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Picture this

Newspaper and studio photo collections pose challenges, opportunities

In a lively discussion on the Minnesota Historical Society's Local History weblog, bloggers recently shared some of the issues they face when offered large photograph collections (see "Digital Windfall," posted July 28 at <http://discussions.mnhs.org/MNLocalHistory>). This article explores some of the points they made.

If you're among the fortunate historical societies that have acquired the photo archives of a studio photographer or local newspaper, you know what a big job it is to manage such a large collection. You also know what a treasure

trove those photos represent. Despite the daunting challenges of taking on such a collection, you'll find that it also holds many opportunities, from preserving a record of community life to drawing new audiences to your museum.

Should your own organization be offered such a photo collection, let the experiences of others guide your efforts to organize and care for these invaluable historical resources.

Transferring the copyright

One of the first orders of business when acquiring a photograph collection is to make sure that the copyright for the images is transferred to your organization along with ownership of the materials. This clears the way for you to use and reproduce the pictures after you've cataloged them, making the collection accessible to researchers and the public.

Without copyright ownership, a collection may just take up valuable storage space, cautions Mary Warner of the Morrison County Historical Society. "Thirty years ago our society was given some photos from a local newspaper that folded," she explains. "But we learned later that the donor, who worked for the paper, didn't



Itasca County Historical Society

Volunteer JoAnn Frick (left) assesses some of the 50,000 negatives donated by a local newspaper to the Itasca County Historical Society. Overseeing the process is director Lilah Crowe.

Picture this – continued on page 2

Picture this – continued

own the photos. Because the issue of copyright wasn't resolved, we haven't processed the collection and can't use the images without tracking down the photographer who shot them. With our backlog of other collections to be processed, we simply haven't had time."

Processing the collection

When your organization's ownership of a donated photo collection is clearly established, you can begin to process the materials. Steps include culling unwanted images, transferring the photos and negatives to a proper storage environment, and identifying and labeling each image.

The large volume of some acquisitions – and the small staffs of most county and local historical societies – can make these tasks seem daunting. In 2005 the Itasca County Historical Society acquired a local newspaper's photo morgue. The donation from the Grand Rapids Herald Tribune numbered some 50,000 photo negatives dating from 1938 to 1994, a time period that was not well represented in the society's collections. When fully catalogued, the negatives will triple the society's photo holdings.

Volunteers trained in archival and cataloging procedures started by assessing and editing the images, determining which ones could be disposed of. Negatives to be kept were then placed in polypropylene sleeves, acid-free envelopes and archival boxes.

The next challenge was to document and label all the images to be archived. Though they were largely in

chronological order and some of the negatives had photos attached, others were labeled only by month and year. Volunteers have been working to identify all the images by comparing them to the published newspapers. The information is then recorded and the negatives cataloged in a PastPerfect database for searches by date, location, event and people pictured. A state grant-in-aid from the Minnesota Historical Society has helped support the project.

"So far, we've processed 15 years worth of negatives," says ICHS director Lilah Crowe. "That leaves just 40 years to go! Already, we've seen an increased use of our research center since making these materials accessible to the public. With the searchable database and our new scanner, we can easily fill researchers' requests for prints from the negatives."

"Be careful but ruthless"

The Sherburne County Historical Society also found itself swamped when

donations to its collections spiked after the opening of the new Sherburne History Center in 2006. Within a nine-month period, three local newspapers donated collections of photographs, bringing in 38 storage boxes of materials to be processed.

One of the biggest challenges was sorting and evaluating the large quantity of images. "We had limited space and resources," says project director Maureen Gavin, "so the editing process was crucial."

By the time the society got a second MHS grant to preserve the collections, they had learned a few things. "First, it will take longer than you think," says Bobbie Scott, SCHS programs manager. "Second, be careful but ruthless in choosing which photos to keep. We worked rigorously to weed things out – duplicates, blurry and damaged images, mass-produced entertainment and advertising photographs, and subjects



When 38 boxes like this one stuffed with newspaper photos (left) were donated to the Sherburne County Historical Society, staff and volunteers sorted and documented the images, then transferred them to space-saving archival document storage boxes.

Picture this – continued

with no local provenance.”

The remaining quantity of images proved much more manageable to identify, document and store.

The move to digitization

Proper handling and archival storage of photographs and their negatives are key to ensuring that the images last for decades to come. This is especially critical for glass plate negatives. The Cokato Historical Society knows firsthand about the challenges of dealing with such fragile resources.

