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## What's all this fuss about preservation? The Heritage Health Index & IMLS Connecting to Collections

Shawna Gandy  
*Oregon Historical Society*

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# What's all this fuss about preservation?

## The Heritage Health Index & IMLS Connecting to Collections

by **Shawna Gandy**  
[shawna.gandy@ohs.org](mailto:shawna.gandy@ohs.org)  
Archivist,  
Oregon Historical Society  
Research Library

Blame it on the culture wars. Yes, that's right, the clarion call to take stock of and address the preservation needs of heritage collections in the nation's libraries, museums, and archives came in the midst of controversy over federal funding for arts and culture. Harsh criticism of the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities prompted President Bill Clinton to direct the President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities to report on the importance of cultural assets to society, and to assess the complicated mix of private and federal support for creating and preserving these assets. In *Creative America: A Report to the President* (1997), the committee offered a passionate declaration: "We affirm that a healthy cultural life is vital to a democratic society. We believe that a great nation must invest in its cultural development and preservation, just as it supports scientific discovery and protects natural resources."

Among the mandates issued by the President's Committee, one is of utmost importance here: "Support a national assessment of the nation's preservation needs and a plan to protect our cultural legacy." The preservation community had, in fact, been discussing this need for some time and was poised to act. The national dialog about preservation assessment and planning dates back at least to the founding of the voluntary coordinating body, the National Conservation Advisory Council (NCAC), in 1973. NCAC's successor, the National Institute for the Conservation of Cultural Property (NIC), got the ball rolling by dedicating its entire 1997 annual meeting to formulating a response to the President's Committee's mandate on preservation.

NIC took on the challenge and with it the name Heritage Preservation. It formulated the first comprehensive nationwide survey of collecting institutions, the Heritage Health Index (HHI). The HHI targeted heritage collections held in the public trust by archives, libraries, historical societies, museums, archaeological repositories, and scientific research organizations. This survey provided the data necessary to quantify heritage assets, as well as gaps in collections care. The data can also help institutions to direct future planning and program development, spark creative cooperative efforts, and make the best of limited resources.

A partnership with the Institute for Museum and Library Services (IMLS), plus additional funding by the Getty Foundation and other private funding sources, made the survey possible. Advisors from thirty-five professional associations and federal agencies lent their expertise, and collecting institutions responded to the survey at an impressive rate.

The survey counted 4.8 billion artifacts held by 30,827 institutions. Sixty-three percent of these artifacts are in libraries, including:

- 96% of books and bound volumes
- 99% of microfilm and microfiche
- 89% of recorded sound items
- 88% of moving images
- 66% of digital material items
- 43% of archival records & manuscripts
- 50% of ephemera and other unbound sheets
- 29% of photographs



While these numbers are impressive, the survey also generated alarming statistics on collections care. Among libraries alone, 40 percent fail to regulate temperature and humidity



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to provide stable storage for collections, greatly reducing their life expectancy. A hair-raising 78 percent of libraries do not have an emergency plan for collections that is backed by staff trained to carry it out, leaving billions of items vulnerable to damage or loss in a disaster. Other threats include lack of staff dedicated to collections care, inadequate storage space, cataloging backlogs, and failure to assess collections conditions. Materials of the most fragile nature, such as photographic negatives, moving images, and digital files, are particularly at risk.

How could collections in this wealthy nation be in such dire straits? Another statistic provides some insight: 77 percent of collecting institutions have no funds specifically allocated for preservation. Without money for cost-effective preventative measures, such as environmental controls and appropriate storage, collections suffer in the same way that the health of Americans suffers from a lack of access to preventative medical care. Just as it is better to maintain healthy arteries than to try to repair clogged ones, so it is better to protect collections with proper handling and storage than to attempt to restore a damaged artifact.

Heritage Preservation concluded its report on the Heritage Health Index with the following recommendations:


- Institutions must give priority to providing safe conditions for the collections they hold in trust.
- Every collecting institution must develop an emergency plan to protect its collections and train staff to carry it out.
- Every institution must assign responsibility for caring for collections to members of its staff.
- Individuals at all levels of government and in the private sector must assume responsibility for providing the support that will allow these collections to survive.

To address these needs, the IMLS formed Connecting to Collections: A Call to Action, “a national initiative to raise public awareness of the importance of caring for our treasures, and to underscore the fact that these collections are essential to the American story.” Underpinned by a desire to build strong collaborative networks, the IMLS has held national and international summits as well as forums, workshops, and conversations. Grants and other programs support preservation activities. In Oregon, the IMLS has thus far distributed the Connecting to Collection Bookshelf of preservation resources to seventy-six institutions, awarded four Bank of America/IMLS American Heritage Preservation Grants, welcomed representatives of several institutions to forums and workshops, and awarded a Statewide Planning Grant to a coalition of libraries, archives, museums, public agencies, and professional organizations. We hope to continue to benefit from this initiative.

The IMLS also works with Heritage Preservation and the American Association for State and Local History to foster collaboration, encourage planning, advocate for collections, and generate support for preservation. The needs are great but funding is limited, so it is imperative to work collectively and fervently while the window of opportunity is wide open. The public needs to be included in the conversation, to appreciate the role collections play in our common heritage and to generate a sense of stewardship. After all, if we’re not saving this stuff for the public, what are we saving it for?



Both Heritage Preservation and Connecting to Collections continue to provide leadership in preservation and are great resources for Oregon's collections stewards. Explore their Web sites to find out more and sign up for the new Connecting to Collections online community to stay up-to-date and connected. But first, read more about what's happening on the statewide level in this issue of the *OLA Quarterly*.

And the culture wars? They're still raging. To arms! 

### **Further Reading**

Heritage Preservation. *A Public Trust At Risk: The Heritage Health Index Report on the State of America's Collections*, 2005. <http://www.heritagepreservation.org/HHI/>

Institute for Museum and Library Services. *Connecting to Collections: A Report to the Nation*, 2010. <http://www.ims.gov/assets/1/AssetManager/CtoCReport.pdf>

President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities. *Creative America: A Report to the President*, 1997. <http://www.eric.ed.gov/PDFS/ED413276.pdf>

### **Important Links**

Heritage Preservation:

<http://heritagepreservation.org/>

IMLS Connecting to Collections Web site:

<http://www.ims.gov/collections/>

Connecting to Collections Online Community:

<http://www.connectingtocollections.org/>

Connecting to Collection Bookshelf

<http://www.ims.gov/collections/bookshelf.aspx>

