

Elder examines Aboriginal artifacts via videoconference  
by Rick Garrick Jan. 2008

An Elder from Manitoulin Island recently examined Aboriginal artifacts in England via videoconference from MiChigeeng First Nation.

"That is a drawstring," says Odawa Elder Eddie King at the beginning of the two-hour videoconference as he examines a woven bison-hair bag with a five-figure-with-joined-hands petroglyph design that is believed to be from the 1730 to 1800 AD year period. "It looks more like a type of bag they would carry extra pipe stems in. These bags were not used for travel, they were just used to store the stems in."

The videoconference was conducted in mid-Dec. 2007 by M'Chigeeng's Ojibwe Cultural Foundation and Oxford University's Pitt Rivers Museum as a unique research experiment to expand both community's understanding of the museum's collection of Great Lakes region artifacts.

"Our cultural heritage is dispersed in museums all over the world, and many of our people don't travel," says Alan Corbiere, executive director of the Ojibwe Cultural Foundation, whose mandate is to preserve and revitalize the culture and traditions of Anishinaabe (Ojibwe) people. "The videoconference is a virtual way of bringing objects 'home for a visit' for our people to see."

King viewed the display of artifacts, which were located in a temporary studio created in the Pitt Rivers Museum's research area, by a remote controlled camera he was able to control via a K-Net (Kuhkenah Network) videoconferencing bridge from a room in the Ojibwe Cultural Centre. As he studied the artifacts, he described them in intricate detail and discussed how the artifacts were likely used.

"This is an exciting new way to make collections in British museums accessible to communities in North America," says Dr. Laura Peers, the Museum's lecturer curator responsible for the Americas collections. "So much more can be learned when we can all see and discuss details such as colour, size and pattern, and we learn a great deal working with First Nations peoples."

King came up with the idea of viewing the artifacts via the Internet after he was unable to travel to Oxford to study the artifacts with Corbiere and a group of Canadian researchers from the Great Lakes Research Alliance for the Study of Aboriginal Art and Culture (GRASAC), led by Professor Ruth Phillips of Carleton University.

"Initially I asked Eddie to come to England with us and he said that he would not be able to handle the long plane ride," Corbiere says. "He suggested that he have one of his helpers set up the webcam through Yahoo. I was just really surprised that the Elder was the one who suggested the virtual connection."

The videoconference was made possible through cooperation between Ojibwe Cultural Foundation and Pitt Rivers Museum technical and education staff and K-Net, a First Nations broadband applications provider based in Sioux Lookout, over a thousand kilometres from Manitoulin Island.

"This videoconference is a perfect example of how a cultural centre can leverage the technology," says Steven Fox Radulovich, the Ojibwe Cultural Foundation ICT consultant who has been working with K-Net for the past few years to develop community broadband circuits in the Manitoulin Island area, in an e-mail message.

“Sometimes this takes a bit of creative thinking in coming up with innovative ways to use it and capture the interest of the users themselves so that they can take it and run with it.”

While King and Fox-Radulovich took part in the videoconference from M’Chigeeng, Ojibwe Cultural Foundation executive director Alan Corbiere helped Peers at the Pitt Rivers Museum. During their four-day visit to the Pitt Rivers Museum, which was funded jointly by the British Academy and the Canadian Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, the group examined about one hundred artifacts, working with conservation and curatorial staff to examine the objects more fully.

“The planning took a bit of effort,” Fox-Radulovich says, noting that Corbiere had originally asked if he could assist in connecting the Ojibwe Cultural Centre to the Pitt Rivers Museum in England. “England is five hours ahead of us so we had a smaller window to work on this on a daily basis. We did almost all of our planning via e-mail.” Fox-Radulovich set up a trial run where the two organizations simply exchanged IP addresses and with a few minor technical glitches were online.

“After the proof of concept, we contacted K-Net’s Lyle Johnson to use their video conferencing bridge to ensure quality of service,” Fox-Radulovich says.

“I think this technique would work well for many aspects of knowledge transfer, storytelling, oral history,” Peers says in an e-mail message. “You can adjust the camera and what is displayed on screen so that each person can see the other. There was a half-second or so of time delay, but then we were in England and Mr. King was on Manitoulin. You do have to do a bit of work to figure out how the remote control works the camera, this nearly did us in, but then Mr. King figured it out and Lyle from K-Net came on with further instructions and we were fine.”

“We were absolutely delighted to learn so much about the collections, but the biggest thing this showed us is that we can provide access to collections for community members. Nearly all the early contact/colonial period First Nations materials are not in Canada, they are in Britain, and very little has been published or exhibited; First Nations have had nearly no access at all to this material. I hope that we might work with other communities in this way as well.”

IMAGE: Alan Corbiere, Executive Director of the Ojibwe Cultural Foundation, discussing artifacts at the Pitt Rivers Museum with Eddie King, an Odawa tribal elder, during the videoconference. Photograph by Suzy Prior, Pitt Rivers Museum.