

## More Objects Than Expertise: A Collaborative Housing and Access Project

### Speaker notes to accompany Power Point

Whitney Baker, Brecken Liebl, Becky Schulte

October 25, 2016

Mountain Plains Museum Association (MPMA) annual conference

Oklahoma City, OK

#### WELCOME (Whitney Baker)

1. Collaboration among three departments within the University of Kansas  
Case study of our work to house objects in an archives setting  
Some housings serve a dual purpose of storage and display for classroom use  
It's our hope that you can take away some ideas of utilizing students, volunteers or community members in order to stretch your budget, and offer training and insight into collections management  
Housing examples are arranged from simple to complex.
2. Panelists:  
Becky: KU graduate with MLS in Library Science from Wisconsin-Madison  
Whitney: KU graduated with MLIS in Library Science and Certificate in Library and Archives Conservation. Also instructor in KU Museum Studies program.  
Brecken: KU undergraduate degrees in journalism and anthropology; recent MA graduate in Museum Studies. She completed a year-long internship in Conservation Services, KU Libraries

#### BACKGROUND: UNIVERSITY ARCHIVES (Becky Schulte)

3. As many of you know, an archive primarily handles the official records of an organization or an institution such as the University of Kansas. Records are traditionally in a paper or electronic format and include correspondence, memorandum, meeting minutes, etc.
4. In addition to these records the Archives at KU also holds artifacts, objects given to us by offices, faculty, alums, or the children or grandchildren of alums. When I became the University Archivist in 2003 artifacts held by the Archives were gathered together on open shelves in rough order with not a lot of attention paid to the housings or descriptions.
5. I felt the need to bring order to this chaos and create a list of what we had. I assigned the task to one of our student assistants who was a graduate student in the University's Museum Studies program. He started by setting up an Access database to begin to create an inventory, assign a number and provide a basic description for each item.
6. [Image of object storage space]
7. [Image of object storage space]

8. There were some very interesting objects unearthed that I had not known existed in our collection. One of the most notable being a small sample of uranium donated by Professor of Chemistry Clark Bricker from his time as a graduate student at Princeton University in 1943 when he was involved with the Manhattan Project. This was startling to say the least! I immediately contacted the KU Department of Environment, Health & Safety to find out if we needed to be concerned. We were soon visited by a Health Physicist with a Geiger counter. The Geiger counter started clicking and everyone started backing out of the room. I was afraid that we wouldn't be able to keep the tiny piece of uranium since it was active but happily we were allowed to keep it since it wasn't enough to cause damage. He recommended that we seal it in some type of a heavy glass jar. In this slide you can see the jar that I purchased at our local Walmart.
9. Another unexpected object had been given to us by the widow of Moses Gunn, an actor who had attended KU from 1959 to 1961 and in the 1980s. He had appeared in several TV shows, movies and stage productions. The mask gave me quite a fright when I took the lid off the box. It was in very poor condition and obviously needed some kind of support to keep it stable. By that time Whitney Baker, the Head of Conservation Services for the Libraries, and I had been working together to identify objects that needed attention.

#### **MUSEUM STUDIES CLASS PROJECT (Whitney Baker)**

10. In Conservation Services, we have system-wide responsibilities to care for KU Libraries' physical collections. The University Archives (UA) artifact collection, while in need of help, fell low on the list of priorities.
11. I've taught the MUSE class since 2004 and introduced this project around 2008. The class focuses on science of environment and storage, with an undercurrent of ethics. We often use UA objects in the class as examples.
12. Developed a condition report assignment in conjunction with Sofía Galarza Liu, Collections Manager at the Spencer Museum of Art at KU. Before she comes we watch the video, *Basic Art Handling* (1988).
13. Sofia helps the students go through the assignment in class by using some UA objects as examples.
14. The students complete the condition report assignment in narrative form (usually about 1-2 pages), so they have to learn condition reporting terminology in a different manner from using a pre-populated spreadsheet or database. They request the items in the Spencer Library reading room outside of class time.
15. We aren't able to house the objects in class as part of this project, due to space limitations in the classroom. However, students provide the UA with a great deal of information they wouldn't receive any other way.
16. Students provide visual information about condition to the UA staff in various ways.
17. The next step is for conservation lab students, many of whom are in the Museum Studies program, to house some of the objects selected each year for the condition report assignment. They write condition reports for these objects in the same fashion as is done in class.

18. Students often confer with the curators on how items are used and handled and how frequently they might be used. As a general rule, we only use standard-size boxes already on hand in the Archives, improve access to materials by adding clearly identifiable handholds for safely removing items when necessary, and add labeling information, including a picture of the object inside and a heads-up when something is particularly heavy or fragile.

