



Alaska State Museums Bulletin 82

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10 questions for the new ASM registrar Andrew Washburn



1. You started in the fall as the new registrar for the Alaska State Museums, what has it been like so far?

Do you remember that part at the end of *Goonies*—the real ending not the one with the Octopus—when Sloth and Chunk swing to the rescue of Mikey and the other Goonies?

Well, it isn't like that at all.

The last six months or so have been the highlight of my museum career. The pace and the professionalism of the SLAM project combine into an experience unlike any I have had before.

2. What is your background, how did you get into museum work?

The first time the thought of working in a museum crossed my mind was on a road trip across Montana and South Dakota with my Dad. I was 11 or 12 maybe 13 years old. It was summer. He is an avid reader of non-fiction and American History in particular. On that trip instead of listening to the radio he just told me about the book he was reading and I just kept asking him questions about the story. I haven't a clue what book it was—or perhaps I remember it wrong and he just knew. But the story was about the Battle of the Little Bighorn. I think my Dad might have grown tired of me asking questions because we eventually stopped outside of Hardin, Montana at Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument—it might have still been called Custer Battlefield National Monument. We spent the afternoon touring the site and the visitor center. The power of the objects recovered from the battlefield coupled with the landscape which preserved the scene had a huge impact on me. I remember leaving thinking and I might have even said aloud that I wanted to work in place like that—a place with a palpable and powerful connection to important events and people who shaped our history.

Since that experience I have sought out an intimate relationship with the stuff and stories of history; museum work satisfies these desires.

3. Your last job was at the Tongass Historical Museum, but that was not the first time you worked in Alaska. Tell us more about your other connections to Alaska.

I first got interested in Alaska history while working at first as an intern and then a contractor for the National Park Service at the San Francisco Maritime National Historical Park. While there I help research, build, and install a new permanent exhibit aboard the historic sailing vessel, *Balclutha*. Though built to haul grain from California to Europe and the East Coast of the USA, she eventual was purchased by the Alaska Packers Association—who changed her name to the *Star of Alaska*.

At about that same time I got a phone call from a friend in Tacoma. He was putting together a volunteer work party to a remote lighthouse in Southeast. Without hesitation I signed on and soon found myself at Cape Decision Lighthouse at the southern end of Kuiu Island as volunteer for the Cape Decision Lighthouse Society. On that trip I also visited Sitka, Petersburg, Juneau, and Port Alexander. At each turn I found myself more and more interested in the history, forest, waterways, and lifestyle of Southeast Alaska.

It took me a while to find the right reason and an opportunity to relocate to Southeast and feel grateful and lucky to have spent my first year up here at the Ketchikan Museums.

4. *You also worked at the Center for Wooden boats, what was that like?*

In all honesty, working for The Center for Wooden Boats was fantastic and stressful—like I imagine working for most “bootstrap” non-profits is. And just like owning a wood boat, the two best days of my life were when I went to work for CWB and the day I walked away. I do miss sailing during my lunch break though.

5. *Speaking of boats, didn't you used to live on a boat and aren't you somewhat of a maritime historian? Do you have an undying love of the sea? Who is your favorite nautical figure (fictitious or real)?*

I have lived on several boats. Before leaving Seattle for Ketchikan I lived aboard near the Ballard Locks and commuted to work at South Lake Union via a 14 foot lapstrake inboard launch with a 6 hp air-cooled Briggs and Stratton motor. It was slower than driving; louder than riding my bike; about the same time as taking the bus, but infinitely more interesting and pleasant than all of those.

No. I'd characterize my feelings for the sea as alternating between a healthy respect, distracting fascination, and periodic fear.

Wolf Larsen from *The Sea Wolf* by Jack London, maybe? My favorite story about the sea and cheese is *Open Boat* by Stephen Crane; it contains everything a person needs to know about duty, loyalty, and how to row an overloaded boat in heavy seas.

6. *Back to the land, what is your favorite part of museum work?*

My favorite part of museum work is touching beautiful, powerful, terrible, remarkable, awesome stuff.

