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## Museum standards project nears completion

AASLH pilot sites put tool kit to the test

In the fall of 2007 the American Association for State and Local History tapped Minnesota as one of eight states to field-test its new program on national museum standards for small and mid-sized history organizations. The goal:

to identify benchmarks and provide resources that smaller museums could use for self-assessment and process improvement (see the Interpreter, November-December 2007).

A service provider in each state – in Minnesota it was the Local History Services Office of the Minnesota Historical Society – selected six sites that would pilot the standards program model. Working with David Grabitske, the Society’s manager of outreach services, each Minnesota group targeted one area of its operation for improvement, then designed a project to test the process. Now, one year later, the pilot projects are wrapping up and the participating organizations have provided feedback that will help shape the final product – a tool kit that enables small museums to measure themselves against national standards of excellence and use those standards to improve their policies and practices.



Bev Miller makes a pattern for a bandolier bag storage mount as part of the Bois Forte Heritage Center’s AASLH museum standards pilot program.

### The Minnesota six

Representing a mix of public and private organizations, some with paid staff and some all volunteer, with budgets ranging from \$13,000 to \$180,000, the Minnesota pilot sites are:

#### Bois Forte Heritage Center

*Area of concentration:* Interpretation.  
*Project:* Construct storage mounts for selected artifacts.

**Museum standards** – continued on page 2

## Museum standards – continued

### Hennepin County Medical Center Museum

*Area of concentration:* Interpretation.  
*Project:* Develop five-year exhibition plan to increase awareness of museum.

### Kittson County Historical Society

*Area of concentration:* Mission, vision, governance.  
*Project:* Write board orientation manual.

### Mower County Historical Society

*Area of concentration:* Stewardship of collections.  
*Project:* Create first-ever collections policy.

### Sacred Heart Area Historical Society

*Area of concentration:* Audience development.  
*Project:* Design forms for data collection and teacher surveys.

### White Bear Lake Area Historical Society

*Area of concentration:* Interpretation.  
*Project:* Develop historic house museum interpretive plan.

## Of timing, training and transformation

The opportunity to participate in the pilot program couldn't have come at a better time for the Kittson County Historical Society, which chose to focus on the area of mission, vision and governance. Grabitske, as he did with each pilot site, arranged a training session geared to their needs – a workshop for the staff and board on setting policy, defining responsibilities and ensuring accountability.

As the project took shape, it became clear that some board members were unable

or unwilling to fulfill their duties. After they resigned, staff and the remaining board moved ahead, tackling a number of challenging tasks. Together, they:

- Revised society bylaws, setting term limits for board members and officers.
- Created mission and vision statements.
- Established a board committee structure, including a nominating committee.
- Created an ethics policy.
- Assembled a board orientation manual.
- Developed personnel policies for staff and volunteers.
- Began work on an organizational history.

Cindy Adams, KCHS director, testifies to the transformative power of the experience. “With David’s help, we tried so many things we had never done before,” she says. “There was a very free exchange of ideas among board members and staff.” With the new policies and procedures in place and an orientation manual in hand, the society has now built a solid framework for itself, including a process for board succession.

## A new measure of professionalism

According to Grabitske, the other pilot sites also have found the standards program useful. Their input will guide the AASLH in refining the tool kit – essentially a workbook of self-assessment questionnaires, best practices and other materials designed to help smaller museums meet nationally recognized museum standards. It will be available for purchase beginning in June.

“Beyond this pilot phase, customized training won’t be available in the same way,” says Grabitske. “But our annual Local History Workshops will continue to provide training in areas covered by the standards. And Minnesota’s historical organizations can use the tool kit as a course in self-improvement that will ensure a measure of professionalism in all they do.” ■



Board member Karen Backlund (left) and director Cindy Adams of the Kittson County Historical Society work on a history of the organization for a new board orientation manual.

# Checking your pulse

## How to track and apply user statistics

by Jim Mattson and Erik Holland

Jim Mattson, program specialist, and Erik Holland, program associate for Historic Sites and Museums at the Minnesota Historical Society, first presented this paper at the Society's Local History Workshops in the spring of 2008. They adapted it for the Interpreter.