### **19. HOUSING MATERIALS (Brecken Liebl)**

20. First, I wanted to provide a list of helpful housing materials.

- a. As it was previously mentioned, nearly all objects stored in standard-sized archival boxes
- b. Corrugated board is great for making custom-sized boxes and trays as well as dividers
- c. Tissue is used for padding and lining
- d. Polyethylene foam is used to secure objects within boxes
  - i. It can be cut to fit around objects using foam knives
- e. We use a soft, fabric-like Tyvek
  - i. This is perfect for wrapping and/or covering objects as well as lining Ethafoam
- f. Foam Knives
  - i. Thinner foam sheets can be cut easily with a scalpel or utility knife
  - ii. The thicker planks are more of a challenge, especially when cutting anything other than a straight line
  - iii. Heated knives work well but can smell terrible
  - iv. The Benchmark foam knives are a new discovery for our lab and have made cutting foam significantly easier

21. All together, the materials I mentioned can be used to create a variety of simple and effective housings. And, aside from the foam, most of the items on this list are fairly inexpensive.

### **FOOTBALL**

22. The first student-made housing was made for this leather football

- a. Football was saved after 1910 game, but now has a broken bladder

23. All this object really needed was some padding to keep it secure and protected in its box

- b. We are trying to move away from wrapping objects in tissue when it is not necessary. This reduces the need for handling to unwarped the object and makes identification easier

The student simply created a nest of tissue for the football

- c. Effective housings don't have to be complicated, this is a good example of that
- d. The student also added a photo to the outside of the box for easier access

### **CIVIL WAR**

24. The next housing was made for this Civil War coat. The coat belonged to KU's second chancellor, John Fraser, who served as a general in the war

One aim of this housing was to minimize the number of folds and creases in the coat.

- a. Additionally, the coat was recently on exhibit. This housing also helped to serve in displaying the object
25. To achieve this, pillows were sewn to pad the inside of the coat
- b. This pillows are made of cotton fabric stuffed with polyester fiberfill
  - c. Tissue was wrapped around each of the buttons to decrease potential damage to the coat from the button

## **BUTTONS**

26. Here, we have a large box of buttons. These buttons were all collected on the KU campus during the 1970s
- a. As you can see, these buttons were just a jumbled mess to begin with
  - b. And this box was **very** heavy, so not only was the housing less than ideal for the preservation of the buttons but it made access impossible
- In this case, as in some situations, the student conferred with the curator to decide how to house the collection
- c. They decided that the accessibility of the buttons should be at the forefront of the housing
27. The buttons were numbered individually and placed in a polyethylene zip-top bag
- d. The bags were placed into archival slide boxes
  - e. Then, they were arranged into categories based on button themes
  - f. An inventory of the buttons was generated at the same time they were being rehoused
28. Some of the buttons were oversized
- g. The student stored those button in a larger box and made dividers using corrugated board for support
  - h. This arrangement effectively stored hundreds of pins using materials already on hand without taking up a ton of space

## **WOOD CARVING**

29. The next housing was made for this lovely woodcarving. This rabbit survived the student union fire in 1970 during student-protest era
- a. He was actually rescued from the wreckage by a student, who took it home and only recently decided to bring it back to the university
- While the carving was charred, it is actually quite stable. The real challenge for the student was that the carving is larger than the size of box we had on hand
30. A special order was placed for a corrugated polypropylene box to house the carving
- b. To support the carving in the box, Plastazote foam was cut to fit the box
    - i. A second layer of foam was added with cut-outs to secure and support the rabbit in the box
    - ii. Using foam and cut outs is a great, simple way to house a variety of objects

## **COMPASS**

31. Another couple examples of this type of housing include the housing for this compass and measuring tape belonging to Lewis Lindsay Dyche and this pocket watch and key belonging to Chancellor Snow
- a. These objects are from the archives' personal papers collection of KU faculty
- Once again, Plastazote foam was cut to fit the box
- b. A second layer of foam was added with cut-outs to secure the objects
  - c. When creating foam cut-outs, it is important to leave enough space for fingers or hand to lift the objects from the foam housing
- This protects the objects from sliding around in their boxes and is an effective way of storing multiple objects in a single box

#### **CIVIL WAR MISC**

32. A slightly more complex version of this housing was created by a student for this collection of Civil War items
- Again, the goal is to store multiple objects in a single box
- To do so foam was cut to fit each of the sections in the box
- a. A second layer of foam with cut-outs for each object was then added
  - b. Corrugated dividers were created to separate the collections within the collection

#### **MASKS**

33. The next student housing example I have was made for these plaster life-masks of previous university chancellors
34. Before the student rehoused these masks, they were stored in boxes that were really too small without much padding
35. To improve this housing, larger record-storage boxes were used
- a. Boxes were first padded with Ethafoam
    - i. Then, Ethafoam bumpers were added to each corner and a divider was placed between the two masks
36. To protect the masks from being scratched by the Ethafoam, a sheet of Tyvek was tucked in around the masks

#### **VIEWING DEVICE**

37. This next object housing was made for this viewing device
- There were two challenges for housing this object
- a. First, all three components needed to be stored together
  - b. Second, main component of this object, the handled piece, was very fragile and we wanted the housing to discourage patrons from lifting the object by the handle
38. To prevent unnecessary handling of the device, a custom-sized tray was created out of corrugated board
- c. Plastazote foam was cut to fit the tray to secure the viewing device within it

