

Published by the Minnesota Historical Society for county and local historical organizations and heritage preservation commissions.

In this issue

More new county society directors weigh in
page 4

AASLH confers nine Minnesota awards
page 6

State sesquicentennial grants available
page 8

Building your collections

Survey what you have, then make a plan to fill the gaps.

Every good museum has a collections management policy – a document or set of documents that addresses all aspects of its collecting activity. Though the specifics of such policies may vary from museum to museum, they all establish guidelines for the basics of collecting, from acquisition to record-keeping to storage and security.

Increasingly, says John E. Simmons, a surveyor for the American Association of Museums' Museum Assessment Program (MAP), museums are creating another type of document – a collections plan – to shape the content of their collections and direct future collecting activity. A collections plan formulates a vision for the collection, then maps out how to achieve that vision. Such a plan can help museums control the growth of their collections rather than merely amassing more objects.

Policy vs. plan

A solid collections management policy lays the foundation for all collecting activity, defining broad areas for collecting, setting general standards for collections care and guiding decisions on how the collections may be used. Because the policy serves the museum's



Stearns History Museum

The Stearns History Museum's collections plan calls for adding to its granite industry materials in the areas of recent technology and the living and working conditions of granite laborers. Among the museum's holdings is this 1905 photograph of workers at the Clark and McCormack Granite Company quarry in Rockville.

mission and goals, it should change as the museum evolves or as standards in the field change.

A collections plan is more specific. It spells out collecting priorities for a defined period of time, detailing what

is to be accomplished, why, by whom and, often, with what resources. Because it is time-specific, a collections plan should be revisited at regular intervals.

Building your collections – continued on page 2

Building your collections – continued

Where to start

To shape your collection – that is, to build on strengths and fill gaps – “you have to know what you have,” says Marcia Anderson, senior curator at the Minnesota Historical Society. “That means starting with a basic collections management system. First, be sure you have a clear mission. Then take inventory of your holdings, organize the collections by classification – farm tools, land transportation, housekeeping, etc. – note the condition of every artifact and, as much as possible, reorganize your storage areas by the classifications you’ve established.”

Without this basic understanding and organization of what you already have, Anderson says, “it’s impossible to determine what you need. And no museum has the space to take everything that comes along.”

Building on what you have

Once you have a collections management system in place, you’re ready to focus your collecting activities. To guide its own collecting, the Minnesota Historical Society formulates a multiyear plan of collecting initiatives tied to both its long-range plan and current projects. Initiatives

for the period 2003-07 include strengthening the documentation of communities underrepresented in the Society’s collections and increasing efforts to document the experiences and activities of Minnesotans beyond the Twin Cities area.

The Society also issues periodic survey reports on specific areas of the collection. These collections surveys are a means of reviewing and assessing each artifact classification. In 1998, for example, before development of the Washburn “A” Mill ruins into the Mill City Museum, an MHS curator studied the Society’s milling collection to

identify strengths and outline areas of need. He then made recommendations for acquiring milling equipment and filming existing milling operations to more fully document Minnesota’s historic role in the milling industry.

A local focus

Like the Minnesota Historical Society, the Stearns History Museum has a collections plan to help focus its collecting. “Because of space limitations, we have to direct our collecting in particular ways,” says assistant director Ann Meline. “We look at both our long-term needs – things that will best represent our county’s history – and short-term needs, such as items for upcoming exhibits.”

Their most recent collecting plan spells it all out, identifying three major areas of collecting for objects and manuscripts and one area of collecting to aid exhibit preparation:

- ethnic heritage in Stearns County, including the cultural impact of German residents and documentation of recent immigrant groups.
- the granite industry in Stearns County – specifically, recent technology, living and working conditions of granite laborers and the monument industry.
- recreation and tourism in Stearns County, focusing on sports past and present and local amateur athletes of note.
- environmental change, for the exhibit “Choices Made – Difficult Choices to Come,” documenting shifting attitudes, changes in land use and alterations to the landscape.



Minnesota Historical Society Collections

Photographs, flour sacks and advertising materials documenting Minnesota’s role as a major flour milling center are well represented in the collections of Minnesota Historical Society. But a collections survey identified the need for more milling equipment such as this flour packing machine, used by workers to package Gold Medal flour at General Mills in 1940.

