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No Ivory Tower: Local History and the Small Museum

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In my day-to-day duties as a museum director, I have often been challenged to find balance between the needs of colloquial collectors from whom we receive most of our artifacts, and the standard policies and procedures that guide museum and library archives. In the not-too-distant past there was a great divide between the ivory towers of professional curators and the personal ownership felt by local history buffs. Now the ability to make resources available online is changing the very definition of preservation for two-dimensional collections and in some ways simplifies the challenge of public access.

Preservation vs. Access

My first exposure to the ivory tower barrier came when I was an undergraduate student at Montana State University and working at the Museum of The Rockies. The museum registrar had given me a thorough training in object cataloging, impressing on me that without good records the collections were neither accessible nor useful. To enhance my training, she sent me to meet the special collections librarian at the University library to understand what resources were available for researching and cataloging objects. I rang the buzzer for entry to the special collections and was greeted by the archivist through the six-inch crack through which she peered. After explaining who I was and why I was there to meet her, she said, “No, I am sorry,” and closed the door. Eventually my mentor at the museum escorted me over to the library for a personal introduction to prove the legitimacy of my request.

The divide between the general public and professionally trained curators, archivists, and historians regarding access and preservation can be antagonistic. Over-emphasis on long-term preservation can lead to stringent and restrictive policies that can impede the enrichment of the people the museums and libraries serve. Finding a balance that meets the needs of both preservation and access is the ultimate goal.

I have often found myself explaining that, behind the scenes, museums are like libraries. Museum cataloging is similar to library cataloging, and registrars are similar to librarians. However, the vast majority of museum collections are not accessible to anyone, or only to a select few serious professional researchers. Part of the problem stems from lack of staffing to provide complete records, which allows antiquity to sit in secure silence during a painstaking cataloging process which could include days or weeks for each and every item. Finding the forest for the trees requires expedient processing at varying levels to provide access as soon as possible. Librarians and archivists have developed procedures for rough inventories, thorough inventories, cursory cataloging, detailed cataloging and finally extensive research, which could go on indefinitely. Each is a layer in the cataloging sequence. Museums can learn much from this protocol.

With the exception of the occasional small local historical societies that place everything on dusty exhibit shelves resembling a sale barn, museums are focused on long-term preservation, and only a very small percentage of the collections is actually on display. For instance, our facility has many more items in storage than will ever be on exhibit, despite the extensive number of pertinent regional themes interpreted in our exhibits. If an artifact is leaving the storage room for a position on the exhibit floor, it must be well documented and researched in order to provide interpretation of the object. The need for interpretation is often the best catalyst to get research and cataloging finished.

Now, in many cases, the interpretation of an historical event does not require the presentation of original artifacts at all. Digital technology has breached the preservation vs. access divide by offering a workable solution: the best preservation actually offers the best



access. Digital copies of photographs and documents provide the ability to provide safe off-site storage of virtual copies and have images that can be viewed by anyone at anytime via the internet. No longer does the archivist have to say “no” to the curious public, and access does not in any way diminish the preservation of the originals.

Stewardship vs. Ownership

In our community there have long been numerous heritage organizations that historically guarded their collections jealously. Most museum collecting policies forbid the acceptance of items that come with conditions, with rare exceptions. Though a larger regional museum may be able to provide better environmental controls, storage conditions and security, the requirement to transfer ownership can be a deal-breaker with those who have long handled and cared for the artifacts. Whether it is a family collection or an organization’s collection, few wish to let go completely.

A smaller museum may have the flexibility to meet the needs of the local community. A case in point is the stellar photo collection compiled and cared for by the Wasco County Pioneer Association. This organization has over 700 members, many tracing their roots back to the Oregon Trail. For over 70 years their primary focus has been putting together photo boards to display collections related to family history and various themes pertinent to the history of the county. The collection now has almost 10,000 images. Well-meaning members have used various adhesives over the decades to affix the original photographs to plywood display boards. It has been deemed virtually impossible to safely remove the photographic prints from the boards without damaging them. In addition, the boards have been stored in various locations over the years, and were stored in a basement of an old house owned by the county before coming to our facility in 2009.



Museum Registrar Carmagene Uhalde working on the photo boards.



Through agreement, the Pioneer Association still owns the collection. The Columbia Gorge Discovery Center Board of Directors was enthusiastic about bending the rules to make sure the community did not lose this invaluable collection. Bringing the photos to our facility for storage and long-term care started with a conversation in 2008, during which we hosted a Heritage Summit to bring together all the stakeholders in the county who managed collections. Speakers at the summit included MaryAnn Campbell, Director of Research at Oregon Historical Society, the late Terry Toedtemeier, Curator of Photography at Portland Art Museum, and Larry Landis, Archivist at Oregon State University Libraries. The four-hour session touched on storage, preservation, documentation, public access and planning for collaborative projects. It opened the doors for communication among the entities and has led to multiple successful collaborations throughout the mid-Columbia heritage community.

Collaboration

Two noteworthy collaborative projects have graced our community in the past four years, each offering a solution to long-standing problems. Through the assistance of Oregon Heritage Commission and Oregon State University Libraries, we now have high-resolution scans of the entire Pioneer Association photograph collection, and the images are available to everyone on the OSU website at <http://oregondigital.org/digcol/cgdc/>.



1877 photograph of the dining room on the Wide West Steamboat, which traveled from Portland to Cascade Locks and from Portland to Astoria. She operated from 1877 until 1888.



Another very important resource, not only for the community, but also for the state and region, is the newspaper collection, owned by Eagle Newspapers, that has long been stored at The Dalles Chronicle office. This collection of papers, chronicling the news of eastern Oregon, dates back to 1864. Realizing how vulnerable the collection was, the publisher began restricting access to it some years ago. Preservation necessitated this action but caused dismay for the local and regional historians who used the collection for research. But, even with this precaution, storage conditions were not ideal, and the collection continued to deteriorate. Through funding from Oregon Heritage Commission and with the assistance of University of Oregon Libraries, the newspapers are now being re-microfilmed for inclusion in the Oregon Digital Newspaper Program. When the project is complete, the originals will be stored at the Columbia Gorge Discovery Center. Eagle Newspapers is retaining ownership of the collection.

It no longer feels threatening to surrender original collections to the necessity of secure temperature and humidity control. Digital access obviates the fear that they will be locked away and never seen again. By being flexible rather than restrictive, and collaborative rather than antagonistic, museums gain valuable access to local historical resources. Agreements have been made to provide storage in exchange for on-line access, thus meeting everyone's needs while opening collections to the entire world.

Black and white policies do not work well in grey areas of human emotion, family pride and heritage. By working side-by-side with those who hold a passionate interest in Oregon's cultural history, and by employing the tools of digital access, heritage preservation is advancing at the velocity of the high speed internet. 