Actually my favorite thing is to give—well-ordered and small—tours of collection storage areas. For a lot of people it is a real epiphany to see and understand for the first time all the behind-the-scenes work that is part of every museum.



7. *What do you think is the most challenging part of your job?*

The main purpose of my job is to keep track of where over 30,000 objects are at all times. That is the easy part. The hard—and challengingly fun—part of my job is to bring balance to collection. In my mind this is the sacred duty of the Registrar to hear, understand, and balance the oft’ competing requirements and desires of curators, designers, researchers, conservators, and other stakeholders for the maximum benefit—or least risk—to the collections.

8. *The Alaska State Museum in Juneau is working full blast on getting the exhibits ready for the opening of the SLAM building in May of 2016, what is your role in getting this project done?*

The term “Vault King” has been used recently.

9. *What piece of advice would you give someone just starting out in their museum career if they want to eventually get a job as a registrar?*

Getting a degree or certificate seems to be the norm these days for entering museum practice, but I don’t think it necessarily has to be. While I learned tons in my course work during graduate school I learned the most by having a variety of hands on experiences in very different types of museums. This might be hard to do in most places in Alaska.

I found my first steady museum employment as a Museum Technician with the National Park Service. To this day I constantly rely on the training and best practices I learned during that time. NPS sets the standards for many museum practices or at least provide free resource and training materials. My advice to anyone looking to find work in the Collections Management field is to get some exposure to those NPS practices.

10. *Tell us something that people would find surprising about you?*

I write poetry addressed to animals.



Ask ASM

Question: We have an old Uncle Sam costume in our collection that people remember fondly from seeing it in the annual 4th of July parade in days past. Since this coming year marks the 100th anniversary of the founding of our city, a request has come in for someone to wear it in this year's parade so I need to know where to purchase archival underwear for the model to wear underneath to keep it cootie free.

ASM: You can purchase archival underwear here: ([tyvek undies](#)) however cooties are the least of your worries. The greatest danger to the costume will come from normal wear and tear of putting it on and walking around in it. Not to mention the potential for rain or bird droppings or any a number of things that can happen to it out-of-doors. Archival underwear would not create a magical force field of protection for the garment.

In the museum world we are always trying to balance preservation and access. It is sometimes useful to think of them as opposite ends of a spectrum and mutually exclusive. To get more access you have to give up some preservation and to gain on the preservation side you need to give up some access. Total preservation would require zero access. We also have to throw factors like museums mission and public engagement into the mix. Zero access means zero public engagement which will not help drive the mission of the museum. How much access is a matter of museum judgment. The normal exhibit environment can take its toll on artifact if we are not careful about things such as the amount of light, the climate control, integrated pest management, dust and pollutants, human interactions etc. but when objects leave the museum for some sort of use-type of access then we are getting into the “consumptive use” territory. Consumptive use is a big topic but in short it means that the object will eventually be consumed by the use it is put to because of wear and tear. Transportation museums face this difficult situation when they want to keep their antique cars running or their historic planes flying. They could eventually replace all the parts.

Here is an example of consumptive use from a recent Hollywood movie that was made about the life of the fashion designer Yves Saint Laurent.

“Most of the clothes shown in this film were original pieces, lent by the Pierre Bergé-Yves Saint Laurent Foundation, which had white-gloved representatives on set at all times to ensure that the clothes remained pristine and unaltered. In a reversal of the usual procedure, the models had to be cast to fit the clothes.” <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/22/movies/in-the-biopic-yves-saint-laurent-fashion-from-the-vault.html? r=0>

Original museum objects worn for a movie, oh my! This creates all kinds of potential for damage. However, they did have representatives on hand with their “white gloves” and they fit the model to the clothes and not the other way around. So they were limiting access to increase the preservation of the objects. The article also talks about what the foundation conservator thought about the process as well. So they were very conscientious about it. I would like to believe that there were many discussions at the Foundation about preservation and access to the legacy of Mr. Saint Laurent. That they very carefully weighed the benefits of providing access

to the possible risk damaging the clothes. That in the end they felt that the exposure of the collection in this way benefited the Foundation and furthered their mission. In the same way, you will need to decide whether to allow the Uncle Sam costume, or any other artifact in your museum for that matter, to be exposed to so many risks. You have to do the same cost benefit analysis. If the costume gets damaged it may be gone.

