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Highlights of a Practicum: The Hattiesburg Coca-Cola Plant Collectibles Museum

By Bernadette Birzer



During my last semester at the University of Southern Mississippi, I participated in a museum practicum at the Coca-Cola Plant located off of HWY 98 in Hattiesburg, Mississippi. This particular Coca-Cola Collectables Museum consists of a small assortment of memorabilia that the company has been collecting since the late 1800's. There are many Coca-Cola museums including the very large and famous [World of Coca-Cola](#) in Atlanta, Georgia. Other Coca-Cola facilities may have their own personal collections as well.

Even though this collection is currently closed to the public, it is valuable to the company because it generates feelings of pride regarding workers and provides a record of their history working in the community and surrounding area for over 100 years.

The Coca-Cola Plant's Collectibles Museum can be found on the second floor of the main building. When I was first introduced to this collection I was a little intimidated mainly because there was not a collection policy or structured maintenance plan for the collection. I had been studying how to manage special collections in school, so I tried to envision that I was the curator, and I spent the first couple of weeks devising a plan to update the collection and improve its overall appearance.



Image 1: Hattiesburg Coca-Cola Bottling Co.

The [Hattiesburg Coca-Cola Bottling Company](#) located on HWY 98 was built in 1978 to consolidate Coca-Cola production in Picayune and Columbia into the Hattiesburg facility (Image 1). The original site of production opened in May of 1906 and was first located on 2nd Street. The plant used to be a popular destination for school and company field trips, but several years ago it became a distribution center. The museum is now currently only opened for special company events and festivities, but there has been discussion of increasing availability to the museum.

My first step was to create a list of objectives; these priorities would incorporate goals that the company had for improving the collection and also ideas I felt would exceed their expectations. These mainly focused on updating the current inventory and creating a floor plan that would allow each item to be easily located (Image 2).

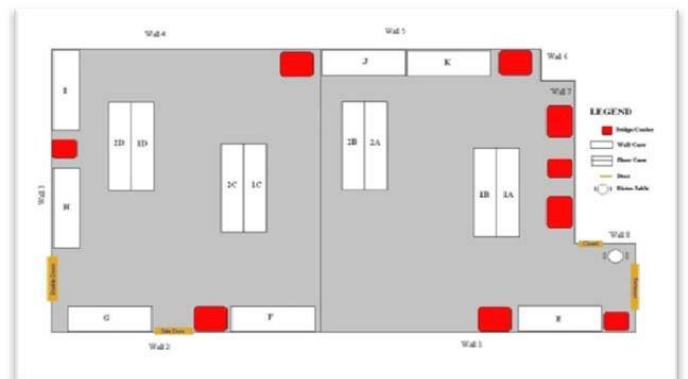


Image 2: Floor Plan for Organization

One important goal was to create exhibits that were visually dynamic; this attractive quality would encourage the exhibit to be educational so that viewers could experience and understand the transition of the product through the years. Another goal was to clean the exhibit without altering or damaging the objects; this was a challenge when cleaning one of the cases that had soda cans that had exploded.



Image 3: Items removed from cases for cleaning and inventory from the 1950s

The overall collection is displayed within eight wooden cases located on the floor and seven cases located against the wall. In addition to the cases, it contains vending machines, large vintage metal signs, and over 100 hanging Coca-Cola items including framed images. The framed images provide local history, especially in relationship to Coca-Cola Hattiesburg. The cases located on the museum floor were initially set up to be in chronological order.

While working with these cases it became apparent that every item needed to be more accurately dated. Using a specialized encyclopedia, *Petretti's Coca-Cola Collectibles Price Guide*, I was able to determine the dates of particular items. Allan Petretti's encyclopedia allowed me to be able to establish if an item was an original, a reproduction, or a fantasy item. Fantasy items are pieces "created with no original like it" (2008, p. 637).

Details used to describe originals compared to replicas and fantasy items may at first seem subtle, but once one understands how to identify them, they become very easily apparent.



Image 4: Items removed and cleaned to repair case

Almost all of the floor cases over the course of three months were emptied and cleaned. A new inventory was created along with a corresponding floor plan of the museum so that items could be easily located in the future. Arrangements for each case were made more visually attractive by lining the cases with felt, dusting the items, and creating new case labels on acid free paper. Specific eras and items were made more eye-catching by incorporating advertisements of products or themes located in vintage *Coca-Cola Bottler Magazines* that corresponded with items found in the exhibit.

Overall, the collection display was improved upon except for two cases that remain under construction at this point. Along with improving the collection's arrangement, a maintenance list was also created for anyone who might need to update the collection in the future. Hopefully, future LIS students needing practicum experience will utilize this small collection as a valuable learning aid and use it to benefit them as well as the Coca-Cola Plant.

Reference:
Petretti, A. (2008). *Petretti's Coca-Cola collectibles price guide*. Iola, WI: Krause Publications.