Think of all the ways your organization generates statistical information – membership rosters, museum visitation, program attendance, research requests, donor lists and more. When accurately tracked and applied to decision making, this information becomes an important tool that will aid you and your board in managing your business functions and operating your museum.

Statistical information can also be used to communicate about the benefits of your organization. Consider how valuable those numbers will be in writing grant requests, talking to reporters, preparing annual reports or laying the groundwork for a fundraising campaign.

All of this information gives you some objective data about a very subjective endeavor – collecting, preserving and interpreting your community's history.

### What to track

There are many aspects of your operation that can be tracked, as the following lists show. Don't think of the statistics generated as just numbers. They convey meaningful information about your organization, your museum and your programs.

**Program statistics** document various activities related to museum use and programming:

- Attendance at exhibits, interpretive programs, workshops and classes.
- Membership numbers by category, and member retention rates.
- Donor information.
- Number of volunteers and volunteer hours.
- Research requests.
- Phone calls.
- Web hits.
- Outreach activities.

**Operations statistics** and related information tell others something about your operation:

- Physical-plant information: number of buildings and square footage, acreage, parking lot capacity, fire and safety data, ADA compliance.
- Museum features, including space for exhibits and services.
- Collections holdings, storage and resources.
- Building acquisition information: property title, year acquired.
- National Register or Landmark status.

**Financial statistics** help your board track your organization's budgeting and financial health:

- Revenue: sales, admissions, rental or event fees, membership income, food service, donations, grants, gifts and endowments.
- Expenses: fixed costs such as utilities, lease or rent, salaries and insurance; variable costs such as marketing,

seasonal and part-time wages, program materials, equipment and cost of goods sold.

- Capital campaigns.

### Why it's important

Tracking statistical and operational information helps you evaluate both your strategic plans and your program performance. When you use objective data to back up subjective program evaluation and anecdotal evidence, your decisions about program direction will become clearer. Use statistical data to:

- Test the viability of your programming. Does it align with your mission, goals and objectives? Is it valued by your membership, funders and other stakeholders? Does it meet the needs of your community?
- Determine program efficiency and effectiveness. Do programs draw new and varied audiences? Are expenses in line with budgets? Assessing program results and costs will help you wrap organizational performance into your planning process.
- Evaluate your program support. Is it strong enough to sustain your programming over time? Knowing this will enable you to advocate more effectively for funding.
- See where your museum stands compared with other, similar organizations.

### Checking your pulse –

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## Checking your pulse – continued

### The data collection model

To be an effective program management tool, the collection of statistics and data must be an integral part of your operation. Establish an information-gathering system with the following components:

- **Procedures** that collect data and measure performance in a routine manner.
- User-friendly **processes** to ensure regular use.
- A **consistent reporting format** for both recording and disseminating your data.
- **Training** for staff and volunteers on your data collection procedures and standards.

However you gather your data, the primary goal of data collection should be consistency and accuracy. This makes your data trustworthy. The best way to achieve an accurate, consistent data

collection system is to use a computer with database and spreadsheet software. This will save time, offer greater reliability and create clear, easy-to-read reports.

A workable model for data collection should have the following structure:

- **Daily tracking** of statistical information – attendance, admissions, sales, revenue, expenses, program use, etc.
- **Monthly reports** based on the information gathered daily.
- An **annual report** summing up the monthly data.

Each step creates its own baseline of information. You can then pinpoint milestones or benchmarks to use for comparative analysis over time, enabling you to detect shifts and identify trends in usage of your museum, programs and site.

### Collecting visitor information

There is no better way to know your audience than to collect visitor information. Basic audience demographics gathered by survey help you understand who visits your museum and uses your programs. This data in turn informs your decisions about allocating marketing and program resources. Here's some of what a survey of your museum visitors, program audiences and members can tell you:

- Who visits? Gather demographic information on age, place of residence, income, gender and ethnicity.
- When and with whom did they come? Track day of the week, first visit, group type and size, presence of children.
- Why did they come? Special program? Leisure activity? Tourism?



