

DOCUMENTING COLLECTIONS

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It was a familiar story. The museum boasted a large collection of wedding dresses, so the curator decided to focus her spring exhibition on weddings. But when she started writing the exhibit labels, she discovered that the gowns, donated by three local women, had been collected without any records about the dresses or any facts about the weddings. Before the curator could write labels interpreting the dresses, she had a lot of questions to answer. Were these the donors' own wedding dresses? When and where were the weddings held? Were they large or small functions? Did the newlyweds take honeymoon trips? And just what were the brides' first and maiden names, anyway?

Undocumented and underdocumented collections present one of the largest obstacles museums face when they attempt to use their collections for interpretive exhibits or for educational or research purposes. It is a problem all too common in museums large and small, regardless of budget. Pressed for time, and with limited resources, staff of most museums find documenting collections to be one of their most challenging tasks. So, many of us shortchange this part of the process, thinking we can always go back to the donor for information or research items later on our own. Sometimes donors tell us stories, but if we lack a procedure to record them, we have to improvise. Sometimes we plan simply to remember them, or we try to find a place to jot them down later. Other times it seems to take forever to get great stories from donors. We don't hit the right line of questioning, and donors wonder why we want to know about their items. Isn't it enough that the objects are old and they've brought them to a museum?

While artifacts form the tangible collections of most museums, the stories about the artifacts make them interesting and provide insights to visitors and researchers. These stories paint a picture of our past, they place the artifacts in context, and they give the artifacts real meaning. When we collect these stories, objects cease to be just "old stuff." This technical insert provides some tools that will make the task of collecting stories easier and will show how to make potential donors effective participants in the process of documenting artifacts.

We devote a great deal of energy to caring for our collections. We write collections policies, loan policies, ethics policies, and deaccession policies. We catalogue artifacts. We pay particular attention to the materials used to make the artifact. We address storage and environmental needs. We even design exhibit spaces with the assistance of conservation professionals. But we tend to fall short in the one area that makes using our collections easier and more meaningful: documentation. Few museums dedicate the time necessary to collect more than just basic information about the artifacts that are the focus of all those other resources and time. And yet, this should be one of our essential activities.

Museum collections can excite and educate visitors, allowing them to connect with "the real thing," to reminisce, or to learn about a new subject. Museums use collections to provide these experiences to visitors, but the mere display of artifacts will not accomplish this. Artifacts must be arranged into inter-

pretive exhibits to help visitors make connections and explore topics. This means we must collect the stories that help interpret these artifacts. If it is important for a museum to amass a collection of a particular type of tool or decorative art object, it is even more important to have specific information about the makers, users, or owners of these artifacts. Without these accounts our exhibits are nothing but generic displays with as much context and interpretation as a flea market booth. Having this information available may allow interpretation of topics that we might not have anticipated otherwise.

The retired executive had spent his lifetime amassing a huge collection of mineral specimens. Upon his death, his children wondered what to do with their dad's rock collection. They decided to offer it to the local natural history museum. The curator was intrigued, but he explained that the museum owned hundreds of mineral specimens and had limited storage space. There were only a few ways to use specimens if their collecting history was unknown. Through the curator's careful questioning, the collector's children bemusedly remembered their dad's overstuffed filing cabinet in the basement. A meticulous note keeper, their father had documented precisely where he acquired each sample. Some he purchased and some he collected in the field, but he carefully filed away his receipts and collecting permits. With this information, the entire collection of mineral specimens could be properly documented and interpreted. The collector would have been proud to see the results of this lifelong hobby enjoyed by visiting schoolchildren and studied by researchers.

The Role of a Collections Policy

A collections policy can play a major role in defining how staff members should document a museum collection. It provides guidelines for determining what and how a museum collects. A collections policy helps with documenting collections by focusing our thinking about how we intend to use those artifacts.

