

Alaska State Museums Bulletin 43

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Photography and Colonialism in North America: “Looking was not an Innocent Act” [\[1\]](#)

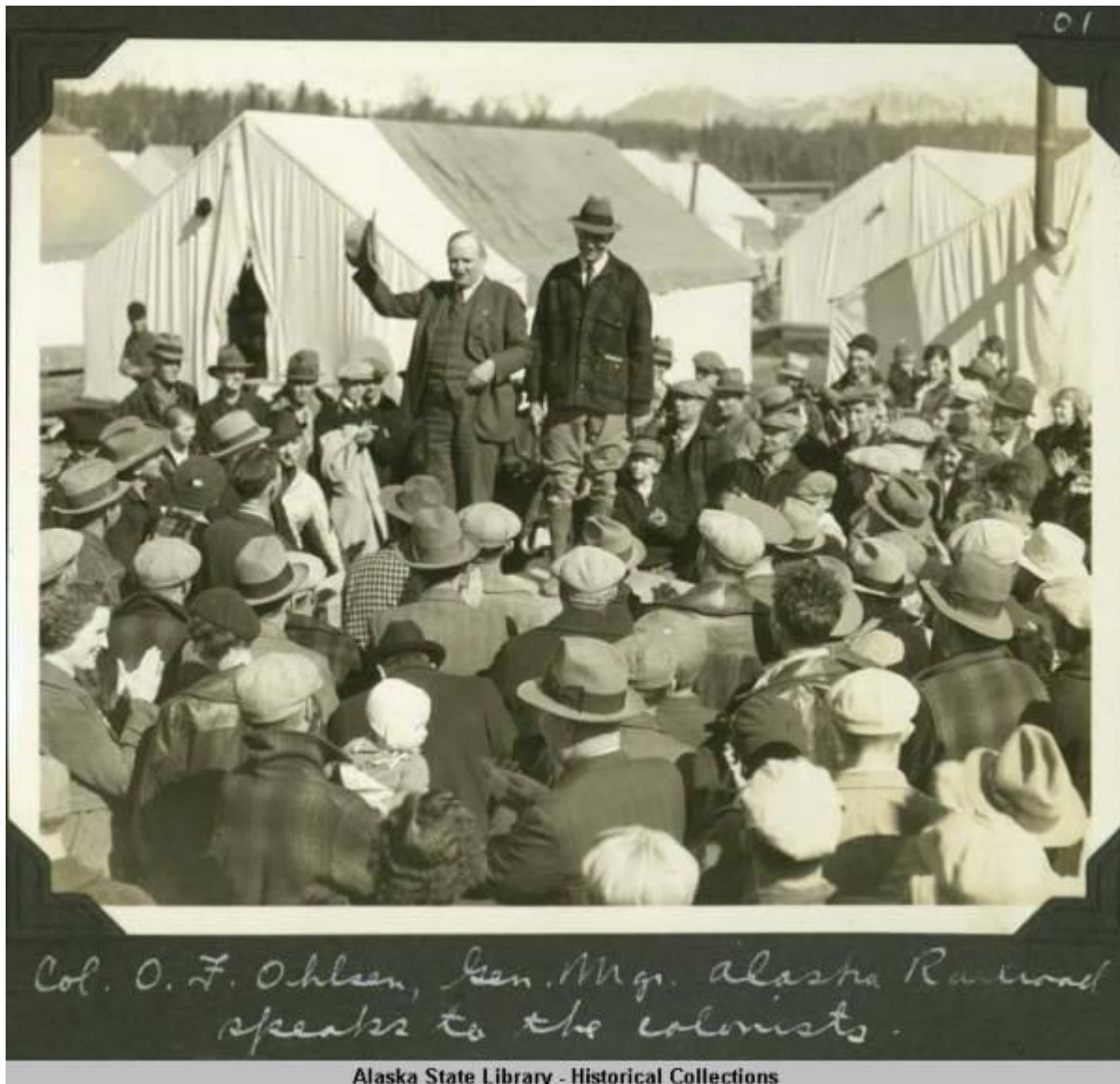
By Sorrel Goodwin, Alaska State Museum Registrar

The world of the professional academic historian is often viewed from the outside as a place populated with linear timelines informed and built by dusty primary source material. It is assumed that this material is meticulously and objectively examined in the quest to reconstruct some semblance of a historical narrative to augment the ever growing body of human knowledge.

Of course, this is only a part of the processes that modern historians use, and it should be assumed that many historians would challenge this somewhat outmoded and oversimplified characterization of what they do, and rightfully so; the historic method is much more complex than this and can often involve multiple levels of inquiry grounded in the constantly contested area of epistemology.

Having acknowledged the complexity of modern historiography, it is still possible and often necessary, to rely on a linear historical model for some reconstructions of historical events and processes, provided that the historiographers acknowledge the difficulties of perfectly thorough and objective interpretation.

One of these reconstructions is the concurrent development of modern photography and the “second wave” of European and Euro-American colonial expansion in the 19th and early 20th centuries. This second wave of what was also termed the “New Imperialism” was characterized, for example, by the so-called “Scramble for Africa” by various European powers and also, by post-revolutionary western expansion in North America, to cite another example.



