

EXHIBITIONIST

Exhibits in Small Museums



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from the president



by Phyllis Rabineau,
President

I'm delighted to write my first contribution to the *Exhibitionist* as NAME Board President. It's particularly exciting to serve in this capacity as NAME prepares to celebrate our 25th anniversary in 2006. The Board has recently begun to consider various ways to recognize this upcoming milestone, and as one of the most valued components of our organization and a significant benefit of NAME membership, we expect the *Exhibitionist* to play a substantial and creative role in the celebration.

Throughout nearly twenty-four years of publication, the *Exhibitionist* has been a unique resource for museum professionals, representing all the disciplines that go into making exhibitions and sharing the experiences and insights of a very inclusive range of individuals. *Exhibitionist* articles have made substantial contributions to the profession both through broad-ranging theoretical considerations of issues such as criticism, evaluation and topical controversy, and also through highly-informed technical papers on topics as diverse as lighting, conservation and labels. The magazine is currently read by over 800 members of NAME throughout the United States, and by international members in countries including Taiwan, Sweden and Chile. Libraries in Nova Scotia and Australia collect it. Unique among the Standing Professional Committees of the American Association of Museums, NAME is the only SPC offering a regular publication of this scope and size. Remarkably, the enormous effort that goes into producing our twice-yearly magazine is almost entirely the work of volunteers. For this issue, as for the one most recently produced, we owe a debt of gratitude to guest editor Beth Redmond-Jones who has given very generously of her time and resources.

In looking toward the future, including and beyond 2006, NAME has created several Board-level task forces to develop sustainable strategies that will help the organization strengthen ties to our current member base and renew its relevancy to broader constituencies, including not only seasoned veterans but also a younger generation of exhibition professionals. One of these task forces, headed by Beth, will focus on the *Exhibitionist*. If you would like to share observations and insights that may help in their work, please contact Beth at bredmond-jones@lbaop.org. (If you would like to share thoughts about other aspects of NAME, please send them to me at rabineau@chicagohistory.org.)

Finally, it's time for me to say "goodbye" to something that's given me a lot of enjoyment for more than ten years. Nothing I do in my professional life has been as much fun as writing the *Exhibitionist's* regular *Newsline* column, but I'm very pleased to be turning over its reins to Kevin Schlesier who has agreed to carry it into the future. I've taken the liberty of sharing with him my list of kind and humorous colleagues who have served as its "stringers" reporting from the field, but I've also encouraged him to take the piece in new directions if they suit his interests and talents, and those of his readers. If you'd like to contribute an item, please do so at schlesk@mail.nih.gov. Good luck, Kevin!



from the editor



by Beth Redmond-Jones,
Guest Editor,
Western Regional
Representative

Small museums make up approximately 75% of our institutions in the United States. That adds up to a lot of exhibitions and resources for our visitors! Some of my favorite museums are small, such as the Museum of Jurassic Technology in Los Angeles and the Bob Marley Museum in Kingston, Jamaica. (OK, it isn't in the US, but it's still one of my favorites). This issue of the *Exhibitionist* is dedicated to the individuals who work in and for small museums, people who so frequently create great exhibitions on miniscule budgets with minimal staff. I'd like to thank all the authors of these articles for sharing their considerable time and expertise with the NAME community. I think there's material in this compilation to enlighten all of us about the challenges you face on a daily basis, and your accomplishments against intimidating odds. For those readers who may be interested in getting more involved with small museums, check out the Small Museum Administrators' Committee of AAM, or the Small Museum Association (<http://www.smallmuseum.org>).

As you can tell from my byline as "Guest Editor," NAME continues to look for a creative, dynamic, forward thinking individual (doesn't this sound like all of you?) to embrace the opportunity and challenge of taking the *Exhibitionist* forward. At the February 2005 Board meeting, we appointed a Task Force—including Sean Duran, Jenny Sayre Ramberg and Mark Driscoll—who will work with me to find a new editor and shape the *Exhibitionist* for the future. I will be chairing this effort, so please contact me if you are interested in stepping up and working with us on this very rewarding NAME activity. You can contact me at 562-951-5346 or at bredmond-jones@lbaop.org.

For those of you who won't be able to make it to AAM this year (you will be missed, and you will miss a rockin' NAME rock 'n bowl event), not to worry! You can catch up on many of the wonderful programs that NAME will be sponsoring in Indianapolis when the Fall 2005 issue of the *Exhibitionist* publishes articles based on these sessions. So, all of you who are presenting at AAM, be thinking about how you can turn your engaging and creative presentation into a dynamic article!

And finally, I want to thank Eugene Dillenburg who assisted me in finding our great authors and editing a few of the articles when I was too swamped. And to the staff of the Gecko Group who stepped up and designed this issue for us—Thank you!

See you in Indianapolis!



by Kevin Schlesier

*Kevin Schlesier is an
Exhibition Coordinator at the
National Library of Medicine.*

*He visits museums as much
as possible, and often 'ruins'
the experience for his friends
and family with critiques
design and content.*

Who gave the Treasurer a column in the Exhibitionist?

When asked to run for Treasurer of NAME, I enthusiastically responded yes. Heck, my checkbook is balanced at all times, I can create formulas in spreadsheets, and I *know* I like money. I responded with equal enthusiasm to Phyllis Rabineau's request for relief from her duties as writer of the *Newsline*, but then the fear crept in. How many museums besides my own have I been to lately? Do I even know enough people to ask about exhibitions throughout the country? How can I fill an entire column with news of the latest in the exhibition world? I saw my shadow, got scared, and *wished* I had six more weeks of winter.

Then it came to me (or maybe Phyllis explained it to me), the point isn't for the writer of the *Newsline* to go and see every exhibition in the country. It's to serve as a moderator, collector and distributor of information about exhibitions of all scales, purposes, audiences and topics. I'm sure if I actually understood *The Matrix*, I could insert some snappy analogy about networks here, but instead I'll just say to you, fellow NAME member, that the *Newsline* is our opportunity to tell each other about exhibitions. After all they are the one thing we all have in common, the thing that we all work to create, and very often the first thing we look for when visiting new ports of call. I'm here to act as the host—to make sure there are enough cups, napkins, and maybe some pigs in a blanket. It's up to you to come up with some witty conversation, maybe some interesting stories about far off adventures, maybe a small gem within your own institution. From blockbuster to shoestring, tell me about exhibits you've been to, created, or even seen online. Don't be bashful; show me pictures, brag a little. If you promise to be an interesting guest, I'll be a good host.

So I'd like to thank Phyllis Rabineau for all of her years of dedication to this column, and for giving me the opportunity to host a party with best people in the profession.

Welcome to *Newsline*! What's new?

Oh, by the way, don't forget to use a coaster.

Kevin Schlesier

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features

Good Things Come in Small Packages

by Paul Orselli

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**"At the end of the day,
does the donation truly
fit your mission
and approach,
or is it merely a refugee
from someone's attic?"**

Few museums ever have all the resources they wish for. But when pulling together exhibits, small museums often find themselves in a particularly tight spot. The money, material and personnel available are rarely sufficient to meet their dreams. Thus, small museums need to maximize their resources and come up with creative solutions to exhibit challenges. I've gathered together a few rules of thumb that I continue to find useful as I develop exhibit ideas. Think of them as a Small Museum Survival Kit, although most, if not all, of what follows should be useful to the "big guys" too!

Money makes the (exhibit) world go round

Naturally, you need money to create exhibits. But, having a tight exhibits budget often forces more creative solutions to challenges that arise. Here are a few things to consider:

Do look a gift horse in the mouth!

Be very careful when accepting donations of exhibits materials from well-intentioned people. Your own institution should have a formal collections and acquisition policy, as well as a form that can be filled out with pertinent details on donated objects. Outdated technology, including computers and the like, can become a real nightmare to maintain.

At the end of the day, does the donation truly fit your mission and approach, or is it merely a refugee from someone's attic? By the same token, be very careful when sponsors offer to build exhibits for you. Just because a board member's company employs a phalanx of engineers doesn't mean they know how to make things that will hold up to the enthusiasm of museum visitors! If a sponsor builds an exhibit, you should work closely with them to have the final say on both content and fabrication issues.

Volunteers, colleges, and community groups

An often-overlooked resource are retirees and volunteers with special skills and talents. These folks can often complement your exhibits staff in important ways. Retired trades-people often are willing to complete projects or exhibit tasks for your institution. Local colleges or universities are often willing to work with a museum to create "real life" experiences for their students to complete as a class project. Engineering, education, and art students are all good candidates for this approach. Are there community groups, such as Rotary or Kiwanis, who might partner with your museum on an exhibit project?

Develop resource bases

It's important to become familiar with exhibit resources (human, printed, and electronic) so that when you get "stuck" trying to solve an exhibit development problem, you will have several avenues to follow. Two types of printed resources are books and catalogs. It is worth spending the money to create a bookshelf full of resource materials for yourself. Both ASTC and AAM sell many excellent publications. Some of my favorites are *The Cookbooks* and *Snackbooks* published by the Exploratorium, as well as the *Cheapbooks* published by ASTC (and edited by me!).

If I could only pick one catalog to recommend to a fellow exhibit developer it would be McMaster-Carr. Inside you can purchase anything from a single washer to a wheel for a railroad boxcar. (Let me know if you build an exhibit with one of those!) McMaster also has a website at <http://www.mcmaster-carr.com>.



The World Wide Web provides many resources for exhibit developers. You can find materials as well as search for local suppliers and fabricators. (Don't overlook eBay as a source for unusual items!) There are several museum-related internet newsgroups that allow registered participants to post questions, as well as just follow the conversations of others. Examples of such newsgroups include: Museum-L, CHILDMUS, ASTC-ISEN, webhead and LSC (Liberty Science Center, listserv.lsc.org). Internet newsgroups provide an instant set of colleagues even for those people who are new to the field or are unable to attend conferences. I've assembled a resource list of my favorites suppliers, organized by category at <http://www.orselli.net/sources.htm>. Feel free to e-mail me suggestions or additions to the list.

People at an Exhibition

Even though I'm writing about exhibits, often the most important thing inside your museum is not the exhibit "stuff," but how people (staff and visitors) interact with the "stuff." A museum visit starts before the front door. Was the museum easy to find, with good directional signs? Do your website and answering machine convey the information visitors need in a simple and professional manner? If a visitor becomes frustrated before they even get inside your museum, it doesn't matter how great the exhibits are—your museum is starting off at a disadvantage.

Little details add up

Clean, attractive, well-maintained exhibits send a message of "we care, you should too!" The same goes for the entire museum environment. Grimy walls, ill-maintained bathrooms, worn out exhibits with missing pieces—what messages do these things send to visitors? I have spoken with several colleagues who have corroborated that when their institution made a concerted effort to improve overall building maintenance, instances of exhibit vandalism decreased as well.

How happy and engaged are your staff?

EVERY staff member (not just exhibits people) should WANT to know what sorts of things happen inside the museum. Ideally, they should want to use the exhibits, too. There is nothing worse than asking a person at the admissions desk a question, and realizing they've never set foot inside! Make it a point to include all staff and volunteers on "mini tours" of new exhibits and some training on the permanent exhibits. Encourage mechanisms for recognizing and responding to suggestions about exhibits by visitors and staff. A worthwhile use of wall space is to create a bulletin board where visitors may post suggestions or questions, followed by answers from the exhibit staff.

Make it a marathon, not a sprint

After the band stops playing and the ribbon is cut on opening day, then what? What will your new exhibit (or new museum) look like five months from now? Five years from now? As Don Verger, the founder of The Discovery Museums in Acton, Massachusetts, remarked to me after the opening of a new museum building, "Well, now we're open forever!" Make decisions about your exhibits program as though you'll be open for a long, long time. Choosing broad "themes" for exhibition areas will allow you to add, subtract, or "curate" exhibit components over time without having to change introductory signage or graphics on a constant basis.

As noted elsewhere in this article, it is worthwhile to spend the time and money to use long lasting (or easily repairable) finishes! Clear-coated wood wears much better over time than painted wood or cheap laminates. Labels, on the other hand, should be easily changeable. (Sometimes the easiest way to "fix" an interactive exhibit is to change the label!) Nicely printed computer labels mounted behind plex or in frames are attractive and easily updatable. I've seen plenty of exhibits that were meant to be "temporary" still being used and enjoyed by museum visitors years later.

"Grimy walls, ill-maintained bathrooms, worn out exhibits with missing pieces — what messages do these things send to visitors?"



Try, Try Again

Creating exhibits really is an iterative process. Every good exhibit developer has to have a little bit of a masochistic streak. Every day, visitors are going to be pounding away at components that you have probably spent months (if not longer) developing. Save yourself some heartaches and headaches by following the tips below:

You call that prototyping?

Prototyping has become a word that means many different things to many different people. To me, prototyping should be a quick and dirty process. Scrap wood and duct tape all the way. Show people a working “proof of concept” to find out if they’re even interested in your idea. You need to make mistakes now in terms of label placements, table heights, reach distances, etc., rather than after you’ve built welded frames or created custom-sized laminate tabletops. If you have already spent too much time and money on an idea, you may be unwilling, or unable, to give it up.

Beware of the latest gizmo

Be clear on what you want visitors to get from an exhibit component. If you don’t know where you’re trying to go, you won’t recognize the best exhibit tools and techniques to get you there. Too often the siren song of technology becomes louder than the voice of the exhibit content itself. Make sure the technology you chose to create an exhibit becomes an elegant solution, and not merely an answer in search of a problem.

Build it to last, because everything breaks eventually

Choose materials and finishes carefully. If you don’t have enough money for laminates, for example, avoid the trap of painting surfaces that visitors will come into contact with. Even high-quality paint fades and gets worn after thousands and thousands of hands rub and pound away at your exhibits. You will be much better off with choosing a sturdy material like birch plywood carefully finished with a clear coating like Polyurethane if you’re on a tight budget. Then, even if

a chunk gets gouged out of your exhibit furniture, a little judicious sanding and a reapplication of clear coating makes it look almost as good as new. Also, don’t forget to add a four-inch or greater “kick plate” or recess around the bottom of exhibit furniture to prevent scuffs and dings from flying footwear.

Even if you build exhibit components that you consider “bomb proof” make sure you provide the people who may come after you with easy access to controls, parts lists and repair instructions (including a copy inside the exhibit component itself). I’m reminded of a frustrating telephone call I made to the designer of a traveling exhibit when I couldn’t figure out how to get inside a piece of exhibit furniture to replace a blown electrical component. “Well, you can’t get in. The box is completely sealed,” he said. “The component is rated for one million hours, so we never expected it to break down!” Needless to say, that exhibit was never repaired at our museum, or any other museum for the rest of the exhibit’s run.

What does ELVIS have to do with prototyping exhibits?

At the 2000 ASTC Annual Conference in Cleveland, I was fortunate enough to speak on a panel about Exhibit Prototyping chaired by Patrick Tevlin of the Ontario Science Centre. Part of my talk dealt with how to use the word ELVIS as a mnemonic (memory aid) for exhibit developers when they are developing prototypes and exhibit components. The meaning of each of the letters in ELVIS follows below:

E = Everyday Materials. Use everyday materials to make it easier to prototype and maintain exhibits.

L = Looseness. Provide open-ended opportunities, both to yourself during exhibit development, and to the visitors in the final product.

V = Vermicious. The word means “wormy.” Good exhibits and prototypes should “worm around” and be accessible on many different levels: old/young, art/science.

I = Interesting. Two things: 1) Great exhibits/prototypes always seem interesting, no matter how many times you’ve seen them. 2) If it’s not interesting to you, how can you expect your visitors to be interested?

S = Sharing. We should be sharing ideas with our visitors, and with each other as professionals.

“Creating exhibits really is
an iterative process.”



Be the Best You Can Be

Sometimes the exhibit staff from newer or smaller museums develop an “edifice complex” (Especially after seeing the larger and older host institutions at museum conferences.) I’ve heard colleagues complain that “we can’t compete with ‘the big museums’ or Disney World.” You don’t have to. There is room for a whole spectrum of museums, large and small. I would much rather visit a smaller museum that is well-maintained and filled with thoughtful and creative touches, than a giant museum of lifeless, cavernous galleries and many “OUT OF ORDER” signs. (How many gigantic museums have you left with a headache from the sheer noise factor?) Large institutions often overwhelm their visitors. Instead, as a small museum, look for ways to “whelm” your visitors by providing more authentic and intimate opportunities for discovery.

