

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

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Lifetime memberships:

A boon to relationship-building or a loss of annual support?

There are two ways to look at every issue. Take lifetime memberships in a small organization.

Many groups view them as a reward earned by longtime supporters. What better way to honor faithful members, the conventional thinking goes, than by

they're your most ardent supporters. Aren't you risking a loss of revenue by taking them off the solicitation list for membership renewal?

Which is the right approach for your organization? Let the experiences of several area historical societies guide you as you weigh the pros and cons on the issue of life memberships.

Making up for lost revenues

The Buffalo County Historical Society in western Wisconsin puts all of its lifetime membership monies into a segregated fund that serves as a sort of endowment for future projects. The hope is that, in a strong

investment climate, interest earned by the fund will make up for lost revenues from lifetime members who no longer give to the annual membership drive.

The society's life members are solicited annually in other ways. They receive all of the organization's fundraising letters



McLeod County Historical Society

Lifetime members of the McLeod County Historical Society enjoy a get-together at the county museum designed to strengthen their ties to the organization.

making them members for life? "We've already won their loyalty," you might argue. "Why spend time and postage asking them to renew their membership every year?"

Then there's the other side of the argument. Those individuals have proven

Interpreter to be published quarterly

To synchronize with the printing and mailing of the Minnesota Preservation Planner, a quarterly newsletter of the State Historic Preservation Office, the Minnesota History Interpreter also will be published quarterly. Beginning with this issue, the Interpreter will come to you four times a year - in January, April, July and October.

It will contain the same lively mix of best practices, technical advice, recognition for county and local historical societies, and news from the Minnesota Historical Society's Local History Services Office. For time-sensitive news and announcements, you can continue to rely on the weekly e-newsletter, Minnesota Local History News, which now reaches nearly 1,300 subscribers. To sign up, go to <http://discovery.mnhs.org/enews>.

except for membership drives. And they're offered special low-cost incentive items each year that are understood to be fundraisers designed to generate extra revenue. "We've had little problem with so-called deadbeat members," says executive director Kelly Herold.

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Lifetime memberships – continued

Lifetime memberships also seed the endowment of the Lake County Historical Society on Minnesota's North Shore. Several years ago the board adopted a new bylaw that grants life member status to anyone donating \$600 or more to the society's endowment fund. A number of life members have signed on. But with other program needs occupying staff time, the fundraising potential for the life membership category remains untested.

Strengthening relationships

A gift of \$300 buys a lifetime membership at the McLeod County Historical Society. Until last fall, however, that level of membership carried no special privileges. "Life members had demonstrated their support for our society through their

membership gift," says MCHS executive director Lori Pickell-Stangel. "But I had never even met some of them. We decided we needed to do a better job of maintaining our relationship with those members. We wanted to find ways to get them reenergized and involved with the museum again." So she and her staff created an event called Backstage Pass to shower a little special attention on the group and, in the process, give them a new perspective on the organization.

"We called in all our volunteers for the event to demonstrate what they do for us in every area of our operation – from archives and collections management to fundraising and maintenance," says Pickell-Stangel. "Our life members learned firsthand how much work it takes to run the museum. Several

of them showed their appreciation by signing up to volunteer and some people made additional donations."

Fifty MCHS life members attended the inaugural event – about half of the society's total. After making follow-up calls that generated even more positive input, Pickell-Stangel is committed to keeping the group involved. "We want to offer some kind of annual event for our life members to move those special relationships to the next level," she says. In addition to annual programming, she and the board are exploring new levels of giving in the form of pledges to an endowment that will be marketed to lifetime members. Says Pickell-Stangel, "We don't want them to drift away again." ■



At the Backstage Pass event for life members, Lori Pickell-Stangel (center), executive director of the McLeod County Historical Society, helps volunteers demonstrate how they make county history booklets to sell in the museum gift shop.

Join the discussion

The June 25 edition of the Minnesota Historical Society's e-newsletter Local History News features this question about life memberships: If your organization offers life memberships, how do you manage the program so that those members remain involved and continue to benefit the organization? To share your museum's experience, go to <http://discussions.mnhs.org/MNLOCALHISTORY/>.

Creating outdoor trail signage

Part 2: Fabrication and installation

by Ellen Miller and Aaron Novodvorsky

Part 1 of this Tech Talk took you through the planning, development and design of outdoor trail signs (see the Interpreter, May-June 2008). Now it's time to have your trail signage produced.

Choose the material that's best for your site

You have five choices of material for your outdoor signs: cast aluminum, fiberglass, phenolic resin, porcelain enamel and vinyl on aluminum. Weigh the pluses and minuses of each against the requirements of your site.

