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Saving the Stratton: The Fate of the Sheldon Jackson College Library Collection

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Abstract

On June 29, 2007, Alaska's oldest educational institution, Sheldon Jackson College, ceased operations without notice. The closure left an uncertain future for the college's students, faculty, staff, resources, and buildings including the Stratton Library and the over 48,000 items housed within. The Library's collection not only contained the college's academic collection, but it also housed two rare book collections, historical photos and plate glass negatives, as well as the archives documenting the school's 128-year history. This article will track the relocation and current status of the Sheldon Jackson College archives and C.L. Andrews rare book collection.

Introduction

On June 28, 2007 the entire faculty and staff of Sheldon Jackson College in Sitka, Alaska were called to an all staff meeting in the college's Yaw Chapel. Without any prior notice, the college President Rev. David Dobbler announced that the college would cease operations for one year and terminated the employment of all but a handful of the college's 109 employees (Sentential Staff, 2007). No other details were provided on how the college would secure the campus and assist current students. Even after the official closure the college faced many challenges, the least of which was to secure the Stratton Library and its unique collections. However, competing priorities left the library as a secondary concern for the college administration. For instance, the college operated a salmon fish hatchery, which would need to maintain its operations or risk the loss of a generation of fish to the Sitka Sound. An Alaska Native high school science and math camp was in operation with students from around the state in attendance. Dozens of students, faculty, and staff still occupied residences on campus. Additionally, the college operated one of the few childcare centers in the community, a wellness center, and summer housing program for seasonal workers. The college also provided facilities that supported both the U.S. Coast Guard Air Station and Alaska State Troopers Academy.

The impact of the closure was felt throughout the community. Different groups began working together to address some of the most pressing needs. For example, the Sitka Rotary Club and Red Cross helped to arrange transportation home or to alternative colleges for the students remaining in Sitka. Community volunteers helped to keep the fish hatchery operational. Different state and local agencies helped displaced college faculty and staff find new employment and/or relocate. By early September 2007, community focus began to shift to the college's assets including the Stratton Library.

Sheldon Jackson College's history began with the opening of the Sitka Industrial School in 1879. The industrial school model of education for American Indian and Alaska Native youth was exemplified by the Carlisle Indian Industrial School, also founded in 1879 by Richard Henry Pratt. Pratt, a former U.S.

Army officer, believed in the rapid integration of young American Indians into white society, and Carlisle sought to achieve this through a combination of basic academic instruction and vocational training (Fear-Segal, 2007). Pratt and his contemporaries may have been well-meaning by the standards of late nineteenth-century white attitudes toward Indians, but Carlisle and similar institutions succeeded or failed in their goals at a heavy cost to Indian lives and culture. Graduates of these schools found that white acculturation did not ensure acceptance in white society, while their native cultural identities were deliberately stripped away to such an extent that those who returned to their tribal communities, sometimes after multi-year absences, often experienced alienation from their friends and family members (Glenn, 2011). Unlike Carlisle, which was a federal institution associated with the Bureau of Indian Affairs, the Sitka Industrial School was a private institution affiliated with the Presbyterian Church, but its purpose was very similar. It undoubtedly had a considerable effect on the local Tlingit culture. The full extent to which it did so, however, lies outside the scope of this article.

In 1882, Presbyterian Missionary Sheldon Jackson became manager of the school. Jackson was best known for his role in the import of reindeer into Alaska. He was also a voracious collector of Alaska Native artifacts. In 1897, Alaska's first concrete building was constructed on school grounds to hold the thousands of items he collected. Later named the Sheldon Jackson Museum, the building and collections were purchased from the college by the State of Alaska in 1984 and is still in operation today (Friends of the Sheldon Jackson Museum, 2017). Following Jackson's death, the campus was renamed the Sheldon Jackson School in 1910. In 1917, the campus became a boarding school and the college was established in 1944. After Sheldon Jackson College received regional accreditation as a college in 1966, the high school program was closed the following year in 1967.

