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Documenting what you do:
The importance of recording
your organization's activities
for posterity

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Sacred Heart Area Historical Society



To prepare photographs for scanning and electronic cataloging, Sacred Heart Area Historical Society volunteers Clayton Mahlum and Liz Lanning identify the images.

Practice makes perfect

More groups using PastPerfect software to manage museum collections

Three years ago State Archivist Robert Horton offered advice in the *Interpreter* on applying information technology in a museum setting (see August 1999 issue). Responding to inquiries about using computers for cataloging collections, he outlined some basic steps:

- Define what you want to do.
- Determine all your costs (equipment, software, installation, training, system maintenance).

- Find partners to share knowledge and experience.
- Adopt a set of standards and stick with them.
- Understand that you may need to change how you do things.

Since then, dozens of historical organizations have taken the leap to computerization. In fact, many have turned to the same software – PastPerfect Museum Software (see list, page 2). Now that its use is

widespread, Horton offers suggestions for making the most of its features. “The key to success,” he says, “is collaboration with other users.”

Learning curve

PastPerfect is a comprehensive collections-management program that handles objects, photographs, archives and library materials. The database also facilitates management of all membership records, including volunteers, docents and prospective members. Designed to meet the automation needs of growing institutions, the program promises ease of use and the latest in cataloging and registration standards.

Sonja Thune, president of the Sacred Heart Area Historical Society, already sees the benefits of their PastPerfect software, newly installed with the help of a state grant-in-aid from the Minnesota Historical Society. “We can now catalog artifacts more quickly and accurately,” she reports. “We’re scanning our photographs into the database as well. That makes information about our collections more readily available to the public and to researchers.”

Thune also shared some lessons learned from their experience. “Make sure systems such as long-distance phone service and Internet access are in place for supporting the software. And allow plenty of time to learn the program. It really would have helped us to consult with someone experienced with the software.”

PastPerfect continued on page 2

PastPerfect *continued from page 1*

That's exactly what Horton recommends for Minnesota's growing number of PastPerfect users – finding a partner whose expertise you can tap.

Time is right for users' work group

"PastPerfect is relatively easy to learn," says Horton. "But few people use all its capabilities. You'll get the most from your software dollar if you work with technology-savvy users to try more ambitious functions like web applications."

As people implement the program, Horton says, some discover that it doesn't do exactly what they want it to do. One answer is to change the way you do some things. Another solution is collaboration. "Work with more experienced users to explore

PastPerfect's customizing capabilities," he advises. "Learning to adapt off-the-shelf software – or learning how to work around its limitations – is much easier and less expensive than designing a system from scratch."

Such specialized expertise isn't readily available in many communities. That's why Horton urges users statewide to form a work group to identify common needs and share ideas. If there's enough interest, he says, group members might eventually develop a manual that would guide others in best practices – a kind of Consumer Reports for Minnesota's PastPerfect users.

If you want to get the ball rolling,



Sacred Heart Area Historical Society president Sonja Thune catalogs artifacts using the PastPerfect software program.

submit the topic for discussion on the Minnesota Historical Society's local history list service by sending an e-mail to mnlocalhistory@state.mn.us.

PastPerfect users in Minnesota

The PastPerfect web site at www.museumsoftware.com lists organizations and agencies that have purchased the software. Following are some of them in Minnesota. If you're considering acquiring PastPerfect or are just getting started with your collections management project, these groups may have some valuable advice.

Afton Historical Society Museum, Afton
 American Swedish Institute, Minneapolis
 Anoka County Historical Society, Anoka
 Becker County Historical Society, Detroit Lakes
 Carlton County Historical Society, Cloquet
 Carver County Historical Society, Waconia
 Chisago Booster and Heritage Association, Chisago City
 Chisago County Historical Society, Lindstrom
 Crow Wing County Historical Society, Brainerd
 Edina Historical Society, Edina
 Faribault County Historical Society, Blue Earth
 Fond du Lac Cultural Center and Museum, Cloquet
 Grand Portage Tribal Council, Grand Portage
 Grant County Historical Society, Elbow Lake
 Hennepin History Museum, Minneapolis
 Hibbing Historical Society, Hibbing
 Hormel Historic Home, Austin
 Houston County Historical Society, Caledonia
 Koochiching County Historical Society, International Falls
 Lake County Historical Society, Two Harbors
 Laura Ingalls Wilder Museum and Tourist Center, Walnut Grove
 Minnesota Fishing Museum and Education Center, Little Falls