- **Cast aluminum markers** are popular for their association with locations of historical interest. Their characteristic look, with light or gold lettering against a dark background, makes them readily recognizable. Durable and heavy, cast aluminum is a good choice for low- or no-maintenance locations such as roadside rests. These panels stand up well to adverse weather conditions. One drawback: they cannot be used for color photographs. Cast aluminum markers generally require a production timetable of 8 to 10 weeks and are moderate to high in price.
- **Fiberglass panels** imbed a digitally produced paper graphic in acrylic-modified polyester resin on a woven mesh backing. Easy to maintain and clean, they can be treated like a fiberglass automobile body. However, they have a relatively short lifespan (5 to 8 years). Though the material filters some ultraviolet light, these signs will fade and become brittle over time; once scarred or cut, the panels will begin to oxidize and fail along the edges of the scar. But because fiberglass signs are moderate to low in price, multiples of the same sign can be produced at one time and simply replaced as needed. That makes this type of panel good for areas that may be prone to vandalism or other damage. Fiberglass panels generally call for 6 to 8 weeks of production time.
- **Phenolic resin panels** are essentially a high-pressure laminate that encapsulates a digital paper graphic between layers of ultraviolet-filtering film and resin composed of formaldehyde and phenol (think kitchen countertops). These panels are good for all locations – remote or staffed, wet or dry. They can be easily maintained and cleaned by waxing once a year with a high-quality automotive wax. If vandalized, they hold their integrity well even after being damaged. Phenolic resin signs used in the field by the Minnesota Historical Society have held up for more than 10 years. These colorfast panels are an excellent choice for reproducing high-resolution photographs. Production time is 6 to 8 weeks; prices are moderate.
- **Porcelain enamel markers** are made by fusing glass to steel. They are



Durable cast aluminum markers like this one require little or no maintenance, making them a good choice for roadside rest areas.

durable and stable and perform very well in moist environments such as zoos and aquariums. However, if damaged, porcelain enamel will rust, causing surface stains or bleeds. Because they are expensive to produce, these panels should be placed in areas that are regularly staffed. They generally require 10 to 12 weeks of production time.

- **Vinyl graphics on aluminum backers**, commonly used for highway markers, are ideal for semipermanent, way-finding signs. They are an economical solution for signs that need to change

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Creating outdoor trail signage – continued

from season to season – those announcing hours of operation, for example, or signs carrying directional or instructional information. The aluminum backer won't rust, and the vinyl lettering can be changed readily without affecting the sign's background and standard information. This type of signage looks professional and offers flexibility, minimizing season-to-season costs. Vinyl-on-aluminum signs take from 3 to 4 weeks to produce.

Fabricate the frame

While your graphic signs are being produced, use the time to fabricate the frames that will hold them. Wood, steel or aluminum – all can be used for your frames. Your choice will depend on several variables – where the signs will be placed, what your budget is and how much maintenance your organization is willing and able to do.

- **Wood** is the most readily available and user-friendly material for trail sign frames. You may even be able to find a volunteer who can make them for you. Since the frames will be exposed to the elements year-round, it's important to use exterior-grade wood, primers, paints and sealers. To prolong the life of your wood frames, don't forget to prime and seal the end grains. Of the three choices of material, wood frames are the most easily damaged or destroyed and will require the most maintenance. If you've ever had to repair a wooden fence, you'll have a good understanding of what sort of maintenance would be involved.



This fiberglass panel shows fading from exposure to ultraviolet light. Though they have a relatively short lifespan, fiberglass panels are inexpensive to produce so multiples can be ordered for replacement as needed.

- There are advantages and disadvantages to using either **steel or aluminum** for frame fabrication. You may be able to have steel frames made locally, whereas aluminum frames may have to be fabricated elsewhere, adding to shipping costs. As for the material itself, steel frames will rust when exposed to the elements, leaving red-brown stains. Aluminum will not rust or stain when left outside. In addition, aluminum frames are usually about half the weight of their steel counterparts.
- There are also variables to consider when choosing the **finish** for steel or aluminum frames. One option is **painting**, which can usually be done locally. Painted metal frames also are easy to repair and touch up but, in

general, are less durable than the other option, **powder coating**. Typically done by specialty fabricators, powder coating is an electrochemical process that bonds pigment to the metal. The powder-coated finish is much harder than a standard painted finish and therefore resists scratching. The downside to powder-coated finishes is that they are difficult to match when touch-ups are needed; automotive epoxy paint comes closest to matching their finish and durability.

- As for **cost**, steel frames and painted finishes are, overall, less expensive to begin with but will require more maintenance over time. Aluminum frames and powder-coated finishes are more expensive at the outset but will require less maintenance.

Creating outdoor trail signage – continued

More things to consider before installation

A few more decisions remain before you're ready to send your signs for fabrication. Determining the exact requirements for their installation – how and where you plan to affix the signs – will help you find the solution that best fits your circumstances.