Grow slowly (if at all)

Be careful as to how your museum grows. Because hands-on components require maintenance, I firmly believe that there is an inherent “carrying capacity” or maximum effective size to an interactive museum. There **is** such a thing as a museum that has grown too large. Larger institutions are often forced into putting five-dollar ideas into five-thousand-dollar boxes simply because inadequate staffing forces them to fill space with things (they hope!) will never break. If you don’t have

enough floor staff and exhibits maintenance staff to manage your interactive exhibits, you are creating a recipe for visitor and staff dissatisfaction.

Break tasks into “chunks”

Starting a museum or an exhibit project can be both an exciting prospect, and a daunting one. Rather than looking at your project as an enormous, complex task, I have found it useful to break the project into smaller tasks, or “chunks.” By breaking your project into these smaller chunks, it’s often easier to see clearly which parts of the project need more attention, as well as making it simpler to delegate responsibility for specific aspects to others (assuming you are not a one-person department!)

Final Words

A great exhibit is never really finished. After the blood, sweat and tears that went into creating an exhibit component, you might feel like you never want to see the darn thing again! Later, after you catch up on showers, meals and sleep again, watch the unexpected things that visitors do with “your” exhibit. It might take a while, but you will start to think of ways to make the exhibit even better. This iterative process of observation and improvement is an important part of exhibit development – enjoy it!

**“As a small museum,
look for ways to “whelm” your visitors
by providing more authentic and intimate
opportunities for discovery.”**



Climbing Up The Learning Curve

by Rick Wurzer

*Rick Wurzer is the
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End of the Oregon Trail
Interpretive Center.*

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As a center with a
limited staff,
almost every employee
is **cross-trained** to
fulfill the organizations
many needs.

There are many challenges to creating exhibits in a young but growing facility. I began working as a Living History Interpreter at the End of the Oregon Trail Interpretive Center nearly eight and a half years ago. In that time, my job has evolved a good deal. When I started, we had one hallway with a static exhibit; we now have nearly 3,000 square feet of exhibits and displays around our site with plans to incorporate other sites around Oregon City.

As a center with a limited staff, almost every employee is cross-trained to fulfill the organizations' many needs. To this end, our interpretive staff is also the exhibit development team. This works out well, as the interpreters learn about any new exhibit while it is being put together, rather than having a crash course on a topic they will be explaining to visitors.

Following the initial rush of visitors to our site after opening, it was determined that we needed to do something different to draw more people. The first change came in altering the static display in our main hallway. We had hanging panels built from rough wood and then wrapped with burlap for a display surface. Exhibits were developed using text panels made of brown typing paper and a simple computer/printer system. The papers were then affixed to the burlap with much masking tape. It was a good start, and most importantly, allowed staff to learn how to create an exhibit.



The End of the Oregon Trail Interpretive Center



In the course of renovating our exhibits, we learned several valuable lessons which I'd like to pass along.

Lesson number one:

Stick to the main story

At first, we wanted to include as much information as possible. While this sounds like a noble goal, there is such a thing as overdoing it. We had so much information we had to use a small font just to fit it on the panels. All of those little letters crammed onto the panels were just too overwhelming to the visitor.

One of our biggest problems was that we had too much tangential information. If it related to the story in any way, it seemed we thought someone might find it interesting, so into the exhibit it went. Some of our exhibits ended up with more extra material than the main subject had. We learned that by reducing the amount of non-essential information, we could enlarge the font size, and learn to embrace the empty space on our boards. More people began to read and get something from our exhibits.

Lesson number two:

Plan an exhibit with as much mass appeal as possible

When beginning the exhibit process, we needed to come up with subjects. We figured if a subject was interesting to us, surely it would interest the general public. There are two problems with this. One: that is not necessarily true. We are historians, and what we find interesting is often the minutiae of a subject, and not the broader topic. Too much detail overwhelms the audience, and in order to make the details relevant, the entire story has to be told making the exhibit much too large.

Two: some subjects are interesting because we do not know much about them and want to learn. Sometimes these exhibits turn out very well, with both the staff and audience learning new information. However, often for such topics either there is not a lot of information available, or, if it is available, the research required is better-suited for a thesis than an exhibit aimed at families on a summer vacation. By listening to the comments made by visitors, and learning what was available, we began to understand what our audience wanted, and how to best meet their needs.

The challenge of programming exhibits to appeal to as many people as possible is a difficult one. There are, of course, those people who have no desire to visit our site and who will never come. By trying to understand who is coming and how to get more people to attend, we can build our overall audience base, and hopefully the number of people who do not want to come will reduce in size.

Lesson number three:

Discover who the audience is

One of the biggest problems we have had is trying to determine who our audience is, and whom we would like it to be. Like many historical sites, we have a fairly set audience. School field trips and senior citizens make up the bulk of our scheduled groups, and vacationing families are the strongest representatives in the summer. These audiences can be counted on to come every year with not too much fluctuation in overall numbers. However, the challenge is learning what kinds of people are not coming and why.

Unfortunately, "museum" is a dirty word to many people in the 20-40 age group. This audience tends to view museums as an extension of their high school history class, something that most tend to remember as the boring memorization of names and dates. As an interpretive center, we are often viewed as "just another museum." If this is the image people have of us, it is easy to understand why those with disposable income would not want to spend their money at our facility.

One way we have tried to change our image is by trying to be an *interpretive* center: an educational, yet interesting place to visit. We tell stories and try to engage our visitors by doing such things as comparing modern life to the 19th century, and by asking them questions.

In one recent exhibit, we had two pictures. The first was of one of our interpreters in period attire, and the second was of another staff member in modern clothing. By simply having a caption that asked the audience to compare the two styles of clothing, we were able to make the visitors think about what clothing they themselves had on, and perhaps why they wear what they wear. While not a complicated exhibit, comparing these two photos allowed the audience to relate to the exhibit more than if we had just had a picture of a 19th century dress. Another display we had was a small case with baby shoes in it. While we could have just labeled this box "19th century childrens' shoes," we tried to evoke a story by mentioning how "many children took their first steps on the Oregon Trail."

We have also tried to change our perceived image by appealing to the school children that come through our site. This is a long-range plan, but if we make their visit as enjoyable as we can, there can be multiple outcomes. A child may go home and tell their family how much fun they had and what they learned on their trip. Some are so

"By listening to the comments made by visitors, and learning what was available, we began to understand what our audience wanted, and how to best suit their needs."



thrilled they insist on having their parents bring them back. These same parents may not have come on their own or even thought to bring their children for fear of the “museum” experience. However, when they see the excitement their child has for learning, they may begin to change their minds about history and what we have to offer. The second benefit of appealing to the children is that they are going to grow up. If we have created a fond memory, the new adults are more likely to return with their own family, and possibly even become a financial supporter of our site.

Another way of changing our image is by renting our spaces out for events. Company picnics, meetings and after-hours get togethers allow people who would not ordinarily come at all to visit our site for a completely new reason. While there, they may look around and realize that we are not what they expected. This can lead to future business for our center.

Lesson number four:
Use more than words

“A picture is worth a thousand words.” It is a simple phrase that we have all heard for years. It is also one of the most important things to learn about exhibits. We wanted to tell the story in our own words, but we have learned that words are not always the best way to get a point across. Pictures are important because they allow the visitor to draw their own conclusions about a subject. They may also be the only things some people will look at. If a picture is interesting enough, it may draw attention to the caption or even the rest of the exhibit.

As interesting as pictures are, however, they are not the only way to tell the story. Having artifacts displayed well can tell a story too. We have learned to make use of the artifacts we have on hand to add to the tale being told. Showing the items needed to cook a meal on the Oregon Trail can get the point across much better than giving

step by step instructions through text. We have also found, when possible, that having artifacts outside of cases is helpful. Mounting an item on a wall, or allowing it to be touched, can make it seem more real than something sitting behind glass.

Lesson number five:
Be creative

We are not really set up to be a collecting facility, and we are a private organization without a lot of outside financial support. This has tested our creativity in both displaying what artifacts we have, and in finding ways to get more items for our exhibits.

Almost any artifact has many different stories that can be told about it. Since we do not have a huge collection of items, we have learned how to tell these different stories. The label in an exhibit case is a guide for the audience. By changing the text, the story being told can completely change as well, meaning that one well-built display can be used for different exhibits over time. This helps reduce the number of artifacts we need to house.

Another way we avoid having to store too many things in a small area, is to borrow what we need when we can. Our current exhibit features artifacts from the local fire department, state sheriffs’ association, and our own staff’s personal belongings. Many of these items would not ordinarily fit into our collection, but work well with what we are doing now. By being able to utilize these items on a case-by-case basis, we not only save on storage space, we also build relationships with outside organizations that can help us with our future needs. In addition, we have different items on display for our repeat visitors.





Lesson number six:

Make it interactive

Today's audience wants to do more than just read and look at pictures. They want to be involved in some way with the exhibit itself. We try to accommodate this. At the End of the Oregon Trail Interpretive Center, we try to have as many hands-on things for visitors as we can. These include a hand-made puzzle that gives historic facts about Oregon's history; replica 19th-century toys; a full-sized wagon to be packed; medical remedies to smell; and wheat to grind into flour among others. By allowing the audience to become part of the exhibit, they feel connected to the information, and can more easily compare then and now in their own lives.

We also ask questions of our visitors. Some are just questions for them to consider and answer for themselves ("Was it really the good old days?"), and others relate to the exhibit. These may be answered by simply lifting a lid on a box to find the answer inside, or completing some other action. Either way, we are involving the audience.

Sometimes, we do not provide an answer. We have learned that by making parts of an exhibit purposefully vague, the visitor will seek out one of our interpreters to learn more information. This gives us an opportunity to expand on the story as much or as little as the visitor wants. This interaction often leads to conversations that make the entire visit more personal.

We recently had a non-functional outhouse constructed and set up in our exhibit gallery. The idea was to compare the ease of using the bathroom today to the challenges of not having running water. This outhouse allowed us to discuss not only these differences, but it let a surprising number of our visitors reminisce about their own experiences with outhouses. What we thought would be an interesting part of our exhibit, became even better as each member of our audience related to it in new ways. While the exhibit the outhouse was designed for is gone, we have taken the building itself to a different part of our center, where it has become a permanent exhibit all by itself. By listening to our visitors and interacting with them, we have been able to continually expand what we have to offer and make sure it is what the audience wants.

Lesson number seven:

Be there with the audience

As an interpretive center, we have a distinct advantage over some other sites. Our goal is to be with the audience and answer their questions. This allows us to gauge their reactions to what we offer, and to tell stories about what we

have. We can also allow the audience to touch, smell, listen and in some cases taste our exhibits in addition to seeing them. Our strongest asset is our staff. Being there with the visitor makes our center less of a "museum" experience and more of what today's audience wants.

Lesson number eight:

Keep learning and changing

Perhaps the most important lesson we have learned is to never be satisfied with what we have done. We are constantly trying to discover ways to improve on what we offer. We have graduated from small pieces of paper taped to burlap on wooden frames, to large, nicely-framed panels with pictures, artifacts and as much interactivity as we can, in a gallery with moveable walls and a changeable floor plan. However, we are not finished. In addition to improving our own site, we are currently working with other sites in Oregon City to have integrated exhibits. As we share and learn with our neighbors, we look forward to new and exciting ways to make our visitors' experiences as enjoyable as possible.



"By allowing the audience to become part of the exhibit, they feel connected to the information, and can more easily compare then and now in their own lives."



Big Things in Small Packages: Video in Your Exhibits

by Eileen Campbell

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Exhibit planners want to communicate big things in exhibits: the evolution of the Earth's surface over millions of years; the emotional impact of Japanese World War II internments on the people who were there; or a feel for places on the other side of the world or long ago in time. Sometimes even a 10,000-square-foot gallery seems too constraining. If only you could compress all that wonderful content—the stuff that's just too big to fit, or takes too long, or happened too long ago or far away.

Well, we do it all the time, of course—it's part of the exhibit developer's job, figuring out how to tell those stories in concentrated ways. And one of the most useful tools for telling big stories in small spaces is video. Especially in the hands of a creative exhibit developer, video can be used in a variety of situations to address many different needs.

A clarification is in order here: I'm not talking about the kind of narrative, documentary-type videos presented in dedicated sit-down theater spaces, where visitors commit to staying and watching a start-to-finish presentation. These do in fact require considerable space—and budget. They can present an absorbing experience on the same topic as the exhibit, and may in fact be physically located within or accessed from the exhibit space. But because of the way visitors use—or bypass—such presentations, they really form a separate experience from the exhibit itself.

This article addresses video used as an integral part of an exhibit, located out on the floor, interspersed with objects, panels, interactives and other exhibit elements. People watch these videos in the course of their visit. In the case of a very small exhibit, the video may be the main event, but even then it will have associated objects. More often, video is used as one element in the rich mix making up an exhibition.



Even in an exhibit space of less than 400 square feet, you can create an experience with some depth through use of video, as with *We Hold the Rock* on Alcatraz Island. Four five-minute segments, each complete on its own, tell the story of the 1969 Indian occupation of the island. *Photo by Jon Plutte.*

Video can be a tremendous tool in the exhibit developer's collection. A three-minute video piece can contain hundreds of words and dozens of images—the content of several standard exhibit panels. And as anyone who's ever been stuck in a doctor's office with a TV in the corner can attest, it's a highly compelling medium, almost impossible not to watch. It's available in a variety of sizes and configurations, can be combined in telling ways with objects and other exhibit elements, and can be made interactive with the addition of computerware.

Although video is not a cheap solution, the cost of producing and installing it is falling with advancing technology and do-it-yourself capabilities. Like desktop publishing before it, moviemaking is now possible to do on a moderate-cost computer. Used intelligently and appropriately, video can be a good exhibit value for the money.



What is appropriate use for video in the context of an exhibit? I've seen it used effectively in a number of creative ways. Video is particularly good for:

Presenting narratives

Video is a linear medium: it has a starting point and runs in one direction to the end. As such, it is the medium of choice for visual narratives. Video has been used effectively to tell many kinds of stories: folk tales, reminiscences, historical accounts. It is also good at presenting step-by-step processes.

Extending or enlivening the exhibit world

Video can be used effectively in exhibits that recreate places or environments. Framed by a door, window, trees, or other elements in the scene, it can give a convincing illusion of the view beyond. Visitors to the *Mardi Gras* exhibit in New Orleans's Presbyter see a doorway looking out onto a grassy yard. Nothing much happens in this video scene—until a costumed figure drops down from the top of the door. The clown begs viewers for food, showing a traditional part of rural Mardi Gras celebrations.

Video can also bring to life those still, quiet collections of mobiles, toys, wind-driven objects, or machines—objects whose motion is part of their essence. Maybe visitors can't be allowed to "make it go," but at least they can see what it would look like. Video can also enliven the frozen moment of a traditional diorama. Outside an old bird diorama, the Field Museum added a pair of binoculars. Visitors looking through them see video of the diorama birds soaring majestically through the air. In a simple usage, I've seen a small video monitor placed into a label panel, replacing a still photo with a moving image.

Introducing people

Humans are social creatures, and one of the ways we learn best is by talking to knowledgeable people. People bring authenticity, emotion and relevance to any subject. Populating your exhibit with real people who have first-hand experience with your topic would be wonderful. Unfortunately, it's usually not possible, at least on a full-time basis—but you can film them. Many exhibits make very effective use of filmed interviews with real people. Through exhibit videos, I've heard real people talk movingly about experiences as large and historic as the Vietnam War or the LA race riots, and as small and personal as playing with a favorite toy. Invented people can also connect with viewers, and many exhibit videos use actors or animation to create informative characters.

Taking you somewhere else

A traditional use of video is to present distant or unusual places. Some museums have taken the standard travelogue



In *A More Perfect Union* at the National Museum of American History, video is used to create characters who comment upon a reconstructed room in the exhibit. In five separate segments, a father who had lived in the Manzanar camp for Japanese-American internees during World War II (played by an actor) tells his daughter what it was like. Photo by Eric Long, courtesy Selma Thomas.

a step farther, combining video with built elements to put visitors in the scene, giving them both the physical and visual feel of experiences like riding in a Mardi Gras float, hurtling down a bobsled run, or living through an earthquake. Video allows you to carry visitors to other times, as well, and even to imaginary landscapes.