Building your collections – continued

Formulating a collections plan

Simmons, in his book “Things Great and Small: Collections Management Policies,” outlines the components of a comprehensive collections plan:

| | |
|-----------------------------|--|
| Conceptual framework | Aligned with your mission, this framework can be organized by interpretive themes that will guide your exhibits, programming and research as well as your collecting. It should be specific enough to aid decision-making. |
| Strengths | This section states what will continue to be collected because of its importance to your mission. |
| Gaps | List here materials important to your mission that are currently underrepresented in the collections. |
| Needs | Specify what you would like to add to your collections. Divide the list into short-term and long-term goals. |
| Limits and overlaps | You may wish to spell out in your collections plan what types of materials will not be collected because they do not relate to your mission or because they are overrepresented in your collections. |
| Resources | Include a plan to develop the finances, space and staff you’ll need to achieve your collecting goals. |

How to get what you need

Few county historical societies have the budget to purchase items for their collections. Most often, they count on wish lists published in their newsletters to ask for donations of specific objects.

Marcia Anderson suggests a different approach. “Building personal relationships with potential donors is the most effective way to build your collections,” she says. “Use your

newsletter to familiarize the community with what you have. Plan programs that bring prospective donors and staff together. Present the personal side of your organization.

“That’s easier for smaller organizations to do than it is for larger institutions. County and local historical societies have well-defined constituencies. And they’re right outside your door.”



Minnesota Historical Society Collections

Among the strengths of the Minnesota Historical Society’s collections is its well-documented group of more than 130 Ojibwe bandolier bags made in the late 19th and early 20th centuries in the White Earth-Walker-Bena area of northern Minnesota.

Further reading

John E. Simmons, “Things Great and Small: Collections Management Policies” (American Association of Museums, 2006). Includes a bibliography of resources on all aspects of collections management policies and collections planning. Reviewed in the Interpreter, March-April 2007. ■

Welcome aboard – part 2

More new faces – and some familiar ones – join the ranks of county historical society directors

In the last issue of the Interpreter, we introduced seven new directors at Minnesota's county historical societies. Eight more, in alphabetical order by county, are profiled here. All 15 of these community leaders bring to their new jobs a dedication to and enthusiasm for their role as stewards of Minnesota's past.



Hennepin History Museum

Jada Hansen

Hennepin County

A classical archaeologist by training and former curator at the Scott County Historical Society, Jada Hansen moved to her new position as executive director of the Hennepin History Museum in December 2006. "We have wonderful collections here and a really strong exhibits program," says Hansen, "but we need to build a stronger community presence. The board wants to shake things up in a positive way." So Hansen made room in her budget for advertising, starting with a large ad in *The Rake*, a monthly newspaper with an arts and culture focus aimed at young professionals. More ads will follow through the fall and winter.

Hansen also plans to increase revenue through programming. Among events in the works that she hopes will become

annual attractions: a New Year's Eve masquerade ball in the museum's grand historic mansion.



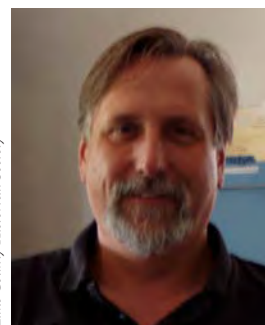
Jackson County Historical Society

Rose (Burch) Parrington

Jackson County

When Rose (Burch) Parrington became the Jackson County Historical Society's first full-time director in May 2005, she found herself surrounded by people who know their way around the organization. "We have a very dedicated board and volunteers," she says, "and a couple of longtime employees who have more than 50 years of service between them." She also took online museum studies courses to familiarize herself with the issues and practices of museum management.

Parrington's hiring coincided with the introduction of longer museum hours. Since then, attendance and donations have tripled. She's been busy augmenting museum displays with new artifacts and planning events for this year's Jackson County sesquicentennial. A revised web site (www.rootsweb.com/~mnjackson/histsociety.htm) helps keep the community informed.



Lake County Historical Society

Rick Tokarczyk

Lake County

Retired business owner Rick Tokarczyk thought it would be a nice part-time job when he signed on as business manager of the Lake County Historical Society in March 2006. By the end of the year he was running the whole operation – the society's Depot Museum, Two Harbors Lighthouse Museum and Bed and Breakfast, 3M Museum, two gift shops and assorted other sites.

"Our biggest challenge was getting the community involved," says Tokarczyk, "so we've been making news. We rededicated our second lighthouse out on the breakwater when it turned 100 and we sold out the high school auditorium with our multimedia production, 'Tales of Two Harbors,' during Heritage Days. Our next big project will be documenting the old high school and its WPA murals before the building is torn down this fall."

Mower County

Kelly Olson will have her hands full as she enters her second year as part-time director of the Mower County Historical Society. The MCHS has just begun the self-study portion of

Mower County Historical Society



Kelly Olson

the Museum Assessment Program (MAP), a two-year, in-depth process of organizational analysis and development. “We have a good, clear mission statement in place,” reports Olson. “Now we need to shift our sights to long-range planning.”