## Checking your pulse – continued

- How did they hear about your organization? Highway sign? Newspaper or radio publicity? Mailing or brochures? Word of mouth?
- How are they connected to your site or museum? Have survey takers note membership or affiliation with other organizations.

To create a context for your results, compare your findings to published surveys available through the University of Minnesota Tourism Center, Explore Minnesota Tourism or your local chamber of commerce or convention and visitors bureau.

### Gathering descriptive statistics

The term *descriptive statistics* is a bit of a misnomer. It represents not numbers but impressions – what people think and say about your museum. Descriptive statistics can be collected

in a variety of ways – from comments in guest registers, by informal visitor survey, through focus groups, even by on-site or in-gallery observation.

These visitor impressions offer yet another way to gauge program effectiveness and guide your decision making. You can use descriptive statistics just as you would use other kinds of statistics – for marketing and fundraising, in annual reports and membership drives, for program evaluation and retail sales decisions.

### Reporting your results

Written reports provide a good way to analyze and summarize your collected data and statistics. There are several components to good reporting. **Tables** are effective for summarizing base data. **Graphs** visually demonstrate trends and key points. Be sure to provide a **summary** of the data, typically shown

in percentages, that allows for easy comparison and contrast. Finally, include a **narrative** that interprets the data and reinforces key points.

### Using statistics

Armed with sound statistical information, you're ready to apply it in a variety of ways to improve all aspects of your operation:

- **Administration:** Write better annual reports. Ensure efficiencies of operation. Manage volunteers. Compare with peers.
- **Membership:** Analyze levels of membership. Recognize trends. Increase repeat visitation. Generate lists of potential members.
- **Marketing:** Make branding decisions. Allocate funds. Shape marketing campaigns.

**Checking your pulse –**  
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## Checking your pulse – continued

- **Development:** Identify donor prospects. Set fundraising goals. Analyze results. Do long-range planning.
- **Programs:** Gauge program effectiveness. Track audience trends. Poll visitors to identify their interests and generate new programming ideas. Assess risks.
- **Sales:** Track seasonal trends. Determine what to stock. Set appropriate pricing.

### A program management tool

Here's how to translate your newfound facility for gathering data into a tool for evaluating museum programs. Use this hierarchy of questions and the knowledge gained from your statistical analyses to guide your decision making about programs under consideration or review. The process will help you understand program impact, strengths and shortcomings.

1. Is the program central to your mission? If the answer is yes, move on to consider additional criteria for success.
2. Does the program meet acceptable standards for quality? Does it reflect industry best practices (for example, fostering civic engagement)? Does it achieve the goals and objectives it was designed to reach?
3. What level of comparative advantage does the program provide? Does it position your organization ahead of others in terms of attendance, revenue, resource acquisition or public perception?

4. Does the program create synergy within your organization? Does it generate partnerships and community collaborations or reach new and varied audiences? Measure attendance, gather information about participants and document a history of financial support for the program to answer this question.

5. What is the demand for the program? Are there resources available to sustain it? By evaluating a program on the basis of current and projected demand, costs and availability of resources, you can predict, at least in the short term, the likelihood of success or failure – an important step in your budgeting and planning process.

6. Is the program efficient and effective? Does it meet the goals you set for program performance? To help determine this, analyze costs and revenue per visitor and compare those figures to original projections.


7. Does the program effectively leverage existing resources and/or create new sources of support? You should be able to demonstrate how your program uses resources, achieves set goals within existing resources or generates new resources.

### A sound business model

Continued changes in governmental support are forcing museums to rely more heavily on earned income while keeping expenses in check. In the face of that reality, the value of using a sound business model for museum operations and program delivery is more apparent than ever before. And at the heart of any successful business model is

statistical data – accurate, targeted and designed to answer questions about your organization.