Showing the unseen or unseeable

Video can show visitors unseen or unseeable things: the microscopic motion of cells, the back side of an untouchable vase, the tour of an inaccessible train, the view from a deep-sea sub, even the ghostly presence of long-dead spirits in a slave market. It can also show processes that happen over time periods either too long or too short for our eyes to observe. *Playing With Time*, a traveling exhibit by the Science Museum of Minnesota and Red Hill Studios, uses time-lapse and high-speed video to let people see such processes as changing seasons, an aging face, the blink of an eye, and a breaking glass. Animation extends this ability even further, helping visitors visualize processes such as plate tectonics that no one can actually see.

Showing beauty and motion

Video can be mesmerizing. Particularly with a large-screen or multi-screen format, it can wash visitors in the sheer beauty of a subject. *Water Waves* was a breathtaking video installation by Andrej Zdravic shown at the Exploratorium. It consisted of 10 screens showing nothing more than the sight and sound of water in its many forms. Other institutions and artists have used video to similar affect.

Making connections

Video can help connect objects to each other or to the wider world. *Sharks: Myth and Mystery* at the Monterey Bay Aquarium makes both simple and elaborate use of video



In *Sharks: Myth and Mystery* at the Monterey Bay Aquarium, a video in a display case shows an initiation dance of young men from Guinea-Bissou (Africa). Visitors can see one of the headdresses in the video displayed in the case.
Photo courtesy Monterey Bay Aquarium.

to accomplish this. A case in the exhibit displays a headdress used by the Bidjogo people in a shark dance. Nearby, a video shows the same headdress in use. A more complex installation presents an Amazon folktale. As the video tells the tale, related objects in a nearby canoe are lit or activated. Exhibit developer Ava Ferguson attests to the power of even the simple treatment: "Visitors notice it's the same object in the case and in the video. They go, 'Look, it's the same headdress!'"

Adding humor

Video's not your only chance to add humor to an exhibit, thank heavens. But TV is so ubiquitous in our culture, it presents an obvious target when using video. One of my favorite touches is in *Traveling the Pacific* at the Field Museum. A recreated lava flow spilling across the exhibit floor carries a half-buried TV set—still playing a news flash about the destructive lava. The newscast breaks to static and you wonder: did the broadcast station get engulfed? Or did the long extension cord finally come unplugged...?

Producing your videos

As you plan your exhibit, some spots may cry out for video. So how do you get it produced? Depending on your in-house capabilities, you can either do it yourself or hire professionals. Video editing software has become simple and inexpensive enough that, with a moderate amount of money and technological savvy, many museums can produce their own. Jon Plutte, exhibit designer for the Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy who has become his own video producer, points out that basic editing software from companies like Avid and Final Cut are available free online, and he recommends publications like DV Magazine for help.

If you don't have the staff to do it yourself, or if your video project is complex, you'll need to go to outside vendors for help. The number of video companies that produce

specifically for museums is growing, but still quite small, so chances are you'll be working with first-timers who are used to making traditional narrative videos. It's important to keep in mind that you are the expert in creating exhibits, and to use your in-house exhibit development and design smarts to define precisely what you want from video in your exhibit. This up-front concept development step will save you money, since you won't be paying outsiders to do that thinking. More importantly, it will result in a video that actually fits into your exhibit and works for your visitors.

The next step is communicating your ideas to a producer and working with them to shape the product. Because video production is a technological process with its own world of terms and procedures, it can be intimidating. Selma Thomas of Watertown Productions, who has worked extensively with the Smithsonian museums, notes that producing a video should be a collaborative process between museum and producer. "Museums need to manage the media process. You need to set the goals, purpose and content, then review it every step of the way, just as you do with your label text." Beverly Serrell, in a study of visitor use of videos in exhibits, suggests that videos undergo the same kind of formative evaluation as other important exhibit elements.⁽¹⁾

Here are several things to remember in developing ideas for video in your exhibits, and later in communicating to producers about the specific needs and abilities of exhibit videos.

Keep visitors in mind

In an exhibit, visitors are on their feet, browsing to find the parts that catch their eye, and staying at each only until it loses their interest. They've come to the museum to see "real stuff," and while a video can grab their gaze, it's competing with many other options for their time and attention. A long, documentary-style presentation will be wasted: "TV-on-a-wall" style video is nearly as ineffective as "book-on-a-wall" style label panels. Serrell's study of five



videos in a traveling exhibit, *The Changing Face of Women's Health*, found that the videos held viewers an average of less than three minutes. A similar study of the videos in their shark exhibit by the Monterey Bay Aquarium showed a maximum viewing time of less than one minute.⁽²⁾

In planning exhibit videos, you need to think in short segments. If you want to offer more than two minute's worth of material, chunk the presentation into shorter pieces and provide clear break points where a visitor can choose to leave, or add an interactive menu and allow people to pick which segments to view. It's also helpful to viewers if they know up-front how long a given presentation is.

There is a flip side to visitors' browsing behavior: because a video is only one element they'll encounter in your exhibit, you can focus the video on what it does best. Your video doesn't have to tell the whole story, as a documentary does, because there's a wealth of supporting material in the exhibit.

Keep other exhibit elements in mind

Video is a component of the exhibit. The best exhibit video doesn't stand by itself off in a corner, but joins with the objects on display to enhance visitors' experiences with them. It can be integrated into labels, cases and dioramas. Video can be aware of its surroundings—as in “object theater,” it can refer to artifacts, images or architecture outside the screen. It can speak to the viewer knowing that they're in a particular space in a particular museum and probably with or near other people. It can be made interactive, helping visitors explore other elements of the exhibit.

Video is a powerful medium—the combination of color, motion and sound draws attention. Its attracting power, used badly, can overwhelm objects nearby. But used well, it can draw visitors to objects they might otherwise pass by. (The Monterey Bay Aquarium study suggests that videos placed in display cases can double the attraction power of a case.) Used in conjunction with objects, video can encourage closer observation of objects. It can tell the stories behind them, give them context, and show their uses. As an exhibit planner, your control of the size, volume, placement and content of the video will determine how well it works with the objects around it.

Keep the exhibit gestalt in mind

A good exhibit has its own concept, voice and feel. A good exhibit video fits with the rest of the exhibit rather than feeling like an unrelated add-on. It should also be appropriate to the subject you're covering. Sometimes the story you want to tell makes its own media choice. American Indians have a strong oral tradition, so it's appropriate that *We Hold the Rock*, an exhibit on Alcatraz Island about the 1969 Indian occupation

of the island, is almost entirely made of video interviews with the participants. Designer and video producer Jon Plutte is working on another installation that begs for video—it's all about Alcatraz in the movies.

Placement is important

The placement of a video in an exhibit will help determine how well it's used. People don't like to stand in the middle of a room with people passing by on all sides—you need to give them an eddy if you want them to linger. The longer your video, the more comfortable, distraction-free a space you need to provide. Visitors also seem more likely to watch video placed near the end of an exhibit, once they've experienced the bulk of the show. The traditional intro video, a longish narrative video placed at the beginning of an exhibit, usually in a flow of busy traffic, seems designed not to be watched.

Be aware of video's limitations

Placing video out in the exhibit, rather than in a theater space, poses special challenges—in particular, light and sound control. Monitors may not be visible in a light-flooded space or where reflections obscure the image, so place them carefully. If the video has sound or narration, it needs to be audible over the exhibit bustle, but not so loud it interferes with other experiences in the exhibit. Especially if you have more than one video, watch out for sound overlap. If the video is narrated, you'll need to caption it for hearing-impaired viewers, and possibly for other languages.

In exhibits, visitors respond to a rich mix of things to see and do, and videos can contribute to such a satisfying experience. Both Beverly Serrell and the Monterey Bay Aquarium quote visitors in their studies as responding positively to the presence of videos used as exhibit elements. Aquarium visitors said they much preferred videos scattered throughout the exhibit to ones segregated in a theater. Serrell's subjects remembered both specific points made in the videos and their emotional impacts, even two months later in a follow-up survey. For their contribution to richness and variety, their superb narrative abilities, and their eye-catching attractiveness, videos can be worth the investment. But because video will continue to be a significant cost, an exhibit planner's most important investment is in the development time taken to ensure the best use of video's unique capabilities.

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What's Working for Small Museums in St. Louis

by Caitlin McQuade

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A new museum has opened in neighboring Illinois, the \$115 million Abraham Lincoln Presidential Museum. The hoopla began this winter; press releases touted “immersive exhibits that employ state-of-the-art technology” and “special effects techniques borrowed from theme parks, Hollywood and Broadway.” The fuss is a hundred miles away from our Gateway Arch and tens of millions of dollars beyond the budgets of our city’s smaller museums.

Without the coffers for Broadway-style exhibits, what do St. Louis’ small museums do to keep the lights on and fulfill their missions? At four museums devoted to preserving the past, the directors answered a simple question: what’s working for you and what isn’t? These leaders described methods that have been successful at their institutions, particularly their creative partnerships and comprehensive historical research. They see the benefits of investing in long-term relationships that adapt their unique resources to the needs of their partners. Drawing on thorough research wins them new audiences, keeps people coming back, and bridges collection gaps. The museum directors were hardest on themselves in the area of fundraising. Each one framed the challenge differently and so had different ideas for increasing their income.

Creative partnerships

For eight years Lois Conley, founder and director of the Black World History Museum (BWHM), has talked with administrators, instructional coordinators, and parents-as-teachers in the St. Louis public schools. She points out how the museum can fill curriculum gaps or help with specific study areas, and she provides teacher workshops. Given the public schools’ demographics—81% of students are African-American—the museum offers useful resources to educators who want kids to identify with history.



Part of the Black World History Museum’s exhibit *Beyond York*

The BWHM builds its exhibits and programs around people from the past who positively affected the experience of black Americans. All these people have ties to Missouri, and they include Harriet and Dred Scott, George Washington Carver, Miles Davis and—in the museum’s most recent installation—York, William Clark’s enslaved servant during the 1804-06 expedition. Since its founding in 1997, the museum has occupied a former school building in a predominantly African-American neighborhood of the city.

Despite the fact that the BWHM charges admission for each student, Conley was bringing public school groups to her 6,700 square-foot galleries. She persevered through the obstacles of a struggling system: retirements, reassignments, budget cuts. Then came more bad news: the school board closed 16 schools in 2003, including many with which Conley had developed productive relationships. After a re-organizational flurry in the schools, Conley and the BWHM’s only other full-time staff member started over again with other schools, other teachers and other administrators.



Lois Conley, Director of the Black World History Museum, on the phone with potential group visitors.

Meanwhile, Conley continued talking to people in private schools. She discovered that many had new diversity programs. Going several steps beyond field trips, she offered her institution's services. "Not just a single visit," she explains, "but long-term planning on both sides to enhance teacher knowledge base or develop curricula. We try to find interesting ways to improve

their programs. We tell them, 'You don't have to struggle alone with it.'" The results of these collaborations take time to develop. "We may not see any benefit for three years," Conley says, "and in the meantime we have to keep our doors open, so the resources are still here after those three years."

In a nearby suburb, the Holocaust Museum and Learning Center offers similar services. Director Jean Cavender says, "Folks in the education system have really discovered us. Often, educators don't have a lot of training to teach about the Holocaust." She marshals HMLC resources to enhance the schools' World War II curricula or their tolerance and diversity programs.

The HMLC's core exhibit presents a chronological history of the Holocaust in 5,000 square feet, focusing on the personal accounts of survivors who emigrated to St. Louis. Some survivors tell their own stories to visiting groups and participate in the volunteer corps that leads tours. A department of the Jewish Federation of St. Louis, the HMLC shares a building on the Federation's campus with other cultural and social agencies.

Funders have stepped up to support events and materials for educators. The William T. Kemper Foundation contributed to a two-day workshop at which museum staff and trained volunteers helped teachers develop curriculum materials that met state standards in Missouri and Illinois. A local university offered graduate credit for participants. This spring, the HMLC is partnering with television station KETC to provide educators with free training and documents related to the PBS documentary *Auschwitz: Inside the Nazi State*. The HMLC staff tries to keep their programs easy to attend. When possible, they coordinate sessions with local school districts' professional development calendars. For this spring's event, a local law firm has agreed to pay for substitute teachers to cover participants' classes during the workshop.

Back in the city, the painted brick walls of the Campbell House Museum rise modestly among the taller steel and concrete structures of downtown St. Louis. In the mid-nineteenth century, this was a tree-lined street on the city's edge. As the urban center spread, it pushed residential neighborhoods further west and the Campbell's house lost its elegant company. Now its near neighbors are office buildings and old warehouses, many renovated into dance clubs and loft condominiums. Director John Dalzell perceives this environment as the museum's neighborhood, and he has sought out nearby community groups. The museum has hosted public meetings for Metropolis St. Louis, whose members pledge "to create and promote an environment in the City of St. Louis that attracts and retains young people." The Downtown St. Louis Residents Association also meets at Campbell House. Dalzell says that these connections, which are "integrating the museum into its new surrounding neighborhood, have made a difference in visibility, in visitation and in membership."

The Campbell House Museum's visitors, once mostly female and over 65 years old, now include more men in their 30s. Dalzell finds a partial explanation in the ongoing restoration work that has occupied the house for the last five years, during which the place has remained open. He calls it the "*This Old House* phenomenon:" when the historic site became a construction site, it attracted tool guys. Dalzell and his assistant director Andrew Hahn played up this appeal, telling stories about stripping finishes and updating mechanical systems.



The Campbell House Museum and its downtown neighbor



Thoughtful use of research will contribute to a human-interest display in the parlor of the Campbell House Museum.

Comprehensive research

Exhaustive research has guided the restoration, and Dalzell plans to keep and expand his more diverse audience by exploiting every bit of evidence, every new story. “We’ve got five exhibits in the works for after the restoration is finished. If we’re not really diligent, the house can become a mausoleum. We want to keep the spaces feeling like they’ve lived in and changing.”

All it takes is one object and reliable information about its past to inspire a temporary exhibit. For instance, Dalzell points out an original fragment of carpet, which researchers traced back to the textile mills in Lowell, Massachusetts. Dalzell foresees a small exhibit that shows “what it took to make that carpet, how the economy of the US changed to make such carpet affordable and available in St. Louis.” Among the Campbell family’s possessions are full-plate albumen prints from their year-long sojourn in Europe in 1867. Dalzell conjures a display about the wealthy Americans who made the Grand Tour in the mid-19th century and returned with images and artifacts to demonstrate their refinement.

Details about emotional events in individuals’ lives are hooks to capture visitors’ imaginations. Yes, the Campbell family was rich, but the museum’s volunteers lead their

tours deeper into the family’s experiences. When the dust clears from the restoration project, the parlor will hold artifacts from a child’s funeral, along with period maternity clothes. Virginia Campbell bore thirteen children, only three of whom survived to adulthood; she often had to mourn while pregnant. Dalzell says he “wants visitors to get a real wince when they see a child’s coffin on the table in the parlor. We don’t usually talk about that aspect of 19th century reality.” Rather than focusing on the museum’s costly furnishings, tour leaders will use them as a backdrop for stories that might sound familiar to visitors. “People understand that family relationships remain a constant, even though the environment changes through history,” Dalzell insists.

Few historic houses have a collection like the Campbell House Museum, which owns many of the family’s original furnishings, along with interior photographs of all the rooms in 1885. At the other end of the spectrum is the Scott Joplin House, owned by the state of Missouri and operated by the Department of Natural Resources (DNR). Joplin, the ragtime composer, lived in an apartment in this row house between 1900 and 1903. None of Joplin’s possessions are known to survive, but the scrupulous restoration has preserved many of the row house’s original features. Site Administrator Victoria Love explains, “We’re clear with visitors that the rooms are furnished with things from the period, not things that were used by Joplin. We balance that by talking about the building’s restoration and what is original: the floorboards and the stairs, for instance, though not the stair railings.” Love describes how careful investigation triggered exhibit decisions and gave her staff plenty of stories to tell visitors. “The placement of the piano is historic: structurally speaking, it’s in the only place that could hold a piano’s weight. We tell people about why we selected the furnishings. We include a desk because Joplin wouldn’t compose at his piano—he always used a desk.”