Olson’s business background will serve her well as she and the board tackle that challenge. “I worked for the county for 10 years before moving into this position,” she says. “That experience is proving helpful in building relationships with our county commissioners.” She plans to make good use of her financial planning experience, too.

Wadena County Historical Society



Sandi Pratt

Wadena County

In January 2006 Sandi Pratt traded her spot on the Wadena County Historical Society board for the role of executive director. “It was a good fit for me,” said

the longtime genealogist. “We’ve enlarged our research space, networked our computers and, with the help of a local college student, built our first web site [www.wadenacountyhistory.org], all to improve public access to our genealogical records.”

Pratt and a crew of volunteers are now bringing order to the rest of the museum: where all the artifacts once sat out on shelves, locked display cases provide security. For a new display on the region’s Indian heritage, Pratt is busy visiting other museums in the area to see how they cover the topic. “We’re doing a lot of homework to get this right,” she says.

Waseca County Historical Society



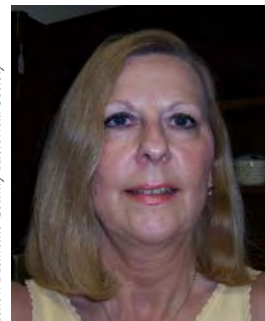
Joan Mooney (left) and Sheila Morris

Waseca County

Before she retired last year as executive director of the Waseca County Historical Society, Margaret Sinn found a creative solution for her succession: she persuaded two part-time staff members to share the directorship. “We had to convince the board that it would work,” says co-director Sheila Morris of her partnership with Joan Mooney. “We showed them we could save time and money because we already knew the organization and wanted to keep building on what Margaret had done.”

Mooney, the society’s former program coordinator, now oversees the research library in the historic Philo C. Bailey House. Morris manages the main museum building. They meet daily and, together, supervise the staff and volunteers. They’ve also launched a \$150,000 fundraising campaign to coincide with the county’s sesquicentennial. “We’re both good communicators,” says Morris, “so, so far, the board is happy.”

Yellow Medicine County Historical Society



Pat Lubeck

Yellow Medicine County

Dominating the Yellow Medicine County Historical Society’s agenda since long before Pat Lubeck took over as director in April 2006 is the pressing need to move the museum building away from the river that flooded it in 1997. “We’re working with both the county and the city of Granite Falls to find an appropriate location but it’s a slow process,” she said.

Meanwhile, she runs a full schedule of weekend programming from Memorial Day to Labor Day. Plans for 2008, the county’s sesquicentennial, are in the works, with after-school programs for Granite Falls students of all ages and a cemetery walk spearheaded by a retired teacher who has involved high schoolers in the research. ■

AASLH honors nine Minnesota projects with Leadership in History awards

Beating last year's record-setting showing, Minnesota has garnered nine Leadership in History awards from the American Association for State and Local History, recognizing outstanding accomplishments in the collection, preservation and interpretation of state and local history.

In addition, one honoree, the Minnesota Historical Society, took home a WOW award, one of only four in the country given for projects of exceptional merit. The winning organizations and individuals will be honored in September at the AASLH annual conference in Atlanta.

Anoka County Historical Society

The ACHS's exhibit "Vietnam: The Veteran's Experience" was conceived as a record of one chapter in Anoka County's

history. It soon became much more – "a place of healing," as one veteran put it, where the vets could share their stories, some for the first time, with families, fellow veterans and the public. Many returned, attending events, donating artifacts and volunteering. An accompanying publication of veterans' biographies and letters home vividly captures their individual experiences in the war.

Donald Empson

Author Donald Empson scoured primary records to update his book "The Street Where You Live: A Guide to the Place Names of St. Paul" (University of Minnesota Press, 2006). Augmenting his earlier research on street names, he fills the new edition with details on the history and significance of every St. Paul geographical feature and landmark, some long vanished.

Users of this comprehensive reference tool range from members of the city's planning commission to realtors to hunters for the Winter Carnival medallion.

Marian Bemis Johnson and Dorothy McIntyre

The book "Daughters of the Game: The First Era of Minnesota Girls High School Basketball, 1891-1942" (McJohn Publishing, 2005) chronicles the enormous popularity of girls' basketball in Minnesota during the first half of the 20th century. Authors Marian Bemis Johnson and Dorothy McIntyre, both longtime teachers and coaches, interviewed dozens of players and pored over old scrapbooks to weave the players' personal recollections into this compelling social history.

