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In search of exhibit expertise

Museums tap local talent to develop new displays

It's a familiar dilemma, one shared by museums across Minnesota: There's a new exhibit to get up but extra hands are in short supply and money is even tighter. What's an organization to do?

That depends on many factors – availability of funds, proximity to exhibit consultants, dedication of skilled volunteers, generosity of in-kind donors – and sometimes just plain luck. A look at the recent experiences of several Minnesota museums reveals a range of solutions.

A good fit

To fill the 2,000-square-foot exhibit gallery in its new history center in 2006, the Sherburne County Historical Society needed to look beyond its own staff. "Our capital campaign and county bond funding helped build the museum," says SCHS director Kurt Kragness. "But we needed additional help with developing an interpretive plan and exhibits."

After researching a number of consulting firms, Kragness chose two. Tom Woods, former site manager of the nearby Oliver H. Kelley Farm and now owner of a company called Making Sense of Place,

was hired to do the interpretive plan. "He knew Sherburne County," says Kragness, "and his background fit the general scheme of our museum – integration of the county's cultural and environmental histories." Split Rock Studios, located in Ramsey County, was selected to design and fabricate

the exhibits. "Their proximity helped us keep costs lower," Kragness notes. "That, combined with their high-quality work and national reputation, gave us very good value for our dollar."

In search of exhibit expertise
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A 1970s irrigation tower, donated by local farmers, is one of the large objects anchoring the exhibit "Life on the Edge," created for the Sherburne History Center by a team of consultants.

Sherburne County Historical Society

In search of exhibit expertise – continued

The team of consultants and SCHS staff together created “Life on the Edge,” a long-term exhibit on themes tied to the county’s location at the edge of the Anoka Sand Plain (see the July-August 2006 Interpreter). Split Rock Studios also built the infrastructure for smaller changing exhibits – a mobile cart, benches, plasma-screen TV and wall display space – on the theme “Communities,” to feature the people and places of Sherburne County. Staff will develop those exhibits.

“The response has been very good,” says Kragness. “Sherburne County residents tell us we’ve exceeded their expectations. But the real story behind our success is not only the professional-quality exhibits – it was the involvement of all the local agencies

and individuals who donated artifacts and in-kind services. We built good relationships in the process of developing our museum. And that reinforces our mission of connecting people to the place where they live.”

A ready resource

“Sometimes everything just goes your way,” says Wanda Hoyum, director of the Beltrami County Historical Society. That was the happy outcome of a call she made last year to the local office of Experience Works, a federal jobs program for older workers. Short of volunteers and looking for help on a new exhibit, Hoyum hit the jackpot when she was paired with Jean Parkin. Parkin, it turns out, has a degree in exhibit design from Bemidji State University.

Hoyum already knew the benefits of having the university nearby. She had used BSU students and faculty before, starting years ago with a history department internship program, then branching out to work with students studying marketing and advertising. And she had hired Steve Sundahl, a professor of visual arts, to design the first two major exhibits at the Beltrami County History Center. This time, though, a bare-bones budget meant taking a different approach; the Experience Works program would pick up Parkin’s salary.

“Jean and I put together an exhibit plan for a transportation exhibit we called ‘Paddle, Ride or Fly,’” explains Hoyum. “Then we recruited students from BSU’s history and industrial technology departments. Some kids worked on the



Beltrami County Historical Society

Jean Parkin (left) came to the Beltrami County Historical Society through Experience Works, a federal jobs program. She and Bemidji State University student volunteer Rachael Martin (right) helped mount a transportation exhibit.

space design, others did the painting, and one class created a touch-screen station in the exhibit gallery.” The finishing touch was provided by a local company called Fabric Images, which donated an 8-by-10-foot curved scrim at the entrance bearing the exhibit title and a digital photo from the BCHS collections. “Considering our chronic budget limitations,” Hoyum says, “we’ll use the same formula of volunteer help and donated services when we change exhibits next year.”

The big picture

A combination of professional guidance and volunteer labor also helped the Norman County Historical Society get back on its feet after a devastating flood 10 years ago. To fill its new museum in 2002, the society turned to exhibits consultant Claudia Pratt, owner of CMP Consulting in North Dakota (see the January-February 2005 Interpreter). Pratt not only created the first exhibit but also developed a system of flexible exhibit furniture, fabricated by a local carpenter, that could be used for future displays.

Since then, exhibits at the museum have been generated by the NCHS board, which doubles as the society’s volunteer staff. Board member Solveig Kitchell, a teacher in the Ada public schools, played a lead role in organizing the current exhibit, “Through the Window of History,” which involved considerable research on each of the county’s cities and townships. “It was a big job for us to pull together,” says Kitchell. “We don’t have many board

members under age 75. We’re a dedicated group with lots of ideas. We just need bodies to implement them.”