Photography served as a valuable propaganda tool in these colonial endeavors, as it enhanced the colonizers' collective ability to not only begin documenting, surveying and parceling stolen land, but in justifying that theft and attendant ethnic cleansing through photographic depictions of the indigenous peoples. In her seminal work on the colonial uses of photography on the Northwest Coast of North America, Carol Williams cautions us that "between parties of unequal status, looking was not an innocent act. Photographs, as a consequence, are primary historical sources useful in unveiling the fluctuating state of agency and disempowerment."[\[2\]](#)



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Indeed, the commonly accepted view of photography as an innocuous and passive media needs to be completely discarded, especially in the colonial context when we begin to really consider its uses: “To understand the social value of photography in the colonial environment, the original, often elusive, purpose or function of the photograph must be part of the overall equation”[\[3\]](#)

When European and Euro-American colonial powers entered a region that they had claimed, either through the “Doctrine of Discovery” or through an equally spurious purchase or “land exchange” between colonial powers, the first order of business was the mapping and surveying of the region.

In these efforts photography often played a central and plural role. Surveyors, often working under the auspices of various colonial “engineer corps,” undertook creating boundary surveys with the help of the photographic record.

Both professional and amateur photographers participated in these surveys and often created multiple sets of images; one set was often used for the “official” government publications and correspondence and another was utilized for personal financial gain. Often the same images would be used for both purposes, and they frequently found their way into popular settler publications in addition to being utilized by governments, as “government administrators and commercial entrepreneurs earned mutual benefits from their collaborative efforts to tame the physical and social terrain through representation”[\[4\]](#) (emphasis added).



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The “social terrain” was of course, the indigenous peoples, who were viewed as annoying or offending obstacles to the concept of “Manifest Destiny” that was at the core of the colonial project. Depending on where the photographs were taken on the historical timeline, the indigenous peoples were variously depicted as either ignoble or noble savages.

When viewed as obstacles, indigenous peoples were depicted as sub-human, and were often contrasted in the photographic record with stilted depictions of “civilized whiteness.”



At this point in the colonial encounter “the photograph was not a neutral bureaucratic device, but was used by those who subscribed to ideology that viewed Native Americans as inherently less civilized than Euro-Americans”[\[5\]](#) as a tool to wield toward removing the offending obstacles, either physically or conceptually.



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Once subjugation of the indigenous populations was complete, and their power to resist also adequately suppressed or removed entirely, other types of imagery begins to surface in the photographic record; the “noble savage” and/or the “good (assimilated and compliant) native” imagery, informed and driven by the 19th century “dying race theory” and raced-based, mission driven Christian theology came to the fore.

Assimilating natives or predicting their eventual demise was part and parcel of an overall historical process where “colonized peoples were subjected to a process of negation that supplied a justification for European intervention, iterated the fundamental difference between colonizer and colonized, and acted as a means of white self-affirmation.”[\[6\]](#)



Archives, University of Alaska, Fairbanks

The rise of modern Anthropology, ironically enough, was also taking place during this time period and the emerging discipline, whose practitioners often accompanied these colonial expeditions, also began to create a photographic record of their own. Photography in the service of Anthropology, found ingenious ways of disguising its imperialist and culturally biased roots and reality from the public by hiding behind convenient academic mythologies like “cultural relativity.”

A popular area of study during this time, on the part of Anthropologists, was to scientifically measure and record human differences through the study of the physical form of different groups:

“The conviction that character could be detected decoded, or “read” by visual signs emitted by the structure of flesh and bone was affirmed by the combination of anthropometry and photography, as the resulting photographs aided in the visualization of differences between variants of human stock.”[\[7\]](#)

The famous photographs of heads, and the measuring of heads by field anthropologists evidences this overly simplistic and misguided endeavor and reigning theory, and is in fact, often held up in modern academia as a false and pernicious detour that betrays the false assumptions of that era.

Informed by the dying race theory, 19th century Anthropologists undertook what has been termed “Salvage Anthropology,” which included the collection of cultural artifacts and human remains from a culture deemed “endangered” by the colonial society (the very same society that caused the cultures “endangerment” in the first place).

The nature of salvage anthropology was two-fold in its relationship with colonized people, first

“Anthropologists, Boas included, were swept up by the salvage paradigm, removing house poles, unearthing grave remains (skulls were a desired collectible for those pursuing anthropometric anthropology), and retrieving other artifacts in response to requests from urban, mostly eastern-based museums. While the motives for this collecting frenzy stemmed from a scientific concern for the preservation of the vanishing cultures of the Indian, anthropologists believed, like those before them, in the manifest destiny of assimilation.” [8]

Secondly, salvage anthropology was often concerned with an imagined “authenticity” in its scholarly and visual depictions of indigenous cultures and because of this the “nineteenth-century anthropologists obsession with authenticity was also a function of assigning value, but here it was a function of the ability to camouflage the damage inflicted by colonialism.” [9]



Irrespective of motivations or publically espoused philosophies, 19th century Anthropology, its methods and media, including photography, were an integral part of the “cultural machinery of imperialism.” [10] At the end of the day, “photography was part and parcel of the colonial conquest in which “subject” peoples of the state were classified and judged in accordance with theories expressed

across the various social sciences including physiognomy, craniotomy, anthropometrics, and eugenics.”[\[11\]](#)

As can be gathered from the above examples, photography, in the colonial context, cannot be seen as an innocuous media, utilized in an “objective” way by photographers and historians in an illustrative fashion.

Whether utilized in the service of limning and carving up stolen land, denigrating indigenous populations, celebrating the imagined superiority of white society in regard to native assimilation, or in the settler state’s “scientific,” “artistic,” or “historical” pursuits, the colonial and neo-colonial context must be taken into consideration.

When photographs which were “employed to embellish an unfurling historical narrative[\[12\]](#)”, are now presented without this critical and informed viewpoint expressed, it “limits our understanding of how photography constructed cultural and racial difference between settlers and Native Americans, largely emptying the photographic artifact of the imperial, commercial, government, or anthropological motivations behind its creation.” [\[13\]](#)



Alaska State Library - Historical Collections

Present-day exhibition viewers thus risk once again being subconsciously lulled into a certain photographic tunnel-vision view of the scene, non-verbal but no less persuasive. Such presentation even in the current enlightened era teeters dangerously close to the edge of intentional disservice, and close, too, to fulfilling the prophesy hinted at during the 19th century.