So help your museum survive these uncertain economic times by gathering good statistical information as part of your museum program management. Then use the data to shape your strategic plans, evaluate your performance and advocate for funding and support. When you can demonstrate the value of your museum to the community, you help ensure that your organization – the keeper of your community's history – will thrive for generations to come. ■



### What statistics do you track?

Do you gather and analyze statistics to help you make programming decisions? On Jan. 7, join the discussion on the Minnesota Historical Society's Local History weblog (<http://discussions.mnhs.org/MNLocalHistory>) to share your experiences with your colleagues.



## Minnesota Historical Society's 2009 Local History Workshops

# Modernize History

History is not just about looking back; it is also about looking ahead. The founders of the Minnesota Historical Society understood that as they set out in 1849 to preserve the new territory's history as it happened. Standing in the present and looking toward the future, they set the example for generations of Minnesota historians to come.

This year's Local History Workshops will help you stay focused on the future, especially when it come to growing your museum's collections, using technology to manage them and reaching new audiences. Join your colleagues at one of these four regional meetings to see what's in store, renew contacts with your colleagues and tour local historic sites.

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### March 27 Northfield

Host: Northfield Historical Society  
Location: Archer Hotel, 212 Division St., Northfield

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### April 17\* Cloquet

Host: Carlton County Historical Society  
Location: Fond du Lac Tribal and Community College,  
Main Building, 2101 14th St., Cloquet

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### April 3 Slayton

Host: Murray County Historical Society  
Location: MCHS, 2480 29th St., Slayton

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### May 1 Shevlin

Host: Clearwater County Historical Society  
Location: CCHS Museum, 264 First St. W. (U.S. Hwy. 2), Shevlin

*\* This is a joint meeting with the Minnesota Alliance of Local History Museums. More sessions, one great price!*



## Registration Information

**Fee:** \$25 per person if you register by March 1, \$30 thereafter. Includes materials, lunch, refreshments and tour of local historic sites.

**To register:** Complete and mail the registration form on page 8. Or you may register online at <http://shop.mnhs.org>. Please register at least one week in advance of the workshop - by March 20 for Northfield, March 27 for Slayton, April 10 for Cloquet and April 24 for Shevlin.

**For more information:** Call David Grabitske at 651-259-3460 or e-mail [david.grabitske@mnhs.org](mailto:david.grabitske@mnhs.org).

## Minnesota Historical Society's 2009 Local History Workshops

# Modernize History

8:30 to 9 a.m.

**Registration, coffee, rolls**

9 to 10

**General Session**

*'We've Always Done It This Way' / David Grabitske, Local History Services Office*

Minnesota's historical organizations have developed a national reputation for not just upholding museum standards but staying ahead of the field. What will it take to maintain that edge in the face of growing demands and changing expectations?

10 to 10:30

**Break**

10:45 to 11:45

**Concurrent Sessions I**

**Insurance for the Future: A Strong Collections Management Policy / Collections Staff**

An effective collections management policy guides your museum as it acquires and cares for its collections – essential steps in interpreting the history of the community you serve. Sample policies will be shared and discussed.

**or**

**Worldwide Access / Technology Staff**

When museum visitation slows, having a website can bring your museum to your audience. Learn the standard components of a good website and explore low-cost applications for creating a strong web presence.

11:45 to 12:30 p.m.

**Lunch**

12:30 to 1:45

**Concurrent Sessions II**

**Shaping Your Future with a Collecting Plan / Collections Staff**

As your community changes over time, so too should your museum's collecting activities. A look at various collecting plans shows you how to refine and expand the scope of your collections to complement your mission and goals.

**or**

**Why Not Scan Everything? / Technology Staff**

Digital assets pose challenges for museums accustomed to managing more conventional collections. Discover how digital collections – those you scan and those “born digital” – can be managed with ease.

1:45 to 2

**Break**

2 to 3:15

**Concurrent Sessions III**

**Grants Workshop / Melinda Hutchinson, Local History Services Office**

Get practical tips for submitting grant applications, with a focus on Minnesota Historical Society state grants-in-aid.

