

Collections Research News

WINTER/SPRING 2003

You Want Me to Do *What?* The Importance of Periodic Inventories

What IS so important about doing that inventory of the collection? Why should you put other duties aside and perform this unglamorous task? For one thing, how can you successfully perform all those glamorous tasks, such as exhibits and public programs, if you do not know what you have in your collection? Secondly, how do you know that wonderful 'whatzit' is still where it was the last time you saw it 10 years ago? Is it even still in the museum? By the way, what is that pile of dust sitting in the place where that lovely black silk hat used to be?

Perhaps you can see where this is going. Periodic inventories of your collections are critical to fulfilling your stewardship obligations as a repository of public trust. 'Visiting' with your collections will remind you of the wonderful things you have in the museum and may spark a new idea or two about how to improve or change your exhibitions or public/educational programs. It will also allow you to monitor your collections for condition and stability, telling you that a change may be needed in the storage/exhibition environment, that the method of housing a particular artifact needs to be improved or changed, or that no changes at all are needed. Periodic inventories also play a large part in the security of the museum and its collections. If you never look in that storeroom, how will you ever know if something is missing and, if it is missing, was it stolen or just misplaced. A misplaced artifact is as good as stolen for all practical purposes.

Now that I know why I should be doing an inventory, how do I do it? Inventories, in fact, are not hard to do, but you must be systematic in how you go about it and always finish what you start. Begin with one section of one room and start at the top and work down (or the bottom and work up, if you prefer). Each room, section, shelf or drawer should be assigned a location name or number (ex. Storeroom 1, Shelving Unit [or Cabinet] 1, Shelf [or Drawer] 1). With both the numbering and the inventory, begin at a logical point in the room and proceed in a logical pattern around the room (ex. left to right, right to left or row by row, etc.). You may find that some of the artifacts you come across do not have numbers on them. They have either deaccessioned themselves (numbers wore or fell off) on the shelf or were missed during the accessioning process. For these items it is a good idea to establish a temporary numbering system with which to track them (ex. T1, T2, T3.....T100, etc.). Attach an acid-free tag to each unnumbered item with the temporary number written on it so you can find it again when it comes time to reconcile the inventory with the museum's records. Keep a temporary number log, similar to your accession number log, to track the numbers you are assigning.

The information we are looking for during the inventory is the Accession number (or temporary number, if necessary), the type of artifact (its name, ex. spoon, photograph, etc), a short description (describe it so you can tell it apart from some other similar artifact in the collection), and the artifact's condition (assuming everything is 'Good' unless circumstances dictate otherwise reduces writing time). It can be helpful to leave a spot on your paper/form for comments just in case there are some major conservation concerns that should be addressed. Write the inventory location (room, shelving unit, shelf) at the top of each page and include the date and the name of the person doing the inventory. You are now ready to begin your inventory.

Next issue: Part II: Reconciling an Inventory

WHY SO LATE? OR IS IT EARLY?

Why was there no *Collections Research News* last Fall? The CRM staff was so busy during the fall of 2002 we did not have a chance to put out the usual Fall edition of this newsletter. Therefore, we have combined the Fall 2002 issue with the Spring 2003 issue for this Winter/Spring 2003 issue. Thanks for your patience!

FILEMAKER® PRO CATALOGING TEMPLATES NOW AVAILABLE FROM CRM

Collections Research for Museums can now assist small museums with computerizing their collection documentation using off-the-shelf database software. Our current specialty is FileMaker® Pro databases.

Collections Research for Museums has created a collection database using the commercial software FileMaker® Pro. Cataloging templates are available for object collections, photographic collections and archival collections. We will customize a cataloging screen for those of you who have specialized collections. We can also connect your database to an imaging system to allow photographs of the collection to be incorporated into the database.

This is an opportunity for small museums to computerize their collection records using a very user friendly database software.

Contact us for details and pricing.

Training is available for our database and in general FileMaker Pro techniques.

For more information, give us a call at (303) 757-7962.

SERVICES

Collections Research for Museums offers **classes for small museums in Cataloging and Collections Management.** The course is designed for those museums which have small, non-professionally trained or volunteer staffs. It covers the basics of marking, handling, measuring, and cataloging, plus general care and storage for all types of objects and materials.

The course is individualized to suit the needs of each museum. Classes are given on site at the museum and utilize the museum's own collection.

The course is priced according to length and may include up to 10 people.

A list of suggested reference material, general supplies, and suppliers is provided, along with samples of cataloging worksheets for ethnographic/historical/art, geological, natural history, and photographic collections.

If you would like more information on topics covered and costs, give us a call at (303) 757-7962 or drop us a line.

We also offer a variety of **other services** to museums, large and small. These **range from simple inventories to complete and thorough cataloging of collections.** Feel free to contact us for more information. We provide a **free initial consultation.**

Also, if you need help preparing your NAGPRA summaries or inventories, we can help. Give us a call.

(Collections Research News is a service of Collections Research for Museums, Inc, 4830 E Kansas Dr, Denver, CO 80246 (303)757-7962, email: schaller@rmi.net. Questions, comments or story suggestions are always welcome.)