To lose this valuable and hard-won critical understanding, whether in an effort to hide behind nationalistic triumphalism, “academic/historical/professional objectivity,” or to simply avoid dealing with unpleasant historical realities, is not only an impediment to the furtherance of human knowledge, it also shines a bright light on the ongoing inability of a society to evolve morally, and that, to be sure, is a shame, because it guarantees that the mistakes of the past will be repeated over and over again.

[1] Carol J. Williams, *Framing the West: Race, Gender, and the Photographic Frontier in the Pacific Northwest* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2003) 8.

[2] Williams 8

[3] Williams 8

[4] Williams 51

[5] Williams 76

[6] Anne Maxwell, *Colonial Photography & Exhibitions: Representations of the 'Native' and the Making of European Identities* (London: Leicester University Press, 1999) 101.

[7] Williams 175

[8] Williams 174

[9] Maxwell 111

[10] Maxwell 111

[11] Williams 76-77

[12] Williams 7

[13] Williams 7-8

Bibliography/Further Reading

Fusco, Coco and Brian Wallis, ed. *Only Skin Deep: Changing Visions of the American Self*. New York: Harry N. Abrams Inc., 2003.

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Ask ASM

Question: I am doing the artifact of the month and have decided to put some of our trade beads out. There is one strand of beads that has bead disease. Is there any reason why the ones with bead disease should not go out on display in the exhibit case? Also could you tell me a little about what bead disease is?

ASM: Bead Disease also known as “glass disease” or “sick glass”, it is not a disease at all. It is the result of improper manufacture. Glass usually has three kinds of ingredients:

1. network former (usually silica)
2. network modifier (to make glass melt at a lower temperature and handle better)
3. network stabilizer (to prevent glass from dissolving in water)

If the recipe has the wrong proportions of ingredients, the result will be crizzled or weeping glass. The white cloudy or crusty look is usually from alkaline salts leeching out to the surface or cracks caused by the deterioration. There is no cure for glass disease, but high humidity makes it worse. Color of bead does not predict bead disease, and it can appear on any size



bead. However, in Alaska we notice it more on the larger size of bead, the ones about the size of a chick pea. Perhaps this is because its size makes it more visible? Most crizzled glass is quite old. Crizzled glass is rarely seen after 1900 and is more common in the 1700s and 1800s.

The only concern with putting it in the case would be that once a bead (or piece of glass) starts showing signs of glass disease it is more fragile. So you need to be extra careful during handling. Glass disease is not contagious and will not spread to other beads in the case.

Shaking the Money Tree

HERITAGE PRESERVATION

The 2012 application booklet will be mailed to institutions on the CAP application mailing list on October 3, 2011 and will be available online at www.heritagepreservation.org/CAP/application.html. To be added to or to verify your address on the mailing list, please contact the CAP staff at [cap\(a\)heritagepreservation.org](mailto:cap(a)heritagepreservation.org) or call 202-233-0800. The deadline to submit 2012 CAP applications will be December 1, 2011.

<http://www.heritagepreservation.org/cap/index.html>

INSTITUTE OF MUSEUM AND LIBRARY SERVICES

October 3, 2011: Conservation Project Support

November 1, 2011: Museums for America

December 1, 2011 & July 1, 2012: Museum Assessment Program

December 15, 2011: National Medal for Museum and Library Services

January 17, 2012: Museum Grants for African American History and Culture
February 1, 2012: National Leadership Grants

February 15, 2012: Sparks! Ignition Grants for Libraries and Museums

March 15, 2012: 21st Century Museum Professionals

April 1, 2012: Native American/Native Hawaiian Museum Services

<http://www.ims.gov/applicants/name.shtml>

IMLS announces Museums for America grant recipients

Ilanka Cultural Center - Cordova, AK
Award Amount: \$102,034; Matching Amount: \$103,622
Grant Category: Engaging Communities

Contact: Ms. LaRue Barnes
Museum Director
(907)424-7738; larue@nveyak.org

The "Voices of Our Elders" project at the Ilanka Cultural Center will provide a digital exhibition accessible to all museum guests and the community that will provide educational, cultural, and historic information. The leadership of the Native Village recognized the need to document the history—particularly the oral history—of the community elders before their memories were extinguished through age or passing. This grant will allow the village to appropriately utilize previously collected oral histories by enhancing them with imagery and technology and provide a permanent collection of that history within the museum and archives.

NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE HUMANITIES

Announces Grant Awards, July 2011

http://www.neh.gov/pdf/July2011grants_state_by_state.pdf

Kodiak

MediaAction Outright: \$39,675

[Digital Humanities Start-Up Grants]

Project Director: Marie Acemah

Project Title: Rural Alaska Cultural Media Project

Project Description: The development and testing of a cultural media-making curriculum

for rural Alaskan students that incorporates instruction in ethnographic methodologies and the use of the Omeka presentation platform as a means of enhancing Alaskan public history.

Spotlight on Grant in Aid

Sam Fox Museum, Dillingham, AK



Sam Fox Museum Before Renovations

In 2009 the Sam Fox Museum board made caring for the museum's collection the top priority. With this goal in mind, they began in earnest seeking financial backing. At the same time, they consulted with a design engineer, laid out a floor plan, researched for a vendor of climate-controlled cases with working knowledge of museum needs and continued cataloging items in its care. The last three activities were enhanced through an intern, hosted thanks to an Alaska State Museum grant.