- Will you attach your signs to the walls of buildings? That will have a bearing on the type of frame you choose – something relatively lightweight, for example, with no legs.
- Will your signs stand on the ground? If so, will they be attached to posts buried in the ground or will they just sit on the ground? If you're using buried posts, they need to be sunk

at least 48 inches into the ground to avoid upheaval as the ground freezes and thaws. If your signs are to rest on top of the ground, they should be weighted so that neither the wind nor visitors can move them easily. Consider a concrete base for this type of sign.

- Will you be mowing the area around your signs? If so, consider a leg design that is easy to work around. Also consider whether you'll be removing snow from around your signs or using ice-melt (salt) near them.

Salty water doesn't mix well with either wood or steel signposts. Wood soaks water in deeply and salt opens the pores of the wood. When cold weather arrives, that water freezes at the post's core,



This type of marker, with vinyl graphics or lettering on an aluminum backer, is an economical solution for signs that need to change seasonally.

gradually destroying it from the inside out. Steel rusts, developing red and brown scars, blisters and other surface blemishes. Eventually the structure

of the steel will be compromised and you'll find your sign lying on the ground. Aluminum signposts are less susceptible to damage from salty water, exhibiting only a white oxidized powder after contact.

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ECONOMIC ENGINE

With hundreds of men and some 175 horses, the garrison had a gargantuan appetite for wood, hay, grain, corn, and beef. Unable to meet the requirements of the post through any direct federal supply system, the War Department issued contracts to civilian suppliers offering the lowest bids. For years, this system made Fort Ridgely the best market in the Minnesota River valley for farmers and businessmen.

The post also provided much-appreciated services to the community. The army surgeons treated and sold medicines to area residents. Mail could be picked up or dropped off at the fort. Groceries and a variety of goods could be purchased at the sutler's store. Local farmers could use the post's slaughterhouse (located one mile from Ridgely) and buy lumber from the post's sawmill.

Getting Here
From 1853 to 1856, steamboats were the principal mode of transportation for military personnel and supplies going to and from Fort Ridgely. The presence of the post and increasing white settlements led Congress to improve and build new military roads in the territory. By 1858, land routes had mostly replaced the water routes to the fort.

MINNESOTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY
FORT RIDGELY

Colorfast phenolic resin panels are easy to maintain and hold up well in a variety of settings.

Creating outdoor trail signage – continued

Project timetable

By this time, you're no doubt wondering how long it will take to create outdoor trail signs from start to finish. The answer: probably longer than you or your board planned for! The easiest way to avoid missed deadlines and other frustrations is to **plan your timetable backwards** from a target completion date. Put your schedule together using the following guidelines:

- **Installation:** On average, you should plan for 1 to 3 days for installation. Allow extra time for bad weather.
- **Production of graphics:** Once the production vendor receives the file (DVD or CD) for your sign graphics, it can take up to 12 weeks for fabrication, depending on the material you've chosen for your signs. Add 2 more weeks for delivery. You can request a shorter production time but rush fees will add to your costs.
- **Frame production:** Since this typically takes less time than production of the graphics, you can easily complete this step while the signs are being made.
- **Final graphic design and file preparation:** Set aside up to 3 weeks for your graphic designer to finalize the digital files of your sign layouts and prepare them for production. Don't forget to review and sign off on the final layouts.
- **Preliminary graphic design:** Your graphic designer will work with you to develop layouts for your signs, using low-resolution images and a variety of designs for your review. Plan for 1 month or more for this process.
- **Research and text writing:** Allow 3 months or more for this initial step, depending upon the quantity of your signs, the complexity of your stories and the number of individuals or groups involved with you. You'll need ample time to select your stories and images; research, write and edit your texts; and send them through the review and approval process. Meanwhile, select a graphic designer to help you create signs with visual appeal.
- **Research and text writing** = up to 12 weeks.
- **Preliminary graphic design** = up to 4 weeks.
- **Final graphic design and file preparation** = up to 3 weeks.
- **Production of graphics** = up to 12 weeks for production and 2 more weeks for delivery.
- **Frame production** = coincides with graphic production.
- **Installation** = up to 1 week just in case Mother Nature doesn't cooperate.

So, from start to finish, how does this all add up?

That's a grand total of 34 weeks, or more than 8 months. Of course, you'll likely be doing other work at the same time so your sign project may take even longer. In other words, if your board tells you to make this happen by your community's Fourth of July celebration, they had better start the ball rolling in September, not February! ■

Ellen Miller, an exhibit developer, and Aaron Novodvorsky, an exhibit project manager, both with the Minnesota Historical Society, have been working in their respective areas of expertise for more than 14 years. They can be reached by email or phone: ellen.miller@mnhs.org or 651-259-3060, and aaron.novodvorsky@mnhs.org or 651-259-3052.