Joplin’s compositions survived where his personal belongings did not, and the museum has capitalized on these ephemeral products. With a player piano on-site and recordings for outreach programs, interpreters help their audience learn what distinguished Joplin’s uniquely American music. Next door to the museum, the DNR has reconstructed another historic building to resemble a turn-of-the-century saloon. In addition to “displaying” Joplin’s legacy with public performances, the museum also rents out the space for earned income.

By delving outside familiar history, the Black World History Museum found inspiration for a popular recent exhibit. In 2004, when Lewis and Clark haunted every spot they had ever visited, the BWHM naturally created a new exhibit about



Multi-disciplinary research guided these furnishings at the Scott Joplin Historic Site.

Clark's slave, York. However, Director Conley titled the show *Beyond York*, reaching past the obvious story to explore other events related to her museum's subject. The museum examined how York's trek across the continent was linked to the revolution by enslaved black people in Haiti. The Haitian uprising motivated imperial France's withdrawal from both Haiti and the Louisiana Territory. Conley found that "the Haitian Revolution was not something most people considered when they considered the Lewis and Clark Expedition." Making connections across time as well as geography, the BWHM showed artwork by a contemporary Haitian. "A whole different segment of the community visited the art exhibit," Conley says.

There's never enough

Except for Victoria Love at the state-supported Scott Joplin House, the museum directors quickly named fundraising as the task at which they felt least successful. Each one expressed

concern about "keeping the lights on." Cavender, at the Holocaust Memorial and Learning Center, says, "We have very generous individuals who want to tie their names to programming. Foundations are particularly drawn by kids programming. But we still have to raise money just to stay open. It's a hard sell. People don't make that connection between operations and programming: no lights, no programs."

Cavender plans a long-term response to this challenge: growing the museum's endowment fund. "Everyone goes to the same donor base with their various needs, and annual giving depends on the economy. We need to look for big chunks that will grow over time." Noting that nearly all of the HMLC's 25,000 annual visitors are schoolchildren—"We're bringing in kids who will grow up into donors"—Cavender also acknowledges the need to reach out more pointedly to an adult audience.

Lois Conley struggles with attracting corporate and foundation support. "They don't see small museums the same way as larger ones. Unless you have someone to make the entrée, you don't get in the door." Once inside, she says, "You make your case and you have to convince them to take you to the next level." John Dalzell has had success with institutional donors; he faces a different dilemma. "Traditional grant proposals work fine. But we need to get more creative about how we raise funds. We're good at getting the bigger donations, but not so good at getting lots of medium and small donations: say, from \$100 to \$5,000. We need to find out where to go to get them."

Critical though the directors may be about their fundraising activities, something's working. While none of these museums employ "special effects techniques borrowed from theme parks," their staff continue to open the doors each week, welcome visitors, and work toward fulfilling their missions. They do this by paying attention to the fine points of their subjects and the specifics of their potential audiences.



The Scott Joplin Historic Site rents out this reconstructed saloon next door to the museum.

Museum Profiles	annual attendance	full-time staff	operating budget
Scott Joplin State Historic Site	6,000-8,000	2	\$32,000
Campbell House Museum	14,000	2	\$150,000
Black World History Museum	12,000 -13,000	2	\$200,000
Holocaust Museum & Learning Center	25,000	3	\$500,000



Strength in Numbers:

Successful Traveling Exhibition Collaborations for Small Museums

by Lisa Eriksen

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As the administrator of a traveling exhibition consortium for small institutions I have the privilege of working with numerous museums, both small and large. Many people who work in small museums tell me that they are often overwhelmed by too much to do, too little time, and too few resources. I also hear the same concerns from staff at large institutions.

I believe that most museum professionals are dedicated to a fault—always trying to do more with less, no matter how little “less” is. But one conclusion I have come to in my almost seven years coordinating the California Exhibition Resources Alliance (CERA) is that staff of small museums have a great ability to work constructively with other organizations, to leverage resources and to provide great service to their communities. Small museum staff, accustomed to operating on lean budgets and undertaking a diversity of job duties, are extremely adept at entering into collaborative partnerships with an understanding of the needs of all participants.

The ethos of small museums—operating on a small budget, the ability of staff to do a variety of tasks (often simultaneously), and being flexible enough to take advantage of new opportunities and collaborations on short notice—has allowed CERA to grow into an extremely successful service organization. CERA was developed *by* and *for* small museums as a way of sharing resources, managing time and providing quality exhibitions for their communities.

There is indeed strength in numbers, especially when it comes to traveling exhibition collaborations. Institutions participating in CERA would be challenged to provide the variety and complexity of CERA traveling exhibitions in-house. But together CERA participants work to provide exhibitions, resources and support for their communities and for others. I believe CERA can serve as a model for other museum professionals in small institutions on how to join forces to provide varied and quality exhibitions and programs to their audiences. While institutions in states smaller than California may not be able create a collaborative network as large as CERA, there are still many concepts in the CERA model that can be adapted on a smaller scale.

Small is beautiful, but together we can do big things—how CERA grew

With a clear vision of needs to be served and the active involvement of its participants, CERA has remained a flexible organization—able to change, grow and adapt to shifting internal and external situations. Over the past sixteen years, CERA has grown dramatically, increasing the numbers of museums it serves and exhibitions it travels, all the while continuing to focus its efforts on serving small museums.

*“...staff of small museums
have a great ability
to work constructively
with other organizations,
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to provide great service
to their communities.”*

CERA was established in 1988 as an informal Rural Museums Consortium of five northern California museums. The Consortium was created to bring three exhibits from the Smithsonian to rural California museums and was initially funded by the California Council for the Humanities (CCH). By the end of this first exhibition cycle, the group was evolving into a statewide coalition of small museums. The new name reflected the changing focus: the California Exhibition Resources Alliance.



"It is estimated that
75% of U.S. museums
are small institutions
with budgets under **\$250,000.**"

CERA Project Manager, Joan Jasper,
spreading the word about CERA at the
2003 AAM conference.

In 1992, CERA grew again thanks to the continued funding of CCH in the form of a planning grant and support for a part-time coordinator. Due to its success, CERA became an official program of the Council in 1994 and two years later a full-time coordinator was hired.

CERA quickly evolved into a statewide coalition of twelve small and mid-sized institutions. It operated as an official program of the CCH until 2002 when a new strategic direction for CCH led CERA to transition into a separate non-profit organization. CERA members and staff worked together to create a transition plan and established CERA as an independent non-profit organization in September 2002. A six-member Board of Directors now governs CERA. Comprehensive strategic, marketing and business plans were developed and adopted by the CERA Board in early 2003.

The original mission to provide humanities-focused traveling exhibitions to small and mid-size museums has expanded to include more diverse intellectual content, such as fine art and natural science exhibitions. In addition to documenting small museums' need for high-quality, cost-effective temporary exhibitions, CERA's Online Market Research Survey indicated that larger museums find the costs of developing in-house exhibitions prohibitive and choose to rent traveling exhibitions as a way of saving money and staff resources. This potential expansion in CERA's client-base produced a challenge for the newly independent CERA: maintaining its traditional focus on small and medium-sized museums while embracing potential new participants. As a result, CERA's Mission

Statement was broadened and coupled with a Core Values statement.

CERA's mission statement

The California Exhibition Resources Alliance (CERA) is a network of professionally operated museums and cultural organizations that collaborate to create and tour affordable, high-quality exhibitions that promote civic engagement and human understanding.

CERA's core values

- We value the contributions that small- to mid-sized museums make to their communities, and we exist to assist them in fulfilling their missions.
- We are a non-profit organization with a heritage of serving other non-profits and recognize the need to keep our products affordable.
- We provide excellent customer service on all levels of our operation.
- We seek to provide unique exhibitions and services.
- We strive to offer exhibitions that are of the highest quality.
- We exercise financial discipline and are fiscally responsible.

CERA continues to work with larger institutions as exhibition providers and to seek financial support from various sources. Currently, fifteen exhibitions are in active circulation with an additional five under development.



Visitors discuss the *Precious Cargo: California Indian Cradle Basket and Childbirth Traditions* exhibition at the Hayward Area Historical Society.

CERA's geographic reach has also grown. CERA exhibits travel to rural, suburban and urban institutions within California, with additional presentations and bookings in Arkansas, Kansas, Nevada, Tennessee and New York. More than 100 museums and cultural organizations have hosted CERA exhibitions since 1988. In 2003, CERA served more than 127,000 visitors, touring ten exhibitions to 19 venues throughout California—an increase of over 100% from 2000 attendance figures.

Why should we work together?— Identifying specific needs

It is estimated that 75 percent of U.S. museums are small institutions with budgets under \$250,000. In 2000, the National Endowment of the Humanities reported, “access to every form of earned and contributed income is limited for small and medium museums. Most small and medium museums are located in non-urban areas, where access to national foundations, corporations, public funding and major philanthropists is not accessible.”



Students learning about Native American traditions and the *Precious Cargo: California Indian Cradle Basket and Childbirth Traditions* exhibition at the Maidu Interpretive Center.

In California in particular, small museums struggle to serve communities that are rapidly growing in population and experiencing significant demographic changes. At the same time resources are shrinking and general economic conditions threaten already-limited contributions from both local government sources and private donors. These challenges directly impact the exhibit programs of these museums. CERA's Online Market Research Survey in 2002 found that about 27% of respondents did not rent traveling exhibitions at all primarily due to limited budget and the costs of renting. These smaller museums are often forced to sacrifice exhibition programs to avoid staff layoffs and cutbacks in public hours.

These national and regional issues can be daunting for individuals working to support small museums. On the other hand, collaborating with colleagues to identify and address specific needs of local museums and developing a plan to share resources can be empowering in solving these larger challenges. It is important to have all partners in a traveling exhibition consortium clearly state their needs before moving forward with a project. What types of exhibitions are museums interested in hosting? Does the museum's mission limit the themes or subjects of exhibitions? Who is the audience we are trying to serve? What are the size and technical constraints of the museums? How much can each collaboration partner afford to contribute both in financial and staff resources? How will we measure our success?

Throughout its history, CERA has functioned as a collaborative network of small museums and has developed specific needs-based strategies put forth by its participants, including:



1. Providing Access to Group Resources – Exhibitions, Financial Support, Professional Services

Exhibition content and rental fees are “test-marketed” through the CERA Associate network to ensure they are mission-appropriate and within financial reach of smaller museums. Proposals to state and national foundations make the financial resources available to these community-based museums, which they normally would not have access to. In terms of content and design, CERA exhibits are scholarly and well-designed, giving smaller museums access to the curatorial and design services of larger partner institutions such as the Oakland Museum and the California Historical Society.

2. Maximizing Staff Time

CERA exhibitions are “turn-key” in nature—ready to install with minimum effort and no special equipment, since most small museums have only one or two full-time staff people. CERA exhibitions enable these museums to provide exhibits on a variety of topics while allowing small museum staff to continue their important work caring for collections, fundraising and developing educational programs for schools, families and other audiences.

3. Offering Regional Networking Opportunities

In its 1999 Assessment of Needs, the California Association of Museums concluded that “a strong need exists for museums to be in contact with one another.” In a state the size of California, however, it is difficult for smaller

museums to take advantage of the opportunities provided by the state museum association. CERA offers quarterly general meetings that are hosted by participating museums around the state. Consequently, CERA takes these important networking opportunities out to various regions of the state, rather than expecting smaller museum staff to travel long and expensive distances. Agendas for these quarterly meetings provide opportunities for museums to learn more about currently traveling CERA exhibitions, express opinions about the content, size and possible rental fees of potential future exhibitions; and to discuss numerous issues of professional best practices.

Developing a plan, putting it in writing – how the CERA collaboration works

Once specific needs are identified and partners are committed to developing a traveling exhibition program, it is critical to devise a written plan to clarify goals and objectives, outline specific activities, and develop a budget.

The CERA Associates

Over its history, CERA has had many operating plans outlining the organization’s and participants’ roles and responsibilities. Beyond its mission statement, strategic, marketing and business plans, CERA has developed a special program for its regular participants to keep them actively involved and written clear guidelines outlining this collaboration.



CERA participants learn to install the *Key Ingredients* exhibition at the San Joaquin County Historical Museum.



CERA has deep relationships with the museums it serves, and it is the direct participation by these museums that keeps CERA a vital program. CERA is supported and advised by a group of museums known as CERA Associates. This network of museums provides feedback about potential exhibitions being offered and schedules advance bookings.

This successful model of evaluating and pre-booking exhibitions is an important way for CERA to monitor exhibition quality and content offerings, as well as assure the demand for future CERA exhibitions. With the Associates participation, CERA has grown from having three touring exhibitions in 1998 to fifteen in 2004.

Recently, the Board of Directors assessed CERA's services and re-designed the Associates program to better serve the needs of museums, while maintaining CERA as a strong and fiscally responsible organization. There are currently twelve CERA Associates, but with the new guidelines CERA hopes many other museums will join the program. While CERA encourages museums to become Associates, libraries and cultural organizations of all disciplines and size are welcome to rent CERA exhibitions.

CERA Associates get priority in pre-booking exhibitions before they are offered to non-Associate museums. Discounted rental fees offered to Associates are tied to annual institutional budgets. The fee structure consists of three levels:

- Tier One: Under \$250,000 annual operating budget.
- Tier Two: Over \$250,000 and less than \$1,000,000 annual operating budget.
- Tier Three: Over \$1,000,000 and less than \$2,000,000 annual operating budget.

Participation in CERA is open to professionally run institutions that meet Associate criteria. Associates are required to attend one meeting a year and rent at least one exhibition every three years. There are no fees for CERA Associate participation.

Criteria for becoming a CERA Associate include:

- 1) Be a not-for-profit institution qualified under §501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code or a unit of a government agency.
- 2) Have the equivalent of one full-time professional staff member and less than 10 full-time professional staff.

- 3) Be open to the public at least 20 hours a week.
- 4) Have a program of changing exhibitions and have adequate space to host CERA exhibitions.
- 5) Meet minimal professional museum standards set by AAM, in particular standards of conservation, facilities and security.
- 6) Host at least one CERA exhibition every three years.
- 7) Attend one CERA Associates meeting a year.
- 8) Have an overall budget under \$2,000,000.
- 9) Demonstrate active community support for traveling exhibitions.

A written Policy and Procedures document outlines the responsibilities of both CERA and the Associate museum. The CERA Partnership Committee, a committee of the board made up of small museum professionals, reviews associate applications.

CERA is a non-profit organization with a budget the size of most of the museums we serve. CERA's one full-time and one half-time staff provide administrative support and coordination such as shipping coordination, developing exhibitions and support materials, and coordinating meetings. Associate museums assist staff in a variety of ways including: commenting on exhibition development topics, assisting with fundraising, providing temporary storage for exhibitions, conducting minor cleaning and repairs of exhibition components, and serving as ambassadors for the CERA program.



Museum professionals have an opportunity to discuss CERA exhibitions and best practices at quarterly statewide meetings.



Terri Cobb of the Smithsonian Museum on Main Street program and Mike Bennett, Director, San Joaquin County Historical Museum enjoying a moment after the *Key Ingredients* exhibition installation.

Grow a circle of friends – developing creative partnerships

Looking outside of the small museum network to develop creative and mutually beneficial partnerships is another way to grow a successful traveling exhibition consortium. CERA has developed long-term partnerships with non-museum organizations that have broadened CERA's outreach, fundraising capabilities and creativity.

Continuing its heritage of collaboration, CERA is developing new and exciting partnerships with a variety of institutions. In the last few years CERA has undertaken partnerships with the following organizations:

Heyday Books, a Berkeley-based non-profit publisher dedicated to producing thoughtful books about California, approached CERA to develop exhibitions adapted from several of its titles. A survey of CERA's Associate museums identified four Heyday titles for future development, including an exhibition on the California grizzly bear and one on Native American art. Heyday is also enriching CERA's on-going collaboration with the California Historical Society (CHS). In 2004, CERA began touring *At Work: The Art of California Labor*, the first exhibition to explore work through the eyes of artists who witnessed or were inspired by significant trends of the 20th Century. This

exhibition was originally developed by CHS and the San Francisco State University Art Gallery, and the catalog was produced by Heyday Books.