- d. Tyvek was then folded into handles, which were adhered to the bottom of the tray with double-sided tape
  - i. This way, the device could be lifted out of the box without ever being handled directly

To keep the tray from sliding in the box and damaging the other components, another sheet of Plastazote was added

- e. A Plastazote divider was also placed between the tray and other components

## **STREET CAR**

39. This set of objects includes a segment of the old KU streetcar rail and three rail spikes. The streetcar ran on campus from 1910-1933. A portion of the track was then buried and forgotten under new roads. During the reconstruction of Jayhawk Boulevard in 2014, the rail and spikes were rediscovered

As you can see, the objects were in pretty poor condition

- a. The major housing goal for these objects was to prevent further corrosion of the objects
40. To accomplish this, one of the NPS Conserv-O-Grams was used
- b. The Conserve-O-Gram provided step-by-step instructions for creating a microclimate box for metal objects, which is designed to slow deterioration by maintaining a dry microclimate
    - i. The Conserv-O-Grams are an excellent resource. They offer instructions for storing a wide variety of objects and information about how/where to acquire housing materials you may not be familiar with

Following the Conserv-O-Gram instructions, two polypropylene boxes with silicon gasket lids were purchased

41. For the streetcar rail:

- c. Plastazote and Ethafoam were used to create a support for the streetcar rail inside the polypropylene box
  - i. The rail needed to be stored on its side because of the amount of corrosion underneath the head of the rail. In doing so, handling of that particularly vulnerable area would be decreased
- d. The Ethafoam was then wrapped in Tyvek
- e. Once inside the support and rail were placed inside the box, silica gel desiccant packets were added to maintain the dry microclimate
  - i. A humidity indicator was also added to the inside of the box
- f. The box was then sealed with its lid

42. For the streetcar rail spikes:

- g. Two layers of Plastazote were used to create a support for the spikes

43. The foam was then wrapped in Tyvek to better protect the spikes

- h. As with the rail, once the support and spikes were placed inside the box, silica gel desiccant packets and a humidity indicator strip were added
- i. The box was then sealed with its lid

## **ROLLED TEXTILES**

44. The last example I have is the housing solution for all of the archives collection of class banners
  - a. There are more than one hundred class bannersThe housing goals were twofold
  - b. First, the textiles needed to be rolled
  - c. Second, a means of hanging the rolls had to be created
45. The textiles were rolled onto archival quality cardboard tubes
  - d. Textiles were rolled with a tissue paper liner
  - e. When possible, multiple banners were rolled onto a single tube for a more effective use of space and materials
  - f. The rolled textiles were then wrapped in unbleached cotton fabric which was secured at each end with cotton tie tape
46. To create the hanging apparatus, a Conserve-O-Gram for flag storage provided instructions
  - g. EMT conduit, galvanized double loop chain, and tie-down s-hooks were purchased at a local hardware store
  - h. The double loop chain was hung from the existing shelving equipment in the Archives' storage space
  - i. S-hooks were attached to the chain to support the EMT conduit, which, in turn, supported the rolled textiles
47. To facilitate access, a tag with a photo of the banner was tied to each tube
  - j. A wall map with the same photos corresponding to the location of the banner was also posted in the storage areaThis solution allowed a large number of textiles to be hung fairly inexpensively using existing storage equipment
  - k. This is something I hope epitomizes the housings examples I chose to highlight. Object housings don't have to be overly complex to be effective, and existing storage supplies and equipment can be creatively repurposed, as in the case of the slide boxes used for housing the buttons, to store a variety of objects. I hope these examples have provided you all with some easy-to-duplicate strategies for storing your own collections

### **SOCIAL MEDIA (Whitney Baker)**

48. Another goal of the project is to provide students exposure to sharing their collections work on social media. I want them to be able to communicate clearly and pithily, share their innovative housing solutions with a broader community, and have a line to add to their resumes.
49. We start with the KSRL Blog, which is jointly run by Spencer Library and Conservation Services staff. Students are asked to tell their story in 500 words or less, with 5 or fewer images.
50. This student wrote about a collection of small metal objects from the same donor that needed to stay in the same box.
51. Here's a list of some recent student blog post topics, many of which Brecken featured today. As you can see in this image, if we house a variety of materials together in a box,

we provide a visual image of how everyone should be stored in the box, in case items are removed.

### **OUTCOMES (Becky Schulte)**

52. I'll speak about some of the intended and unintended outcomes of this project.
53. Working with Whitney and her students has enabled us to continue to add information to our artifacts database – providing a list in record group number that I can easily search when I need an object to add some dimension to an exhibit or class display. This was particularly helpful last year when the University was celebrating its Sesquicentennial.
54. Blogposts have been written about some projects that students have done adding to the information out there about materials in the Archives. For instance, these figurines are actually made from Ivory soap. I had always assumed that they were carved from wax. The daughter of the student who created the figurines contacted us to find out more about her father and provided that information.
55. Most importantly, these projects have provided real life experiences for students.
56. Thank you! Questions?