The new cases arrived in crates

Initially, they secured enough funding for three cases. When the order was placed, it was for fourteen cases. The Alaska Community Foundation/Pebble Mine invested over \$40,231, the Rasmuson Foundation just under \$25,000, the Alaska State Museum \$10,000, the City of Dillingham \$87,000 and individuals and small companies \$8,650. Casewerks, with headquarters in Baltimore Maryland, and the manufacturing plant in Germany custom built the glass cases which include desiccant drawers.



Unpacking the new exhibit cases

Over the course of seven months, through phone calls, e-mails and letters, the case dimensions were designed thanks to significant guidance by the Casewerks staff. The museum board members decided to eliminate built-in lighting so additional cases could be ordered, thereby protecting dozens of additional artifacts previously displayed in compromised cases or stored in the museum office in metal file cabinets.



Work in progress at the museum

All the room preparation work and now the renovation has been carried out by volunteers in the community. The old cases were removed as was the old wall covering. Acoustic carpeting has been installed on all the walls. The ceiling was painted. Uncrating the cases and moving them into

position in the museum required brute strength from eight men working for hours. Putting artifacts both previously on display and formerly in storage into the cases and adding labels/descriptors continues to fill the days.

The immediate advantages recognized by this project are (1) Better care of irreplaceable artifacts. (2) A few people who volunteered on this project are now interested in continuing on at the museum. This includes a few teenagers, which is exciting since it may suggest to them some career possibilities they might not have considered before. (3)



Exhibits in new cases

The descriptions being added to the displays have proven significantly educational to those who have visited thus far; especially to the summer tourists / fisherman to this area. (4) In wanting to display artifacts previously in storage, some items are being rotated through an older display case at the local Wells Fargo Bank, asking the community to help identify what the items are.



Baskets exhibited in a new case

Members of the community have expressed that now they feel as though they're contributing to the preservation of the cultural history, especially for the younger generation. (5) The new floor plan offers improved traffic flow and promises to be efficient as a venue for social gatherings. (6) An unexpected benefit to the community was the use of the crate material. The university was teaching a construction class to young adults and had only enough funding for one dog house which was going to be made for the City of Dillingham's dog catcher's use. With the wood and foam donated to them from this project (estimate value of just over \$1,000 per their instructor), they were able to build three dog houses and start on new bus stop kiosks.

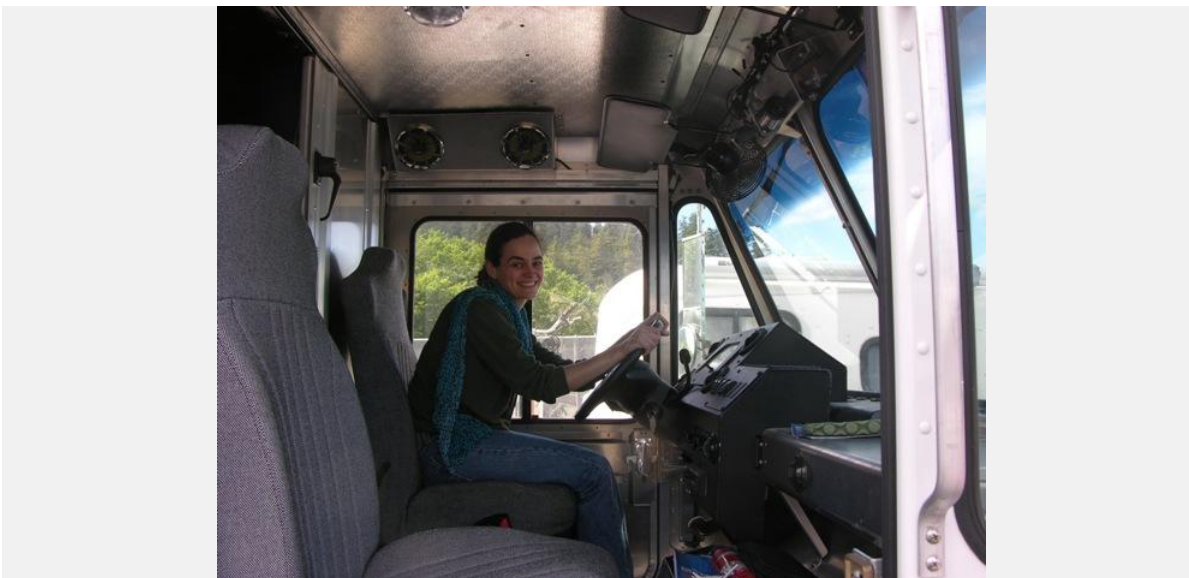
ASM on the Road: Sitka

Alaska State Museum Curator of Museum Services Scott Carrlee traveled to the Sitka to perform a Museum Assessment Program (MAP) site visit at the Sitka Historical Museum. The MAP program is a peer review process that helps guide museums in setting priorities and in meeting national museum standards and best practices. There are 4 different MAP assessments available: Organizational, Collections Stewardship, Community Engagement, and Leadership. The Sitka Historical Museum chose the Collections Stewardship MAP to help them focus on collections policies, planning, access and documentation. MAPs are free to museums with annual operating expenses of less than \$125,000 and only cost \$350 for museums with annual operating expenses of \$125,000 to \$400,000. The deadline for the next application is December 1. For more information go to the MAP page of the AAM website:

<http://www.aam-us.org/museumresources/map/index.cfm>

Ellen Carrlee, Conservator

The bright, sunny morning of July 17th, intern Crista Pack and I gingerly drove the State Archives "big white van" onto the M/V Fairweather, headed to Sitka for three days of conservation work.