This year CERA will begin touring *From the Byways to the Highways: Rondal Partridge Photographs California 1936-1969*, celebrating the work of photographer Rondal Partridge, son of the renowned photographer Imogen Cunningham. This CERA traveling exhibition is based on the Heyday book and exhibitions *Quizzical Eye: The Photography of Rondal Partridge*, produced by the California Historical Society and the Oakland Museum of California. Joint CERA/Heyday/CHS fundraising efforts for these and other exhibition projects have resulted in over \$100,000 in grants.

CERA has also developed a new partnership with the California State Library (CSL). With funding through CSL, CERA was contracted to travel a panel exhibition titled *California's Labor History* developed by the CSL. The exhibit will first be made available to libraries and then to museums and other cultural organizations. CERA is looking forward to continuing its relationship with the CSL in order to identify new exhibition hosts and better serve California's libraries and their patrons.



Since summer of 2002, CERA has been the state partner for the Smithsonian Institution and Federation of State Humanities Council joint Museum on Main Street (MOMS) program. The MOMS program is very complementary to CERA's mission, as MOMS criteria for participation target museums that are even smaller or in more remote areas than the typical CERA participant. Thus, this partnership allows CERA to extend its services even further into underserved areas and provide professional development to these small museums. CERA is currently touring *Key Ingredients: America By Food*, exploring the foods Americans produce, prepare, present and eat through a selection of artifacts, photographs, maps and other illustrations. Long-time CERA Associate the San Joaquin County Historical Society has served as a mentor for the MOMS project, providing staff to lead training workshops and serve as advisors to the other museum participants.

CERA has grown and thrived

As CERA has developed and changed to meet the needs of small, community-based museums, it has become a noted model of results-oriented collaboration for traveling exhibitions. The reasons CERA has grown and thrived for over sixteen years are:

- 1) CERA has a core group of committed museums that serve as a "focus group," and meet regularly to clearly state their needs and contribute their talents.
- 2) The museum professionals participating in CERA are willing to give their time and expertise to make the program a success—each museum contributes to the program.
- 3) CERA has a concise and well-conceived mission statement and strategic plan, as well as clear, written documents outlining participation.
- 4) Supportive partners realize the value of CERA and work with the organization to develop mutually beneficial traveling exhibitions and programs.

Together the CERA Associates and staff will continue to work to inspire creative thought and provide communities with engaging, quality traveling exhibitions. As small museums continue to undergo dramatic change, the work CERA does to provide cultural and educational opportunities to Californians from all walks of life is even more critical. I hope that CERA's work will provide motivation and a model for other small museums to realize that there is strength in numbers, and that they can work together to produce successful traveling exhibition collaborations.

"Together the CERA Associates and staff will continue to work to inspire creative thought and provide communities with engaging, quality traveling exhibitions."



Arthurdale: "Eleanor's Little Village"

by Amanda Griffith

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The good deeds that Eleanor Roosevelt performed during her lifetime are innumerable. As First Lady she championed civil rights and sought to help the underprivileged throughout the country. Reminders of her compassion can be found in cities across the nation. Arthurdale, West Virginia, is proud to be one of the lucky communities to have been connected to such a remarkable woman.

In 1934, the federal government established Arthurdale as the first national New Deal Subsistence Homestead Community after an eye-opening visit Mrs. Roosevelt made to West Virginia in August of 1933. She traveled to Scott's Run, located outside of Morgantown, and saw the deplorable conditions in which the coal miners of that area lived. Affected by the people and sites she saw in Scott's Run, Mrs. Roosevelt returned to Washington determined to help the deprived families any way she could. Her solution came through Title II, Section 208 of the National Industrial Recovery Act, which provided \$25 million to establish communities for destitute farm and industrial workers. As a result of the project, Arthurdale provided homes, employment, and restored the dreams of 165 families.

The government officially left Arthurdale in 1947, at which time all of the homes and governmental buildings were sold into private ownership. By 1984 many of the community buildings had fallen into disrepair. That year, Arthurdale celebrated the 50th anniversary of its homesteading. The preservation initiatives of that celebration resulted in the establishment of Arthurdale Heritage, Inc., a non-profit organization that is devoted to preserving the unique history of Arthurdale.

The AHI New Deal Homestead Museum is comprised of five restored historic buildings including the original governmental Administration Building, the Forge, the Cooperative Filling Station, and the Community Center Hall. Visitors can also relive the 1930s and 1940s in the E-15 Homestead Museum, an original home built in 1936.



The Arthurdale Forge

**"In its time as a government-run
community,
the project received
numerous criticisms.**

**Critics called its cooperative
ventures too socialist,
and socialists complained the
project was too wasteful."**



Interior of the Administration Building

AHI's main objective is to educate the residents of Arthurdale and the general public about the heritage of Arthurdale. In its time as a government-run community, the project received numerous criticisms. Critics called its cooperative ventures too socialist, and socialists complained the project was too wasteful. The government could not find companies to locate in the factory to provide employment for the homesteaders. Congressmen disapproved of Mrs. Roosevelt's involvement in the project and the money being spent like "drunken sailors." Problems with communication and lack of coordination on the part of Mrs. Roosevelt, Franklin Roosevelt's aid Louis Howe, and the project directors added to the cost of homes. The first homesteads were prefabricated cottages, not suited for winters in West Virginia. When the homes arrived in Arthurdale to be assembled, they were too small for the foundations, which had already been completed. Adding to the mounting costs, Mrs. Roosevelt insisted all homes be equipped with modern conveniences such as indoor plumbing, electricity, and refrigerators—the infrastructure for which was not available to most rural citizens in the 1930s. But while government officials fought over many issues — the amount of money being spent on the project, the companies chosen to provide employment in the factory, and the influence of Mrs. Roosevelt over the

homesteaders — the residents of the community counted their blessings for their new-found chance at life. Her efforts to help the residents of the community are still appreciated seventy years later.

Like most small museums, AHI faces daily challenges related to operational expenses and lack of staff. The AHI Museum staff consists solely of an Executive Director, who manages the administrative aspects of the organization in addition to the curatorial duties of the museum. AHI receives no direct county or state funding and relies greatly on fundraisers and donations for its continuance. AHI does have a dedicated group of community volunteers who have made outstanding efforts in the preservation of Arthurdale over the past twenty years. Because of these exceptional volunteer efforts, AHI received an Albert B. Corey Award from the American Association of State and Local History in 1989. Volunteers are directly or indirectly responsible for approximately seventy percent of the organization's annual revenue, generated through monthly fundraisers, two annual festivals, and various community events.

Despite its small nature, AHI continues to make strides in its tourism and promotional efforts. It is one of four major



sites in the From Frontiers to Mountaineers heritage tourism program in northern West Virginia that seeks to promote the cultural heritage in eight counties of the state. AHI has seen an annual increase in tourists to the museum and believes the growth will only continue. Through a Save America's Treasures Grant, the original Arthurdale Schools are being stabilized in preparation for restoration. AHI hopes to utilize the school buildings to operate a New Deal research center as well as create additional exhibit space for the New Deal Homestead Museum.

Another challenge for AHI is educating the public about the importance of the New Deal and the preservation of our unique community. AHI has an archives and manuscript collection, photograph collection, library, and museum artifact collection, all of which help document the rich history of Arthurdale and convey it to visitors as well as Arthurdale residents. AHI is a Partner in Education with the community's elementary school and through this partnership, each year local students visit the museum to learn about the history of Arthurdale. Each grade has a different focus on the community's history. Some study the agricultural aspect of the community, while others study the progressive educational programs of the 1930s. AHI believes these visits are integral to our continued existence because they educate the younger generations about life during the 1930s and 1940s. Through these yearly visits, AHI hopes to give the students a greater appreciation for their heritage and inspire them to take part in the efforts to preserve the community for future generations. We hope that by making children stewards of Arthurdale's history, the legacy of Eleanor Roosevelt will continue for generations to come.



Eleanor Roosevelt handing out diplomas at the 1939 Arthurdale High School graduation

Arthurdale is located 16 miles from Morgantown on Route 7 East. For more information please contact AHI's office at 304-864-3959. Museum hours are 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Monday-Friday year round, 12 to 5 p.m. Saturdays, and 2 to 5 p.m. on Sundays from May 1 to October 31.



Valley Elementary students touring the E-15 Homestead

"Volunteers are directly or indirectly responsible for approximately seventy percent of the organization's annual revenue, generated through monthly fundraisers, two annual festivals, and various community events."



HELP is on the Way:

A Texas Pilot Program Has Lessons For Small Museums

by Joyce Cheney and
Edana McSweeney

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independent exhibit developer
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The Hands-on Experiential Learning Project (HELP) was created by the Mid-America Arts Alliance (M-AAA) in 2000 to identify and address the professional development needs of small and midsize museums through a combination of research, on-site training, and traveling exhibits.

Founded in 1972 and based in Kansas City, Missouri, M-AAA is a private, nonprofit organization that enriches communities with cultural experiences. In 2000, M-AAA decided to expand its support to small museums by starting a program that paired traveling exhibits with training opportunities. "We have been working to help small museums bring in quality exhibits for three decades, so we've been aware of a lack of quality training opportunities for those institutions," said Mary Kennedy McCabe, executive director of Mid-America Arts Alliance.

McCabe and her team organized a pilot project, consisting of needs research conducted in 2000-2001, followed by four years of training for eighteen small Texas museums. The research phase was funded by the Texas Commission on the Arts and conducted by M-AAA in partnership with the Texas Association of Museums (TAM). This research was the basis for the training phase as it helped to identify obstacles to training including museums' geographic isolation, lack of funding, and "lean staffing." More than half of the museums reported that they would have to close their museums in order to attend training off-site.

**"HELP—the Hands-on Experiential Learning Project—
provides customized, on-site training to institutions
without disrupting daily museum operations
or community access."**

In 2002, M-AAA began the training component of the project and HELP—the Hands-on Experiential Learning Project—began. HELP provides customized, on-site training to institutions without disrupting daily museum operations or community access. It builds on a predecessor Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS)-funded project in Utah that found success in using traveling exhibits as an experiential training model.

In the Texas HELP pilot, each participating museum hosts one traveling exhibit a year, chosen from a selection offered by M-AAA's exhibit-touring arm, ExhibitsUSA. Exhibits are selected expressly for small museums and share several common characteristics. They incorporate two- and three-dimensional objects; encompass topics that easily fit for history and art museums alike; elicit broad public appeal; provide opportunities for educational, marketing, and program activities; fit in small galleries; and require limited security. HELP exhibits feature Mexican folk art, photographs of the Grand Old Opry, artist's birdhouses, aprons, contemporary rag rugs, 1930s rodeo photographs, and photos of a WWII fighter squadron.

Every year, a consultant conducts at least two on-site visits with each museum. These meetings are held with museum staff, volunteers and board members, when applicable, and focus on goal-setting and achievement in one of five areas: public relations/marketing; public programming; fundraising/grant



writing; volunteerism; and exhibit design. Many participating museums host their first traveling exhibit through HELP. They learn the basics of crating, handling, condition reporting, shipping and installation.

"In addition to providing new skills, HELP fosters regional resource-sharing museum networks among participating museums through meetings and a dedicated group listserv."

In addition to providing new skills, HELP fosters regional resource-sharing museum networks among participating museums through meetings and a dedicated group listserv. Museums pay a small annual fee for the program, plus partial shipping expenses for the exhibits. Museums apply for and receive annual grants that provide them with the opportunity to try something new in their training area of focus.

Museum staffers meet in regional groups for annual two-day meetings, to discuss last year's successes and accomplishments and to learn about the coming year's training topic and new exhibits. Staffs then go back to their boards, volunteers and others to draft their own goals for the year's focus area.

Goal-setting and evaluation are key components in the HELP program, says HELP co-director Edana McSweeney. "Museums are asked to set goals and share their progress with the group throughout the year on the listserv. At the annual meeting, museums are asked to provide the facts—what worked, what didn't, and how they plan to extend this learning in to future projects." M-AAA collects annual statistics on each museum including operating budgets and museum visitation, as well as specifics on each training area of focus. At the end of four years, each museum will receive a detailed account of their progress through the program.

During the consultants' first visit to each museum, they help museum teams solidify their museum-specific goals, objectives and strategies. According to Brian Crockett, HELP co-director, local control is key. "We need to deliver [training] to them as locally-applicable as we possibly can. By that I mean they need to own it, direct it, and figure out—with the consultant's help—where they most need improvement."

Though all the museums in one region focus on the same area of training, each museum's experience is

different. For example, in a region focused on volunteerism, one museum concentrated on attracting new volunteers, while another improved volunteer orientation, recognition and retention. With plans to eventually offer HELP to museums throughout its entire six-state region, M-AAA has completed needs research among small Nebraska museums and libraries. The Nebraska research identified needs for training on fundraising, public programming, long-range planning, collections management, computer/technology, administration/finance, board management, and volunteerism. In addition, the research uncovered a specific need for the trustees of the state's small cultural organizations to be trained in the areas of strategic planning, fundraising, finance and legal issues for nonprofit organizations. Research is currently under way in Arkansas, including written surveys, and telephone and on-site interviews.

2005 is Year Three of HELP's four-year Texas pilot. As HELP continues to expand to new areas, training will continue beyond the initial four years in the states already served. Crockett sums up the program's benefits: "HELP has allowed participant museums to set their sights on a level of museum excellence and professionalism that heretofore seemed out of their reach."

HELP, a program of Mid-America Arts Alliance in partnership with the Texas Association of Museums, is made possible through the combined vision and generosity of The Brown Foundation, Inc., of Houston; The Don and Sybil Harrington Foundation; Houston Endowment, Inc.; The Meadows Foundation; the Texas Commission on the Arts; and the Institute of Museum and Library Services, a federal agency that fosters innovation, leadership, and a lifetime of learning.

To learn more about HELP and to read about each museum's progress, go to www.maaa.org/help.

HELP at the Depot: How one small Texas museum got help

The Depot Museum, Henderson, TX

The Depot Museum pursues a mission to preserve Rusk County's material and cultural heritage, with special emphasis on preserving folk arts. Opened in 1979, the Depot Museum consists of eight historical structures, a children's hands-on Discovery Center, and a picnic pavilion. Visitors experience the county's history through a video, displays of artifacts, and models of institutions of the past (school, beauty shop, country store, syrup mill, doctor's



"HELP has allowed participant museums to set their sights on a level of museum excellence and professionalism that heretofore seemed out of their reach."

office, depot, and dogtrot home). The Depot Museum sponsors Folk Art Day and the Heritage Syrup Festival as part of its Folk Life Preservation Project.

Year One Exhibit: *Rags to Riches, Handcrafted Rugs*

Goal: Focusing on public programming to increase the public's knowledge of rag rugs, the museum emphasized rugs on their Web site, used new display methods for the rug exhibit, and hosted a juried rug-making contest and a family day exhibit opening event with a storyteller and rug-weaving demonstrations. They offered rug-making workshops, including one by a national figure, attracting new visitors and volunteers. New promotional strategies included targeted mailings, personal invitations, and broader media advertising.

Year Two Exhibit: *Apron Strings, Ties to the Past*

Goal: Focusing on exhibit design as their area of training in year two, the Depot Museum took advantage of the *Apron Strings* exhibit to spark new interest from the community in the museum and its events by incorporating a local element to the exhibit: collecting aprons from the community, and finding sponsors for the exhibit via local businesses. Since they are primarily a local history museum, they made a concerted effort to use items from their collection to display with the exhibit and to interpret the content in a way more appropriate to a history museum, and less like a fine arts museum.

Other Year Two "successful firsts" included hosting a speaker in conjunction with an exhibit: having an opening reception complete with local musicians and an apron fashion show; using new marketing techniques, including printing rack cards and advertising in the local newspaper; creating a website and posting press releases on it; receiving a grant for a speaker; and attracting new volunteers as a result of an exhibit.

Marketing and PR are the focus for Year Three. Museum staff and volunteers will work with a program consultant to design a new museum brochure, create a press kit, host and publicize a fundraising event, and improve their web site and niche marketing.

