

# The Field Museum of Natural History Collections in Traditional Athletic Games of the Native American

WILMA J. PESAVENTO

College of Health, Physical Education, Recreation  
University of Illinois – Chicago Circle  
Chicago, Illinois 60680

The Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago has established itself as one of the major natural history museums of the world with a collection of more than thirteen million specimens. Its anthropology exhibits also are among the best and most extensive and occupy about two-fifths of the total exhibition space. Included in these are the exhibits which illustrate the cultures of various Native Americans and the traditional athletic games of these people. However, less than one percent of its collections is on permanent exhibit; the remainder is stored. It was of importance to this researcher, and perhaps others, to have knowledge of the Field Museum collections in Native American traditional athletic game artifacts both on permanent exhibition and in storage. This study dealt with determining the nature and strength of the holdings of the Field Museum of Natural History in traditional athletic game implements of the American Indian.

The Museum's accession catalogs were searched and holdings of athletic game implements were recorded. The recordings were organized by Native American culture areas as defined by the National Geographic Society of the United States. The study was delimited to the eight Native American culture areas lying totally or partially within the geographic area of the forty-eight contiguous states of the United States, namely, California, Great Basin, Great Plains, Northeast Woodlands, Northwest Coast, Plateau, Southeast Woodlands, and Southwest. Further, the study was delimited to athletic game implements utilized by boys and girls and men and women.

The Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago collected large numbers of traditional athletic game implements of the Native American. As estimated 1000 specimens were contained in the collections. The holdings represented sixty-two tribes from the eight culture areas investigated. Culture area collections, as represented by tribal contributions, varied in strength; fourteen represented tribes were from the Great Plains, while the number of tribes represented in the collections ranged to a low of two tribes from the Southeast Woodlands. California, Northeast Woodlands, and Southwest culture area collections represented from eight to twelve tribes.

Traditional Native American games of archery, darts, ring and pin, snowsnake, wheel and missile, doubleball, kickball, racket, and shinny were included in the artifact collection. The number of athletic game artifacts in the collections was uneven when examined by tribal units. Wheel and missile and shinny collections were the Museum's strongest with 35 and twenty-eight represented tribes, while ring and pin, snowsnake, doubleball, kickball, and racket collections also possessed some strength with between nineteen and ten tribes represented. The archery and dart collections were weak.

The diversity of game implements collected from the separate culture areas also varied greatly. Implements from all nine traditional athletic games were collected from the Great Plains; implements from only one game were collected from the Southeast Woodlands. Collections from the other six culture areas ranged between these two extremes, with California, Northeast Woodlands, and the Southwest collections containing implements from at least six games.

Finally, while artifacts were collected from tribes in all eight culture areas in significant numbers, the Field collection in athletic game artifacts from Great Plains tribes showed its greatest strength; perhaps 400 specimens were in this collection for 195 accession catalog entries, with numerous entries listing multiple artifacts, existed in the collection. Accession catalog entries from no other culture area approached the Great Plains in strength; entries from the Southwest were second in strength as determined by number of entries and but fifty-one entries existed. The numbers of entries from California, Great Basin, Northeast Woodlands, Northwest Coast and Plateau culture areas ranged down to thirty-one. The Southeast Woodlands had but thirteen entries.

Chicago's Field Museum of Natural History offers the researcher of Native American athletic games a wealth of collections for scholarly investigation. Future inquiry holds promise when related to particular tribes, specific culture areas, and particular athletic games of the Native American as collections vary considerably in strength.