

REFLECTIONS



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MARSHALLESE ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Stories From Arkansas Last Wave of Pioneers

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MARSHALLESE ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

STORIES FROM
ARKANSAS'
LATEST WAVE
OF PIONEERS



“That is exquisite! Where did you get that? Can I buy it here? What is it exactly?” Two older women from one of the many tour buses that bring tourists from across the country to Crystal Bridges Museum in Bentonville, AR had stopped me outside of the gift shop as I was leaving and peppered me with questions. “It’s Marshallese wall art, and no, it’s not for sale here, this one is mine, but they should be,” I responded as I was leaving the museum after pitching the idea of the museum hosting a Marshallese cultural event. I was carrying an amimono (handicraft) made of dried pandanus leaves, copra, and likajir shells from the islands. This particular handicraft takes weeks, even months to make.

Jane Ritok, a well-known master craftsperson from Majuro and now a resident of Springdale, makes necklaces, baskets, and wuts (head wreaths). She remembers collecting the materials indigenous to the islands to make them. “I would go out and cut panda-

nus leaves, then wait two to three days for them to dry,” she said. “The process of collecting materials and preparing them is difficult...but it is our way of life,” she said. She learned the art from her mother and aunts. Now she is passing her skills onto her granddaughters, but it’s not quite the same. Instead of gathering shells and drying leaves, “here you buy your supplies from the store.”

Ritok is just one of the Marshallese who live in Springdale, Arkansas, and who shared her story as part of the Marshallese Oral History Project (MOHP), a multi-year project to collect Marshallese stories to share with the public to raise awareness of Marshallese history and culture. Another major purpose of MOHP is to empower the narrators by providing a space for them to articulate their own histories in their own language.

Albious Latior, MOHP’s primary interviewer and Benetick Kabua Maddison, the team’s transcriber and transla-

tor, are Marshallese and fluent in both Marshallese and English. Dr. Jessica Schwartz, Assistant Professor of Musicology at UCLA, is the project’s humanities scholar, and I am a historian at NorthWest Arkansas Community College, and I serve as the project director. MOHP is funded, in part, by an Arkansas Humanities Council major grant and is one of the major cultural projects of the Marshallese Educational Initiative (MEI), a nonprofit based in Springdale co-founded by Dr. Schwartz and myself. Phase I of MOHP was wrapped up in February of 2015.

Around the corner from MEI’s office in Springdale is Shiloh Museum of Ozark History, a regional museum rich in the history of the region and its pioneers. As some of Springdale’s latest wave of pioneers, the Marshallese migrated to Arkansas from the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI), an area in the Central Pacific made up of 29 coral atolls and numerous islets and is-

lands. The land area comprises about 70 sq. miles spread out across 750,000 sq. miles of ocean. Traditionally, the Marshallese were known as master navigators, using the waves rather than the stars to plot their course, and for their fast and sleek outrigger canoes. There are approximately 7,000 Marshallese who live in Springdale, and the population, particularly the elders, hold a wealth of knowledge about Marshallese culture and traditions (manit), or ways of doing things, such as this customary form of navigation.

Liton Beasha, a master canoe builder, spoke about his trade. One of Beasha's canoes is on display in a museum in Chicago, he said. "I've never been to Chicago and I'd like to see it," he said. Beasha also raced canoes and won several awards for his skills. He was taught the trade by an elderly man who was ill and could not move. "He laid on the ground and told me about the different parts of the canoe and how to put them together," he said. "I sketched out the canoe. That's how I first learned how to build them."

Knowledge of canoe building is passed down to a select few from the elders. So too are traditional healing techniques, chants, and stories. For the most part, the elders in the Springdale community are eager to share their stories and MOHP team members wanted to concentrate on collecting the elders' stories first.

Navigating their way across the Pacific and the continental United States, the Marshallese began arriving in Springdale in the 1980s. John Moody, who is considered the first Marshallese to move to Arkansas, was given a scholarship to an Oklahoma college and ended up moving to Springdale to work at Tysons Foods. Family and friends soon joined him and, today, the greater northwest Arkansas region is home to the highest concentration of Marshallese outside of the Islands.

The Marshallese, who are considered non-immigrants, may travel freely between the Marshall Islands and the United States because of an agreement between the two nations signed



in 1986, the Compact of Free Association. The United States took over the Marshall Islands as part of the Trust Territory of the Pacific (1947-1986) through the United Nations following World War II. The U.S. military had already begun testing nuclear weapons on Bikini Atoll in 1946. Ultimately, the United States detonated 67 nuclear weapons on Bikini and Enewetak Atolls. The tests had an enormous impact on the islanders, including forced relocations, loss of land, and health effects.

Several Marshallese elders we have interviewed were children during the testing period and shared their stories. Ajlok Beasha, witnessed the Bravo shot in 1954, the largest nuclear weapon (15 megatons) ever tested by the United States. He described the bright colors in the sky and how, three days later, plants on the island turned brown and died. He also remembers the Japanese occupation during World War II and how food was scarce. Beasha went on to become mayor of Namdrik and participated in writing the Marshallese Constitution.

MOHP has collected stories from elders about clans, religious practices, and the role of women. Bokkie Matauto was the first woman to graduate from Marshall Islands High

School. She then received a scholarship to attend college in Hawaii. It was there that she began working with the Peace Corps and accompanied the first volunteers to Majuro. When talking about women's traditional activities, she described the importance of the pounding stone. "The pounding stone was used by Marshallese women in ancient times," she said. Women in the past made medicines from plants. "They collected the green and yellow leaves" then would "pound it until it is smashed and afterwards put it inside a coconut to dry...and then drink it." Matauto is considered a pioneer for Marshallese women within the community. She emphasized the importance of retaining cultural knowledge and learning from your elders. "Even though they many not be by your side...their footsteps are still there for you to follow," she said.

The first ten MOHP-collected histories, translated into English, will be made available to the public this summer on the MEI website and at select repositories. MEI also has plans to create a traveling exhibit made up of some of the collected stories and physical items, including a navigation chart, clothing, and handicrafts, as well as selections from a music archive.

April Brown