You could also look for a more creative solution. What about making a working replica of the costume that could be used in the parade and then putting the real costume along with all the other relevant 100th anniversary objects on display during the month of July. Whoever wears the replica could pass out flyers advertising the exhibit at the museum. This could turn the lemon of not being able to see the original in the parade, in the lemonade of increased public engagement with the museum. Lemons to Lemonade! And who doesn't like lemonade on the 4th of July.

Shaking the Money Tree

NEH

Preservation Assistance Grants for Smaller Institutions

Deadline: May 5, 2015

Preservation Assistance Grants help small and mid-sized institutions—such as libraries, museums, historical societies, archival repositories, cultural organizations, town and county records offices, and colleges and universities—improve their ability to preserve and care for their significant humanities collections. These may include special collections of books and journals, archives and manuscripts, prints and photographs, moving images, sound recordings, architectural and cartographic records, decorative and fine art objects, textiles, archaeological and ethnographic artifacts, furniture, historical objects, and digital materials.

Website: <http://www.neh.gov/grants/preservation/preservation-assistance-grants-smaller-institutions>

Free recorded webinar <https://vimeo.com/120836685>

State of Alaska

Grant in Aid

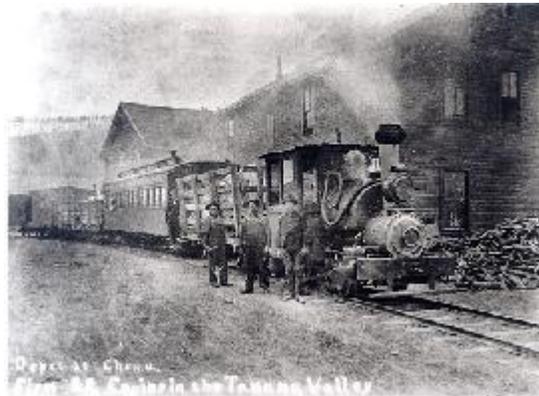
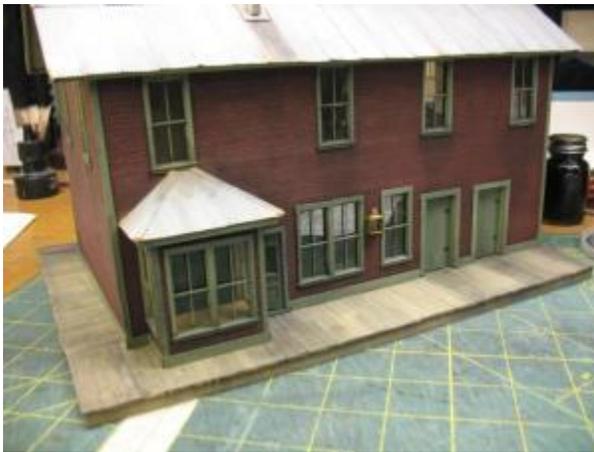
Deadline: June 1, 2015

The Alaska State Museum awards grants to Alaska museums and museum-related organizations, such as historical societies or support groups, for projects that improve the quality of museum services and operations within the state. The grants are awarded on a competitive basis once a year. For more information visit the website <http://museums.alaska.gov/grants.html>

Spotlight on Grant in Aid

Tanana Valley Railroad Museums

The Friends of the Tanana Valley Railroad obtained this grant to aid in construction of an "O" scale diorama of the Tanana Valley Railroad terminal as depicted in 1905 archival photos of the first steam train in the Alaska interior. They commissioned the work to be done by a professional model builder of dioramas who has built several other early Fairbanks Gold Rush era scenic displays. Dave Lyons of Little Acres Group has agreed to take the existing model train of the engine and rail cars that were built and donated by other members to construct a scene of the original railroad terminal at the ghost town of Chena in 1905.



The town was abandoned by 1917 and no remaining structures are extant at the old site where the first steam train in the interior of Alaska was brought in 1905. They have obtained many archival photographs and maps of the railroad terminal at Chena that show the original engine at the dockside warehouse and terminal.

