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Setting the standard

AASLH pilot project helps smaller museums measure up

In its role as the national organization for those who work and volunteer in state and local history, the American Association for State and Local History (AASLH) provides leadership, resources and training to countless museums across the country. In recent years, however, AASLH staff began hearing from one important segment of its constituency – smaller history museums – that they were not being as well served as larger institutions.

So the AASLH did what its member museums do when a need for organizational development arises: it applied for a grant. Now, armed with a three-year grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services, the AASLH is developing a new program to help small and mid-sized history museums, historic houses and other historical organizations learn more about national museum standards. The goal: to provide benchmarks and resources for achieving the standards that smaller museums can use to undertake a process of self-assessment and improvement.

Minnesota tapped to participate

To pilot the standards project, the AASLH recruited eight service providers from around the country – state and regional history associations, humanities councils, field service offices and others – who will work with selected smaller museums in their regions to field-test the program. The Local History Services Office of the Minnesota Historical Society is one of the service providers chosen.

David Grabitske, MHS grants and field programs associate, will serve as the state coordinator for the AASLH standards project. “This is a great opportunity for Minnesota organizations to help shape and evaluate a program that will benefit museums across the country,” he says.

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Kittson County Historical Society

Proper storage of artifacts is a pressing need for the Kittson County Historical Society, one of six Minnesota museums chosen as pilot sites for the AASLH standards project. Among the collections-related challenges faced by the museum: a building with no dedicated artifact storage space, a bare-bones budget and staff, and a shortage of nearby volunteers.

Setting the standard – continued

The need

According to AASLH estimates, there are 8,000–10,000 small and mid-sized history museums (budgets of \$500,000 or less) in the United States. And that number continues to grow.

Together, these smaller organizations hold a disproportionately large share of the country's historic and cultural resources. Yet, due to budget and staff limitations, many of them do not have access to the kinds of professional development and training that enable them to care for and interpret their collections using standards generally accepted in the museum field. This leaves their vast collections at risk and threatens the loss of important stories from their communities' and the country's past.

Program concepts and goals

Gathering input from smaller museums around the country, an AASLH task force defined the standards program concepts and developed goals. What emerged was a program designed to be voluntary, accessible and easy to implement. It allows organizations to set their own improvement priorities and proceed at their own pace, as time and budgets allow, guided by a list of what needs to be done in each area of their operations.

The program is meant to complement, rather than compete with, standards programs at other agencies in the museum community. The AASLH is working in partnership with the American Association of Museums

and its Accreditation and Museum Assessment (MAP) Programs, for example, to create a seamless structure of self-improvement for history museums.

Standards framework

Six areas, based on national standards used by the AAM, have been identified for use in the AASLH program:

- mission, vision and governance
- management
- audience
- interpretation
- stewardship: collections
- stewardship: historic structures and landscape

A team of consultants for each area is developing a workbook of self-assessment questionnaires, best practices and other materials to help organizations achieve the standards. To customize the standards to the unique needs of history organizations, particular care has been given to the areas of interpretation, archives management and stewardship of older buildings.

Pilot sites

To test the standards program model, 48 pilot sites from across the country – six from each of the eight participating regions – were chosen by the AASLH Standards Training and Assistance Committee from among groups suggested by the service providers. As a whole, the organizations piloting the program exhibit diversity in staffing (volunteers, paid staff and trained paid staff), encompass a variety of subject-specific museums and represent a range



Bois Forte Heritage Center

Exhibits at the Bois Forte Heritage Center depict the history and culture of the Bois Forte Band of Ojibwe. This scene recounts a dream received by an elder that the Ojibwe should move west, their journey guided by a shell appearing in the sky. The center, overseen by a board of governors composed of Bois Forte Tribal Council members and at-large representatives from the reservation, may choose governance for its AASLH standards project.

Setting the standard – continued

of progress toward meeting museum standards. In addition, all have budgets under \$500,000 (with some under \$100,000) and are representative of their region's historical organizations.

