

Interfaces.....

A Tribute to Brian Deer

By Jean Weihs, C.M.



Jean Weihs

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services work in a way that integrates with the rest of the library's services. Collaboration among catalogers and developers is beneficial to the project as well. When you work together with other colleagues, one certain outcome is that you will come out of it both inspired and challenged by their insights.

I have written a series of columns about famous people who were also librarians. This column is about a librarian who contributed much more to librarianship than many of those "famous people." I have, in fact, written one short paragraph about the Mohawk librarian Brian Deer in a previous column, but a notice in the newspaper about his recent death on January 12, 2019, two days after his 74th birthday, prompted me to find out more about his contributions to librarianship.¹

Although Alec Brian Deer was not born in, nor did he die in Kahnawake, his name is closely associated with this territory.² Because no taxis were available on the stormy day of his birth, his mother had to walk through a blizzard to get to the hospital. Brian was born with double pneumonia, which led to lifelong medical problems. In his early teenage he had an operation in which half of one lung and two-thirds of the other lung were removed. Before he went under the anesthesia he heard one doctor say to another doctor that Brian would never live to age 16 and his immediate mental response was a determination to prove the doctor wrong. During his life Brian walked and hiked often with the purpose of building his lung strength.

After graduating from the John Grant High School in Montreal, Brian entered Sir George Williams University (now named Concordia University) in 1966 where he earned a BSc degree majoring in mathematics and then obtained a teacher's certificate from Bishop's

University. He taught in the school in Kahnawake for a period of time but found the strain on his voice and lungs was affecting his health and he had to retire from teaching. He had used libraries extensively during his life and had become aware that the system for organizing a library's collection did not take into consideration the culture of the First Nations' people, so he enrolled in McGill University's Faculty of Library Science and added a MLS degree to his academic accomplishments.

His studies at McGill confirmed in his mind that the classification systems taught there and used widely in much of the English-speaking world were not suitable for the Aboriginal peoples' culture. Upon his graduation from McGill the National Indian Brotherhood gave him a contract to catalogue their collection. He worked at the Brotherhood from 1974 to 1976 and it was during this time he developed his classification system. He finished this task before this contract time with the Brotherhood was up, so he travelled to Vancouver to catalogue the collection of the Union of British Columbia Indian Chiefs. In the latter part of the 1970s Brian went to live with the Tohono

(continued on page 12)

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Interfaces.....→

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(continued from page 11)

O'odham people (called the Papago community at the time) in the Sonoran Desert in Colorado and came home to Kahnawake in 1978. In later years he worked at Cultural Centre at Kahnawake and the Mohawk Nation Office, taught courses at Concordia University, and wrote on issues related to Indigenous knowledge and culture. At some point he was also an entrepreneur, establishing the Otiohkwa Video store. A man of many talents!

The Brian Deer Classification System

Brian did not start out to create a universal classification scheme for all Indigenous resources in all libraries. Brian's first classification system was created to organize the research materials and papers in the National Indian Brotherhood Library, but he did not intend this particular scheme to be used in all Indigenous libraries. He believed the classification system used in a particular library should be designed to reflect the concerns of local Indigenous people and also reflect on relationships between people, animals, and the land. He created a new classification system for each library in which he worked.

His classification system is limited in scope intended to be used by small and specialized libraries and is not designed to be applied to all topics of interest to the Indigenous peoples of North America. Short and easily remembered call numbers are to be used in local libraries. Because English is the common language among First Nations peoples and non-Indigenous library patrons, the text of the classification system was written in English, while individual libraries may use a local language in catalogue records to

facilitate retrieval of wanted materials.

In 1980 Gene Joseph and Keltie McCall adapted Brian's classification scheme for use in British Columbia and the scheme has been applied to appropriate collections at the University of British Columbia's Xwi7xwa Library, and the British Columbia Indian Chiefs Resource Centre.³ The Cree Cultural Institute in Oujé-Bougoumou, Quebec, has also adopted it. *Classification, Bias and American Indian Materials* by Holly Tomren is an interesting study of the classification of these materials using the Library of Congress Classification, the Dewey Decimal Classification, and the Brian Deer Classification.⁴

There are drawbacks to the Brian Deer Classification System, one of which is the shortage of clear guidelines to the system which can result in inconsistencies not only between the catalogues of different libraries but also within a particular library's catalogue.

References and Notes

1. Jean Weihs, "Summer Miscellanea Once Again," *Technicalities* 36, no. 5 (Sept./Oct. 2016): 9-12. Much of the information in this column came from Daniel J. Rowe, "Humble Intellectual Leaves Unique Legacy," *The Eastern Door* (Feb. 7, 2019), www.easterndoor.com/2019/02/07/humble-intellectual-leaves-unique-legacy (accessed March 22, 2019).
2. The Kahnawake Mohawk Territory is a First Nations reserve of the Mohawks of on the south shore of the St. Lawrence River in the Province of Quebec, across from Montreal. Throughout this article I have not given the spelling of names in the way used by First Nation's

peoples. For example, "Kahnawake" is written "Kahnawá:ke" in First Nations' documents. However, I have used the formal name of the First Nations Library at the University of British Columbia which is Xwi7xwa Library.

3. The Brian Deer Classification used in the University of British Columbia Library can be found at <https://xwi7xwa.library.ubc.ca/files/2011/09/deer.pdf> (accessed March 26, 2019). See Sydney Worth, "This Library Takes an Indigenous Approach to Categorizing Books: Xwi7xwa Library in British Columbia is Working to Decolonize the Way Libraries Organize Information," *yes!* (March 22, 2019), www.yesmagazine.org/peace-justice/decolonize-western-bias-indigenous-library-books-20190322 (accessed March 26, 2019), for an in-depth essay on the use of the Brian Deer Classification at the University of British Columbia.
4. Holly Tomren, "Classification, Bias, and American Indian Materials," ailasacc.pbworks.com/f/BiasClassification2004.pdf (accessed March 22, 2019).

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