**or**

**'I Don't Have Time!' / Technology Staff**

Software is supposed to help you manage your workload. But does it? Familiarize yourself with some common applications and learn how to evaluate their usefulness to you.

3:15 to 4:30

**Tour**

## Registration Form: Modernize History

Name:	Title:	E-mail:	
Organization:	Phone:		
Address:	City:	State:	Zip:
Select Date: <input type="checkbox"/> March 27 - Northfield <input type="checkbox"/> April 3 - Slayton <input type="checkbox"/> April 17 - Cloquet <input type="checkbox"/> May 1 - Shevlin			
Number of persons registering:	Total enclosed:		

Make check payable to **Minnesota Historical Society**. Mail payment and registration form to Minnesota Historical Society, Attn. Melinda Hutchinson, 345 Kellogg Blvd. W., St. Paul, MN 55102-1906.



## ‘Between Fences’

Smithsonian traveling exhibit to tour state

Fences are tools that embody cultural values. They define boundaries, enclose spaces, create a sense of place. By understanding the changing uses for fences, we can better understand ourselves as Americans. That’s the premise of “Between Fences,” a traveling exhibition from the Smithsonian Institution that will make six Minnesota stops in 2009 and 2010.

The exhibit was developed by Museum on Main Street, a partnership of the Smithsonian, state humanities councils and rural museums across the country. Minnesota venues scheduled to host the exhibit are:

- Minnesota’s Machinery Museum, Hanley Falls, Sept. 9–Oct. 17.
- Dassel Area Historical Society, Dassel, Oct. 24–Dec. 5.
- Zumbrota Area Historical Society, Zumbrota, Dec. 12–Jan. 30, 2010.
- Otter Tail County Historical Society, Fergus Falls, Feb. 6–March 20, 2010.
- Roseau County Historical Society, Roseau, March 27–May 8, 2010.
- Clearwater County Historical Society, Shevlin, May 15–June 26, 2010.

As with all Museum on Main Street exhibits, local hosts are encouraged to plan programs and supplemental exhibits that link their own region’s history to the national story told in the exhibition. For more information on “Between Fences” in Minnesota or to find out how to book future Museum on Main Street exhibits in your community, call Tom Fitzpatrick, director of community partnerships at

the Minnesota Humanities Center, 651-772-4255 or toll free 866-268-7293, ext. 255, or e-mail [tom@minnesotahumanities.org](mailto:tom@minnesotahumanities.org).

For a preview of “Between Fences” go to [www.museumonmainstreet.org/exhibs\\_fences/fences.htm](http://www.museumonmainstreet.org/exhibs_fences/fences.htm). ■



Smithsonian Institution

*This Saturday Evening Post image in the exhibition “Between Fences” captures the spirit of mid-century suburbia.*

