

Field retrieves long-lost voice of an expert

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By Sandra Guy - Sun-Times Columnist

Technology is bringing to life an enthusiast's collections of Pacific artifacts. In a throwback version of the Nixon tapes, the enthusiast, Capt. Alfred Walter Francis Fuller, revealed 47 years ago on a now-obsolete tape system the origins and meanings of the items he collected.

Fuller, then 76, explained in exhaustive detail to Field Museum curator Roland Force why he collected pieces produced before Western influences arrived in the Pacific. The 6,500-item collection, including many pieces on display at the Field's Halls of the Pacific, comes from every corner of Polynesia, Melanesia and Australia.

John Maniatis, a collections assistant in the museum's department of anthropology, became fascinated with Fuller's collection when Maniatis prepared some of the artifacts for the Field's new Collections Resource Center, scheduled to open in the fall.

"I came across the tags on each artifact, and I was intrigued," Maniatis said. "Instead of this being just a fish hook, you learn that it was a fish hook collected during Captain Cook's third voyage."

The problem is that Fuller's conversations about the items were recorded on a machine that is obsolete, and on tape that has become rigid and brittle.

The battery-powered machine, called a Walkie RecordAll, is a boxy contraption typically used in the 1950s and 1960s to record spies' observations, police interrogations and testimony in law cases. The machine etched sounds on 2-inch-wide media tapes called sonobands. A needle on the machine read the etchings.

The Field Museum had kept two Walkie RecordAlls used for Fuller's conversations.

Museum officials turned to the Cutting Corp., an audio production company in Bethesda, Md., to restore the recordings and digitize them.

Specialists worked for eight months to reconstruct a Walkie RecordAll in the Cutting Corp.'s sound preservation laboratory, said Anji Cornette, the lab's division director who coordinated the project with Ryan Davis, the company's senior preservation engineer.

"The machine's operational part looks like a miniature conveyor belt, and the belt runs the sonobands," Cornette said. "It's a challenge to work with the original recordings and to play them back because the bands are very fragile."

The magic comes when the sound is reproduced.

"You hear the curator talking about how he got some of the artifacts. He sounds really proud and excited," Cornette said.

The recordings were particularly important because the Field Museum had only cryptic notes from the interviews, rather than word-for-word transcripts. On the tapes, Fuller describes masks, skulls, weapons, tools, idols and boomerangs.

"The Field has one of the better collections of Pacific artifacts because of this collection," Maniatis said.

Fuller named a greenstone adze from New Zealand, a woodworking tool thought to be 300 years old, as the No. 1 item in his collection.

"When these workaday recordings were made nearly half a century ago, they were seen as little more than verbal notes on what we were getting from Capt. Fuller," said John Edward Terrell, Regenstein curator of Pacific anthropology at the Field. "But today, these recordings add depth and nuance to his fabulous collection."

Fuller died nearly 44 years ago at age 79.

Museum officials are considering using the digitized Fuller tapes in the museum's Halls of the Pacific.

One idea is a touch-screen display featuring a map of the Pacific. If a visitor is interested in Papua New Guinea, he or she would click on it, and up would pop a thumbnail sketch of the Fuller artifacts. Click on one of the artifacts, and Fuller's voice would sound out, describing it in his own words.