

Alaska State Museums BULLETIN

An Information Source for Alaska's Museum Community

Conservation Intern at the Alaska State Museum

Lauren Anne Horelick was an intern at ASM from August until December of 2009. She worked with Conservator Ellen Carrlee in the ASM conservation lab. The following is a description of the internship in her own words.

A large part of caring for cultural objects involves research and analysis in materials characterization so that we can understand why and how certain materials change with time. The activities of conservators also involve preparing detailed condition reports and performing stabilizing treatments on objects in advance of travel, exhibition, or for researchers. Conservators engage in environmental monitoring, including pest management, as well as developing handling protocols for objects. We are often collaborators with curators to help with materials identification and with exhibition staff to recommend lighting parameters and object mount specifications. My training in graduate school over the past two years prepared me to engage in all of these types of activities—experience I was able to apply during my internship at the Alaska State Museum.

I was attracted to come and intern at the Alaska State Museum to work specifically with conservator Ellen Carrlee who is well known in the field for her research on deteriorated, water-logged wood and the use of PEG (polyethylene glycol). Ellen had proposed a research project for a third-year conservation graduate student to help develop a web-accessible Alaskan fur identification



Lauren at the microscope. Photo by Ellen Carrlee

guide. Envisioning the research value (and glamour!) of just such a project, I enthusiastically applied to be an intern.

During an initial interview with Ellen conducted over the internet, we discussed the types of projects I could participate in, in addition to helping develop the fur identification guide. These projects included the treatment of inner skin, or gut skin, objects and shipwrecked materials including bone, ceramics, copper alloys, lead, and composite Civil War-era munitions. The variation in materials proposed presented a fantastic opportunity for me to gain a depth of experience in working

with both organic and inorganic objects possessing unique historical backgrounds. At the end of August, while Los Angeles was ablaze, quite literally, I hopped on a plane and flew to Juneau where I have been learning the value of dressing in layers ever since!

Upon arriving for my first day in the lab, I was given a small box containing a pair of very torn and crushed Aleut or Alutiiq child's knee boots, reportedly made from sea lion esophagus and sealskin. These small boots had been purchased in an auction by Sheldon Jackson Museum curator Rosemary Carlton and were slated to be on display as the artifact of the month for October at the SJM in Sitka. These boots presented several challenges with their multiple compound tears, ingrained dirt, missing decorative

elements, and overall disfigured forms; to say nothing of the fact that I had never worked with inner skin materials prior. Researching the conservation literature, as well as conducting my own battery of experiments, helped me to determine appropriate adhesives and tear-mending materials to repair the boots. The materials selected needed not only to have excellent aging properties, compatibility with the original material, and be reversible, but must also be readily distinguishable as new repairs to not confuse later interpretation.

The condition of the unique pair of Aleut or Alutiiq boots was documented before treatment with digital images and de-

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Museum Success Stories

*Clausen Cannery
Exhibit. Photo by
Sue McCallum*



Petersburg's Clausen Museum

Over the past few years, Petersburg's Clausen Museum has shown how a small museum can build capacity by participating in bigger state-wide museum projects. In 2005, museum director Sue McCallum put the finishing touches on a new cannery exhibit. This exhibit takes a fresh approach to relating an important part of Petersburg's history by incorporating scholarship with stunning visual displays. The core parts of the exhibit were developed through a series of workshops sponsored by staff at the Alaska State Museum.

This past April, the Clausen was host to paper conservator Seth Irwin who worked at ten different institutions around the state, spending a month at each site. Funding for their portion of this project came from a grant which Sue wrote to the Rasmuson Foundation's management assistance program. While at the Clausen, Seth surveyed their paper and photographic collections and treated several important artifacts. One of the most exciting artifacts treated was a badly deteriorating and stained log book from summit of Devils Thumb, a popular but difficult climb whose starting point is usually Petersburg. The log papers contain signatures and accounts of many climbs including the first ascent by renowned mountaineer Fred Becky. After surviving for years in a tin can on the summit, it was brought to the museum due to its deteriorating condition.

The Clausen also participated in the final year of ASM's IMLS funded internship program. The intern, Abbi Huderle, who is getting her master's degree in museum studies from the University of Washington, worked on various cataloging projects throughout the summer. It was a positive and rewarding experience for both intern and staff at the museum.

Ask ASM:

Our museum has started using Past-Perfect software to catalog our collection. We don't have storage locations for individual objects. How do we organize our storage so that the locations make sense?

Here is an idea that has worked well in the past. When you assign location codes to areas in your storage space, consider using a system that combines Roman numerals, letters, and numbers. The Roman numeral stands for the unit containing shelves or drawers. The letter stands for the bays or larger subdivisions of that unit, like a vertical set of shelves/drawers or a cabinet. The number stands for the individual shelves or drawers. It is intuitive for westerners to go from top to bottom and left to right when reading a sequence.

Therefore start your numbering system with Roman numeral I for the unit to the left of the first aisle farthest to the left. You will have a different Roman numeral for the unit on the right side of the same aisle. This is somewhat different from your typical supermarket numbering system where the aisle is numbered rather than the shelves on either side. Then, starting from where you first walk in, mark the first bay as A, the next as B, and so on. Finally, use numbers for the individual shelves or drawers starting from the top.

In this system, IV-A-3 would mean:

IV = fourth unit from left

A = first bay of fourth unit

3 = third shelf/drawer down from top

If you have more than one storage room, there can be a two or three letter prefix, rather like an airport code. For example V stands for *collections vault* and OS stands for *off-site*. It is useful to make a map and post prominently both in storage and near your work station.