Conservator Ellen Carrlee transports artifacts, supplies and intern Crista Pack on the fast ferry in the "big white van" on loan from the State Archives

The van carried a supply of surplus boxes for delivery to Jackie Fernandez and Bob Medinger at the Sitka Historical Society Museum, two new acquisitions for the Sheldon Jackson Museum (baskets), security equipment for the SJM, and supplies for our work. Usually, the conservator flies to the SJM around April for “spring cleaning” but this time we had the opportunity to bury ourselves in collections storage for some behind-the-scenes work. At the top of my list was a drawer-by-drawer condition survey of the collections in storage, which I had never had the opportunity to review in detail before. It dovetailed nicely with the summer project of University of Delaware graduate conservation student Crista Pack: “what’s that white stuff?” Searching for examples of fatty spew, old insect infestations, glass disease, corrosion, and other white accretions on the surface of artifacts provided great data for the project, complementing the conditions we observed in the ASM collection in Juneau. The project, meant to assist Alaskan museums in analyzing mysterious white substances on their collections, is available online at <http://alaskawhitestuffid.wordpress.com> and described elsewhere in this bulletin. It also gave me the chance to begin planning for the long-term conservation needs of the Sheldon Jackson Museum collection, a discussion that will take place with the new incoming curator, Nadia Jackinsky-Horrell.



Bottom five pieces of argillite vessel SJ-I-B-11 carved by Charles Edenshaw

I spent more time than I expected condition reporting a masterwork of argillite by Charles Edenshaw that had been requested for loan in an Edenshaw retrospective. The unusually large carving, a “compote” or covered dish, was assumed to be safe to travel because it was made in three parts. I thought I would easily discover its secrets of disassembly and make some packing recommendations. However, the vessel was considerably larger and heavier than I anticipated, and was constructed not in three pieces, but seven. The stem of the vessel was itself made of three pieces which had been adhered together during manufacture with what the Canadian Conservation Institute had identified as a collagen-based adhesive, perhaps hide glue or fish glue. A previous conservation treatment years ago had failed to get these original bonds apart, and had added in supplemental adhesive with a syringe. The central column of the stem also had a barely-visible fault line of lighter colored mineral, perhaps quartz, running across the entire diameter at a steep angle.



Lid and finial pieces of Edenshaw vessel SJ-I-B-11 depicting a woman suckling a bear cub

What do we know about argillite? We know it is heavy, brittle, tends to crumble along its edges when broken, and has rarely been used in vessels of this size and complexity. We also know that if an adhesive join is very strong, stress tends to cause breakage in new locations. The fault line on the stem happened to be in the worst possible orientation to support the stress of the heavy bowl, and the stem could not be easily separated from the bowl. A retrospective of any artist deserves the best work possible, and this was certainly a magnum opus, but the inherent vulnerabilities and risk of damage forced the decision to keep the compote safely in its exhibit case at the Sheldon Jackson Museum.

On July 19th there happened to be FOUR conservators in Sitka! Crista and I had lunch with legendary wood conservators Ron Sheetz (retired National Parks Service) and Al Levitan (NPS), who were in town working on the totem poles in Sitka National Historical Park, following up yet again on the preservation project the two of them began there twenty years ago. We were joined by Sue Thorsen and Mike Trainor of the NPS as well as Jennifer Klein of the DOT, who has been the project manager for the Totem Square project. The lunchtime discussion was lively and I wished it could have gone on for hours, but everyone had to get back to work!



Ellen Carrlee cleaning the dust from Athabascan canoe SJ-IV-X-21

Cleaning and condition reporting of the Athabascan birchbark canoe in storage was undertaken and a new dust cover made for it. When I got up on the ladder with the vacuum I was delighted to see beads still lashed into the gunwales of the canoe.

Repair of an ivory-inlaid cane was taken care of by Crista Pack on site. We also packed up a badly damaged walrus tusk cribbage board with a tiny (quite injured) sled dog team and some



Intern Crista Pack stabilizes a detached piece of ivory inlay on cane SJ-II-X-141

Tlingit hide armor with a wicked case of fatty spew for transport back to the Alaska State Museum for in-depth treatment.



Hide armor with fatty spew.

We were quite tired when we drove the big white van back onto the ferry (more confidently this time, as we had bonded with the “bread truck”). In all fairness, the exhaustion wasn’t just our packed days of conservation work. Cable TV at the hotel had episode after episode of “Storage Wars,” “Pawn Stars” and “American Restoration.” Can you imagine all the outraged and fascinated chatter that two conservators HAVE to have when they see programming like that?!?

Alaska Museums in the News

- (July 29th, 2011) **The Museum of the North** at the University of Alaska in Fairbanks announced North America’s most complete skeleton of a thalattosaur, a rare marine reptile which was found by the Forest Service near Kake. Scientists at the museum are excited about the find because the specimen includes a soft-tissue outline which could help scientists more accurately model its ancient characteristics. Check out how this reptile fit into Alaska’s Triassic climate:

<http://www.torontosun.com/2011/07/29/rare-fossil-of-sea-reptile-found-in-alaska>

- (August 1st, 2011) At the **Seventh International Congress of Arctic Social Sciences** (ICASS VII), held in Iceland in June 2011, National Geographic met up with Sven Haakanson, the director of the **Alutiiq museum in Kodiak**. In two videos included in the article, Haakanson describes the Alutiiq museum’s aim of sharing their history while repatriating cultural knowledge and historical materials to their living context. He also emphasizes the museum’s urgent work to protect the Alutiiq native language which has 24 remaining fluent speakers. Learn more about how this Northern museum is returning dignity and cultural identity to its community here:

<http://newswatch.nationalgeographic.com/2011/08/01/for-alaskas-alutiiq-the-future-may-be-found-in-the-past/>

- (July 31st, 2011) According to the Bristol Bay Times, the **Samuel K. Fox Museum** in Dillingham has finally completed their renovation project which will help to better preserve indigenous artifacts and local culture. 14 new climate controlled cases have been added to the exhibition floor which has allowed artifacts previously in museum storage and newly acquired works to appear on display. Read details on funding sources and the people who made the renovation possible:

http://thebristolbaytimes.com/article/1130samuel_k_fox_museum_renovation_completed

- (July 15th, 2011) Although relevant to Alaskan history and not a particular museum, the Sealaska Corp. recently announced that a 500 year old cedar canoe was discovered on Haida/Tlingit in the rainforest near Kasaan on Alaska's Prince of Wales Island. A tribal archaeological team say that the canoe was carved from traditional hand-tools, and may be one of the only such canoes of that time period yet discovered. How did this canoe get abandoned in the woods? Learn more from a Sealaska official here:

<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2011-07-15/ancient-canoe-found-in-alaska-forest/2795460>

- (July 31, 2011) David Yesner, an anthropology professor at the University of Alaska, Anchorage has a big thing for one of the biggest mammals to have walked North America: the woolly mammoth. This article follows Yesner’s fascination with the

mammoth, and its potential interactions with early Alaskan inhabitants. It points out that Yesner recently gave a speech at **Anchorage Museum** on the topic, and how his efforts contributed to the recent exhibit at Chicago's Field Museum entitled, "the Mammoth Hunters." Get wooly with Yesner and learn more about archeological work involving northern animals here:

<http://www.thenewstribune.com/2011/07/30/1765188/uaa-professor-studies-mammoths.html>

- (July 12, 2011) While excavating for a new retaining wall, the **Baranov Museum in Kodiak** discovered a potential structure from the Russian era of colonization. Their on-site archeologist noticed wooden planks and stacked rocks that resemble Russian-style structures between 1743 and 1867. Gun flint discovered in the excavation also points to this time period. Read more about this contribution to Kodiak history:

<http://juneauempire.com/state/2011-07-12/excavation-project-yields-likely-russian-structure-kodiak>

- [Pratt picks architects](http://www.homernews.com/stories/071311/news_ppa.shtml)
http://www.homernews.com/stories/071311/news_ppa.shtml

Converse said he is known for his knowledge of technical and aesthetic challenges of museum buildings in all regions of Alaska.

Professional Development/Training Opportunities

The Reciprocal Research Network (RRN) is an online tool to facilitate reciprocal and collaborative research about cultural heritage from the Northwest Coast of British Columbia. The RRN enables communities, cultural institutions and researchers to work together. Members can build their own projects, collaborate on shared projects, upload files, hold discussions, research museum projects, and create social networks. For both communities and museums, the RRN is groundbreaking in facilitating communication and fostering lasting relationships between originating communities and institutions around the world.

Who can use the RRN? The RRN is for people who are interested in and researchers of Northwest Coast Culture. This includes but is not limited to Originating Communities, First Nations Organizations, Researchers, Students, Museum Professionals, Academic and Cultural Heritage Organizations and more. If you would like to use the RRN, you can request an account!

How is the RRN different from other sites? The RRN is different because of its collaborative nature. From conception through development and into its use the RRN sees collaborative research as the foundation of the project.

<http://www.rrnpilot.org/>

Intern Report

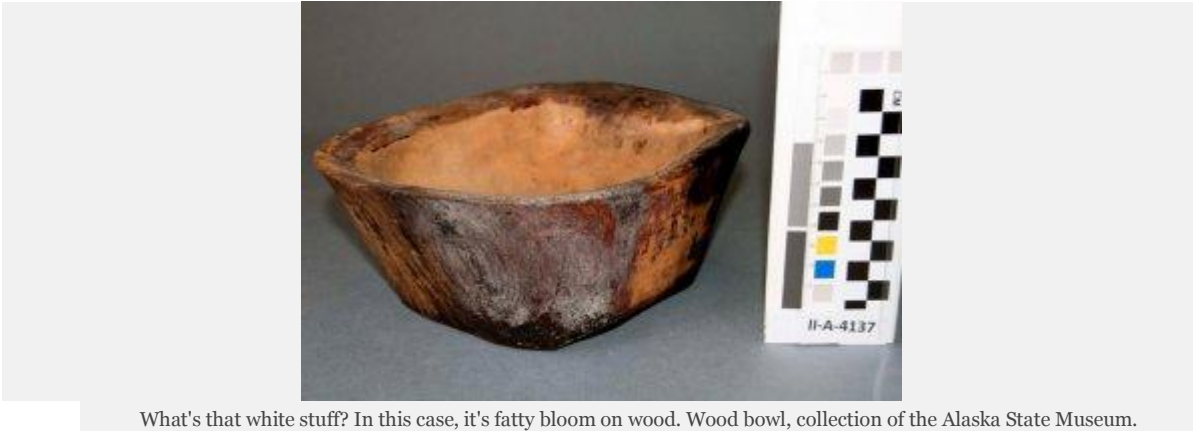
by Crista Pack, Conservation Intern



As a student finishing my first year in the Winterthur/University of Delaware Program in Art Conservation, I was expected to embark on an 8-10 week internship somewhere in the United States. These internships are meant to give students some hands-on experience in working with artifacts and reinforce our first year curriculum on various kinds of materials. My interests in art conservation are focused primarily on ethnographic and archaeological artifacts. My educational background is in pre-Columbian art history, so working with ethnographic objects from North and South America has always felt like a natural fit. I've had less experience with Northwest Coast material culture, so when one of my instructors asked if I would be interested in doing my internship at the Alaska State Museum – I unhesitatingly and enthusiastically said “yes!”