The Stratton Library, built in 1974, was home to more than the college's academic collection: rare books, archival quality prints, plate glass negatives, artifacts, and the archives of the school were also held in the building. In an effort to protect the collection, the library was closed and locked immediately after the closure. Less than a year later, the college announced that the closure was permanent and began the process of selling off the college's assets in order to pay off a reported \$6 million in debts (Jaschik, 2007). Concerned about the fate of irreplaceable collections still in the library, community members started to organize efforts to preserve and return access to the collections. Members of the Sitka Library Network, a library consortium consisting of the Kettelson Public Library, Sitka School District libraries, and Mount Edgecombe High School took the lead in this effort. Working with the Sitka Friends of the Library, the Sitka National Park held a community meeting on September 19, 2007 for those looking for information about the collection and interested in helping preserve the collection.

The chief concern that surfaced at the meeting was the lack of heat in the Stratton Library, which had been turned off following the closure. Following the meeting, members of the Sitka Library Network were able to work with the property management firm hired by the Sheldon Jackson College Board of Trustees (SJC BOT) to gain access to the building and assess the conditions of the collection. Staff members from the Alaska Historical Library visited the campus on October 15, 2007 and prepared a report on the condition of the materials and facility. Finally, on November 13, 2007 the SJC BOT appointed a Stratton Library Advisory group made up of community members to assess and make recommendations for the future of the collections. The advisory group divided the library collections into

seven sub-collections, identifying the Sheldon Jackson College Archives and the C.L. Andrews rare book collection as the highest priority. Over 20 volunteers worked every Saturday for almost three years to inventory, assess, package, and relocate materials.

Sheldon Jackson College Archives

The Sheldon Jackson College Archives contain the records of the school's operations beginning with the Sitka Industrial School. The archives include non-academic student records, school publications, faculty papers, administrative meeting minutes, and correspondence with the national offices of the Presbyterian Church. The archives include botany samples, photographs, books, ledgers, sports memorabilia, and various ephemera. The archives reflect the history of the state of Alaska, the local community, and Tlingit people. The archives also document the schools' link to the original founders of the Alaska Native Brotherhood and Sisterhood, many of who were alumni. Founded in 1912, the Alaska Native Brotherhood is the oldest known indigenous persons' civil rights organization. (James). Both organizations were instrumental in the passage of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act in 1971. Detailed information regarding the lives of important Alaska Native civil rights activists were included in the archives. This included Elizabeth Peratrovich, who was instrumental in the passage of the Alaska Anti-Discrimination Act of 1945 and for whom in 1988 the Alaska State Legislator declared February 16 as a statewide holiday known as Elizabeth Peratrovich Alaska Civil Rights Day. (National Institutes of Health). Other alumni in the archives included Tlingit scholar and Presbyterian Minister Walter Soboleff and Tlingit elder and U.S. Naval Veteran Isabella Brady.

Due to the importance of the archival collection, the Alaska State Library worked with the local community and SJC BOT to make their protection and preservation the highest priority. In October of 2008, the SJC BOT placed the materials on a 5-year loan to the Alaska State Library. Staff from the State Library's Historical Collection came to Sitka in December 2008 to pack and ship the archives to the Alaska State Library in Juneau, Alaska. The larger library community in the state was notified through the *Alaska State Library Friday Bulletin* on November 21, 2008:

Following the 2007 closure of the Sheldon Jackson College, staff members of the Alaska State Library assisted Sitka's library community in caring for the books and archival materials in the Stratton Library. As a part of that effort, the ASL Historical Collections has agreed to house the Sheldon Jackson College Archives for a period of 5 years.

The Sheldon Jackson College Archives totals approximately 140 linear ft., and includes administrative files, correspondence, photographs, oral histories, moving images, and a wealth of information about the operations of SJC beginning in the 1880s. The bulk of the materials were beautifully organized by Evelyn Bonner, Nancy Ricketts and other caretakers of the collection. The several guides to the collections are being compiled and will be available through the Alaska State Library Historical Collections.