The six Minnesota pilot sites, in alphabetical order, are:

- Bois Forte Heritage Center and Cultural Museum on the Bois Forte Reservation (St. Louis County)
- Hennepin County Medical Center (HCMC) History Museum
- Kittson County Historical Society
- Mower County Historical Society
- Sacred Heart Area Historical Society (Renville County)
- White Bear Lake Area Historical Society (Ramsey County)

Each pilot site will work to improve its policies and practices in one or more areas of the standards.

Timetable

In the spring of 2008, the participating organizations will conduct a self-assessment and identify their areas for improvement. Grabitske will then match each pilot site with a training activity or workshop in an area where improvement is needed; some funds will be made available for that training.

Over the summer months, the six Minnesota museums will work on a project of their choosing that will help them move closer to achieving the standards in their designated area. After a period of evaluation in the fall,

AASLH will fine-tune the standards program for a nationwide rollout in 2009.

Testing the process

What's important for this pilot phase of the standards project, AASLH staff acknowledge, is not that all pilot sites meet the standards in their chosen area. Rather, the AASLH and regional service providers will be watching to see how the process works. Among aspects of the project to be tested:

- usefulness of program resources in helping history organizations embark on a course of self-improvement,
- likelihood that small and mid-sized history organizations will choose to take part in the standards program,
- funds needed in order for such organizations to participate, and
- preferred types of recognition or validation for meeting standards program goals.

Findings of the AASLH pilot project and plans for implementing the agency's history museum standards program will be covered in a future issue of the *Interpreter*. Meanwhile, for more information, you may direct questions to David Grabitske at 651-259-3460 or e-mail david.grabitske@mnhs.org. ■



HCMC History Museum

Employees are frequent visitors to the HCMC History Museum, established in the 1930s at the old General Hospital. The museum holds medical equipment, uniforms, archival materials and photographs from precursor hospitals dating to the 1880s. HCMC has identified collections stewardship as the standards area it hopes to focus on during the pilot project.

Collecting memories

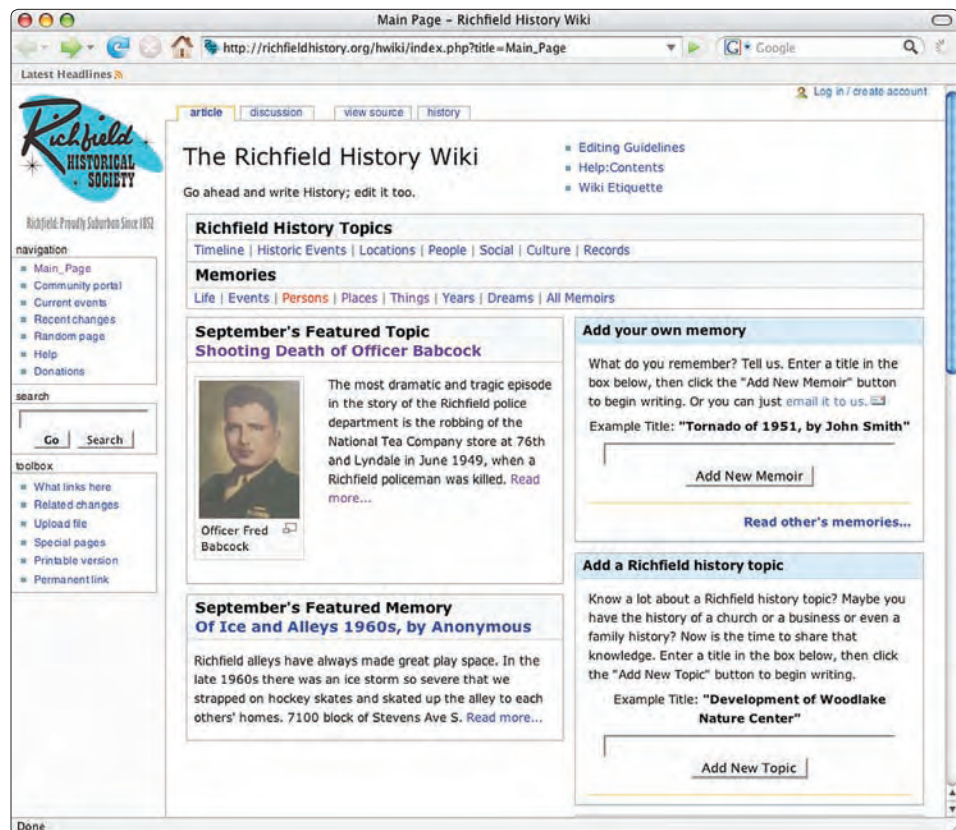
Richfield History Wiki opens door to community collaboration

