to imagine that value is enormous for specialists in the history of Nevada. I haven’t had much prior cause to peruse the library website, but I was impressed by the ease with which scanned materials like photographs could be found and accessed remotely.

As to content, I took a passing look at the historical material as time allowed (but dared not touch the wallet, lest it turn to dust). I confess a lot of this material was too arcane to get a quick grasp of, such as the thick, bound text of handwritten correspondence between Sarah Winnemucca and one of the Indian agents with whom she feuded. I spent most of my time with the copy of Sally Zanjani’s biography of Sarah Winnemucca which the librarians pulled for us. I read the introduction and the conclusion, and I would definitely return to the text were I doing future work on Winnemucca.

One pretty compelling episode described in the conclusion concerned a public dispute over the possibility of renaming Reno’s Sarah Winnemucca elementary school in 1994. This seemed like a very interesting, teachable episode in the modern perception of Sarah Winnemucca and the discourse about indigenous people in American history. The Paiutes themselves were divided on the question, reflecting their own internal disputes over Winnemucca’s actions and legacy, and from Zanjani’s description it seems a lot of ugly emotions and raw history came to the surface for both the Paiutes and white parents.

Most interestingly, Zanjani describes a passionate speech at a school board meeting in defense of Sarah Winnemucca that purportedly reduced some of those who witnessed it to tears and contributed to the school’s name remaining unchanged. The speaker passionately argued that Winnemucca’s life and actions had been misunderstood, and that she was ultimately an inspiring and important figure. I would be very interested in reading or otherwise hearing more about this speech. (As I mention in my next reflection, I was a little disappointed that our hosts at the Pyramid Lake Museum didn’t know more about this, but I suppose 1994 was a pretty long time ago at this point.)

As a final note, I’m definitely guilty of the reluctance to make use of library resources which the librarians who spoke to us mentioned. I suspect this is a common error that many students have internalized without much thought. I’m abstractly aware that librarians are happy to help with research, and extremely capable of doing so. But “bothering” a librarian still feels somehow wrong. Still, the sheer amount of Winnemucca material that the Special Collections librarians pulled for our visit makes a pretty convincing argument that we should collectively get over it.

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English 494A

Field Trip Reflections: Special Collections

14 January, 2018

I will briefly recount a few reflections on our class visit to the Pyramid Lake Museum on January 11th.

My parents took me to Pyramid Lake when I was very young (my dad is quite passionate about fishing) but I have no memory of the experience, so seeing the lake in person was effectively a first for me. My extended family in the Reno area have long told stories about mishaps out boating or fishing on Pyramid Lake, but I’m far from the outdoorsy type so I never partook. It’s quite beautiful country- I’m glad we took the longer way and got to enjoy the scenic overlook especially. I was struck when we were outside the museum by how quiet it was; that’s a city boy for you I suppose. Connecting the experience with Sarah Winnemucca and the travails of the Paiutes added a lot to the experience as well.

As to the museum itself, it was small but quite densely packed with information, though some items such as maps were clearly getting up there in the years. I should have taken more pictures. One exhibit that particularly interested me was somewhat hidden in a corner near the circle where we had our long discussion with the hosts. It concerned the cui-ui fish, which lives only in Pyramid Lake and was one of the main sources of food for the Paiute people before contact. Sadly but unsurprisingly, the fish is endangered and only narrowly survived extinction. (Also, what was upstairs? There appeared to be more exhibits up there but they were blocked off).

I especially enjoyed our conversation with our hosts in the back half of the visit. I was quite surprised by and interested in the opinion of our hosts about the Stewart Indian School, which I would characterize as generally positive. (As I mention in my reflections on the Nevada State Museum, the school was given a fairly positive spin there as well, with only a little acknowledgment of controversy.) I don’t know the extent to which the abhorrent practices we learned about at other Indian schools took place at Stewart- and to what extent they were corrected over the nearly 100 years of the school’s operation if they occurred- but hearing a native perspective claiming the schools to be far from the vehicles of genocide described elsewhere in this class was surprising. In general though I have to praise Billie Jean for her exceedingly eloquent, nuanced answers to our questions, especially Gary’s final question about coexistence and how to treat people of other cultures and backgrounds.