I arrived on June 20th and I've been working on a number of projects since then. My main project for the summer has been to characterize and research different kinds of “white stuff” that is frequently found on museum artifacts in Alaska. Over the past few years, Ellen Carrlee discovered a need for this type of information to be made available to cultural caretakers across Alaska. ASM Conservator Ellen and her husband Scott, Curator of Museum Services, have both received numerous emails and phone calls over the years from people asking them to help identify white substances being found on a variety of materials. It could be anything from mold to salt to pesticide residues.

Differentiating between these on visual analysis alone can be tricky. Our task has been to compile as much information as possible on the identification of various kinds of “white stuff,” then make it easily accessible and easy to understand. What we've designed is a website that provides Alaskans a quick, easy, and inexpensive way to access this information. The internet address is alaskawhitestuffid.wordpress.com.



What's that white stuff? In this case, it's fatty bloom on wood. Wood bowl, collection of the Alaska State Museum.

Guests can visit the site, learn how to look at and describe what they are seeing, and then look at descriptions and images for all the various possibilities that might apply. In addition to learning the possible identification of what the white substance is, people will, perhaps most importantly, find out what could be causing it and then be able to properly address those issues. For example, the correct identification of mold raises awareness for self-protection during handling as well as what options may be available for treatment. Most importantly, finding mold may indicate the presence of inappropriate relative humidity conditions in your storage or exhibit environment that need to be addressed.

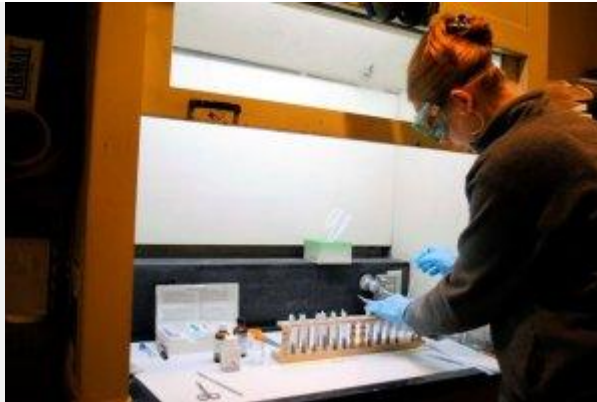
Towards the end of the summer, I was able to give a talk and participate in a discussion through the monthly online chat session hosted by the ASM's Office of Museum Services for those involved with Alaska museums. This provides a way for the museum to reach out to numerous museum workers across the state and address concerns they may not otherwise have a chance to voice. The talk I gave was intended to give those in attendance an overview of what the "white stuff" project is about and how they may be able to use it in the future. The discussion was archived and, if you're interested, you can access it here: <http://www.museums.state.ak.us/ASMChat.html>.

During my first week in Juneau, I also spent some time working with Ellen at the ASM's off-site storage facility to condition report, photograph, sample for arsenic, and lightly vacuum a collection of taxidermy birds.



Taxidermy bird collection, Alaska State Museum.

These specimens had recently come off of exhibit from the Juneau airport. It was a really interesting experience and the following week I was able to test all of the samples we had taken for arsenic. I followed Ellen's method for testing which uses a base (potassium hydroxide), an acid (hydrochloric acid) and zinc dust to generate arsenic gas if arsenic is present in the sample. If arsenic gas is evolved, then it will turn mercury bromide test papers (placed at the top of the tube) yellow. Ellen has her whole procedure outlined on her blog, which has been a great resource! (<http://ellencarrlee.wordpress.com/2009/01/14/arsenic-testing-step-by-step/>)



Performing arsenic testing on samples taken from taxidermy birds.

Additionally, I've been working on a condition report and treatment proposal for a sealskin parka. There are a number of large tears along the back of the parka and losses of fur around the cuffs. These will need to be stabilized in the future to prevent further loss and make the jacket stable for storage and exhibition. As part of my condition reporting for the object, I am performing a fur identification of each of the different furs on the parka using the resources made available through the Alaska Fur ID Project. Ellen and a previous intern, Lauren Horelick, did a lot of research and developed a website – the Alaska Fur ID Project – that makes fur identification a lot easier with helpful data and comparison images. So far, I've been able to identify the following furs using these resources: hare around the cuffs, ringed seal for the main body of the jacket, mustelid (potentially marten) on the shoulder tassels, dyed baby seal (lanugo) for decorative embellishments, and wolf along the zipper and pocket edges. I've learned a lot about hair and fur structure in the process...and that identification is much harder than it looks!



Sealskin parka, Collection of the Alaska State Museum.

One of the highlights of the internship has been the outreach that is so well integrated into the work the museum does. For part a week, Ellen and I spent some time down in Sitka at the Sheldon Jackson Museum. While there we delivered supplies and picked up a few artifacts that would need treatment in the conservation labs at the ASM. We also took time to survey the collection in search of white stuff for my research project. We also worked on a couple of objects that could be treated in situ. I replaced an ivory piece that had become detached from a wood cane:



Eskimo Cane, After treatment - round ivory inlay (furthest right) has been reattached

To cap off the internship, I embarked on a 10-day journey through Alaska and Canada with Ellen, Scott, their son Carson and their dog Ziggy. The five of us piled into the Carrlee minivan and headed north. We drove along the Golden Circle Route (<http://goldencircleroute.com/>) and made stops in Skagway and Haines in Alaska, Atlin in British Columbia, and Whitehorse and Haines Junction in the Yukon. We visited many museums along these stops, including: Klondike Gold Rush National Historical Park (Rapuzzi Collection), the Red Onion Brothel museum, Skagway Museum and Archives, Corrington's Alaskan Ivory and Museum, MacBride Museum of Yukon History, Transportation Museum, Old Log Church Museum, Beringia Interpretive Center, Hammer Museum, and the Sheldon Museum...just to name a few.