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Alaska State Museum

395 Whittier Street
Juneau, AK 99801
Phone (907) 465-2901
Fax (907) 465-2976

Sheldon Jackson Museum

104 College Drive
Sitka AK 99835
Phone (907) 747-8981
Fax (907) 747-3004

To contact Museum Services:
Toll-free (888) 913-MUSE
Email: scott.carrlee@alaska.gov

museums.state.ak.us

Grant-In-Aid Awards

Applicant	Project	Award Amount
Palmer Museum, Palmer	Internship program	\$5,400
Baranov Museum, Kodiak	Collections storage improvements	\$5,400
Museum of the Aleutians, Unalaska	Equipment purchase	\$4,899
Alutiiq Museum, Kodiak	Museum library project	\$7,855
Juneau Douglas City Museum	Hands-on exhibition model	\$9,980
Sam Fox Museum, Dillingham	Exhibit case upgrade	\$10,000
Sheldon Museum, Haines	Technology upgrade	\$7,092
Anchorage Museum, Anchorage	Internship project to improve storage	\$7,520
Museums Alaska, Anchorage	Two conference workshops	\$9,439
Hammer Museum, Haines	Mobile Storage Unit	\$5,000
Alaska Museum of Natural History, Anchorage	Exhibit lighting upgrade	\$4,868
Ketchikan Museums, Ketchikan	HVAC improvements	\$7,008
Sealaska Heritage Institute, Juneau	Preservation supplies	\$1,349
Hope and Sunrise Historical Museum, Hope	Exhibit lighting upgrade	\$1,940
Carrie McClain Museum, Nome	Collections cataloging	\$1,950
Cordova Historical Museum, Cordova	Collections management equipment upgrade	\$2,000
Ahtna Heritage Institute, Glennallen	Exhibit upgrade project	\$2,000
Pioneer Air Museum, Fairbanks	Collections cataloging	\$2,000
K'Beq Interpretive Site, Kenai	Exhibit development and installation	\$2,000
Kodiak Maritime Museum, Kodiak	Photographic portraits for oral history	\$2,000
Alpine Historical Society, Sutton	Protection of outdoor exhibits	\$2,000

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scriptive text. The specifics of the treatment involved cleaning, humidification, tear mending, and loss compensation in locations where the fragile inner skin material was missing. The stabilizing treatment for these boots took about a month to complete and was a fantastic learning experience for me. With Ellen's guidance, the end result was successful and images with the full report are accessible on her conservation blog, *el-lencarrlee.wordpress.com*. At the end of September, I created a box with special archival foam padding for the boots to rest in during travel to the Sheldon Jackson Museum in Sitka. I was able to visit Sitka to assist with the Sheldon Jackson Museum's annual cleaning, transporting the boots as well.

Once back in Juneau, I began working on the Alaskan fur identification project. The aim of this project was to create a blog consisting of written descriptions

of macro and micro features of various furs. By providing key descriptors of mammal furs, outside researchers, as well as museum staff, will be able to compare unknown fur fiber in their collections with our sample of identified fibers. The Alaskan fur ID blog will enable correct identification of the use of certain furs on Alaskan cultural objects, which can inform cultural attribution. In some instances, the furs identified on objects may speak to specific religious or symbolic meaning. Their presence on cultural objects may also relate to certain time periods or to trade relations. It is our hope that the fur ID blog will have enough information to be used by conservators as well as anthropologists, archaeologists, mammalogists, and forensic biologists. My internship work on this particular project allowed me to hone skills in recording descriptive information of the micro-features seen in mammal fur.

Another project I was involved with was the treatment of recovered objects from the shipwreck of the *Torrent*. I worked on a man's hairbrush made from bone as well as recovered ceramic fragments. The fragments were completely covered in marine growth, which I removed with a sharp scalpel while working under the microscope. Some fragments were plates but others related to part of a ship's toilet. When this project was completed, I enjoyed bragging to friends and family that after all that graduate school training I am finally skilled enough to clean a toilet!

The internship was a wonderful experience allowing me to see how small museums operate while participating in meaningful research and treatment work. I enjoyed working with the incredibly talented staff at the Alaska State Museum.



LAMP Progress

Planning work for the Alaska State Library, Archive & Museum Project is progressing well. In the spring of 2010, the State of Alaska hired the architectural firms of ECI/Hyer, Anchorage, and THA Architects, Portland, as the principle design team for a new building. The new building is to be located in Juneau on the current museum site and on the vacant lot adjacent to the museum property.

The design team has been working with division staff, constituents served by the three institutions, and the community of Juneau to determine how to best combine the three operations. The goal is to construct a new building that will insure quality service to constituents and a rewarding experience for visitors. Behind the scene improvements for staff support and expanded collections storage are also included in the project.

DOT Project Management has scheduled the concept, building schematic, and design development phases of the project to be completed by August 2011. At that point, the architects will start developing construction documents. Building public support for funding the facility is underway. The first major effort, 18.5 million dollars included in the General Obligation Bond, is being voted on in the coming November election.

Watch this space for updates on the project and to learn how you can help with the statewide efforts to build the new Alaska State Library, Archive & Museum building.

Hands-on Loan Program Available Online!

Go to museums.state.ak.us/sheldon_jackson/sjhandson.html, select "create an account," and begin searching for educational materials. Login using your password during future visits. For information call 907.747.8981

THE BULLETIN

Alaska State Museums
395 Whittier Street
Juneau, AK 99801-1718