Minnesota Masonic Historical Society and Museum, St. Paul
 Morrison County Historical Society, Little Falls
 Nicollet County Historical Society, St. Peter
 Nobles County Historical Society, Worthington
 North Shore Commercial Fishing Museum, Tofte
 Northfield Historical Society, Northfield
 Olmsted County Historical Society, Rochester
 Redwood County Historical Society, Redwood Falls
 Rockford Area Historical Society, Rockford
 Roseau County Historical Society, Roseau
 Sacred Heart Area Historical Society, Sacred Heart
 Scott County Historical Museum, Shakopee
 Shakopee Mdewakanton Sioux Community, Prior Lake
 Sleepy Eye Area Historical Society, Sleepy Eye
 Washington County Historical Society, Stillwater
 White Bear Lake Area Historical Society, White Bear Lake
 Winona County Historical Society, Winona
 Wright County Historical Society, Buffalo
 Yellow Medicine County Historical Society, Granite Falls

Users not yet listed on the web site:

Itasca County Historical Society, Grand Rapids
 Martin County Historical Society, Fairmont

PastPerfect is distributed by AASLH and its publishing partner, AltaMira Press. For information go to www.museumsoftware.com.

Documenting what you do

It's elemental: Preserve your own organization's history

Imagine that the 100th anniversary of your historical society is coming up. To celebrate your organization's many accomplishments, past and present, you decide to create an exhibit. Would you have the pictures, artifacts and other materials you'd need to tell your story?

"Probably not," says Craig Wright, curator of manuscripts at the Minnesota Historical Society. "All too often historical organizations are so intent on preserving the history of their communities that they forget to document their own history."

If you're one of those who always put themselves last, take note. Don't wait another day to begin recording the activities of your group. Here are a few simple suggestions to get you started.

Leave an archival trail

1. Take plenty of photographs

You know the saying – a picture is worth a thousand words. "You can write at length about what you've done," says

Barbara Averill, media relations manager for the Minnesota Historical Society.

"But with one photograph, you can tell so much more."

Photos are a great way to document your special events and public programs, of course. But don't overlook your everyday activities. Set a goal of snapping pictures on a regular basis – of your volunteers indexing obituaries, an artifact undergoing restoration or the staff setting up your display at the county fair. And remember to capture on film your group's leaders. Why not take an annual photograph of your board of directors?

2. Preserve a written record

Your organization's newsletters, annual reports and meeting minutes together contain a record of your work. Make sure you preserve them in your archives (and think about indexing the newsletters for future researchers). Save production files of your publications so you can reuse

the photographs at annual meetings or community events. For advice on what archival materials to keep, call Wright at 651-296-7989.

You might also think about writing a column for your local newspaper, like Bev Jackson of the Freeborn County Historical Society has done for years. What a rich resource those columns

will be down the road when your successors at the historical society plan that anniversary celebration.

3. Conduct oral histories of your group members

Departing officers, board members and long-time employees are fonts of knowledge about your organization's growth and development. Interview them on tape so their experiences become part of your historical record.

Reaping the benefits

Besides preserving your history for posterity, there are two very practical uses for the record you create of your organization – promotion and fund-raising. Both will rely heavily on the pictures you take of your activities.

"It's fine to *talk* about a workshop you're going to give or an event you're planning," says Jim Fogerty, head of the Minnesota Historical Society Acquisitions and Curatorial Department. "But to *show* people engaged in the activity is so much more effective. Photographs will enliven your own publicity materials. And newspapers will give you more prominent coverage if you accompany your story with pictures of local interest."

The same goes for fund-raising. Including a visual record of your work with your grant proposal or funding appeal is more vivid and compelling than pages of text. Without pictures, it's so much harder to tell your story – to potential members and donors, to the media and to successive generations.

Thanks to the following individuals for sharing their ideas: Bob Burgess, Brown County Historical Society; Tom Garcia, Carver County Historical Society; Wanda Hoyum, Beltrami County Historical Society; and Pat Zankman, Cook County Historical Society.



Cook County Historical Society staff kept a photographic record as volunteers re-created a Grand Marais fish house. The pictures will go into an archival photo album documenting society activities.

Peanuts! Popcorn!