How else does M-AAA support small and mid-sized museums?

The Mid-America Arts Alliance is a private, nonprofit organization in partnership with the state arts agencies of Arkansas, Kansas, Missouri, Nebraska, Oklahoma and Texas, the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), and the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH). Founded in 1972, M-AAA enriches communities with cultural experiences by supporting professional development, exhibits, performances and related activities.

The M-AAA work described below is made possible through collaboration and support from many organizations in addition to those listed here. To learn more, check www.M-AAA.org. All US regions have organizations similar to M-AAA. To find others, check www.usregionalarts.org

ExhibitsUSA (EUSA), founded in 1988, annually offers more than 50 diverse art and humanities exhibits to museums and other exhibiting institutions nationwide. EUSA's mission is to create access to an array of arts and humanities experiences, nurture the understanding of diverse cultures and art forms, and encourage the expanding depth and breadth of cultural life in local communities. EUSA helps communities bring in new exhibits, or get their own exhibits on the road.

NEH on the Road provides opportunities for communities of all sizes to host some of the most popular exhibits funded by the NEH. Each exhibit, based on a larger NEH-funded project, has been scaled for small to midsize museums and is available at very affordable fees. Exhibits offered during 2005 and 2006 include:

- *Heroes of the Sky: Adventures in Early Flight*
- *Asian Games: The Art of Contest*
- *Wrapped in Pride: Ghanaian Kente and African American Identity*
- *Farm Life: A Century of Change for Farm Families and Their Neighbors*

For more information on these exhibits, visit the M-AAA website at www.mmaa.org.



Adapt, Adopt and Improve: Reinstalling the Mitchell Museum of the American Indian

by Janice Klein

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From the Fall of 1989 to the Spring of 1999 I worked in the Anthropology Department of the Field Museum in Chicago. Given the Museum's structure, I was only peripherally involved with exhibits. I did know that there were exhibit developers, exhibit content specialists, 2-D and 3-D exhibit designers, exhibit fabricators, exhibit lighting specialists and exhibit installers. I also knew that exhibits cost a lot of money.

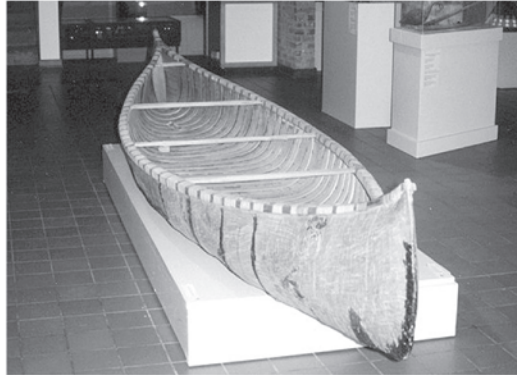
In May 1999 I took over as Director of the Mitchell Museum of the American Indian, and, in addition to all my other duties I became the exhibit developer, exhibit content specialist, 2-D and 3-D exhibit designer, exhibit fabricator, exhibit lighting specialist and exhibit installer. And I didn't have a lot of money.

The Mitchell Museum is part of Kendall College, a small liberal arts and professional studies college that stands in the shadow of Northwestern University in the Chicago North Shore suburb of Evanston. It has approximately 10,000 square feet of exhibit space and two permanent staff members, the Curator of Education and me, the Director. The collection consists of approximately 8,000 objects that represent the history, culture and art of the Native peoples of North America. These range from fabric and skin clothing and bags to basketry to low-fired pottery to stone carvings. In 1999 the Museum's total budget was \$129,000, including two salaries and utilities. It is now a slightly more realistic \$200,000.

Because of major repairs to the physical plant, the Museum was actually closed during the first four months of my tenure. The repairs required—but also gave us the opportunity—to completely reinstall the permanent exhibits on the first floor. When we reopened we also began a schedule of changing exhibits, using both the second floor gallery and our first floor "Craft Room." While this article focuses on the permanent galleries, we have continued to use these techniques for our temporary exhibits and over the last five years have installed more than fifteen different temporary exhibits in these spaces, all at very minimal cost.

We first assessed our needs and evaluated our resources. Our primary need was, of course, to support our mission. The founding donor's purpose was two-fold. First, he wanted the collection, which included many exceptionally fine objects, to be available to "his" community





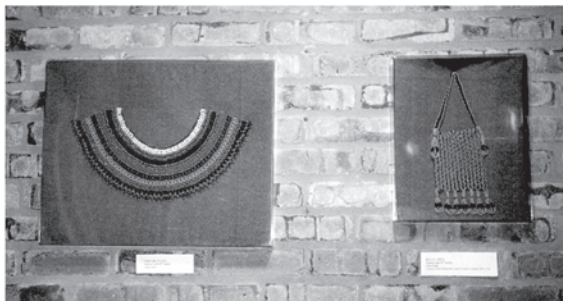
of Evanston. Secondly, he wanted children to be able to appreciate and understand the wonders of the Native cultures of North America.

Of our 10,000 annual visitors, almost 50% are school children on field trips. Another 25% consists of families with one or more children. Because of this we decided that all objects needed to be protected inside closed cases. (As with all “absolutes” in a small museum, we’ve had to make exceptions to that on occasion, the main example being our full-sized canoe, which is located immediately adjacent to the front desk where there is always a volunteer or staff member.) We needed a clear, understandable layout with good sight lines for the docents that guided school tours. We knew we needed more graphics, most importantly maps. We also wanted to rest some of the objects that had been on display for almost 20 years, as well as increase the overall number of objects available to the public.

We then looked at our resources. The Museum has over 8,000 objects, but had no comprehensive database or easily usable card catalogue. Objects were densely stored in drawers by type (e.g., dolls, baskets, and textiles). We had four wall cases, four large standing cases and one table case, as well as an odd assortment of wooden vitrine bases and plexi tops, most of which did not match. There were also “left-overs” from previous exhibits, including plexi and metal mounts, human forms and a wide variety of hardware. One of our members had donated \$5,000 for the construction of new cases, but had also designated the maker, who, unfortunately, knew how to make cases for trade shows, not museums. We also had a number of enthusiastic volunteers. And we had seven weeks from the end of construction for installation.

So here’s what we did. Following intensive meetings with the docents about exhibit content and a physical review of the collections, a basic gallery layout was developed. We used the \$5,000 to buy plexi lids for all the available vitrine bases and limited the purchase of new cases to just two. The trade-show inspired design of these two cases was probably our biggest mistake, but we have managed to work around the major problems (primarily that they open only at one end and have no shelves, despite their six foot plus height). In the last five years we have also been extremely fortunate to benefit from the generosity of some of our larger sister institutions, including the Chicago Historical Society and the Terra Museum of American Art. The gift of “old” vitrines from past temporary exhibits has doubled the number of cases we have available for both permanent and temporary exhibits.





We hired a graphic design company to create maps for the permanent exhibits, promising ourselves (and them) that more graphics, including labels, would come later.

Everything else was done in-house with volunteers, some of whom I should say were friends from within the museum profession. We lined the wall cases and some of the vitrine bottoms with fabric keyed to each gallery. We painted all of the cases a uniform color that would blend with our brick walls. Small wooden bases for objects were either painted to match the cases or covered with the appropriate fabric. We used a number of the “base-less” plexi vitrine tops as wall mounts. Old plexi mounts became both supports and shelves. We also used fabric-covered foamcor.



Mounting materials included both common items like:

- wooden dowels (which could be covered with acid-free tissue)
- monofilament
- velcro
- brass L-pins covered with plastic tubing;

and somewhat-unusual items like:

- cup hooks (for ceiling mounts for quilts)
- burlap and Christmas tree ornament hooks (for hanging ice-fishing decoys)
- a plastic shower curtain (used *outside* a case as a backdrop-divider).

We decided to use computer-generated paper labels. While these do not have a particularly long life, they are easily replaced and also easily revised. Depending on the backdrop we used either pushpins or Scotch® brand Wall Mounting Tabs to secure them. We back some of the labels with colored paper. We have also found that visitors are more likely to read text labels that are outside the cases rather than inside. We are now rethinking some of our labeling methods, and begun framing, laminating and, yes, using our outside graphic design company.

The total reinstallation of 10,000 square feet took seven weeks and, in addition to the \$5,000 used for cases, cost \$1,800. We have continued to use many of these methods in our temporary exhibits, with each new installation costing between \$200 and \$500 for background fabric and mounting materials. Piecing together materials and assistance—from colleagues, members and volunteers—not only allowed us to complete the renovation and reopen the museum to the public on time, but also makes it possible for us to pursue an active exhibits program for minimum cost.



technically speaking...

Playas . . . Gems of the Plains

A Traveling Exhibit Project of the Northwest Texas Museum Association

by Paul Katz, Ph.D.

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Playas . . . Gems of the Plains received the Excellence in Exhibition award in 2004. This traveling exhibit was designed by and for a consortium of small museums. Its opening in January 2003 at the first of nineteen venues was the culmination of ten years of planning, fundraising and especially, commitment.

The small museums of the region wanted a traveling exhibit

The geographic area represented by the Northwest Texas Museum Association (NWTMA) includes forty-four Texas counties, twenty-six in the Texas Panhandle region and eighteen in the Texas South Plains immediately south of the Panhandle. There are more than sixty museums in these forty-four counties. Most are small, county history museums. There are only two large metropolitan areas, one in each region: Amarillo in the Panhandle and Lubbock in the South Plains, both with populations of about 175,000. The only large museums in the NWTMA constituency are located in these two metropolitan areas.

A traveling exhibit appeared consistently at the top of all “want and need” lists, based on questionnaires sent to museums throughout the region. The Panhandle Museum Resource Sharing Consortium (PMRSC) was established in 1995 in part to provide just this type of project, and its last activity before disbanding three years later was to decide on a topic and contract for its design. Responsibility for a traveling exhibit project was subsequently assumed by the NWTMA.

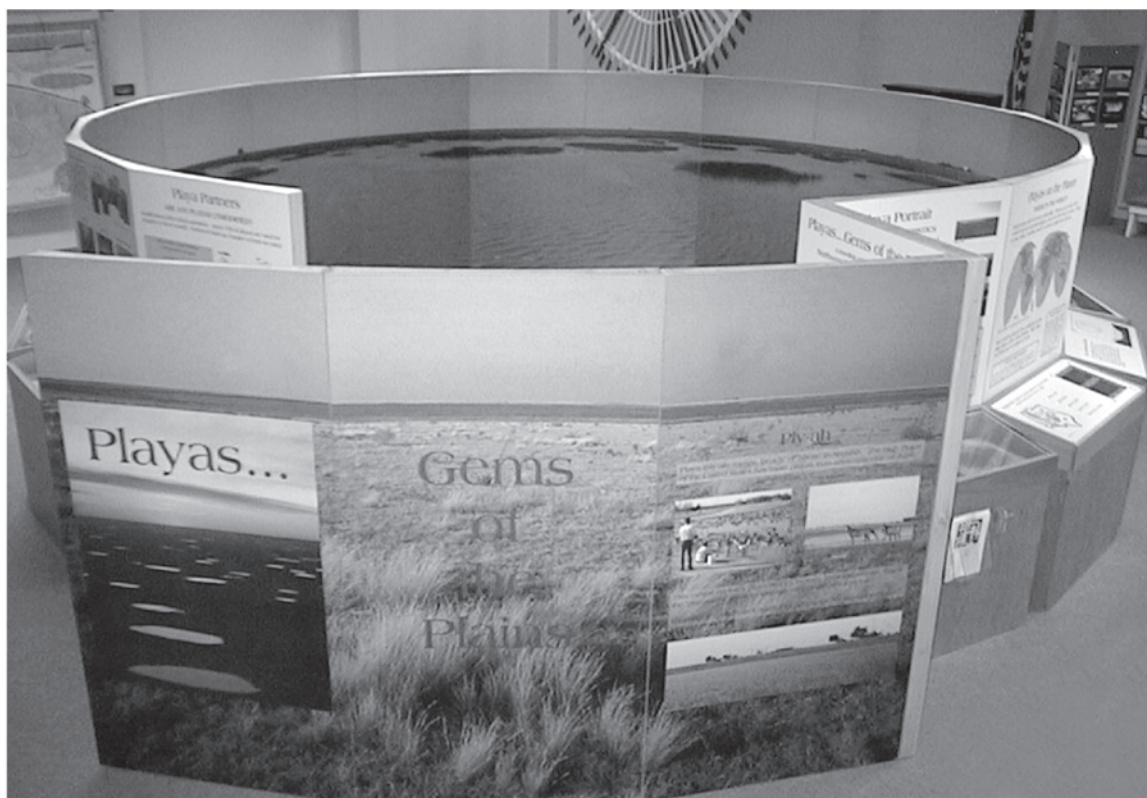
The exhibit is about something familiar

It was agreed from the start that the topic of the exhibit should attract and inform the local residents and school classes as well as the traveling public. The PMRSC Traveling Exhibit Committee first focused on water as a general topic of interest and importance to the entire High Plains region. The playa lake was selected over the Ogallala Aquifer and the Canadian River as the specific topic of the exhibit. Playa lakes are depressions on the landscape that are generally round and small, averaging less than thirty acres. They have clay-lined basins and fill with water periodically, mostly from precipitation. Playa lakes are formed through a combination of natural processes, most involving wind and water.

The playa lake is ubiquitous on the High Plains, and there are more than 20,000 in northwestern Texas alone. Playa lakes also occur in eastern New Mexico, southeastern Colorado, western Nebraska, southwestern Kansas, and western Oklahoma. It is also almost unique to the High Plains region, with about ninety-six percent of the world's playas found in this area. The region's climate and geology encourages their growth. Occasional rains loosen the ground in small depressions. Strong winds pick up the loose soil. Over time, wind scours the playa surface, making it deeper and larger.

During the wet season, playa lakes are filled with water. From the air, the round playa lakes actually look like jewels or gems as they sparkle in the sun. They are also just as precious to the High Plains region, providing the primary recharge into the Ogallala aquifer and serving as a major wildlife habitat.

Despite the ubiquity of these natural features across the High Plains, many—perhaps most—residents do not appreciate them. Landowners are actively antagonistic to the feature, which interrupts their fields. Wetland habitat regulations restrict their freedom to develop their land. The content of the exhibit grew to something approaching ‘everything you want to know about playa lakes...and more.’ With a subject that is little-known and less understood, you cannot go too far wrong including a wide variety of topics about the subject.



"The content of the exhibit grew to something approaching 'everything you want to know about playa lakes...and more.'"

The 'Playarama'

Obviously including a playa lake in the exhibit would be difficult. We did the next best thing, however, in making the whole exhibit look like a playa lake. The exhibit is designed to be viewed in the round, like a playa lake. Even the fifteen display boxes, fastened to the front of the vertical panels, mimic the raised circumferential edge of a playa lake. Visitors walk around twenty panels covering a wide range of topics about playas. The exhibit is designed so that there is a gap in the circle between the last panel and first, effortlessly leading the visitor into the inside of the circle and the 360° panoramic photograph of the playa mounted on the back of the topical panels. Here they can reflect on what they have learned or participate in an educational program.

The twenty panels of the exhibit have a definite order to them. The first three are introductory. Then there are groups of panels devoted to different topics: the physical aspects of playa lakes (six panels); natural history (three panels); history (two panels); current uses and case studies (two panels); art (two panels); and a concluding panel providing sources for more information. The early panels inform the visitor about playas, and the later ones are organized chronologically from the past, through the present, and into the future. The topic grouping has a practical aspect as well, in that the exhibit can be separated into different combinations of panels to conform to the exhibit space of the host museum.



The exhibit 'fits' into most, if not all, of the regional museums

Most of the museums are small. They do have some space allocated for traveling exhibits, but these areas and configurations are extremely variable. From the beginning, the exhibit was designed to be flexible. Its twenty panels can be connected in a circle in the middle of a room if space permits, or subdivided into smaller units which can free stand in islands or line a wall. Related topics always stay together to form subgroupings of the whole subject that are independent, consistent and intelligible.

The free-standing design recognizes the fact that floor outlets are rare in small county museums, and that taped extension cords snaking across the floor to a wall outlet are both unsightly and hazardous. Four interactive quizzes and an audio cabinet providing playa sounds are battery powered. The batteries are continuously charged by "solar" panels built into the exhibit which draw energy from the overhead interior lighting.