Three goals were high on the list for Richfield Historical Society director Lisa Plank and her board last year. “We wanted to find new ways to reach out to the community,” says Plank. “We also wanted to broaden our audience base. And, because our community is largely a post-World War II suburb, we wanted to tap the memories of residents who helped shape it. That kind of anecdotal materials is hard to capture.”

They turned to the Web for inspiration. Intrigued by the success of Wikipedia, the online interactive encyclopedia that lets anyone contribute an entry, Plank and RHS board member Joe Hoover decided to create a local version, the Richfield History Wiki. It’s accessible through the historical society’s web site at www.richfieldhistory.org/hwiki/.

Using openly available software, the technology-savvy Hoover built the wiki as an interactive component of the RHS web site, which he had previously designed. “To get people interested,” he explains, “we seeded the wiki with lots of content – featured topics and featured memories – then made it easy for users to add their own stories or suggest new topics.” Editing guidelines, templates and a Wiki Etiquette section help new users learn the ropes. “It turns the web site into a two-way communication tool,” says Hoover.

That’s just what Plank wants from this collaborative online project – a dialogue with the community. She and Hoover admit it won’t be easy to attract older residents unfamiliar with the technology.



The Richfield Historical Society uses its online interactive History Wiki to gather personal stories of Richfield's past from community residents.

But as people begin sharing their favorite Richfield stories, others will join in. Says Plank, “We hope the history wiki becomes an important resource as well as another way for people to get involved with the historical society – by using this online forum for contributing their memories.”

For more information on the project, call Plank at 612 798-6140 or Hoover at 651-259-3020. ■



Austin Area Commission for the Arts photos

Richfield Historical Society

Curators-in-the-making

Students create exhibit for Morrison County museum

A curious young visitor was the inspiration for a class titled “When Artifacts Speak: How to Mount a Museum Exhibit,” offered last summer at the Morrison County Historical Society’s Charles A. Weyerhaeuser Museum. Museum manager Mary Warner and curator Ann Marie Johnson worked with a small group of youngsters ages 12-15 to explore all aspects of putting together an exhibit – choosing a topic, selecting artifacts and photographs, conducting research and preparing labels. The class culminated in the opening of a small exhibit created by the participants.

Rather than assigning an exhibit theme, the staff let the students select the artifacts they wanted to work with. “Not surprisingly,” says Warner, “the boys were drawn to our military collection and the girls wanted to work with clothing. The challenge was coming up

with a cohesive theme from that mix. Going through our photo collection helped them put their artifacts in a context – the period between the two World Wars.” After a lively debate, the group decided on an exhibit title that revealed their struggles: “World War Mishmash: The Home Front and the Battlefront.”

Warner was delighted with the results. “We still had work left to do on the exhibit after the class ended,” she says. “The kids came back on their own to finish it. They helped set up the opening reception, too. They were a little shy about all the attention but very proud of their accomplishments. One budding curator even wants to do it again!” ■



Morrison County Historical Society curator Ann Marie Johnson shows students proper artifact handling for their exhibit at the Charles A. Weyerhaeuser Museum in Little Falls.

Morrison County Historical Society



A fitting flourish

When the stone spire was hoisted into place atop Austin’s Paramount Theatre, it capped an 18-year campaign to restore the 1929 property. Listed on the National Register of Historic Places, the Paramount boasts an “atmospheric” auditorium evoking a Spanish village, complete with picturesque Moorish architecture and stars twinkling overhead. The cast stone spire, recreated by American Artstone of New Ulm from historic photographs, was funded through donations and a state grant-in-aid from the Minnesota Historical Society. Owned and operated by the Austin Area Commission for the Arts, the reborn theater palace stands proud once again as a treasured community resource.