Brown County Historical Society acquires vintage popcorn wagon

As long as New Ulm residents can remember, the red-and-white popcorn wagon has been a fixture at community events. When its owners shut it down in 1999, a local movement began to ensure that the ca. 1913 wagon, built by C. Cretors and Co. of Chicago, stayed in Brown County. After a successful fund-raising campaign to purchase the wagon, it now resides at the Brown County Historical Society.

Sold primarily in the Midwest, such popcorn wagons were marketed to street vending entrepreneurs eager to “receive a substantial income from a legitimate and agreeable occupation,” said the company brochure. Originally horse-drawn and equipped with a small steam engine, boiler and mechanical nut roaster, the wagon long ago was converted to electricity. Plans call for more fund-raising to repair and restore the wagon to its 1960s appearance.

“We’re wrestling with a number



Volunteer Dennis Wagner (right) helped BCHS director Bob Burgess find a company in Kansas that still makes parts for Cretors popcorn wagons.

of questions,” said BCHS director Bob Burgess. “Do we treat it as an artifact – ‘Look but do not touch’? Or can we use it as originally intended – to make and sell popcorn at community

events? But then do we risk loving it to death?” If your organization has weighed similar questions about an artifact in your collection, call Burgess at 507-233-2616.

A decade a day

Carver County day camp revisits 20th century

Forget churning butter. At *this* history day camp, it was all about tie-dyeing t-shirts. And that was just part of the fun awaiting youngsters who signed on for the Carver County Historical Society’s week-long, decade-a-day day camp in July.

Instead of turning the clock back to “pioneer” times, education coordinator Suzie Armstrong gave her young charges a glimpse into life during the 1930s, 1940s, 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. From the perspective of the

grade-school-age participants, *those* are the “olden days.” On the agenda: producing a ‘40s-style radio show and making a Depression-era cake with no eggs, milk or butter, along with hula hoop contests, games of Mr. Potato Head and plenty of rock and roll.

For children wishing to explore the more remote past, CCHS staff also offer history day camps covering the late 1800s and the early 1900s. For more information call Armstrong at 952-442-4234.



With money scarce during the Depression, people made do. At the Carver County Historical Society’s decade-a-day day camp, Elizabeth made a picture using fabric scraps.

Norman County Historical Society dedicates new museum

'Buy a log' project funds building

Floodwaters didn't stop a crowd from gathering June 28 to dedicate the Norman County Historical Society's new museum – a log building constructed at the society's Prairie Village near the Norman County fairgrounds. Ironically, it was a flood five years ago that set the project in motion. In 1997, flooding in the city of Ada damaged the county society's display space in an old church building, along with many items in its collections. Since then, the collections have been in storage, awaiting a new home.

Now that home stands ready. Originally built in Jackson, Wyo., of western pine logs, the 3,000-square-foot building was dismantled and shipped to Ada for reassembly. Through a "buy a log" fund-raising project, much of the building's cost was covered by donations; names of



Norman County Historical Society

In June local dignitaries dedicated this new museum building in Ada "to the citizens of Norman County – past, present and future."

all donors will be displayed inside. As more funds become available, exhibit space in the new museum will be developed. One piece is already in place: a stained glass window from a 1901 Ada church has been installed in one wall.

The museum's grand opening is planned for later this year. According

to NCHS president De Floren Rude, countless hours of volunteer work helped make the building a reality. But much remains to be done. Next up: an auction to raise funds for museum equipment and furnishings. Rude hopes eventually to have the museum staffed and open year round. For more information call him at 218-356-8767.

Kudos



The Hennepin History Museum's exhibit "Unsatisfied: Minneapolis Rock in the 1980s" recently caught the eye of the American Association for State and Local History. The exhibit,

about the punk and independent music scene that flourished in the city (see *Interpreter*, August 2001), received an AASLH Certificate of Commendation, awarded for the museum's success in reaching younger audiences.

Congratulations to curator Jack Kabrud and museum administrator Todd Mahon.

Getting a little local color

Itasca County history class proves popular

It's back to school this fall for Itasca County Historical Society researcher Brian Vroman. But this time he's the instructor, teaching a class at Itasca Community College on local and regional history. Though Vroman is new to the classroom, his course is not. Taught for years by now-retired ICC history instructor Don Boese, the class attracts a mix of college students and community residents. "The older folks in the class come with their own memories of the area's history," says Boese. "It adds a nice dimension."

