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Helping Researchers: An Extraordinary Encounter in the Marquette Archives

Mark G. Thiel

Marquette University, mark.thiel@marquette.edu

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An extraordinary encounter in the Marquette Archives

By Archivist Mark G. Thiel

Wednesday, March 26th was more than a typical busy day in Marquette University's Special Collections and Archives Department, the archival home for the historical records of the Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions and associated organizations of the Black and Indian Mission Office (Washington, D.C.). Behind the scenes, staff members were engaged in several projects simultaneously from sorting past photographs from the Black and Indian Mission Office to scanning selected ones from among them and those received from other Catholic organizations that will be used soon in several historical documentaries. In the adjacent reading room for researchers, a graduate student from the University of California Irvine was studying late 19th and early 20th century Bureau correspondence for her doctoral dissertation on women who shaped San Diego, California. Here she focused on the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet who taught Diegueño and Luiseño children at St. Anthony's School adjacent to the famous San Diego Mission.

Early that afternoon, a middle-aged man from Oregon stopped by for a brief research visit. He was searching for information on a grandfather, and based on his Internet search, he believed that Marquette University might hold the information he needed. He and his relatives were of Flathead ancestry, but they were not enrolled due to insufficient documentation on the degree-of-Indian-blood from the grandfather's lineage.

His provisional birth certificate, issued many years after his birth, stated he attended St. Andrew's School on the Umatilla Reservation in Oregon during the 1890s. However, the Bureau's archival copies of the St. Andrew's School quarterly attendance records do not begin until 1900, and even if his grandfather was a student since then, the attendance records are specialized and not intended to list all students. Rather, reservation-based Catholic schools created and submitted these records quarterly to the federal government as part of its process to allow parents to use their tribe's federal trust funds to pay their children's school tuition. But this procedure applied only to students enrolled in federally acknowledge tribes and typically these students comprised about only 90% of a school's students.

The archivist retrieved the box of records for St. Andrew's School and the researcher examined the quarterly reports for the 1900-1901 and 1901-1902 school years. He was pleased to find his grandfather's



Mark G. Thiel shows visitor his grandfather's lineage.

name immediately. In so doing, he found the boys' and girls' names were listed separately and their tribal affiliation. However, that crucial detail he needed – degree-of-Indian-blood – was not listed for that first school year. So he proceeded on to the records for the next year, which would be his grandfather's last. He found that the degree-of-Indian-blood information was included, his grandfather was enrolled, and he was described as "1/2 Flathead".

Realizing now that he and his relatives were eligible for enrollment in the Flathead Nation, the researcher jumped up immediately and gave the archivist a bear hug. Then with a few photocopies in hand, followed by profuse thanks and handshakes, he was on his way. For the archivist, that moment was his most unprecedented research encounter ever in his more than 25 years in serving researchers.