Paramount Theatre facade (far left) and detail (left).

Claims to fame

Spotlighting local “notables” raises funds for history

Not every county historical society is as lucky as those in Freeborn and Washington counties. Both found sure-fire ideas for fundraising events right on their doorstep.

Freeborn County is the birthplace of actress Marion Ross, best known for her starring role in the 1970s television show “Happy Days.” After donating some artifacts to the county historical society museum in 2002, Ross agreed to serve as honorary chair of the organization’s Heritage Club, recognizing members who give at least \$1,000 a year. Also tapped as grand marshal for Albert Lea’s sesquicentennial parade in 2006, Ross appeared at several events for Freeborn County Historical Society members and donors.

This year, to help raise funds for the society’s building expansion project, Ross donated a 1955 Ford truck from her Happy Days Farm in California for a raffle. “Instead,” explains FCHS executive director Pat Mulso, “we decided we’d like to keep the truck, add it to our collection and use it for ongoing fundraising.” The first 20 donors to pledge \$2,000 or more to the building fund get their names on a plaque displayed with the truck. Proceeds will also go to the FCHS Foundation. “So far, we’ve raised more than \$35,000,” says Mulso. “And the truck continues to attract visitors.”

In Washington County, it was another kind of community asset that attracted attention. Last year, for the first time in nearly 90 years, the public had an



Freeborn County Historical Society

To help the Freeborn County Historical Society raise funds, native daughter and actress Marion Ross lends her name – and donated her Happy Days Farm truck – to the county museum.

opportunity to visit two related historic properties – the 1880s William Sauntry House and its stunning 1902 Recreation Hall – both on the National Register of Historic Places. Proceeds from the tours and an evening soirée at the hall, now a private residence, benefited the Washington County Historical Society.

Owners of both properties are historical society members. It was the proprietors of the Queen Anne-style William Sauntry Mansion, now an award-winning bed-and-breakfast inn, who suggested the fundraiser. The owners of the Recreation Hall jumped on board. Nearing the end of a painstaking, seven-year restoration, they were eager to show off the striking property, known locally as the Alhambra for its Moorish architecture. The one-time events drew more than 400 people and raised over \$15,000 for WCHS operations.

Has your organization made similar use of a notable historical asset for fundraising?

Let the Interpreter know and we’ll share it with readers in a future issue. See page 8 for contact information. ■



The William Sauntry Mansion



Photo by John Runk, MHS Collections

Owners of two adjacent National Register properties in Washington County – the William Sauntry Mansion (top), a Stillwater bed-and-breakfast inn, and the recently restored Sauntry Recreation Hall (bottom), shown here in 1919 – opened their historic homes for public tours as a fundraiser for the Washington County Historical Society.

Winter round added for state grants-in-aid

After an absence of several years due to lack of funding, the winter round of the Minnesota Historical Society's state grants-in-aid program is back. Thanks to a one-time budget-surplus allocation from the Minnesota Legislature, a total of \$158,000 is available for grants to help qualifying organizations interpret and preserve Minnesota history.

Who is eligible?

County and local nonprofit historical organizations are the primary recipients of state grants-in-aid. Local units of government and tribal governments also are eligible to apply.

What will be funded?

Projects undertaken to mark the Minnesota Sesquicentennial in 2008 will receive special consideration in this

round. Projects in the grant program's customary 10 categories also are open for funding: historic properties, artifact collections, interpretive programs, microform copies, oral history, photographic collections, manuscripts, publications and research, museum environments and technology.

Maximum awards are \$10,000 for most categories, \$50,000 for the historic properties and museum environments categories, and \$5,000 for microform copies. Projects awarded more than \$10,000 will receive dollars on a reimbursable basis.