In 1984 the family of photographer Gust Akerlund donated to the City of Cokato his photography studio, filled with photographic equipment and more than 14,000 negatives – some 11,300 of them on fragile glass plates – capturing all facets of early 20th-century town life. The building and its contents, listed on the National Register of Historic Places, became the responsibility of the Cokato Museum and Historical Society.

After restoring the studio and safely housing the negatives, the staff turned

its attention to the monumental task of getting prints made – a step that would eliminate the need to handle the glass plates. Over a period of more than 15 years, contact prints were made from roughly 70 percent of the negatives. Eventually, however, a need arose to find other means of duplication.

“It got harder and harder to find someone with the equipment to make prints from glass plates,” says museum director Mike Worcester. “And making copies of the contact prints took us further from the original source. So we’ve moved to digitization.”

With a series of state grants-in-aid, the Cokato museum contracted to digitize 4,000 of Akerlund’s negatives using standards developed by the Minnesota Digital Library. “We don’t ever have to handle those original negatives again,” says Worcester. “And the digital versions produce prints of phenomenal clarity, which is a plus for using the images in exhibits and publications.” Now the public can see



Kristen Miller, Enterprise Dispatch

Dave Johnson uses a digital scanner to copy negatives from the Gust Akerlund Studio collection. Once the images are scanned and stored on DVDs, the fragile glass plates (detail) do not have to be handled again.

not only the studio where Gust Akerlund worked but also pictures of the local citizens and special occasions he chronicled. They are his legacy to the people of Cokato – a window into their past. ■



Washington County Historical Society

Photo ID Nights like this one at a Stillwater senior center help the Washington County Historical Society identify unlabeled photos in its John Runk collection.

Join the discussion

The Oct. 1 edition of the Minnesota Historical Society’s e-newsletter Local History News features this question about the challenge of identifying old photographs: Donations of large photo collections often come with only a smattering of images identified. What does your organization do to get unidentified photographs identified? To share your museum’s strategies, go to <http://discussions.mnhs.org/MNLOCALHISTORY>.

Getting acquainted – part 2

Six more new directors sign on at Minnesota’s county historical societies

In the last issue of the Interpreter, we profiled three new directors at Minnesota’s county historical societies. Six more, in alphabetical order by county, are introduced here. These nine community leaders, some local history veterans and some new to the field, join their colleagues across the state in helping to collect, preserve and interpret Minnesota’s history.

Jackson County

Mike Kirchmeier hopes to put an end to staff turnovers at the Jackson County Historical Society. “We have a good museum in Lakefield, a historical village at the county fairgrounds and lots of artifacts to work with,” says the retired high school science teacher, who took over as JCHS manager in March, “but we’ve lacked a consistent system for tracking our collections. Our



Mike Kirchmeier

biggest need, other than storage space, is PastPerfect software to improve our record-keeping.”

Looking at the bigger picture, Kirchmeier hopes to work with his board

to refine the society’s accession policy. “We need to focus our collecting and decide what areas we’ll concentrate on,” he says. “We can’t do everything. Besides, our work should be about more than preserving artifacts. It’s really about preserving people’s stories.”



Jim Milan

Meeker County

Jim Milan, executive director of the Meeker County Historical Society since March 2007, is also looking to sharpen his organization’s focus on local history. “We’ve redone some of our exhibits to highlight Meeker County artifacts, not just show old things,” he explains. “We’re doing more local history research to tie our displays to the county’s history.”

Milan oversees Litchfield’s 1885 GAR Hall and its 1960 museum addition, both recently improved with a new heating system, windows and lighting. He uses his background in radio broadcasting to increase community awareness of the sites through guest spots on local radio stations and talks to community organizations. His marketing efforts

don’t stop there. “We have a new web site [www.garminnesota.org] to help us spread the word,” he says. “Look us up.”

Murray County

Formerly a journalist who often covered news about the Murray County Historical Museum, Diane Clerx assumed the directorship in 2007, capping a five-year stint as assistant director. Among the facilities in her charge, in addition to the museum, are a log cabin and a building of agricultural implements and artifacts, all located on the Murray County Fairgrounds.

“Last year the county purchased the 1891 Dinehart-Holt House to restore and open as a historic-house museum,” Clerx says of the National Register property in Slayton. “We’re writing grants to help us with the restoration. And we’re making good use of our volunteers on tasks like peeling wallpaper. Recently, we discovered some of the original papers underneath.” Though the restoration has a long way to go, the house is open for rental and tours as a work-in-progress. Next steps: fundraising and a search for furnishings.