Some museum's collections policies contain lengthy and highly detailed descriptions of classes of materials, topics, and time periods that are appropriate to collect. If your institution has such a policy, you will probably find it fairly easy to focus on the types of stories you want to collect, as you've already spent a great deal of time thinking about what is important to your institution.

If your collections policy states your collecting focus in a paragraph or less, you may need to go into greater detail and define your collecting scope more precisely. Such policies may state only that the aim is "to collect, document, interpret and preserve the history of X place from date to date." Articulating a more detailed collections philosophy—expanding your collections policy from a general statement to specific delineation—will help you make planned and directed collecting decisions for both artifacts and stories.

Collections Philosophy

A collections philosophy is not a detailed list of every artifact

can be used as both a guide for staff and a self-directed form for a donor to complete. Staff members (or volunteers) should familiarize themselves with both the questions and the types of information the questions are designed to elicit. When the questionnaire is used in conjunction with an interview of the potential donor, the staff member must transcribe the donor's answers to the questions. Used in this way, the form functions as a general guide or checklist, prompting the interviewer to ask crucial questions. The form helps the interviewer maintain consistency and thoroughness in collecting stories from potential donors. Some potential donors, especially those who arrive at the museum with an artifact but without an appointment, can complete the form at home. Try to spend a few minutes reviewing the form with the potential donor. You can explain the types of information you are looking for and why you are collecting it. Most people are flattered and surprised that you'd show a strong interest in their lives. People are often unsure of specific genealogical details such as birth and death dates; sending the form home with them will enable them to check their records. Furnish a stamped, self-addressed envelope to make returning the form easier.

How will you use the questionnaire? The form can provide structure to your donation process. All museums experience the "dump and run" phenomenon of artifact drop-offs. Eager donors, believing you will be thrilled with their donation, occasionally refuse to sign even the most basic receipt forms. They don't want to stand on ceremony and can't imagine why you need to know whom they are. If you present the donor with a donor questionnaire form and explain how knowing the history of an artifact makes that artifact more meaningful and useful to your museum, it will help the donor understand your mission and collecting policy as well. In this way, the form acts as a filtering device, helping you to determine who is serious about donating artifacts. Serious donors will understand why you want to spend time learning the historical significance of their artifacts.

A museum will often use the form as a tool to evaluate potential donations, especially as its collecting philosophy evolves. As previously noted, a strong collections policy establishes criteria for determining what your museum will collect. A potential donor who is asked to describe the history and associations of the artifacts offered to you has provided much of the evaluation criteria. This documentation outlines how the potential donation relates to your mission and, possibly, to other materials already in your collections. If your institution uses an acquisition review process in which staff members write justification statements, a completed questionnaire can supply much of the needed information.

Another use of the form is to identify persons with whom you might like to conduct oral history interviews in the future. Although most of the information you collect will relate directly to artifacts in your collections, the stories could also justify further conversations worth recording.

What should you do with the completed forms? They become part of the permanent record of the donation and should be considered primary source material. As such, they should be printed on archival-quality paper, just like your Deed of Gift forms, and filed with the rest of the accession documentation.

Why Document?

A decade ago, Lonnn Taylor of the National Museum of

American History, Smithsonian Institution, writing about the Common Agenda for History Museums program, observed, "The majority of objects in America's history museums are of minimal use to scholars or members of the general public trying to get a picture of our past because they have never been researched satisfactorily or documented." Despite gains in practices and professionalism, he wrote, "the one area in which much improvement had not been shown is in the core of our existence: researching and documenting our collections. Only when that is done, and when systems are established to ensure that future collections are documented, can it be said that our collecting, preserving, and interpreting activities are rooted in scholarship and serve an educational purpose. Until then, we remain accumulators" (Taylor, 26).

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- * Available in the Oklahoma Museums Association's lending library; may be borrowed on interlibrary loan through most public libraries.

Thanks to the following institutions for sharing their documentation standards and collections forms: Chicago Historical Society, McLean County Historical Society, Mendocino (California) County Museum, Minnesota Historical Society, National Museum of American History, and Oakland (California) Museum.