

"We Would Love to Home Your Basket"

Returning my Grandmother's Native American Artifacts to their Tribes

Sarah Tarr Fleming

I grew up visiting my father's mother in her Southern California home, where Granny sat in her study in an overstuffed black leather chair, surrounded by books and newspapers. She was also surrounded by Native American artifacts of every kind, collected over decades.

Margaret Fleming grew up an only child in well-to-do east coast family. She traveled extensively with her family and on one trip, they stopped in Pasadena, California. She never forgot the scent of the orange blossoms and the beauty of the mountains, as well as the allure of the West. In 1929, when she and my grandfather were looking a new home for their retirement, they chose Pasadena.

Granny was fascinated by Native American cultures and so began to collect artifacts. Sometimes artifact traders would come to her home in Pasadena. Other times she would travel to the Southwest by car or by train. The trains used to make stops at trading posts and it became fashionable in the 1920s and 1930s for passengers to disembark and purchase items. My cousin recalls my grandmother talking about doing that herself.

On the wall above Granny's blue couch was a large and beautiful fringed Chilkat blanket from Alaska, woven in yellows, pale blues and blacks. There were also Native American pots and baskets and paintings displayed on the shelves and walls. In the room next door was a small library which held a wooden chest. When I was moving into my first apartment, Granny invited me to choose a blanket from the chest. I opened it and was met by a musty, wooly smell and a burst of colors: oranges and reds and blacks, stripes and diamonds. I chose a Navajo Chief's wearing blanket that for many years hung on my wall.

When Granny died, I inherited many more items: baskets, other blankets, a flute and more. That was over forty years ago. Now it is time for them to go home.

Alaska: Yukatat Tlinget Tribe

I walked into the post office in my Northern California home town of Petaluma, carrying a feather-light box destined for Yakutat, Alaska. Nestled inside, wrapped in acid-free tissue paper, was a broken yet beautiful old basket woven by the Yukatat Tlingit tribe. The basket is dark brown and open-weaved with two woven golden bands like a geometric snake, zigzagging back and forth around both the top and bottom of the basket. I handed the box over to the postal worker, hoping its travels would be smooth and easy.

After mailing the basket to Alaska, I wrote to Marry, the Cultural Heritage Director of the Yukatat Tlingit tribe, to tell her it was on its way. She had been the person who had answered my

exploratory phone call about sending the basket home. And she was the person to whom I had texted a photo of the basket to see if it belonged with her tribe - the modern world nudging up against the ancient. She had replied, "We would love to home your basket within our organization." To home the basket. That sounded right to me. Marry has since told me that the basket was received with great joy and the emoji she used to convey this message was the one with streaming tears.

I will say that even though "homing the basket" sounded like the right thing to do, I was in fact torn, part of me wishing I could keep these things that I knew I must send back. They are beautiful. They have been in my home and in my family for over 50 years. And then a wise friend, upon hearing this story and sensing my inner struggle, simply said, "Their need is greater than your want." That was all I needed to hear to release my yearning.

I have been blessed to shelter these precious objects for a long time, and now they need to go back. I may have been unconsciously coming to this conclusion for a while. The Navajo Chief's blanket has been tucked in a closet for years, not hanging on a wall. The Paiute Shoshone deer skin cradle board I used to hang on the wall is also not on display.

I embarked onto this path with my sister, who was also returning her Native objects. I have been exploring what it means to be white in America for several years now, and, as the descendant of Southern enslavers, have been focused on the great harms my ancestors did to African-Americans. But as I sat reading Black history, I would glance up at the shelves where I had a Native flute, baskets and other artifacts. Something felt off. There was a reason I had not displayed the cradleboard or the blanket in recent years. I think they did not truly feel like they were mine anymore.

My grandmother was many things besides a collector of Native American artifacts. She was a suffragette who voted in every election, even when wheelchair-bound at the age of 90. She was a staunch Democrat (her vote cancelled out my Virginia grandfather's vote every election). She was a member of the NAACP, fought for Civil Rights and women's rights her whole life. She was widowed at 50, just before World War II, which she spent volunteering for the Red Cross. She was very funny, a great story teller, loved to read (history and politics all week long, Agatha Christie on Saturdays), and wrote an endless number of letters to politicians expressing her views. And she collected precious artifacts belonging to another culture. I sometimes wonder what choices I am making in my life now that my grandchildren will wonder about. I don't know what they are. Neither did Granny.

Nevada: Paiute Shoshone Tribe

Rosalie from the Paiute Shoshone Tribe in Fallon, Nevada is very excited for the cradleboard to hang in their new museum. That is the appropriate display spot for this precious baby bed. I will travel there in a few months to take it back to the tribe.

When I found out that the designs on the cradleboard (red beaded parallel lines) meant that it had been made for a baby boy, I felt like a grave robber. This baby bed did not belong in my home. (If it had had red diamond decorations, instead of the red parallel lines, it would have denoted a baby girl's cradle board.) It was too personal, too intimate to be on show-and-tell on my wall.

I have since learned that the cradle board was probably made-for-sale and never had a baby boy in it. But that did not change my desire to return it. It is still a beautiful, intimate antique that belongs in Nevada.