# Minnesota garners six 2008 AASLH awards

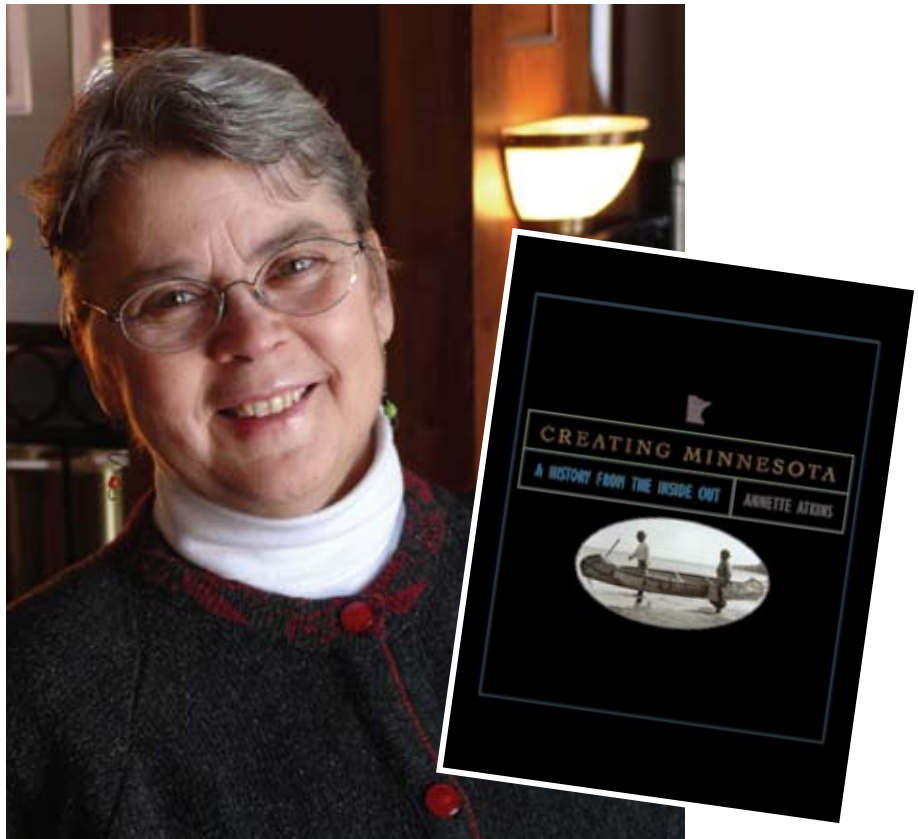
In a year when the AASLH bestowed 30 percent fewer Leadership in History awards nationwide, Minnesota held its own, again garnering roughly 10 percent of the total. In all, five Minnesota projects took home awards of merit for outstanding accomplishments in the collection, preservation and interpretation of state and local history.

One of those projects also won a WOW award for exceptional merit – one of only two such awards given in the country. The winning organizations and individuals were honored in September at the AASLH conference in Rochester, N.Y.

### Annette Atkins

A professor of history at St. John's University in Collegeville, Annette Atkins is well known for her fresh approaches to familiar topics in Minnesota history. Her latest book, "Creating Minnesota: A History from the Inside Out," is no exception. Published by the Minnesota Historical Society Press on the occasion of the state's sesquicentennial in 2008, the book offers a new look at how modern-day Minnesota came into being. Each chapter focuses on a telling detail or incident from the past that illuminates a larger trend or event that shaped the state. Atkins's book won a WOW award as well as an award of merit, marking the second year in a row that a Minnesota Historical Society project has been so honored.

MHS Press



Annette Atkins and her award-winning book.

### James B. Bell

Historian James B. Bell battled long odds to write his book "From Arcade Street to Main Street: A History of the Seeger Refrigerator Company," published by the Ramsey County Historical Society. Many of the company's records had been lost or destroyed so Bell relied largely on interviews with former Seeger employees to chronicle the rise of the family-owned appliance manufacturer, its eventual merger with Whirlpool and the devastating effects of the plant closure in 1984. Thanks to Bell's exhaustive research and the workers' first-person accounts, the history of an important St. Paul manufacturing company has been preserved.

### Mona Nelson

When Mona Nelson died at age 56 in February of 2008, she left a legacy of dedicated service to Minnesota's history museum community. For 33 years she led the Kandiyohi County Historical Society, becoming its first professional staff member in 1979 and later its executive director. During that time the organization grew dramatically, going from a budget of just \$500 to more than \$100,000 in just a few years, thanks largely to Nelson's grant-writing skills. The museum took shape under her leadership as collections grew, displays changed and research services were added. Membership quadrupled and museum visitation soared with the



advent of special programming and the acquisition of Engine #2523, now a widely recognized community symbol. Along the way, Nelson helped organize the Minnesota Alliance of Local History Museums. This well-deserved honor, awarded posthumously, recognizes her many contributions to Kandiyohi County history and the state's museum community.