Pratt occasionally boosts the head count of staff at the Clay County Historical Society, too. “We’ve worked with Claudia for several years,” explains CCHS director Lisa Vedaa. “She consults with us on our main exhibit, which changes annually. Her strong suit is exhibit design – she has a good eye for spatial layout.” What results have Pratt’s involvement brought? “An AASLH award, for one thing,” says Vedaa. “‘Eating Out in Clay County,’ one of the exhibits she helped us with, won a Certificate of Commendation in 2004.”

When planning for the historical society’s 75th anniversary threatened to overwhelm her staff, Vedaa turned once again to Pratt, who not only tackled the main exhibit, “Celebrating 75 Years of Collecting,” which opened in October, but also served as project director for a whole year’s worth of Diamond Jubilee programs. “She helps us with big-picture planning,” says Vedaa. “She can step back and see how to bring everything together.”

Vedaa sums up Pratt’s role this way: “She’s a great cheerleader.” Now, who can’t use one of those? ■



Exhibits consultant Claudia Pratt and her father, volunteer Paul Pratt, hang a banner announcing the Clay County Historical Society's Diamond Jubilee.

Volunteers play essential role

2006 survey looks at recruitment, training and recognition

by David Grabitske and Jean Nierenhausen

Minnesota's historical organizations depend on volunteers in many ways. To learn more about how volunteers make a difference, Local History Services staff at the Minnesota Historical Society designed the 2006 survey of county and local historical organizations to gauge how volunteers are recruited, trained and recognized.

A total of 180 surveys were returned by October 2006 – a return rate of 55 percent. Here's what you said.

Who are local history volunteers?

Survey respondents reported the involvement of 6,763 volunteers at their county and local historical organizations. Those volunteers contributed a total of 225,306 hours last year. That's the equivalent of 108 full-time employees.



Crossings Arts Alliance

Volunteers, especially those doing interpretation, are often the public face of Minnesota's historical organizations. Here, volunteer Ann Grussing leads a tour of the Smithsonian traveling exhibition "Key Ingredients" at the Franklin Art Center in Brainerd.

No wonder volunteers are credited with contributing significantly to our success.

A look at volunteer demographics reveals few surprises. On average, 65 percent were women and 35 percent were men. More than half (53 percent) were young retirees, ages 50 to 70. Another 31 percent were over age 70.

How are they recruited?

By far, the most common way volunteers are recruited is by word of mouth. Fully 88 percent are found this way, many of them encouraged to volunteer by the positive experiences of others.

Newsletters and local newspapers also are important vehicles for spreading the word about volunteer opportunities. And more and more people are turning to organizational web sites to learn about ways to get involved.

Though few volunteers at Minnesota's historical organizations fill out a formal job application, about 40 percent are interviewed before starting work.

What about training?

Training and tracking of volunteers depend largely on the size of the organization and the volume of its volunteer program. But job descriptions for volunteers, the foundation for a sound volunteer program, are still rare at local historical organizations.

A good job description helps define the relationship between the volunteer and the organization in question. A written description works best, serving to clarify

the role of the volunteer, identify tasks and spell out the time commitment expected. At some organizations, those matters are communicated through informal conversation rather than a formal job description. At the most basic level of clarifying expectations for volunteers, 40 percent of organizations at least define the start and end dates for their projects.

Three-quarters of all volunteers receive some kind of training, and most of that is done one-on-one with the volunteer's supervisor. Roughly half of all training is done on the job.

What do volunteers do?

The number one job filled by volunteers is service on governing boards. These are often the people who have the longest-lasting impact on the organizations they serve.

A surprising 72 percent of volunteers work as library and research assistants. This undoubtedly reflects not only growing interest in genealogy among volunteers but also higher demand from patrons.

How are volunteers recognized?

Rewarding volunteers need not be a costly endeavor. Small gestures are sometimes the most appreciated. Forty percent of organizations welcome volunteers with a nametag when they report for work.

Volunteers continued on page 5

'Stories of Service'

Nicollet County veterans featured in student project

Last year Marcia Applen, a social studies teacher at St. Peter High School, sent her 11th-grade students on a mission: Uncover stories of unsung heroes in the community by interviewing veterans who served their country in World War II, Korea and Vietnam.

Lessons learned

Applen had multiple motives in mind. Through the project, students would learn lessons about commitment, sacrifice and civic values. They would also gain experience conducting oral history interviews and research in primary sources.