The BOT transferred full ownership of the archives to the Alaska Division of Libraries, Archives and Museums in February 2012 (Ronco, 2012). Today, the archives reside in the Alaska State Library Historical Collections in Juneau, Alaska where they are accessible to the public. Since the state purchased the Stratton Library, the hope is that the archives will eventually return to Sitka and reside in either the former Stratton Library or the Sheldon Jackson Museum.

C.L. Andrews Rare Book Collection

Around 1944, the Rotary Club of Sitka purchased the personnel library collection of Clarence Leroy Andrews for approximately \$1,200 (Tabor, 1944). Andrews' personal library contained first edition Alaska books, newspapers, and reports, as well a wealth of ephemera including catalogs from the gold rush era. Andrews lived in Alaska from 1897 to 1940 (Alaska State Library Historical Collections, n.d.). He worked as a customs agent in Sitka, Skagway, and Eagle, Alaska. He also worked in the Arctic region as an employee of the U.S. Bureau of Education's School and Reindeer Service (University of Oregon Libraries, 2004). C.L Andrews wrote two essential histories of Alaska: *The Story of Sitka* and *The Story of Alaska*.

The collection was housed in several locations in Sitka before coming to the Sheldon Jackson Campus in 1958 (Veatch, 1959). The collection was gifted to SJC under the agreement that the collection would not be sold, bifurcated, or relocated outside of Sitka. The collection became the bases of the Stratton Library's research and one of the justifications of its construction. Author James Michener lived on campus and used the C.L. Andrews collection while writing his 1988 novel *Alaska*.

The collection remained in the Stratton Library while the City of Sitka and SJC BOT negotiated its transfer. In November 2008 the BOT agreed to transfer ownership of the entire collection to the Kettle-son Memorial Library. The Sitka Friends of the Library donated the funds to pay for the collection to be relocated to secure city storage by a licensed and bonded company. In January of 2009, the entire collection was relocated to City of Sitka storage. Today, the collection is housed in the new Sitka Public Library and is accessible to the public by appointment.

The Stratton Today

In addition to the SJC archives and C.L. Andrews collection, the community relocated the remaining materials. The E.W. Merrill plate glass negatives were eventually sold to Sitka National Park as a means to reunite a collection that had been divided between the State of Alaska, SJC, and the National Park Service. The archival quality Merrill prints was purchased by the Sitka School District through a grant from the Sitka Permanent Charitable Trust. The libraries' extensive collection of religion monographs was donated to Alaska Christian College in Soldotna, Alaska. Sitka Library Network members absorbed books that were less than 5 years old. Sitka High School and Mount Edgecombe High School now house the collection of circulating Alaska books to support their Alaska history curriculum. Native language materials were transferred to the Sitka Tribe of Alaska Education Programs.

Finally, after relocating the rare and unique collections, the remaining general collection was distributed throughout the community through three book sales held in the Stratton Library. (Woolsey, 2010). The Alaska Division of Libraries, Archives, and Museums purchased the building in 2010. The Stratton came back to life in 2014 as the temporary home of Sitka Public Library while their new library was under construction. Today the Stratton Library sits empty awaiting renovations and a new life as part of the Alaska Division of Libraries, Archives, and Museums.

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Figure 1: Community volunteers inventorying and encapsulating C.L. Andrews rare books at Stratton Library in Sitka, Alaska. 2008.



Figure 2: Community volunteers moving materials to safe room at Stratton Library in Sitka, Alaska. 2008.



Figure 3: Community volunteer conducting inventory of archival materials at Stratton Library in Sitka, Alaska. 2008.



Figure 4: Boys at work in boar shop, Sheldon Jackson School Sitka, Alaska. (n.d.) from the Alaska's Digital Archives. (Waggoner).



Alaska State Library - Historical Collections

Figure 5: Class photographic, Sitka Industrial School. (n.d.) from Alaska's Digital Archives. (Merrill).