

# “Keeper’s of the Fire” a Success for Tribe and Community

Concluding a successful run in the temporary gallery at the Museum at Southwestern Michigan College, “Keeper’s of the Fire: The Potawatomi Nation” closed its doors on December 29. After extensive preparation and collaboration, the first ever exhibit telling our Nation’s story was opened on June 21, 2006 and was enjoyed by over 4,500 visitors while open. The exhibit came at a time of monumental change for the Tribe with the groundbreaking of the Four Winds Casino, and coincided with our hosting of the 2006 Language Conference and Potawatomi Gathering.

The exhibit covered some of the most crucial aspects of our tribal history and culture. Visitors would enter and flow through the gallery in a circular fashion, an important aspect of traditional teachings. This was done intentionally to let the viewer in to our way of believing about life. The historical issues covered included our pre-contact history and lifestyle, early relations with Europeans and trade items, and the Treaty and Removal Periods. The interesting artifacts in this section included arrowheads and old tools, a set of bowl dice, pictures of traditional housing and storage structures, early beadwork examples, and an especially rare Peace Medal from the 1795 Treaty of Greenville. These Peace Medals were the Government’s way of ‘wowing’ the Native people, but they are actually markers of unfortunate occasions in which our lands were stolen.

By public opinion, the most popular cases were dedicated to Potawatomi material culture. One amazing case included some of the finest examples of Potawatomi black ash basketry in this region. We were proud to display at least one example from each of the basket making families within our tribe, including a few beautiful baskets from elders active with the Basket Co-Op who have walked on. Elaborate beadwork, pottery, birch bark and quill boxes, fiber bags, and sweetgrass baskets were showcased for their popularity these materials have within our Tribe for creating objects.

One area was dedicated to historic and contemporary Potawatomi dress. Visitors were able to see how the subtle use of floral patterns and appliqué ribbonwork work in older clothing has blossomed into the stunning regalia that we recognize from modern-day pow wows. A video kiosk was included to explain to visitors the importance of concepts like the drum, pow wow, teachings, and the fire.



This beaded bandolier bag is an example of the fine ceremonial dress and trade items our people were producing in the 1800 and 1900s.



Sylvester Wesaw, teaching students at one of the four monthly workshops held in conjunction with the exhibit. The workshops were a great success with over 120 people in attendance.

The impact of the Catholic religion and boarding schools on the Pokagon Band and our citizens was examined for both its historical and contemporary effects on our people. No exhibit about us would be complete without addressing the notoriety of past Chiefs Leopold and Simon Pokagon. Visitors enjoyed photographs of our elders, ancestors, and current Tribal doings, including the Kee Boon Mein Kaa pow wow. One complete wall was dedicated to our Pokagon Band veterans, with many families submitting pictures of their beloved warriors.

The project work group felt it was most important to highlight our Potawatomi language. What is in fact a dying language, we are seeing an upsurge in students and materials for people that want to learn. We highlighted the '200 Words to a Community' language project that the Pokagon, Huron, and Gun Lake Bands are currently working together on that included a CD-Rom language program. In honor of our last fluent speaker, LuElla Lewis, a bible translated in to the Potawatomi language was displayed.

In the center of the exhibit area, visitors were able to sit around a small mock-fire, with simplified teachings of the Seven Grandfathers and an audio track covering our connection to the fire. We are thankful for the guidance of our elder Clarence White, who helped us make sure we were doing this respectfully. Many visitors felt it was the most humbling part of the exhibit.

It really was a monumental task that was completed in a good way. Never before have we had an opportunity to tell our story, in our words. Too often has it been told for us, with abundant stereotypes and inaccuracies. We could not have done this without the help of Tribal citizens (you know who you are!), Dan Rapp and Tribal Council, the staff and friends of the Museum at Southwestern Michigan College, the Grand Rapids Public Museum, and the Milwaukee Public Museum. With a successful first attempt now behind the Tribe is working toward creating our own Cultural Center and Museum. Keep a look out for surveys and open meetings to discuss this. We need you!

- This is Your Story, Our People's Story -

Wéwéne from the Museum Project Work Group