Boese, who is also currently president of the county historical

society, developed the curriculum based on the rich local history he found when he moved to the region 32 years ago. Topics include mining, lumbering, the paper industry and the contributions of notable residents such as John C. Greenway, who founded the Iron Range town of Coleraine and made a success of mining low-grade ore. One class assignment is a boon for the county society – the students' oral history projects, which always generate information of interest to local historians. For more information call Vroman at 218-326-6431.

CAP grants help museums assess collections care

Need guidance for your board, staff and volunteers in caring for your museum's collections? A CAP (Conservation Assessment Program) grant may be the answer.

Funded by the Institute of Museum and Library Services and administered by Heritage Preservation, CAP grants provide for a general conservation survey of museum collections, sites and environmental conditions. A professional conservator spends two days on site, then identifies conservation priorities in a written report. The report serves as a tool for long-range planning and fund-raising

and helps shape strategies for improved collections care.

CAP grants are awarded on a first-come, first-served basis. Applications for 2003 grants will be mailed to interested parties on Oct. 11, 2002; completed applications must be postmarked no later than Dec. 1. Note that only the official 2003 application will be accepted. To help you prepare for the application process, Heritage Preservation outlines eligibility requirements and provides sample applications on its web site. For more information see www.heritagepreservation.org/programs/capover.htm.

A family legacy

Two generations of artists profiled in book on the Gágs of New Ulm



Perhaps no Minnesota family more closely integrated art in their lives than the Gágs of New Ulm. Their remarkable story

unfolds in a new book, *The Gág Family: German-Bohemian Artists in America*, by Julie L'Enfant.

After settling in New Ulm in 1879, immigrant Anton Gág established

himself as an artist, decorating houses and painting murals in churches. His oldest daughter and protégé, Wanda, made her reputation in New York as a printmaker and children's book author and illustrator. Her younger sister Flavia was a prolific writer, illustrator and painter. Using newly available family papers, L'Enfant weaves through their work the threads of German-Bohemian tradition and devotion to family.

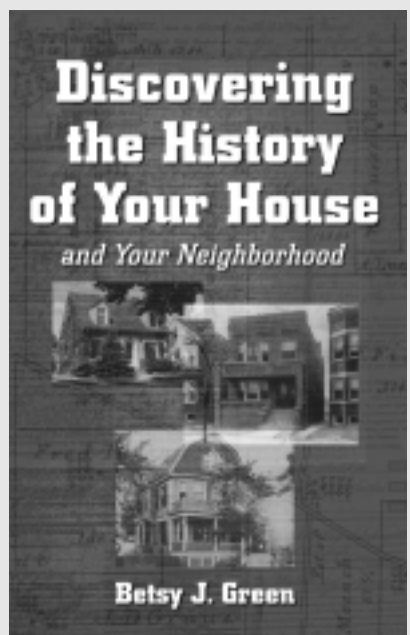
To order *The Gág Family* (Afton Historical Society Press, 204 pages, 200 color and b/w images, \$35 hardcover, ISBN 1-890434-50-7), call toll-free 1-800-436-8443 or 651-436-8443. Also available in bookstores.

Researching house history

New book offers tips, strategies, resources

Part treasure hunt, part jigsaw puzzle. That's how author Betsy Green characterizes the search for the history of a house. In her new book, *Discovering the History of Your House and Your Neighborhood*, she takes readers through the process – from locating historical sources to understanding surveyor records to organizing research materials. Along the way, she shares some of her own house detective experiences.

To order *Discovering the History of Your House* (Santa Monica Press, 288 pages, 35 b/w photos, \$14.95 paper, ISBN 1-891661-24-8), call toll-free 1-800-784-9553. Also available at bookstores and from Amazon.com.



MHS Reference Department classes

The Minnesota Historical Society Reference Department offers one-session classes to acquaint you with historical sources at the Minnesota History Center. All sessions are held in the History Center library.

Registration is required. For fee information and to register, call 651-296-2143. Or register online at www.mnhs.org/library/classes/index.html.

I'm New Here: Introducing the Library

Every Saturday, 9:15 to 10:15 a.m.

Explore the Society's amazing array of sources for researching family, church, organization, business and community history – or any other aspect of Minnesota's rich past. This session

introduces you to the library's catalogs, policies and procedures. No fee. Registration preferred.

Researching Church Records

Sept. 17, 6 to 7:30 p.m.