Many years ago I showed these same objects in my children's classrooms. I got the idea from my grandmother, who used to invite school children to tour her basement shelves which were crammed with any Native American object you can imagine: flutes, pestles, acorn brushes, water-carrying baskets sealed with pitch, brightly painted kachina dolls, stone fetishes (one in the shape of a bear), arrow heads, ancient ceramic pots, hundreds of baskets. I remember one basket had quail feathers all around the lip, standing up like tiny waving hands.

Now these beautiful artifacts feel like burdens from another time. When I mailed off that first basket, I felt an easing of that burden.

California: Hupa Tribe

Last winter time I spoke with Ralph of the Hupa Tribe (Naatini-xwe, in their own tongue) in Northern California about an antique acorn brush my grandmother had collected. I sent him a photo as we talked and he immediately knew that it was an acorn bowl brush and that the brown bristles came from soap root, the handle from wrapped deer skin. He suggested I wait to return the brush to the tribe until the snow had melted on the mountain passes around the Reservation.

So in May of this year my daughter and sister and I went to the town of Hoopa (formerly called Hupa). The road was beautiful, curving up through mountains until it dropped down to the valley where it meandered along the Trinity River until finally reached the town. My sister was returning a woven hat and also a basket from my grandmother's collection. Ralph identified it as a trinket basket, used to hold small pieces of jewelry, strands of beads or shells.

The museum is in downtown Hoopa, next to the Casino. Ralph showed us the array of baskets and ceremonial dress (made from deer skin and adorned with tiny clam shells and rectangular pieces of abalone). He said that tribal members can borrow items to wear for ceremonies or for important family events. Like a marvelous lending library.

When he lifted one of the deerskin dresses and gently waved it back and forth, the shells clicked together in a beautiful and soothing rhythm. He said drums are not used at their ceremonies, just dancers with the clicking dresses and chanting and singing. The clicking reminded us of the

sounds that shells and stones make at the beach as waves gently push them back and forth across the sand.

Arizona: Tohono O'odham Tribe

When I reached out to Dedric of the Tohono O'odham Tribe of Arizona, I texted him photos of two baskets I thought might belong in Arizona. When he saw the photos, he exclaimed at their beauty and recognized them immediately as woven by the Tohono O'odham.

One day I rinsed those two baskets in chlorine-free water (as suggested by Marry of the Yukatat tribe in Alaska). One of them is the size of a round gallon of ice cream. It has the figure of a person woven in dark brown around the periphery of the sand brown basket. I swirled the water to remove the dust that had accumulated for decades. I did the same with a larger basket, also sand colored with a dark brown pattern almost like stepping stones. My grandmother used that one as a trash receptacle. I cringe to say that she sometimes emptied her ash trays into the basket as well as paper trash. It felt like a sacrilege, defiling a thing of such beauty.

While the baskets were still damp, something made me stick my head into the larger one and inhale. I was immediately transported into Granny's study, by the smells of the sweet grasses used to weave the baskets and by the scent of the tobacco. I know that when these baskets go home, I will lose this particular scent of my childhood forever.

My son James lives near the Tohono O'odham tribe and I asked him if he would like to return the baskets in person. He suggested instead that I fly to Tucson and we drive the baskets to the reservation together. So in late March of this year we accompanied the baskets home, with a bit more ceremony than the first basket had, which flew by itself to Alaska.

The drive to the Tohono O'odham Reservation took about an hour and a half. James drove and Donovan, my seven year old grandson, sat in the back seat. We drove through the desert, traveling south west, passing saguaro and other cacti, the population growing sparser and sparser with each passing mile.

The Tohono O'odham Nation Culture Center and Museum is in Topawa, Arizona, near the small town of Sells. The Center opened in 2007 and intentionally sits in an unpopulated part of the desert, close to the flora and fauna of the region. It is in view of Baboquiuari Mountain, the home of the Tohono O'odham creator, I'toi. According to tribal legend, he lives in a cave below the base of the mountain. It is he who brought his people to this earth from the underworld, sculpting them out of clay.

Dedric was waiting for us when we arrived and took us into a large white room where donations are collected, labeled, cleaned and, if needed, sent out for repair. Dedric gave me gloves to put on and then handed me a tiny horse hair basket (the size of a golf ball) that was white with

black decorations. It had an equally tiny lid that fit snugly. It was hard to imagine how one would weave such a small and perfect basket with human fingers.

He spoke of each of the objects having its own life, being on its own journey, and I then felt comfortable telling him about how my grandmother used the basket for trash and cigarette ashes. He nodded his head and said he was glad to learn more of its history, to learn what its life had been like before we brought it to him.

Another Tribe

One story I cannot tell in all its details is that of a tribe who asked me to keep my return of their items private. They fear further looting of the sacred places of their ancestors. I can say that one tribal member said that seeing the objects made him feel emotional. We then talked about the ways Native Americans had been mistreated by this country. My 11 year old grandson was present and later expressed frustration that none of this had been part of his education. The history still being taught in so many places is incomplete.

I can also say that before we parted, as we were standing in a circle getting ready to say farewell, the same tribal member sang to us a song in his tongue, a song of safe passage through the wilderness. It felt like a blessing, as if ancestors were watching and nodding at the new connections being made.

There are more items to return, more tales to tell, more ways I will learn to reckon with the choices of my ancestors. I will close with this:

Upon hearing my stories, my sister said: "We grew up saying, 'My grandmother collected....'. Now your grandchildren will say, 'My grandmother returned....' "