Correction

In Part 1 of this Tech Talk, which appeared in the May-June 2008 Interpreter, credit for the photos on pages 3 (left) and 4 should have been given to Corbis/Bettmann. We regret the omission.

Corbis/Bettmann



Porcelain enamel panels are durable and stable but expensive to produce.

Getting acquainted

New directors take the helm at nine county historical societies

Since we introduced a batch of new directors at Minnesota's county historical societies last fall (see the July-August and September-October 2007 Interpreters), nine more have joined the ranks. Three are profiled here. The rest will appear in the next issue.

Kandiyohi County

When the Kandiyohi County Historical Society's executive director, Mona Nelson, died earlier this year, the society lost its longtime leader and a true champion of local history. During Nelson's 30-year tenure, KCHS membership quadrupled and historic preservation took a front seat. Working under her direction during her last 18 months in office was the KCHS curator and Nelson's eventual successor, Andria Olson, a 2006 graduate of Minnesota State University Moorhead who took over as executive director in April.



Andria Olson

"I'm learning as I go," says Olson. "Our board and volunteers have been so helpful, jumping in whenever I have questions

about how Mona did things. We're in the middle of redoing some of our exhibits and rearranging the museum to improve the flow. Meanwhile, we have a full schedule of Sesquicentennial events

planned." Among the programs on tap: a traveling exhibit that will tour 10 Kandiyohi County communities.

Lac qui Parle County

Janet Liebl brings to her job at Lac qui Parle County Historical Society many years of experience as a social sciences teacher, grantwriter and author (her latest book: "Ties that Bind: The Minnesota Orphan Train Story"). Now she's counting on others for guidance in her new role as part-time curator. "June Lynne in Chippewa County has been very helpful," says Liebl, noting that the neighboring counties have much in common.



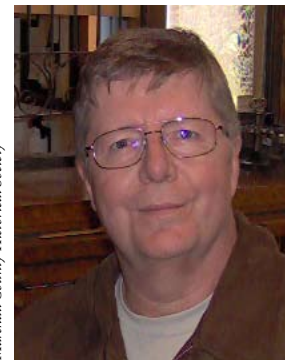
Janet Liebl

to improve is archival storage," Liebl says. "We also want to index our collections, then eventually develop a web site to make them more accessible." But first things first: the Lac qui Parle society just got online with a new e-mail address: lqphistorycenter@lqpc.com.

Marshall County

Like outgoing director Ethel Thorlacius, who retired after 10 years at the helm of the Marshall County Historical Society,

incoming director/curator Mike Johnson is a former board member. He's also a 28-year veteran of the Marshall County Sheriff's Department and "a history buff for as long as I can remember."



Mike Johnson

When he assumed his new position in February, Johnson waded right into the society's building project and \$100,000 capital

campaign. "We're adding a building for our big collection of agricultural artifacts and large machinery," explains Johnson. "That will free up space to put more of our other collections on display. We're planning a collections work area, too. We'll also move our offices for a better view of the galleries and upgrade our computer network." So far, the MCHS has raised \$60,000 toward its campaign goal.

Watch for more profiles in the next Interpreter, where we'll look in on Jackson, Meeker, Murray, Olmsted, Pennington and Todd counties. Did we miss you? If so, please let us know and we'll include you next time; e-mail David Grabitske at david.grabitske@mnhs.org. ■

Fall grants round still open for applications

State grants-in-aid, capital grants to be awarded

You can still beat the deadline for the fall round of state grants-in-aid and state capital project grants-in-aid. But beware: there's a logistical complication this year. Due to the Republican National Convention in downtown St. Paul beginning Aug. 30, it may be difficult getting to the History Center on Aug. 29, the day final applications are due. The deadlines for both grant programs are:

July 25 Preapplication due.

Aug. 29 Final application due.

Oct. 2 Grants Review Committee meets.

State grants-in-aid are awarded twice a year in the categories of interpretive programs,

photographic collections, publications and research, historic properties, artifact collections, microform copies, oral history, manuscripts collections, museum environments and technology.

Matching grants for historic preservation projects of a capital nature are awarded to county and local jurisdictions once a year. Monies for these grants are included in a bonding appropriation from the Minnesota Legislature.

For details about the two grant programs, including guidelines, eligibility and application forms, go to www.mnhs.org/about/grants. ■



With funding from a state grant-in-aid, volunteer Joe Franks sorted and filed a collection of photographs acquired by the Sherburne County Historical Society from the Elk River Star News.

About this publication

The *Minnesota History Interpreter* is published quarterly 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*, Summer 2008, Vol. XXXVI, No. 4, 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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