I was hoping to ask our hosts more about conservation, preservation, and the question of water rights for Pyramid Lake, but we ran out of time. There was an interesting but fairly old display in the museum which reflected my vague knowledge of the issue- climatic factors and man made dam projects circa the 1930s have contributed to a severe fall in Pyramid Lake water levels over time. I was curious about the extent to which a plan exists to attempt to combat these factors and preserve the Pyramid Lake environment. It goes without saying that further loss of the lake would be truly tragic, on many levels.

As I mentioned in my Special Collections reflection, I asked our hosts about the feud over the name of Sarah Winnemucca elementary school in the mid-1990s, but didn’t get much of an answer. It’s a shame, as the episode as described in Zanjani’s book in Winnemucca sounded very interesting, and easily worthy of documentation in the museum as a modern facet of Winnemucca’s legacy.

Patrick Austin

English 494A

Field Trip Reflections: Nevada State Museum

15 January, 2018

I will briefly recount a few reflections on our class visit to the Nevada State Museum on January 16th.

I have high praise for our group’s guide, Dennis Cassinelli. I think he presented the material with the seriousness and nuance which it deserved, and he obviously had a lot of respect for the indigenous peoples of Nevada. He mentioned during his talk and I later verified that he’s something of a homespun specialist in the history of the Great Basin region as a whole and is actually the author of four books on the subject (see <https://denniscassinelli.com/> for more details). He brought a lot of interesting personal experience with archaeological work to the table, and also recounted some interesting firsthand interactions with students from the Stewart Indian School during his youth. I’d be interested in hearing about what the presenter for the other group added to the Under One Sky exhibit.

In terms of presentation, I had cause to wonder if the Under One Sky concept was ultimately somewhat reductionist. Much of the material that was presented spoke of the practices of indigenous people in Nevada generally, as if they were one population and not several tribes with different languages, histories, and practices. As we’ve learned from the Winnemucca text and the visit to the Pyramid Lake Museum, among other things, these are tribes that have some historical grievances, come from fairly disparate geographical zones, and exist in a complex and nuanced political coalition in the modern day. I would have enjoyed learning more about what differentiated Shoshone from the Paiute and the Paiute from the Washoe, how differing materials and practices were used in their craftworks, and so forth. I acknowledge that this level of detail may have been too intricate for a general audience, and especially too much for a young audience- and it sounded like young audiences were quite common at the museum. I was particularly curious about how basket-making practices differed between the tribes, since I imagine they had access to different materials, but I didn’t find a good chance to ask as we moved from the vault to the Under One Sky area.

The exhibit on the Stewart Indian School reflected my experience at the Pyramid Lake Museum- namely, surprise and curiosity that the school seemed to be depicted in a fairly balanced, nuanced way even among indigenous people. There’s an acknowledgment of controversy, but also considerable first hand testament to the positive influence the school had on the lives of at least some of its students. I remain unclear on the extent to which the abusive, disgusting practices documented in the video we watched on Indian Schools were also practiced at the Stewart School- if Stewart was run in a less blatantly dysfunctional and abusive fashion, I can see a more nuanced perspective being fair. Still, I personally find it hard to be enthusiastic about the project pursued in these schools when they demonstrably tore families apart and did incalculable harm to the transmission of native languages. I suppose since the school operated for about 100 years, the context of reform over time has to be taken into account. Graduates of the school talking about their experiences now attended during a period of more modern practices.

Finally, a few stray observations: the Stewart Indian School mascot was, to my disappointment, a racist cartoon of an Indian. It seemed to me somewhat unfortunate and telling that the Under One Sky portion of the museum was literally segregated from the rest of “white” Nevada history in terms of the space of the museum.