Finding an audience

The students wove excerpts from their videotaped interviews with photos and other historical sources to create short movies. To give the finished products a wider audience, Applen arranged for the student films to be shown at Nicollet County's Treaty Site History Center. A grant from the Schmidt Foundation, dedicated to supporting projects in the Minnesota River valley, underwrote construction of a media cabinet at the history center. There, visitors can access the movies via a touch-screen monitor and hear, in the veterans' own words, their stories of service to their country. ■



Nicollet County Historical Society

At this interactive station in the Treaty Site History Center, visitors can watch interviews with veterans of World War II, Korea and Vietnam, taped by local high school students.

Volunteers play essential role - continued

Two-thirds of volunteers are thanked for their service with a letter. Many of you also noted that you take a moment to express your thanks personally. And annual volunteer recognition events are hosted by 40 percent of historical organizations.

Recognizing the good work of volunteers, providing feedback on the quality of their work and making them feel an important part of the organization are very effective means for ensuring low volunteer turnover. Volunteers want to feel valued; sometimes that means more to them than any gift. If their experience with your organization is a good one, your volunteers will want to come back. And they'll tell their friends.

How are volunteer programs evaluated?

One survey respondent summarized how many of us gauge whether or not a program is working: "We can evaluate by the quality of work accomplished."

Most of you report, however, that you have not yet instituted a formal evaluation of your volunteer program. Evaluation takes a little more time but it's an important step in any program you undertake. Volunteers are making a personal commitment of their time, energy and ideas. That's more than worth the extra effort it takes to ensure a positive experience for your volunteers.

The next survey

Look for the 2007 survey to be in your mailboxes by June. This year's focus will be on archaeological collections and their use. We hope you'll take part! ■

For more information about the annual surveys conducted by the Minnesota Historical Society's Local History Services staff, call David Grabitske, grants and field programs associate, at 651-259-3460 or e-mail david.grabitske@mnhs.org. For more information about managing volunteer programs, call Jean Nierenhausen, the Society's volunteer program manager, at 651-284-0435 or e-mail jean.nierenhausen@mnhs.org.

Collections management policies made easy

A book review by Timothy Glines, MHS manager of outreach services

With its appealing title and eye-catching cover image, John Simmons' new book on museum collections management policies is sure to attract browsers. Yet "Things Great and Small," published by the American Association of Museums, deserves serious study and a place on the reference bookshelf of historical organizations everywhere. Why? Because care of collections is central to the mission of all historical organizations. And because Simmons, an experienced administrator and teacher, tackles his subject with a clear vision and straightforward approach that make his subject accessible to museum professionals at all levels of experience.

Defining terms

Simmons begins with a chapter on why collections management policies are important. He is careful to differentiate between collections policies and procedures – a distinction confusing to many.

Definitions continue to play a central role in the book. Simmons defines collections management broadly as "the activities that relate to the administration of collections, including planning, development, care, conservation and documentation." He casts his net even wider to cover the use of museum collections by researchers and others. That's a lot of ground to cover but Simmons does it well, devoting subsequent chapters to each of the relevant topics. An appendix is devoted to a glossary of the terms used in collections management and care.

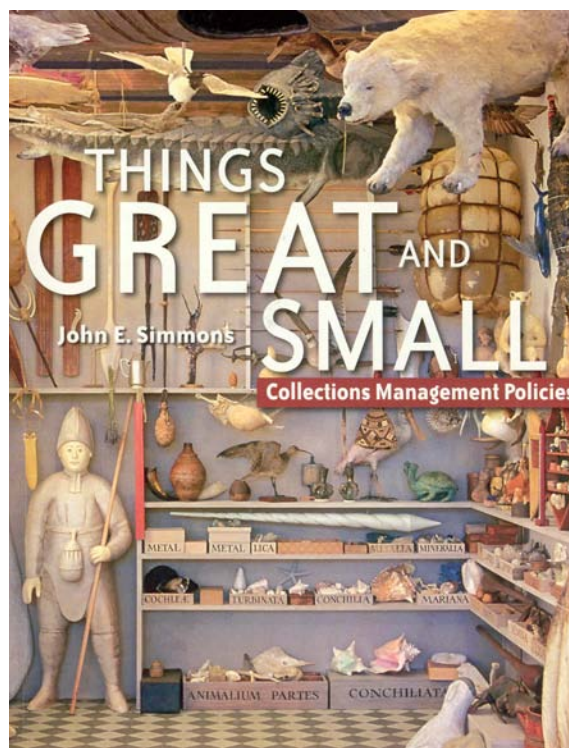
Practical tools

Simmons' approach to his subject is a flexible one. He believes there is no single right way to manage a collection; rather, there may be several right ways to do it. To help readers apply the general principles of collections management and care, he offers practical tools for those charged with writing collections policies and procedures. "Things Great and Small" is full of sample policies from real organizations on a variety of topics.

