

## Mitchell Museum marks 40 years of celebrating Native American cultures

VISUAL ARTS 09/21/2017, 08:30am

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*Hopi pottery is among the relics on display at the Mitchell Museum of the American Indian. I COURTESY OF THE MUSUEM*

In 1917, a young John Mayo Mitchell embarked on a series of life-changing trips when his family visited an uncle that was working as an agent on an Osage Nation reservation in Oklahoma. The young boy was enamored with the incredible depth of culture and unique artwork of the Osage people, a far contrast from what he was learning about Native-American history in school classes and comic books. The trip began a lifelong obsession of collecting artwork and artifacts that started to fill up Mitchell's home, and eventually the basement of his real estate office on Green Bay Road in Evanston where he took pride in educating school groups and boy scout troops.

By 1977 he and his wife Betty Seabury Mitchell had amassed 3,000 artifacts in their collection, and through a donation of the materials to Kendall College, the Mitchell Museum of the American Indian was born. Though Mitchell passed in 1985, and his wife in 2013, their mission to promote and share a deeper understanding and respect of Native American people continues to thrive today as the museum celebrates its 40th anniversary this weekend with a fete full of music, crafts, highlight tours and raffles.



*John Mayo Mitchell and his wife  
Betty Seabury Mitchell. I Courtesy of  
the Mitchell Museum of the  
American Indian*

“We’re a pretty unique museum and really only a handful of institutions in the U.S. share our scope,” says executive director Kathleen McDonald. She is one of two full-time staff members at the Mitchell Museum, along with collections manager Scarlett Engle and a board of directors that helps steer daily operations, with funding provided by donors including the Chicago Community Trust, the Richard H. Driehaus Foundation and the Evanston Community Foundation.

“What sets us apart is that we do cover all tribes in the U.S. and Canada,” continues McDonald, “and that opens up opportunities for us to discuss diversity and move past the stereotypes that there is a single Native American, or a single language.” In fact, there are more than 1,200 unique cultures to draw from, with 567 federally recognized tribes in the U.S. and another 640 bands of First Nation peoples in Canada. In the Chicago area alone, says McDonald, 40,000 native people call the city home, representing 150-plus tribes.

“I do think primarily because we don’t have reservations in Illinois, there isn’t the same kind of visibility,” admits McDonald, who says the museum’s popular Heritage Markers exhibit was created to provide more recognition for the rich cultural history that was bestowed on the state through Native American influence. McDonald cites the origin of streets like Lehigh in Glenview (meaning “fork of the river”) and Aptakisic Road in Lincolnshire named for a notable Potawatomi chief that had settled in the area. The town of Wilmette also took its name from Archange Ouilmette, the wife of a French settler and daughter of a Potawatomi woman; she was granted 1,280 acres as part of the Treaty of Prairie du Chien in what is today the bustling North Shore community.



*A doll by noted Lakota artist Rhonda Holy Bear is on display at the Mitchell Museum of the American Indian. I COURTESY OF THE MUSEUM*

The exhibit also highlights the evidence of various chipping stations set up near the site of Evanston Hospital and has a collection of axes, arrowheads and other stone tools that an Evanston resident found in their backyard. There's also much talk of the Garrison Site in Lake Forest that became a source of much fanfare after an archaeological dig in 1991 uncovered evidence of human occupation from as early as 8000 B.C. to 1450 A.D.

McDonald estimates that of the 10,000 artifacts the Mitchell Museum currently has in its possession, the oldest is pottery from the ancient Pueblo people in Arizona, dated about 900 A.D. Though the bulk of materials are from the 20th and 21st century. "We do cover the past history [including a replica wigwam hunting display and robust library with research materials]," she says, "but we really want to make sure people understand these cultures are living and thriving today as well." To that end, the museum has also filled their space with the work of contemporary artists like Doug Hyde and the late Charlie Pratt and has held regular programming with poets, dancers, fashion shows and ongoing conversations.



*A hunting wigwam is featured in the Heritage Markers exhibit at the Mitchell Museum of the American Indian. I COURTESY OF THE MUSEUM*

The latest exhibit, “Contemporary Native Women: Opening Doors to Change” was recently awarded the Illinois Association of Museums Superior Achievement Award and focuses on the work of 12 women that have been activists in their communities, working to fight for water rights, tribal sovereignty and social and economic issues. By the time the exhibit has wrapped later this year, seven of the women will have visited to talk about these contemporary issues.

“We try and incorporate the native voice and perspective into all our projects,” says McDonald, noting that the museum is also part of the Chicago American Indian Community Collaborative, a group of 12 organizations that talk through issues in the native community and share ideas and programming.

“I think there are a lot of lessons to learn through native history,” says McDonald of the museum’s purpose. “To me what’s most meaningful when you learn about a culture — and this is where museums have a role to play today — is that it helps us to see people as people and understand the past to recognize what’s happening in the present.”



*John and Betty Mitchell shared their collection and knowledge of Native-American artifacts with a boy scout troop in the basement of John's real estate office the “Green Bay Trading Post Museum,” on Green Bay Road in Evanston, c. 1970. I COURTESY OF THE MITCHELL MUSEUM OF THE AMERICAN INDIAN*