Kandiyohi County Historical Society



Mona Nelson

## Sherburne County Historical Society

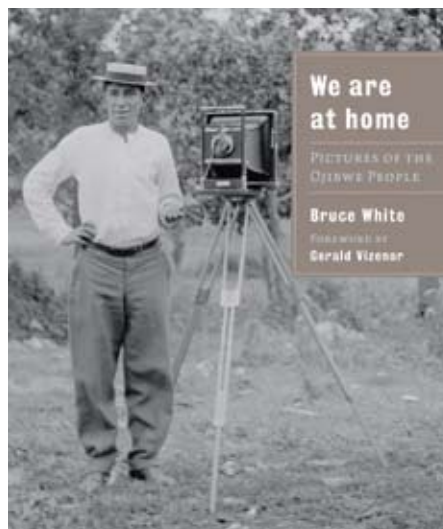
To make the most of the 50-acre setting for its new history center, the Sherburne County Historical Society formulated an interpretive plan for both indoor and outdoor exhibits that would link the county's cultural and environmental history. Developed with the help of outside consultants, local businesses and countless volunteers, the resulting exhibit, "Life on the Edge," and the half-mile Legacy Trail focus on several main themes, from conservation and agriculture to power generation and rural electrification. The exhibits, based on extensive audience research,



Chris Lommi

Attention-grabbing artifacts like this tree-planting machine illustrate stories in the exhibit "Life on the Edge" at the Sherburne County Historical Society.

have raised awareness of the county historical society and helped transform its relationship with the public, which has gained a new appreciation for Sherburne County's unique history.



MHHS Press

## Bruce White

Historian Bruce White's book "We Are at Home: Pictures of the Ojibwe People" shows the Ojibwe of Minnesota and Wisconsin as they have rarely been pictured before – in a context

that is accurate and respectful of their culture and the individuals pictured. Starting with hundreds of photographs from the Minnesota Historical Society archives taken of and by Ojibwe people, White spent decades tracking down the subjects and their families to learn more about their lives and the circumstances surrounding the images. The resulting text illuminates their stories – the seasonal round of Ojibwe activities, spiritual traditions, leaders and prominent families – as they themselves told them. ■

## 2009 nominations due March 1

The AASLH awards program encourages standards of excellence in preserving and interpreting state and local history by bestowing awards of merit for performance deemed excellent compared nationally with similar activities. Nominations for the 2009 awards are due by March 1. For more information, go to [www.aaslh.org](http://www.aaslh.org), call state chair Melinda Hutchinson at 651-259-3459, or e-mail [melinda.hutchinson@mnhs.org](mailto:melinda.hutchinson@mnhs.org).



## 'Connecting to Collections Bookshelf'

IMLS offers third round of collections-care resources for small museums

The Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) has announced a third round of its Connecting to Collections Bookshelf, a multiyear initiative that provides small museums and libraries with resources needed to improve the condition of their collections. One thousand more sets of free materials will be distributed. The resources include books and DVDs on such topics as the ethics of collecting, collections planning and management, emergency preparedness, and culturally specific conservation issues. For a complete list of Bookshelf publications, go to [www.aaslh.org/Bookshelf](http://www.aaslh.org/Bookshelf).

### How to apply

The application period for the third round runs from Jan. 5 to March 9. You'll find instructions and the application form, which requires completion of several essay questions, at [www.aaslh.org/Bookshelf](http://www.aaslh.org/Bookshelf). Because the IMLS is a federal agency, you'll also need an institutional DUNS number to apply; instructions can be found at [www.imls.gov/applicants/grantsgov/duns.shtm](http://www.imls.gov/applicants/grantsgov/duns.shtm). To date, 29 Minnesota museums, archives and libraries have been awarded these essential collections-care reference tools. To view the list of previous recipients, go to the Bookshelf website. ■

## Winter grants cycle underway

Deadlines for the Winter 2009 round of state grants-in-aid and Certified Local Government (CLG) grants are:

**Jan. 9** Preapplication due.

**Feb. 20** Final application due.

**April 1** Grants Review Committee meets.

For guidelines, eligibility requirements and application forms for all Minnesota Historical Society grants, go to [www.mnhs.org/about/grants](http://www.mnhs.org/about/grants). ■

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