Ideally, the full circle floor plan requires 1,000 square feet of space, or a room at least 31' x 31'. This provides four feet of space outside the display boxes, sufficient for visitors in wheelchairs.

There are no seats as an integral part of the exhibit, but there is a seating area designed into it. This is the 19' diameter circle inside the playarama, where school classes can sit on the floor, in the middle of a playa lake, listening to the sounds of a wetland environment that their generation will hopefully restore in great numbers.

Regardless of the final floor plan (full circle or some combination of arcs and islands), the introductory panels



with the title are always set up facing the entrance to the exhibit space. These three are designed to move the visitor to the right, and the rest of the panels logically follow as the topics present themselves, group by group.



Art and artifacts

We have included actual prehistoric artifacts found at a playa, and a soil core extracted from a playa. There are 110 color photographs of playas and their inhabitants, eight maps, eight original color graphics, one three-dimensional model, and four button-and-light interactive games. In addition to the geology, geography, natural history, and culture history aspects of playa lakes, we have presented a variety of artistic expressions in as many media as we could gather. There are two examples of literature: a text passage and an original poem. There are reproductions of two pastel paintings, a contemporary color photographic montage, and an historic (1908) silver nitrate black-and-white photograph. There are two artistic playa photographs, and a picture of metal cutouts beside a playa. Four original works were commissioned for the exhibit: a turned wooden bowl, a ceramic plate, a metal sculpture and a painted fabric banner.

All are sturdy items which can handle variations in light, heat and humidity. All are securely mounted inside display boxes which are attached to the front of vertical panels, and these boxes are covered with plexiglass screwed to the box. Host museums must agree to provide a climate-controlled exhibit space and to keep the exhibit in view of a staff member at all times that the museum is open to the public.

Nuts and bolts

Because *Playas* is a traveling exhibit, there was concern about the nature and method of packaging the various exhibit components. Zippered canvas bags lined with foam



were custom made to fit each panel, display box, base and pedestal. No component is heavy, and any piece can be carried by two persons. All components fit tightly into a trailer purchased to travel the exhibit. The staff of the design and production firm, PRIAM, are the only people who handle the exhibit. In this manner, it moves from venue to venue with a minimum of distress. Now in its third year of travel, it has sustained only minor scratches. Plans are currently underway to travel it for three more years, before it retires to a permanent venue in the Texas Panhandle.

Only one tool is required for assembly, an Allen wrench, which locks adjacent panels together at the top and bottom with a hook-and-cam device. The display boxes and the bases are fastened together finger tight with bolts and wing nuts. The panels are hooked onto the back of the display box and base unit with wooden wedges, and stability is achieved by gravity and the locking of adjacent panels. Assembly and disassembly is quick and easy, taking about three hours by the now very experienced PRIAM crew.

Audience and information

The intended audiences include elementary, middle, and high school students, their teachers, local residents, playa lake owners, and the small museum host. The content never "talks down" to the audiences; and the design encourages learning with many colorful photographs, graphics, and interactive games.

There are four levels of information on the panels. A visitor can quickly skim the exhibit by reading the major heading and subheadings on each panel. Even this minimum will provide information about structure, function, number, age, habitat, seasonality, history, uses, abuse, artistic

representations and where to go for more information. Several blocks of copy on the vertical panels provide more detailed information. Attached to the bottom of the fifteen panels are display boxes, expanding the panel topic with graphics, models, artifacts and interactive games. Most of the panels have a "Did You Know?" box, with several factoids relating to the panel topic. Finally, there are literature boxes on the final panel, providing information or sources for the most seriously interested visitor.

Educational material

An educator was hired by the project to develop teacher and student activities specific to the subtopics within the exhibit. In addition, an activity book, colorful poster and videotape are provided by the Playa Lakes Joint Venture (PLJV), one of the project's major sponsors. These convey general information about playa lakes.

Visitors to the exhibit are given a pamphlet containing information about the project, the exhibit and the tour schedule. Attached to Panel #5 is a sheet with two puzzles to solve while moving through the exhibit; this provides positive reinforcement and increases visitor involvement. There are three literature boxes attached to the last panel with different information sheets for visitors to take away.

The exhibit is affordable

There is no rental fee for the exhibit. Sufficient funds have been raised to underwrite insurance, major maintenance and all travel expenses. The only direct cost to a host museum is their annual dues (~ \$40) to the NWTMA; only members in good standing can obtain this exhibit. Indirect costs, the only expenses that are borne by the host, include local publicity; working with the schools to bring in classes; copying the educational material for teachers and the takeaway literature to the visitors; and cleaning the laminated panels and plexiglass surfaces of the display boxes.

Because of the volunteer nature of the Northwest Texas Museum Association, no member has to do anything but receive and enjoy the exhibit

The exhibit was designed and its copy written under a contract let by the Panhandle Museum Resource Sharing Consortium, with funds provided by the Amarillo Area Foundation. When the Northwest Texas Museum Association assumed responsibility for the project, another contract was let to raise all funds needed to first build, and then travel, the exhibit. PRIAM of Panhandle, Texas has been the contractor for this project from the beginning. PRIAM





first obtained a challenge grant from the Playa Lakes Joint Venture, a consortium of federal and state agencies and private partners. The balance of the production funds from the Amarillo Area Foundation. A final grant from the private Meadows Foundation started the exhibit on its three-year journey around the High Plains region.

PRIAM consists of only three people: Dr. Susana Katz, an archaeologist, conducted the research and wrote the copy; Dr. Paul Katz, a small museum director and curator, handles project administration and logistics; and James Williams, an architect, designed and produced the exhibit. Only one consultant, an environment educator, was hired from the outside. The exhibit was built in a local cabinet shop, the graphics were printed by a local blueprint company, and the travel bags were fabricated by a local canvas company.

Part of the service provided by PRIAM is the delivery, installation and disassembly of the exhibit. This has a real advantage with respect to maintenance and longevity. Since PRIAM also designed and built the exhibit, their hands-on involvement during its travels will extend the life of the exhibit significantly.

A trailer has been purchased to transport the exhibit from venue to venue. While the exhibit is being shown, the trailer serves as a storage facility for the foam-lined canvas cases custom made for the fifty pieces of the exhibit. The name of the exhibit is painted on the sides of the trailer, providing "billboard" advertising for the exhibit if the trailer is parked outside the host museum.

Publicity posters are provided free of charge. PRIAM lends masters of the exhibit-specific educational material and the visitor handouts for reproduction by the host. A number of PLJV activity books and playa posters are offered for discretionary distribution. A VCR/TV is provided to play the PLJV audio tape. A CD player and speakers are included to play the playa sounds. Even the cleaning supplies are provided, just to make sure that the proper plexiglass cleaning product is used.

Evaluation

Each host museum director is asked to complete an evaluation form, on which audience data is summarized and questions about visitor and staff reactions are posed. All intended audiences have reacted positively to the exhibit. The twelve evaluation forms completed to date indicate that the museum, the teachers, and the local visitors have enjoyed looking at the exhibit and have learned from it. Attendance during the two months of showing has averaged about 900 at each venue, a significant number of visitors for a small museum in our region.

Peer evaluation came in the form of a design award from the Texas Association of Museums, a 2003 Certificate of Commendation from the American Association for State and Local History, and the 2004 Excellence in Exhibition award.





Museum Professionals at the Crossroads: Personal Defining Moments

by Eugene Dillenburg

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at The Science Museum
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The theme of this year's AAM conference is "A Defining Moment: Museums at a Crossroads." And there is no question that our institutions face many challenges: funding, community relations, dealing with controversy, and finding relevance. The paths we take will define our profession for years to come.

What is true for the profession is also true for the professionals. As individuals, each of us encounters numerous crossroads as we move along our career paths. What are the defining moments that tell us we're on the right track, or the warning signs that something is amiss?

"I contacted a number of colleagues—
friends and co-workers, students and associates—
and asked them if they too had had experiences
which helped define their exhibit careers."

Looking back over my own career, I can recognize several moments which changed my understanding of museums or the museum profession. Last summer, I contacted a number of colleagues—friends and co-workers, students and associates—and asked them if they too had had experiences which helped define their exhibit careers. At the time I had hoped to pull together a session for AAM, but then my boss had this crazy idea that I should actually meet my deadlines, so it never happened. But the stories were interesting, so I present a collection here. Perhaps you'll recognize yourself in the experience of another. It helps to know that we're not alone, and it's useful to gather whatever guidance we can as we navigate our own personal crossroads.

Getting in

Many defining moments deal with the decision to get into the museum field in the first place. Some of us got started on our paths in school. **Lindsay Hannah**, student in the Museum Studies program at Michigan State University, describes attending a panel discussion of the *Teen Chicago* exhibit at The Chicago Historical Society. Listening to the professional discuss the exhibit, Lindsay says, "I realized that I could work in museums, that I could fit in, be comfortable and happy. This was an amazing feeling especially since I am graduated and have felt more lost and overwhelmed coming out of school than I did going in. All of the majors that I looked into were interesting, but did not seem to fit me, I couldn't really see me and my personality working in the[se] environments.... [The experience showed me] that I am capable of having a career, liking it and possibly being good at it."



Kris Nesbitt, former exhibit developer and currently teaching English in Turkey, remembers "a high school art history project to curate a pretend thematic art exhibit and write a catalog. I made mine geared towards children and made the guide and labels child-centered. This experience—a joy—led me to seek an internship in a museum education department and I started working on kid-friendly exhibits."



Other people came to exhibits through more round-about means. **Barb Becker**, independent exhibit developer, tells a story of the career change that brought her to museums. “I had been freelancing for about a year. My main client was an advertising agency (writing travel brochures); while I also hung around the edges of the local museums and courted exhibit professionals, feeling gloomy about the prospects of ever being able to do exclusively exhibit work. During this period, I went to Kenya to take part in a research opportunity and work in the Kenya National Museum. On my flight back, I saw with clarity that come what may, I had to quit the advertising job and focus on the museum work. Within two months of my return and giving up of advertising, the Field Museum bird hall renovation project arose, and *Animal Kingdom* was born.”

“Some of us had defining moments
very early on in our careers.”

Early experiences

Some of us had defining moments very early on in our careers. I remember my own very first exhibit project: updating the 60-year-old labels for some Chinese statuary at The Field Museum. Figuring that museums are academic and authoritative, I wrote long, dense, erudite (or pseudo-erudite) text. My boss took one look at the draft, tightened her lips, and said, “let’s run this by the editor.” A couple weeks later, the copy came back, unrecognizable—friendly, conversational, accessible. Oh!, I thought, so *that’s* what they want! I immediately changed my attitude toward exhibits and museums.



Benjamin Filene, senior exhibit developer at The Minnesota History Center, had his baptism by fire on a much bigger project. “My first real job was exhibit curator at the Outagamie County Historical Society (Appleton, WI). The director had

decided to have a community-based exhibit about holiday celebrations, opening in time for the December season. The idea was to turn over part of the gallery to six different local ethnic groups and let them do whatever they wanted. When I arrived... the groups were completely at sea, unsure how to make an exhibit yet wanting to come out with a good product.

“I decided to hold meetings with each of the groups separately and get a feel for the issues they were facing. The meeting with the Jewish group was particularly tense. They had been asked to prepare a display about Hanukkah, and they couldn’t agree on how to get started. After a lot of failed facilitation on my part, I asked the group what they felt was holding them back. Finally the elder member of the group exploded, ‘The problem is that Hanukkah is a two-bit holiday! It’s not what we would should be showing!’ The other group members nodded their heads vigorously and launched into an animated discussion about the inflation of what had once been a minor Jewish holiday. It was quickly agreed that Passover was the holiday they should feature, even if it didn’t come around until several months after December. Thrilled to see the group energized at last, I immediately agreed. That part of the exhibit came together in a snap after that. At my request, they also worked with me to create a sidebar about the fascinating issue they had raised—about the commercial and cultural pressures Christmas brought onto minorities in an overwhelmingly Christian culture.

“For me, fresh from completing my Ph.D. in American Studies, this meeting affirmed why I had chosen public history. Here was a chance to learn directly from people outside the academy and, in a relatively immediate way, give an outlet to concerns that had both historical and contemporary relevance and that, likely, most of the town’s other residents knew nothing about. The experience also taught me another lesson about community collaboration that has been affirmed in other experiences since. Community representatives want their voices to be heard, but they usually do not want to be left alone to muddle through the exhibit process. ‘Giving voice to the community’ does not mean handing over the keys to the exhibit gallery. The most successful community-based exhibits depend on active collaboration—good listening and positive actions on both sides.”

“Giving voice to the
community does not mean
handing over the keys
to the exhibit gallery.”



The impact of our work

For many of us, defining moments come when we see the impact of our work on visitors. If I may again indulge in a personal story, one of my last projects at The Field Museum was *Dinosaur Families*, a hodgepodge of four different exhibits, which I had to redevelop into a coherent whole. I carefully laid out the messages and composed the labels. During my last week at the Museum, I took a stroll through the exhibit and sat in the back, taking it all in. A mother and her young son came up to one of the final exhibit cases. She read the label aloud (yes!) and then said to her child, "See, that's what they were talking about in the other room." (YES! She gets it!)

Barbara Ceiga, independent exhibit developer, had a defining moment when working on the *Sue* dinosaur exhibit at The Field Museum. "There was considerable disagreement [on the team] over the interactive elements, especially over what kinds of handles, buttons, etc., should be used. The design folks lobbied for small, elegant fixtures, while the developers advocated larger, easy-to-manipulate ones. One day the disagreement escalated into a full-blown argument between aesthetics and accessibility. It wasn't our finest hour, but in the end, we got our large buttons, levers, and cranks.

"The episode slipped from my mind until one day several months after the exhibit had opened. I happened to be walking through the exhibit and saw a family group there. Among them was a young girl in one of those super-complicated wheelchairs. It supported every part of her contorted body, including her head, which was sharply bent over one of her shoulders. Her father (I assume) wheeled her up to one of the exhibit elements that had a lever that visitors could crank to change the color and pattern of a picture of Sue the dinosaur. He read the text to her and then lifted one of her twisted arms and placed it on the crank lever. She slowly turned the crank, making Sue green, then brown with stripes, then pink with polka dots. When her father asked which one she liked best, she made another complete revolution of the crank and stopped at the polka dots. Her eyes went from the exhibit to her father and the two of them laughed.

"Moments like these help galvanize my commitment to making sure the exhibits I work on are for everyone."



Ted Ansbacher, principal of Science Services, recalls a moment which helped him understand how exhibits work. "At the New York Hall of Science there were two exhibits side by side. One was five foam blocks that

visitors could assemble to form an arch bridge they could then walk on. The other was a structure of beams with a rope that visitors could pull, with lights along the beams that indicated the stress in each beam. These were both popular, 'interactive' exhibits, but they epitomized for me the difference between 'strong' interaction and 'weak' interaction. With the former, visitors could make meaning directly from what they saw and did with the exhibit; with the latter, no meaning (at least any intended) could be made from the direct experience, only by reading the interpretive signage (and often even not then). 'Strong' interaction is what I see as the heart of what I call the experience-based approach to exhibits; actually, I believe, at the heart of any successful exhibit."

Minda Borun of The Franklin Institute also draws her defining moments from visitors. "Every time I test exhibit prototypes with visitors, I rediscover how terrific museum visitors tend to be. Lots of them are really interesting people who are genuinely interested in learning and understanding science. When I ask them 'How could we make this prototype exhibit better?' they often come up with good suggestions which we use. As museum staff, we often get a jaundiced view of visitors because we work Monday through Friday and see masses of school children tearing around our spaces making a lot of noise and seeming to be concentrating mostly on their social relationships rather than our content. We seldom see the family audience that comes in on weekends and often does a really good job of paying attention and learning."

**"Every time I test exhibit
prototypes with visitors,
I rediscover how terrific museum
visitors tend to be."**



Dealing with controversy

As more and more exhibits tackle controversial issues, more and more exhibit professionals are finding their careers shaped by the experience. **Katrina Hase**, exhibit developer at The Science Museum of Minnesota, says, “When working on the Ethics of Stem Cell Research component, I remember going out on interviews with people prominent in the field, and then going home that night and hearing them talk on the news. I thought to myself, wow, this is really important stuff. Then, later to read the first comments roll in about the video interviews from visitors, it just really felt like, yes, this is why I’m here. We’re starting a dialogue.”