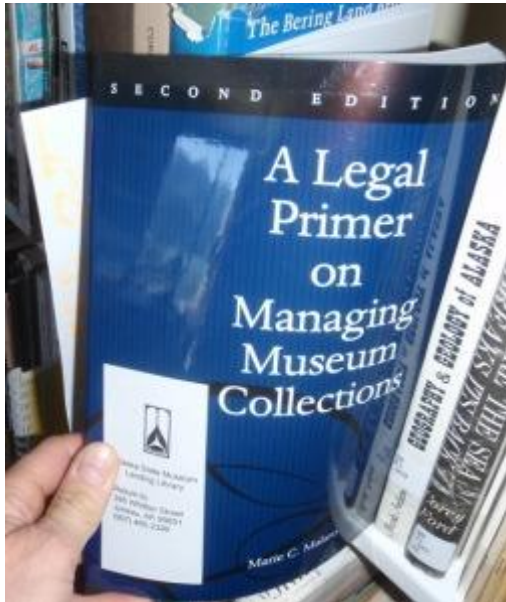
Overall the trip was a great success that allowed me to see more of Alaska and northern Canada. I also think it allowed me to have a greater appreciation for the history of the gold rush in this area and what the people endured to settle and prospect in these areas. It also gave me a deeper appreciation for the diversity of collections across the state and the challenges facing them.

My experience in Alaska was nothing short of life-changing. What I've learned here and the connections I have made will undoubtedly serve me for the rest of my career. I look forward to seeing where my journey takes me next, but will always be grateful for the time I spent in Juneau with the Alaska State Museum.

Book Review: Manual of Museum Exhibitions

By Miguel Rohrbacher, ASM Volunteer

Much of the work in museums happens behind the scenes – the research conservation and collection of artifacts often happens outside of the public eye. Exhibits are the public face of the museum to our Alaskan communities. The display of artifacts and objects of historical and cultural significance teaches and engages the public and brings them back to the museum time and time again.



The Manual of Museum Exhibitions is a step-by-step guide to both the practical skills required in building exhibits and the philosophical framework to why they are important. The manual focuses different chapters on different aspects of the trade and highlights museums with art, anthropological, historical and scientific collections with specific notes and suggestions on how to highlight each particular item. Rather than only showing museums in London or New York, the museum profiles feature some museums operating with similar challenges and constraints as such as the Alaska Native Heritage Center in Anchorage and the Museum of Anthropology in British Columbia. The manual is just that – a manual, and the chapters are broken into segments, each written by an expert in the museum exhibits field. The book is broad in scope yet very precise where it needs to be. There is advice on how to plan, finance and build a whole gallery to show art in, with lighting and drywall instructions as well as comparisons of which adhesive would be better when joining a display case. In addition to the practical advice for building an exhibit, the book has information on budgeting money for an exhibit and different financial options for how a museum could pay for it. Especially interesting for smaller museums is a chapter on how to integrate audio and visual presentations into the museum and how to do that in a way that fits and blends into the rest of the aesthetic and the overall theme of the museum.

The format of the book is like some other guidebooks almost like “museum exhibits for dummies” with bullet points, graphs and other illustrations, and is filled with helpful hints and information. It is quite accessible to the common reader but is also used as a textbook for graduate level exhibition courses. This book could be very useful for helping both professional museum staff and volunteers continue to develop their skills in creating thought provoking, beautiful and relevant exhibits.

Professional Time Wasting on the Web

Scientists finally crack the physics of the coffee ring.

<http://www.npr.org/2011/08/17/139681851/scientists-crack-the-physics-of-coffee-rings>

Lincoln image theft is a lesson

http://www.dailybreeze.com/news/ci_18495500

Brandeis does the right thing

For now, there is cause for celebration. Speaking truth to power by this small museum with a mighty collection and even mightier supporters has yielded a milestone decision for museums everywhere

<http://www.theartnewspaper.com/articles/Brandeis+does+the+right+thing/24367>

[Mummies to chocolate in Mexico's offbeat museums](#)

http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/object/article?f=/g/a/2011/07/27/mexico_offbeat_museums.DTL&object=%2Fc%2Fpictures%2F2011%2F07%2F26%2Fba-Mexico_Mix_0503839471.jpg

Museum security guards: Lots of art and a little eavesdropping

<http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/culturemonster/2011/07/museum-security-guards-dish-on-art.html>

SFMOMA conservators turn back time

http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/blogs/kalw/detail?entry_id=92941

Photos on Flickr of "Cabinets of Curiosities"

WonderKammer (Wonder Cabinet) Group

<http://www.flickr.com/groups/wunderkammer/>

The Secret Museum Exhibition, 2010

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/astropop/sets/72157623978258955/with/4624603961/>

Curious Exhibitions Photostream

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/curiousexpeditions/>

"Chamber of Wonders" exhibit at the Walthers Art Museum

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/23911267@N06/tags/cabinetofwonders/>

Teylers Museum (Holland)

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/geschiedenisbeleven/sets/72157624928754673/with/5033019823/>

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/astropop/sets/72157612836663492/with/3216462180/>

Cabinet of Curiosities of Bonnier de la Mosson, Paris

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/astropop/sets/72157615858746451/>