How do you locate a baptismal record? What do denominational records hold? Who were the founding members of a particular congregation? Reference archivist Ruth Bauer Anderson answers those questions and more.

Organizing Your Family Papers

Sept. 24, 6 to 7:30 p.m.

Craig Wright, curator of manuscripts, shares techniques for organizing and storing family papers – from letters and diaries to school papers and scrapbooks.

Genealogy Resources at the Minnesota Historical Society Library

Oct. 8, 6 to 7:30 p.m.

Learn about the variety of genealogical research materials available in the library, particularly those relating to Minnesota.

From Immigrant to Citizen: Naturalization Records at the Minnesota Historical Society Library

Oct. 19, 2 to 3:30 p.m.

Reference librarian Alison Purgiel surveys naturalization records in the Minnesota State Archives and offers strategies for using them in genealogical research.

Warren research classes at the Minnesota History Center

These one-session classes on family history and genealogy meet at the Minnesota History Center. Instructors Jim and Paula Stuart Warren are nationally recognized genealogical researchers, lecturers and writers.

Advance registration by mail is recommended. For fee and registration information, call Warren Research, 651-503-4802, or e-mail warren@spacestar.com.

Taxes, Trials and Tribulations: Research in Courthouse Records

Sept. 14, 10 to 11:30 a.m.

Learn how to find and use information in probate, land, naturalization, tax, divorce and other civil and criminal court indexes and records.

Salt Lake City: Using Resources of the Family History Library from Near or Far

Sept. 14, 12:30 to 2 p.m.

Salt Lake City's Family History Library contains millions of microfilmed records and indexes from archives, churches and courthouses worldwide. Electronic search tools and a network of local family history centers make access easy.

Discover Your Family History Workshop

Oct. 5, 10 a.m. to 12:30 p.m.

Designed for beginners, this workshop covers the basics of genealogical research, from your own family to public repositories. Fee: \$12 for MHS members, \$16 for nonmembers.

U.S. Census Records: The Basics and Beyond

Oct. 5, 1:30 to 3 p.m.

Explore the wealth of data in U.S. census records for the years 1790 to 1930. Highlights include online indexes and special census schedules.

Vital Records and Substitutes: Fundamental Tools for Family History

Oct. 19, 10 to 11:30 a.m.

Birth, death and marriage records are basic resources for researching family history. Learn how to locate them and what access restrictions may apply.

Finding Ancestral Places of Origin

Oct. 19, 12:30 to 2 p.m.

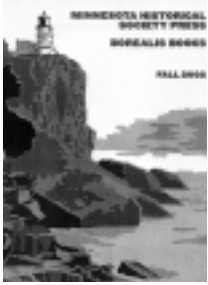
Still looking for great-grandma's birthplace? These research strategies will help you find it.

Researching from a Distance: Tracing Your Ancestors from Coast to Coast

Oct. 19, 2:30 to 4 p.m.

Discover the research tools available in your home area, from local repositories, lending libraries and family history centers to electronic and online resources.

Minnesota Historical Society Press announces changes in order fulfillment



Beginning Oct. 1, Minnesota Historical Society Press titles will be distributed by the Chicago Distribution Center (CDC), a division of the University of Chicago Press. CDC

will handle all order fulfillment, returns processing and accounts receivable for MHS Press books and the quarterly journal *Minnesota History*. This new partnership with the University of Chicago Press, the largest distributor of scholarly books in the country, will ensure the continued growth of MHS Press as a nationally recognized regional

publisher. It will also give the Society more efficient systems for tracking sales and controlling inventory.

"We're committed to maintaining our high standard of customer service," said Greg Britton, director of MHS Press. "We'll also be able to take advantage of CDC's technology initiatives like their new short-run digital printing facility and BiblioVault, an electronic repository for backlist books and new titles."

Orders received through Sept. 30 will be shipped and invoiced by MHS Press. After that, orders, returns, payments and customer service inquiries are to be sent to CDC. By now all MHS Press customers should have received full instructions for

switching their accounts to CDC. If you still have questions, call Kevin Morrissey, MHS Press sales and marketing manager, at 651-296-7539, or e-mail kevin.morrissey@mnhs.org.

Seeking information on the home front

Marilyn Harper, a consultant working with the National Park Service, is seeking information on museum exhibits about the home front during World War II. She is particularly interested in identifying surviving places associated with any aspect of life on the home front. Please respond to her via e-mail at marilyn.harper@verizon.net.

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