Marjorie Schwarzer, Chair of the Museum Studies Department at JFK University, remembers “1987, sitting in the Boston Children’s Museum resource center with Joanne Rizzi writing a grant for an exhibit on ‘multiculturalism.’ Joanne says, ‘This just doesn’t feel right. The exhibit *has* to include something on racism.’ I say (as I remember it), ‘OK, let’s put it in the grant, then.’ Boom. The exhibit is *Kids Bridge*. I realize that museums *can* take on major social issues.”



Kim Louagie, current exhibit curator at the Outagamie County Historical Society (what is it with Wisconsin and museum careers?), had her defining moment in the controversy surrounding the

Houdini exhibit. “What I took away from all of this was that museum exhibits *can* be relevant. When asked if I like the controversy, I always say that as a curator I am satisfied that people are talking about museums. That means we have made a connection to present generations. It’s the old fight that museum folks think they are doing relevant work, but the public doesn’t agree. The stereotypical view that museums are dusty old places hold true to many, many people. The project was defining for me because it proves that OCHS can do exhibits that connect to the general public.”

The power of the object

Not surprisingly, many museum professionals found their careers changed by interactions with objects. **Maija Sedzielarz**, Coordinator of School Visit Programs at The Science Museum of Minnesota, recalls her first volunteer job in cataloguing. “I was taking a break after a very disappointing experience with graduate school. I was working as a volunteer several days a week at the museum and supporting myself by working at a local department

store the other days of the week. I knew there was more satisfaction and more depth than I had experienced in the graduate program I attended, and was seeking some practical experience in ‘real’ museum work. I was rewarded for that change of direction through that cataloguing experience.

“I was handling a small collection of Inuit tools and took up a hide scraper to investigate, number and describe it. My hand fit around the tool, obviously made to order for the woman who used it, probably decades before. I suddenly felt a deep connection to that other woman’s life. I still believe in the emotional power that those objects can have in our understandings of other lives. Maybe today I am now more aware of nuance, more aware of a variety of theoretical approaches to museum learning and thinking, more cynical (more experienced?) and, I hope, a little less naïve than in those days long ago, but I still believe.”

Ted Ansbacher tells of his days at The Museum of Science and Industry in Chicago. He and a colleague had to figure out how to interpret two objects on display: a stage coach, and an old fire pump. After much examination and fiddling around, they were able to figure out how the mechanisms worked. As Ted puts it, “These incidents are inconsequential in themselves, but they show a number of critical points regarding inquiry at exhibits:

- There was tremendous satisfaction at first finding and then solving a problem by *ourselves*—no prompting or help from labels or guides. This ‘ah-ha!’ feeling is so strong that it can keep you coming back for more.
- Our interest was first aroused because these were real artifacts.
- The ‘ah-ha!’ discovery can be very small, very personal.
- The specific ‘learning’ outcome here was of no consequence; no one would have listed this as a goal for these exhibits; these would not be on any list of school standards.
- The satisfaction, and any ‘learning’ that took place, were in the *process*. Any prompting or shortcut to the answer would have spoiled it.
- We, as employees, were able to get closer and do and touch things that regular visitors would not have been able to.
- The inquiry was sustained by the interaction between the two of us.
- Our interest in these particular problems was largely dependent on our earlier experiences.
- It would be hard, almost impossible, to cause this same ‘ah-ha!’ experience to happen for anyone else. “



**"The satisfaction, and any 'learning' that took place,
were in the process.
Any prompting or shortcut to the answer
would have spoiled it."**

Moving on up

In any career, we eventually reach a crossroad where we realize it's time to change what we've been doing. For me, I remember going to a conference (I think it was VSA) and attending a panel where three directors of major science museums were going to discuss the challenges facing the field. Wow, I thought, a chance to sit at the feet of the masters. At the start of the program, each introduced himself. One came from business. One came from academia. One came from government. None of them came from within the field. None had 10 years of museum experience; at that point, I had 12. I was dumfounded. I knew more about the field than any of these guys. (That's not quite true—one acquitted himself reasonably well. But the other two were pretty clueless.) If these are our leaders, we are in deep trouble. And that was the moment I decided I needed to stop attending sessions and start presenting at them.

Phyllis Rabineau, now Vice President of Interpretation and Education at The Chicago Historical Society, reached a crossroad after developing the *Pacific* exhibits at The Field Museum. She says she "realized... that my own personal growth didn't lie in continuing in the exhibit developer role, but that I wanted to move into a management role because I thought 1) it would be fun to help other people learn the profession; 2) it would expose me both to more topics and to more people trying to solve problems with their individual and collective creativity; and 3) it looked difficult, and challenging. For the past seven or eight years, all these expectations have been met. I've given up a fair amount of individual creativity in the workplace, but I channel that into other things that interest me, namely studying and making my own art. It didn't hurt to earn more money, too."

Janet Kamien, independent museum consultant, faced a crossroad when her then-boss, Michael Spock, took a new position in Chicago and tried to lure her to join him. She found her defining moment in a dream—actually two dreams:

"(1) Michael and I have come to work together and parked in the 'mud lot,' which is, indeed, muddy. He leaps out of the car and starts running to the Children's Museum. I am poking my way behind him. As he runs he acknowledges some Board members who are standing in the mud and sinking! (They are being regaled by an especially long-winded member and are being polite.) As he runs further he looks over his shoulder to see if I am coming. I am far behind. He yells 'Come on! What's wrong? You have your galoshes on!'

"(2) I am in Chicago ordering my very favorite Chicago meal: a David Berg Vienna Red Hot. The man gives me the delicious thing and I pay him. He gives me money back—more than I paid! I say there is a mistake. He says no, this is what you deserve! Wow! I'm moving to Chicago!!"

Getting out

Perhaps no decision is more important than the decision to leave—leave a job, an institution, or the field entirely. Many people have stories of struggling with such decisions.

Barb Becker dealt with serial unemployment by becoming her own employer. "Two stints at The Field Museum and another at Shedd Aquarium had *all* ended with great praise for exhibit work accomplished – and subsequent unemployment. I returned to The Field Museum for yet another exhibit project. When that project ended prematurely and I was again laid off, I contemplated my future. I could find no cell of my entire being that wanted a full-time job at another museum. I started my own business and have been successfully busy as an exhibit professional for the past two years. (Knock on wood.)"



Kris Nesbitt found her defining moment in a distasteful situation. “After sitting through many meetings, both as staff and as a freelancer, in which marketers, PR people, VPs, etc., told me that I needed to consider first and foremost how the exhibit strategically positions the institution—I realized that my job was not really about educating or inspiring visitors. It wasn’t really about sharing meaningful content and creating a great experience. It was about selling tickets and getting press coverage—leveraging the image of my employers. If I wanted to be a PR or marketing person, I should get a job doing that instead—and probably make more money. But I don’t want to do that—I still want to educate and inspire people. So now I’m looking for a way that I can effectively use my skills to do that, in a place where that is the priority. My employer’s goals need to match my personal mission.”

And, if you can stand one more story from me: I played a supporting role in my first job at The Field Museum. After a while I felt I had outgrown it, but it took me four years to find another job. OK, the first two years I wasn’t looking very hard. Still, my resume clearly needed beefing

up. I eventually landed a position as Lead Developer on a major project at another institution. It soon became apparent that, despite my title, my role was actually going to be *smaller* than the one I had left. Realizing that I needed to increase my network and add to my resume, I got involved in NAME. Within two years I had the prominence in the field necessary to leap to the wonderful new job I hold now. So see, there **are** happy endings!

Wrap up

Each of us will face a thousand crossroads in our careers, some great, some small. As Marjorie Schwarzer describes her career, it’s “a story of luck, being in the right place at the right time, and taking a leap of faith ... and having it grow on me incrementally.” We define ourselves over years and decades in the course of a thousand decisions. And when facing two roads diverging in a yellow wood, it’s sometimes helpful to hear from someone who’s walked the path before.



“We define ourselves over
years and decades in the course
of a thousand decisions.”



NAME-Sponsored Sessions

at the 2005 AAM Annual Meeting in Indianapolis

Sunday May 01, 2005

Board Meeting 11:00am – 4:00pm

- National Association for Museum Exhibition (NAME) Board Meeting

Roundtable Discussion 12:00pm – 4:00pm

- National Association for Museum Exhibition (NAME) Exhibit Development Roundtable

Single Session 2:15pm – 3:30pm

- Guerrilla Exhibitions: Small Feats with the Community
- Strength in Numbers: Successful Traveling Exhibition Collaborations for Small Museums

Single Session 3:45pm – 5:00pm

- Adapt or Die: Sustaining Change at the California Academy of Sciences
- Are All Roads Good? Opening the National Museum of the American Indian
- Curators at the Crossroads: Old and New Priorities
- Getting the Most Out of Video Production: A Primer for Museum Professionals
- You Can't Say That! Cutting Across Cultural Conversations in Museums

Evening Event 7:00pm – 11:00pm

- National Association for Museum Exhibition (NAME) Rock-N-Bowl (#Event #03) \$45.00

Monday May 02, 2005

Single Session 9:00am – 10:15am

- Cacophony or Comfort? Acoustic Considerations for Museums
- In or Out: A Crossroads for Exhibition Design
- Peeling the Onion: Applying New Psychological Research to Create Meaningful Visitor Experiences
- Technology Has Left the Building: Interpretive Devices in the Great Outdoors
- Turning the Tables: Putting Our Profession on Public Display

Single Session 10:30am – 11:45am

- Can Universities Cultivate Museum Leadership?
- Learning in Your Own Backyard: Place-Based Education for Museums
- What the Heck is Experience Design?

Marketplace of Ideas 3:30pm – 5:30pm

- 17th Annual Excellence in Exhibition Competition Marketplace
- National Association for Museum Exhibition Marketplace: When Less Is More



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Tuesday May 03, 2005

Single Session 9:00 am – 10:15 am

- Designer-Client Relationships: Strategies for Success
- Interpretive Agendas: From the Cold War to the Counterculture
- My Favorite Design Decision

Issues Luncheon 12:15 pm – 1:45 pm

- National Association for Museum Exhibition (NAME) Issues Luncheon (#Event #33) \$23.00

Single Session 2:00 pm – 3:15 pm

- Old Topic, New Designs: Three New Species of Dinosaur Exhibits

Single Session 3:30 pm – 4:45 pm

- Exhibitors at the Crossroads -- Building Better Museum Teams

Wednesday May 04, 2005

Business Breakfast 7:30 am – 8:30 am

- National Association for Museum Exhibition (NAME) Business Breakfast (#Event #43) \$14.00

Single Session 9:00 am – 10:15 am

- Community Curatorship: The National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) and Native Peoples Working Collaboratively
- Cooking from Scratch: Alternative Approaches to Museum Careers
- Family Learning Theory into Practice
- What's Going on VII: Discussing Hot Topics in Exhibition

Single Session 2:00 pm – 3:15 pm

- Managing Color: From Concept to Output
- New Directions for Collections
- Self-Service: The Concept of "Self" in Visitor Motivation and Learning Outcomes
- Telling Hard Truths in Difficult Times
- Vox Populi: Adding Diverse Voices to Audio Tours

Double Session 2:00 pm – 4:45 pm

- Making It Real: Educators Shaping Interpretation through Accessibility, Advocacy and Accountability

Single Session 3:30 pm – 4:45 pm

- Balancing Act: The Art Object and Progressive Art Museum Exhibitions
- Courting Controversy
- Keeping the Faith: Interpreting Sacred Art for Diverse Audiences

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Exhibitionist is published by the National Association for Museum Exhibition (NAME), the Standing Professional Committee on Exhibition of the American Association of Museums (AAM). NAME enhances the cultural landscape by advancing the value and relevance of exhibitions through dialogue among individuals, museum leaders and the public. NAME promotes excellence and best practices; identifies trends and recent innovations; provides access to resources; promotes professional development; and cultivates leadership. Opinions expressed in *Exhibitionist* are those of the authors, and may not represent the policies of NAME and/or AAM.

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How: We prefer to receive initial submissions electronically. Save your document as a "text-only" file and attach it to an e-mail message—or, for shorter pieces, simply paste it into your e-mail. If you don't have access to e-mail, use regular mail to send a hard copy accompanied, if possible, by a "text-only" file on a disk.

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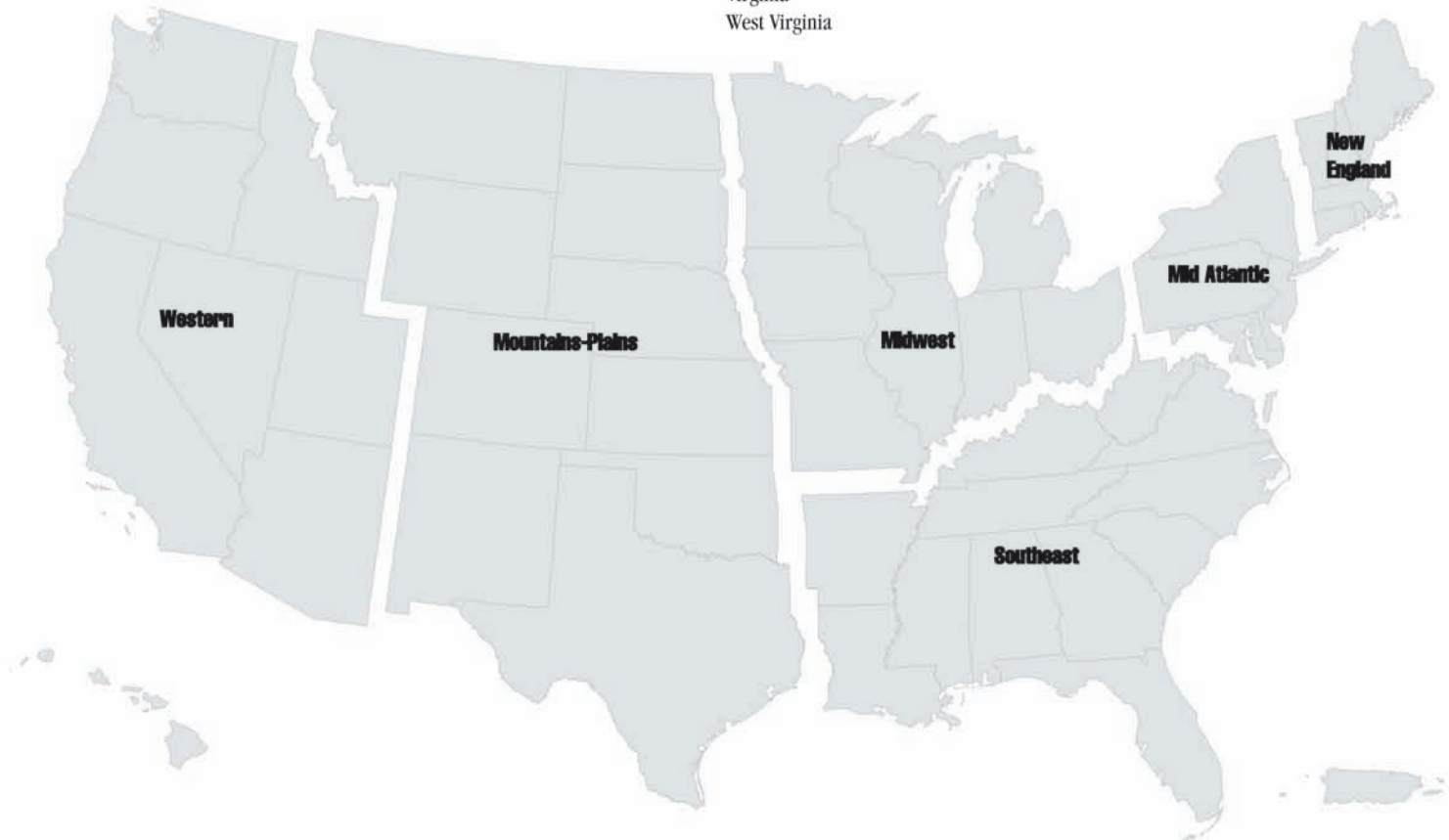
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