How to apply

For application materials, go to www.mnhs.org/sgia. A pre-application is strongly recommended for all

projects and is required for the historic properties and museum environments categories. Applications should address the following:

- the importance of the project to organizational goals,
- the project's potential for capacity-building and organizational transformation, and
- expected outcomes that will significantly benefit the public.

Deadlines

Jan. 11, 2008: Pre-application due.

Feb. 22: Final application due.

April 3: Grants Review Committee meets.

Questions? Call David Grabitske in the Grants Office at 651-259-3460 or e-mail david.grabitske@mnhs.org. ■

'The State We're In'

Proposals sought for Minnesota history conference

On May 28-30, 2008, public and academic historians will gather in Collegeville, along with high school and college teachers of local, regional and state history, to explore the most recent work on Minnesota history. The conference, titled "The State We're In: Creative and Critical Approaches to Minnesota History at 150," will include new research, teaching sessions and workshops, material culture exhibits and book displays.

The conference is being planned by Annette Atkins, professor of history at St. John's University/College of

St. Benedict and author of "Creating Minnesota: A History from the Inside Out" (Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2007).

Call for proposals

Individual and group proposals are invited for presentations on research, demonstrations, workshops and works-in-progress covering all aspects of Minnesota history. Submit proposals via e-mail to aatkins@csbsju.edu (in Word, if possible), including title, brief abstracts, preferred format and one-page vita for each participant.

Deadline: Jan. 15, 2008.

A few small scholarships may be available; please send a separate e-mail for details.

For more information, call Atkins at 312-363-2138 or e-mail aatkins@csbsju.edu; or Debbie Miller, MHS Research Library, 651-259-3315, e-mail debbie.miller@mnhs.org. ■

2008 workshops

Five communities will host the Minnesota Historical Society's 2008 Local History Services workshops. Titled "Systems for Success," the workshops offer strategies for achieving organizational goals by integrating operations and programs. Mark your calendars for one of these always-popular offerings; they promise great ideas, valuable resources and plenty of opportunities for networking.

March 28: Stillwater, Washington Cty.

April 11: Harmony, Fillmore Cty.

April 25: Montevideo, Chippewa Cty.

May 9: Grand Marais, Cook Cty.

May 19: Warren, Marshall Cty.

Watch for more information in the January-February 2008 Interpreter. ■

Update your mailing list

The best way to ensure that word of your organization's activities reaches the right audiences is to keep your mailing list in good order. So take a minute now to check your list for these two Minnesota Historical Society departments:

- Local History Services. We use your news to help us plan our programs and services.
- Serials. This copy becomes part of the periodical collection in the MHS Library.

Note: Mail addressed to David Grabitske reaches him in the Local History Services Office – no need for both on your list. One more request: Please remove Tim Glines's name; he retired in July.

It pays to get yourself on the right mailing lists, too. The Interpreter is one of the primary vehicles we use to communicate with you about local history programs, resources and issues. So ask yourself a few questions:

- Do we have your correct address?
- Does the Interpreter go to the right people at your organization?

If not, please help us correct the Interpreter mailing list. You may mail your mailing labels, with corrections noted, to Michele Decker at the address below; fax your changes to her at 651-282-2374; phone them in to 651-259-3450; or e-mail michele.decker@mnhs.org. ■

www.mnhs.org/lhs

Mary Ann Nord, Editor

Readers may submit information for publication. Send to Interpreter Editor, Minnesota Historical Society, 345 Kellogg Blvd. W., St. Paul, MN 55102-1906. On request, this publication is available in alternative formats: audiotape, large print or computer disk. Back issues can be found at www.mnhs.org/about/publications/interpreter.html. For address changes: Michele Decker, 651-259-3450 or michele.decker@mnhs.org. For other matters: Britta Bloomberg, head, Historic Preservation Department, 651-259-3466 or britta.bloomberg@mnhs.org, and David Grabitske, grants and field programs associate, 651-259-3460 or david.grabitske@mnhs.org. To subscribe to the Minnesota Historical Society Local History News e-newsletter: <http://discover.mnhs.org/enews/>.

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