Diane Clerx

Olmsted County

James Lundgren is a familiar face in Minnesota's local history community. For nearly 10 years he headed the county historical societies first in Rice County, then in Blue Earth County. Now, after a few years out of the history field, he's back – this time as executive director of the History Center of Olmsted County, taking over from John Hunzicker, who moved on last winter to the Rochester Public Library.



James Lundgren

Among projects that Lundgren inherited are ongoing restoration work at two National Register properties – Maywood and the George Stoppel Farmstead. “At the moment I’m focusing on fundraising,” he says, “both for our many programs and for a capital campaign. We started with a feasibility study on whether to expand our existing facility or build new. Next, I’ll be looking to partner with local organizations to launch the quiet phase of the campaign in 2009.” No doubt he’ll call on many of the society’s 400+ volunteers to kick off the public phase that follows.

Pennington County

Third-grade teacher Jill Johnson put on a different hat in June as she

assumed the new part-time, summers-only position of Pennington County Historical Society director. Her office at the society’s Peder Engelstad Pioneer Village makes a nice change of scene from the classroom, she says.



Jill Johnson

PCHS archivist Caryl Bugge “continues to volunteer more hours than I can count,” says Johnson, who hired a college student for the summer to help keep displays in the village’s 19 buildings in order. “Three quarters of our visitors come from outside the area so my biggest challenge is to strengthen ties with the local community. Because we don’t have the staff to do much special programming, we need to build partnerships that sustain themselves. This summer I worked with a local latchkey program to pull more kids into the village. We shared the planning and divided the execution. That works well for us.”

Todd County

When the Todd County Historical Society’s administrator position went unfilled, longtime society volunteer Shirley Lunceford stepped up to fill in. She and her new administrative assistant, De Eberle, share the duties of welcoming visitors, giving museum tours, helping

patrons with their research and planning new displays.

Besides new lighting for the museum, the society’s greatest need is to build its annual membership. Like a few other county historical societies, the Todd County organization grew out of an Old Settlers Club, whose 225 members became life members of the new historical society. “We have far fewer annual members than life members,” says Lunceford, “so there’s not nearly enough money coming in every year from memberships. We’re planning an annual membership drive this fall.” She also hopes to raise awareness of the organization through ties with the county’s tourism bureau and local chambers of commerce.



Shirley Lunceford

New to your job?

If we missed you in this year’s roundup of top jobs at Minnesota’s county and local historical societies, let us know and we’ll include you next time. Just e-mail David Grabitske at david.grabitske@mnhs.org. ■

State grants-in-aid awarded in 25 counties

Thirty-four applicants to the Minnesota Historical Society's State Grants-in-Aid program, representing 25 counties, received a total of \$181,852 in the winter cycle of fiscal year 2008.

Grants were awarded in the categories of historic properties (10 grants distributed), museum environments (7), technology (5), interpretive programs (3), oral history (3), microform copies (3), photographic collections (2), and publications and research (2). Projects ranged widely, from an opera house historic structure report to installation of a security alarm system to a Dakota Elders language and oral history project.

Blue Earth County: Blue Earth County Historical Society, \$2,400, to purchase steel storage shelving.

Brown County: Wanda Gág House Association, \$3,000, to restore Anton Gág's faux wood graining in the Wanda Gág Childhood Home, listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Brown County: New Ulm Turnverein, \$10,000, for a historic structure report for Turner Hall, listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Carver County: Carver County Historical Society, \$729, to purchase county newspapers on microfilm.

Clay County: Probstfield Farm Living History Foundation, \$7,500, for restoration of the barn roof at the Randolph M. Probstfield House, listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Cook County: Cook County Historical Society, \$1,983, for an archival storage project.

Dakota County: Dakota County Historical Society, \$7,500, for a biography of Harold Stassen.

Dakota County: Lakeville Area Historical Society, \$1,932, for an interpretive sign project.

Faribault County: Wells Historical Society, \$40,000, for roof restoration on the Chicago Milwaukee St. Paul and Pacific Depot, listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Fillmore County: City of Preston, \$2,500, for an oral history project.

Fillmore County: Chatfield Brass Band, \$4,617, for preservation of instrumental music.

Goodhue County: Zumbrotta Area Historical Society, \$1,427, for fire and security alarm systems.

Grant County: Grant County Historical Society, \$1,635, for photograph collection preservation.