Steven R. Kinsella

Steven Kinsella's book "900 Miles from Nowhere: Voices from the Homestead Frontier" (Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2006) chronicles the lives of Great Plains settlers through their own letters, diaries and photographs. "Doing what good history does," says history professor and author Joseph A. Amato, the book "brings the past to life... capturing the worlds and minds of the first generation to open the land across the Great Plains."

Martin County Preservation Association

Rescuing Fairmont's 1898 First Church of Christ Scientist from demolition, the Martin County Preservation



Anoka County Historical Society

Vietnam veterans shared their stories with family members and each other at the opening of Anoka County Historical Society's exhibit on the Vietnam war.

Association led the preservation and rehabilitation of the distinctive National Register property. Transformed into the Red Rock Center for the Arts with the investment of more than 46,000 volunteer hours, the multipurpose facility is now the heart of the region's cultural community.

Minnesota Historical Society

For its groundbreaking exhibit "Open House: If These Walls Could Talk," the Minnesota Historical Society used a single, existing house in St. Paul as a window into the daily lives of its occupants. Through meticulously researched, dramatic multimedia sets, visitors can explore recreations of the house from different eras and discover for themselves telling details about the people who lived there. The exhibit, said one AASLH reviewer, "shows a deep respect for the East St. Paul neighborhood, museum visitors, historians and students. It calls attention to an area of the city that is often overlooked and reveals interconnections between that history and the wider world."

Morrison County Historical Society

Morrison County's 2006 sesquicentennial provided the occasion for publication of "A Big Hearted Paleface Man: Nathan Richardson and the History of Morrison County," a book that makes widely available the county's first written history. Published originally in 1876 as a serial in the

local newspaper, Richardson's account is augmented with a biography of its author, a county founder and state legislator with important ties to the region's Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe.

Margaret Ladd Sinn

In her 17 years as executive director of the Waseca County Historical Society, Margaret Sinn took the organization to new levels, using her creativity and vision to inspire her board, grow the membership, increase collections and improve accessibility. Among the many accomplishments of this committed, community-involved leader are preservation of the historic Philo C. Bailey House and its development as the WCHS Research Center.



Margaret Sinn, longtime executive director of the Waseca County Historical Society, received congratulations from board member Rod Searle on her retirement in 2006.

Stevens County Historical Society

After years of planning, the investment of countless volunteer hours and funding from a creative variety of sources, the Stevens County Historical Society revitalized its longtime home, the 1903 Morris Carnegie Library, listed on the National Register of Historic Places. A much-loved community landmark, the library building was restored inside and out, sensitively expanded and adapted for 21st-century use as the county museum and research center.

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 2008 awards are due by March 1. For more information, go to www.aaslh.org, call state chair Ben Leonard at 507-934-2160, or e-mail ben@nchsmn.org.

Courtesy of Waseca County News

Sesquicentennial grants available

Matching grants in two categories are available to Minnesota communities and organizations planning activities, events and projects for the state's sesquicentennial in 2008.

Micro-grants: At least one micro-grant of up to \$1,000 will be awarded in each county. Collaborative projects between counties may apply for larger amounts (\$1,000 for each county involved).

Deadline: Dec. 7.

Legacy grants: A limited number of larger grants (\$5,000-\$7,000) will be made for projects of an enduring nature – that is, projects resulting in

something tangible, such as a product, exhibit, publication, artistic form or improvement in a community structure. **Deadline: Nov. 1.**

For more information on grant criteria and eligibility and to download the application form, go to www.mn150years.org/grant_programs.html. E-mail questions to info@mn150years.org or call 651-296-1870. ■



Exhibit planning workshop reminder

You can still register for the Minnesota Historical Society's ever-popular exhibit planning workshop. This year, the day-long workshop will be held in two locations:

- **Thursday, Oct. 18:** Lac qui Parle County Historical Society
- **Friday, Oct. 19:** North West Company Fur Post Historic Site

Cost: \$25 per person (includes lunch). **Registration deadline: Oct. 8.** Register online at www.mnhs.org/mhowkshp. For more information see the July-August Interpreter, call David Grabitske at 651-259-3460 or e-mail david.grabitske@mnhs.org. ■

About this publication

The *Minnesota History Interpreter* is published bimonthly by the Historic Preservation Department of the Minnesota Historical Society. Unless otherwise noted, photographs are from the Local History Services office. Material from this issue may be reprinted with the following credit line: Reprinted with permission from *Minnesota History Interpreter*, Sept. - Oct. 2007, Vol. XXXV, No. 5, published by the Minnesota Historical Society. Do not reprint material taken from another source without permission.

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.

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