

The History of the “Buser Project”

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(on the occasion of the launching of the Buser Collection in OSU Library’s
Special Collections, Tuesday April 16, 2013)

The history of the Buser Project as far as OSU and the Library’s Special Collections are concerned began in May of 2006, so it is fitting that we are meeting here in the Library within reach of May, just shy of 7 years from that date.

In May 2006 I received an e-mail message from Jay Miller, who at that time was the head of American Indian Studies here at OSU. Jay was an anthropologist with experience in the Pacific Northwest with indigenous populations there, but with a particular interest in the Shawnee and other tribes historically of Ohio. I mention him because I think it is important to give credit where credit is due. He was here at OSU just for a few years but my interest in the Cree Indians of western Canada led me to get together with him on occasion as he worked to build American Indian Studies here.

In any case, he wrote to me then, May 10, 2006, saying “The library has just received a dozen tapes made with the last Wyandot speakers. Is there someone in Linguistics who could take on an independent study or maybe an MA to put them to good use? There is lots of documentation, but that has yet to arrive.”

Those tapes came from Charles Buser’s collection of Wyandot materials.

I did not have a student in mind at the time, but in September of 2006, a student, Kelli Searfos, who had taken some classes with me, came to me asking about possibly doing a Senior Honors thesis under my direction.

I proposed to her that maybe there would be something she could do with the Wyandot tapes.

It later emerged, in September of 2006, that there was more than just tapes -- Jay wrote “I have 9 boxes in my office of correspondence and raw data that is mostly historical and biographical. Someone needs to sort through it”.

And with that, the Buser Project really began. Kelli undertook to catalogue, in an admittedly amateurish way (she was just a student, after all, not a professional archivist) but as a useful first pass through the materials, the 9 boxes of varia that Charles Buser had collected and produced over the years, so that we would know what was in them. It never developed into a senior honors thesis for Kelli, but she did not mind and her work constituted a useful start. Importantly, Steve Buser got involved with this financially, and donated money to the newly created Touching Leaves Fund -- a brainchild of Jay’s -- and

that money was used to create a fellowship for Kelli in summer 2007, during which time she finished the inventory.

Jay Miller moved on at that point, but he had made sure that the Library had the boxes and would do something with them. Tom Cetwinski, who left OSU in spring of 2008, was the point person at the time for the Library at these early stages of the Buser Project, though Tschera Connell, still with the library, was also involved at this stage. This was exactly the time when the Library moved operations over to Ackerman Road so that the Thompson building could be totally redesigned and refurbished, giving the stunning setting we are enjoying today, so the boxes were over in Tom's office in Ackerman more or less lying dormant for a while, though sporadically Tom and I had some discussions about them.

In April 2008, before leaving OSU, Tom Cetwinski officially transferred the materials -- the various boxes and the tapes -- to the Rare Books & Manuscripts Department in the Library, what has now become part of the library's Special Collections branch, and that is when Lisa Iacobellis took charge of the project. Under her direction, several students were put to work on the project; these were mainly students from the Library's pool of student assistants but also ones that I was able to lure from Linguistics into service on the project, including several work-study students whose time was donated by the Linguistics Department to the project. And, Steve Buser continued to provide additional funding that helped with a steady flow of student workers on the project.

This turned out to be a far larger project than any of us envisioned at the outset, but to some extent it was a matter of doing it right -- scanning each document to make sure it was properly preserved in a high-resolution image (the originals have eventually, per request of the Buser family, been delivered to the Wyandot Tribe) and cataloguing each scan so as to produce the repository and the finding aid that is being discussed and presented, officially launched so to speak, today.

These many students over the past 5 years have worked hard with Lisa to catalogue and scan the materials, and the result is an archive that faculty, students, and other researchers can put to good use in their teaching and their work. More important, though, this project now establishes a place for the study of Wyandot life, culture, and even language, in Ohio once again, thus in a small way making up for the years of exile from the state that the Tribe has faced.