And then there are the tables – plentiful, easy to follow and eminently useful. In the chapter on acquisitions and accessions, for example, tables summarize acceptable means of acquisition and outline the process for making accessioning decisions. Another table lays out important laws, regulations and treaties affecting museum collections, describing the purpose of each and providing sources of further information.

Because of the book's modest length, not all subjects are covered in depth. The chapter on intellectual property, for example, is only three pages long. But as with all the other chapters, Simmons gives a list of references directing the reader to additional information.

This book will help you answer many of the questions that may arise as your organization formulates and refines its major operating policies. Whether you're new to collections management or have been involved with museums for many years, you'll find Simmons' book an essential reference tool. ■



"Things Great and Small: Collections Management Policies" by John Simmons (American Association of Museums, 2006). Paper, 208 pp., ISBN: 1-933253-03-7, \$40; \$30 for AAM members. Order online at www.aam-us.org/bookstore.

May is Preservation Month

This May, state and local community groups across the country will celebrate their historic preservation successes. Spearheading the nationwide observance of Preservation Month, with the theme “Making Preservation Work,” is the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

There are many ways your community can participate. The National Trust’s web site offers tools for mounting successful Preservation Month events, including a proclamation template, steps for creating a publicity plan and sample press releases. For details go to www.nationaltrust.org/preservationmonth.

For information on what the Preservation Alliance of Minnesota has on tap, go to www.mnpreservation.org. And let your colleagues know what you’re planning by posting a notice of your Preservation Month events online:

- in the Minnesota Historical Society’s Local History News e-newsletter (localhistorynews@mnhs.org).
- on the web site of the Preservation Alliance. E-mail kandre@mnpreservation.org with the subject line Preservation Month Events, or call 651-293-9047. ■



State Historic Preservation Office

A preservation success story, the 1914 Hotel Kaddatz in Fergus Falls was rehabilitated for retail space, an art gallery and artist lofts.

Conservation workshops help preserve family history

As part of the Minnesota Historical Society’s ongoing project “Minnesota’s Greatest Generation,” outreach conservator Bob Herskovitz continues his series of conservation workshops to help Minnesotans preserve their family history.

Practical approaches

The programs offer practical approaches to preserving various kinds of family memorabilia – letters, photographs and other materials – particularly from the World War II era. Using items brought by participants, Herskovitz demonstrates how to care for, store and display family treasures. He also offers guidelines for creating oral histories that will be useful to future generations.

Seven workshops are scheduled for March and April:

March 5: Stillwater

Lowell Inn, noon
Sponsor: Washington County Historical Society
Call 651-430-3830.

April 11: Aitkin

Aitkin County Historical Society, 1:30 p.m.
Sponsor: Aitkin County Historical Society
Call 218-927-3348.

April 12: Wadena

Wadena County Historical Society, 2 p.m.
Sponsor: Wadena County Historical Society
Call 218-631-9079.

April 21: New Prague

New Prague Public Library, 10 a.m.
Sponsor: New Prague Historical Society
Call 952-758-2201.

April 24: Lake Bronson

Kittson County Historical Society, 1:30 p.m.
Sponsor: Kittson County Historical Society
Call 218-754-4100.

April 26: Mora

Kanabec History Center, 6:30 p.m.
Sponsor: Kanabec County Historical Society
Call 320-679-1665.

April 27: Duluth

The Depot, 2 p.m.
Sponsors: Veterans’ Memorial Hall, St. Louis County Historical Society
Call 218-733-7500.

Host a workshop

Herskovitz is now scheduling workshops for the summer and fall. To host a workshop in your community, call 651-259-3465 or e-mail bob.herskovitz@mnhs.org. For more information on the Greatest Generation project, culminating in a major exhibition during Minnesota’s 2008 sesquicentennial, go to www.mnhs.org/mgg. ■

Five chances to catch a local history workshop

What's in store this spring for Minnesota's historical organizations? Five regional meetings with one common theme: striving for excellence.

Brought to you by the Minnesota Historical Society's Local History Services, these workshops explore new strategies for engaging visitors, planning outdoor exhibits, using archaeological collections, raising funds and more. Choose one of the following workshop locations, all featuring the same program:

March 23, Becker
April 13, Worthington
April 27, St. Peter
May 11, Chisholm
May 21, Roseau

See the enclosed flyer for a complete schedule of workshop sessions. Register online at <http://shop.mnhs.org> or use the form provided. If you have questions, call David Grabitske at 651-259-3460. ■



The Worthington workshop features a stop at the George D. Dayton House, now owned by Historic Worthington, Inc. It was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 2005.

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