Hennepin County: Rockford Area Historical Society, \$6,250, for a structural survey for the Ames-Florida House, listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Hennepin County: Edina Historical Society, \$2,425, for an oral history project, "From Small Town to Suburb."

Houston County: La Crescent Area Historical Society, \$1,500, to purchase PastPerfect museum cataloging software.

Meeker County: Greater Litchfield Opera House Association, \$5,000, for a historic structure report for the Litchfield Opera House, listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Mille Lacs County: Milaca Area Historical Society, \$1,309, to purchase PastPerfect museum cataloging software.

Mower County: Austin Area Commission for the Arts, \$3,150, for restoration of neon lighting at the Paramount Theater, listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Nicollet County: Arts Center of St. Peter, \$4,680, for the interpretive project "Giving Vision and Voice to the Minnesota River Valley."

Pipestone County: Pipestone County Historical Society, \$2,949, to purchase a microfilm reader.



Edina Historical Society

A grant-funded oral history project, "From Small Town to Suburb," will help the Edina Historical Society document the suburban population boom of the 1950s, when newcomers with young children spurred the growth of Edina's park system.

Polk County: Prairie Skyline Foundation, \$6,000, to stabilize the foundation on 107-109 Robert Street in the Crookston Commercial Historic District, listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Ramsey County: Maplewood Area Historical Society, \$352, for a scanner and digitization project.

Ramsey County: White Bear Lake Area Historical Society, \$803, for an online photograph project.

Ramsey County: Saint Paul Police Historical Society, \$2,000, for reproduction of a 19th-century police uniform.

Ramsey County: Czech and Slovak Sokol Minnesota, \$8,000, toward installation of a sprinkler system in the CSPA Hall, listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Redwood County: Dakota Wicohan, \$7,600, for a Dakota Elders language and oral history project.

Renville County: Sacred Heart Area Historical Society, \$6,330, for publication of "Sacred Heart: Town and Country."



Buhl Public Library

A state grant-in-aid helped restore the stained glass skylight (inset) in the Buhl Public Library. The well-appointed library was built in 1917-18 with tax revenues from area mining operations.

Renville County: Danube Historical Society, \$8,000, for the Danube Railroad Depot HVAC project.

Rice County: Northfield Historical Society, \$2,500, toward the Northfield History Collaborative project.

St. Louis County: City of Buhl, \$10,000, toward restoration of stained glass in the Buhl Public Library, listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Sherburne County: Sherburne County Historical Society, \$5,431, for rehabilitation and preservation of the Herbert M. Fox House, listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Wright County: Cokato Historical Society, \$6,000, for preservation of glass plate negatives at the Akerlund Photographic Studio, listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Wright County: Wright County Historical Society, \$6,350, for light mitigation at the Heritage Center.

Applications for the 2009 winter round will be accepted beginning in January. See page 8 for details. ■



Saint Paul Police Historical Society

Chief John Harrington (right) tours the Saint Paul Police Historical Society's transportation museum with costumed interpreter Paul Johnson, a retired forensic artist. Displays include an 1890s bicycle patrol officer and an 1897 workhouse van. A state grant-in-aid will support the reproduction of additional 19th-century uniforms.

Bulletin Board

Plan now to apply for winter grants cycle

An estimated \$100,000 is available for the winter round of the State Grant-in-Aid program to support projects that will increase your organization's capacity to interpret and preserve Minnesota history.

Projects in 10 categories are eligible for funding: artifact collections, historic properties, interpretive programs, manuscripts collections, microform copies, museum environments, oral history, photographic collections, publications and research, and technology.

Primary recipients of state grants-in-aid are county and local nonprofit

historical organizations. Local units of government and tribal governments also are eligible to apply.

Deadlines:

Jan. 9, 2009 Pre-application due.

Feb. 20 Final application due.

April 2 Grants Review Committee meets.

For other details about the grants program, including eligibility and application forms, go to www.mnhs.org/about/grants, call Melinda Hutchinson at 651-259-3459, or e-mail melinda.hutchinson@mnhs.org. ■

Help us find you!

We are currently updating our online directory of Minnesota's county and local historical organizations. To see if we have all of your current contact information, including your web site, take a minute to check the entry for your organization at www.mnhs.org/localhistory/mho/.

Both Minnesota Historical Society staff and members of the public who use the MHS site can link directly to your web site from our directory listings. If you wish, we will also include your e-mail address.

Please send your updated information – contact names, organization address, phone numbers, web site and e-mail addresses – to michele.decker@mnhs.org. ■

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