They have rebuilt the original 1899 engine that is depicted on the museum wall panels to full operation at Pioneer Park running on a 3/4 mile oval track circuit. They run the steam train on special events about six times a year to raise revenue for the museum and engine maintenance. Besides the actual train being on display inside the museum shop when not in use during these special run days, the next most attractive feature are the three model trains they have of the engine at different scales in our glass display case on the store floor with other antique train artifacts of the era.

Alaska Museums in the News

Tlingit Master Carver Resurrects 74-year-old totem

http://www.sitnews.us/0315News/031315/031315_master_carver.html

New Anchorage Museum “lab” sparks innovation

<http://www.alaskapublic.org/2015/03/05/new-anchorage-museum-lab-sparks-innovation/>

Wearable art of place: Armor and Masks

http://www.capitalcityweekly.com/stories/021115/ae_1238417010.shtml

News about the SLAM project in Juneau

SLAM steel work getting underway

<http://www.ktoo.org/2015/03/19/slam-steel-work-getting-underway/>

Smooth Sailing for the SLAM project

<http://juneauempire.com/state/2015-03-09/ketchikan-man-making-replica-sail-museum-ship>

<http://kdlg.org/post/new-sail-vintage-bristol-bay-double-ender>

Egan introduces bill to name SLAM after Native historian.

<http://juneauempire.com/state/2015-02-27/egan-introduces-bill-name-slam-after-native-historian>

Professional Development/Training Opportunities

NEH

The National Endowment for the Humanities, Alaska Humanities Forum and the Anchorage Museum will be hosting a funding workshop for individuals and organizations interested in pursuing grant funding for humanities projects on **Thursday April 2nd**, from **1:00pm to 4:30pm** at the Anchorage Museum auditorium.

The workshop will include an overview of National Endowment for the Humanities programs and special initiatives presented by Peter Fristedt, followed by presentations by the Alaska Humanities Forum and the Anchorage Museum. You are also invited to join us for a tour of the NEH-funded Arctic Ambitions exhibit. A networking reception will follow from **4:30-6:00pm**.

This workshop is free, but you must register to attend. To register, visit: <http://goo.gl/forms/O2PhgfHKMU>.

Space is limited, so we ask that those interested please register by March 27th, 2015.

NATIVE AMERICAN MUSEUM STUDIES INSTITUTE:

JUNE 9-12 AT UC BERKELEY

The Myers Center is now accepting applications from tribal museum professionals for its annual Native American Museum Studies Institute (NAMSI). Sponsored in collaboration with the

California Indian Museum and Cultural Center and the Phoebe A. Hearst Museum of Anthropology, and supported with generous funding from the San Manuel Band of Mission Indians, NAMSI helps to develop the capacity of tribal community members to conserve and revitalize tribal cultural heritage, foster tribal representations and partnerships, and educate tribal and non-tribal communities through museum development exhibits. This year, NAMSI will be held from June 9-12 at UC Berkeley. Review of applications will begin on March 2, 2015. Read more about the Institute's goals and workshops, and download an application here.

http://crnai.berkeley.edu/training/museum_studies

Professional Time Wasting on the Web

Future Library

A thousand trees have been planted in Nordmarka, a forest just outside Oslo, which will supply paper for a special anthology of books to be printed in one hundred years' time. Between now and then, one writer every year will contribute a text, with the writings held in trust, unpublished, until 2114.

<https://vimeo.com/97512418>

Museums responding to what ISIS has done

http://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/09/world/middleeast/race-in-iraq-and-syria-to-record-and-shield-art-falling-to-isis.html?ref=world&_r=1

A pretty crazy time-lapse video of reconstructing a marble statue that smashed when the pedestal collapsed.

<http://www.metmuseum.org/metmedia/video/collections/esda/tullio-lombardo-adam-time-lapse>

Two new Cezanne watercolors discovered

http://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/21/arts/design/two-new-cezanne-works-discovered-by-barnes-foundation-museum.html?emc=edit_th_20150221&nl=todaysheadlines&nid=62288030