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Serving Their Communities By Preserving And Explaining Their Past: North Dakota County And Local Museums

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SERVING THEIR COMMUNITIES BY PRESERVING AND EXPLAINING THEIR PAST
NORTH DAKOTA COUNTY AND LOCAL MUSEUMS

by

Austin Allen Olson
Bachelor of Arts, University of North Dakota, 2015

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty

of the

University of North Dakota
in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of
Master of Arts

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May
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This thesis, submitted by Austin Olson in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts from the University of North Dakota, has been read by the Faculty Advisory Committee under whom the work has been done and is hereby approved.

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Austin Olson
April 21, 2023

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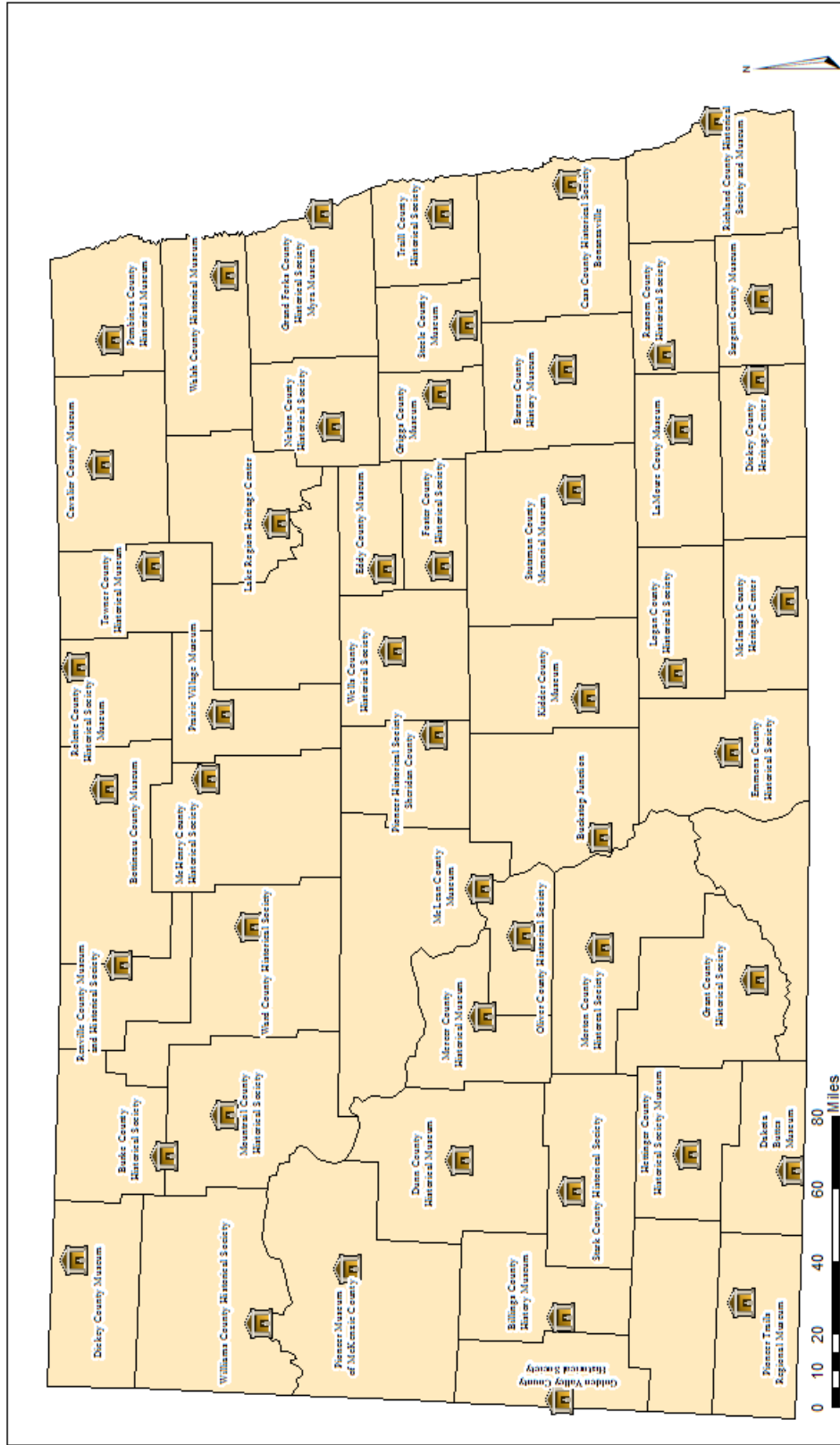
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ABSTRACT

Museum scholars and professionals continue to debate the purpose of museums and their relationships to the public. These contentious debates revolve around the institution's roles within contemporary societal issues. The purpose of this study is to analyze the expanding roles of county and local museums in North Dakota and how they serve their communities with the goal to understand how these museums can thrive and provide positive outcomes to the communities they serve. This thesis argues that local and county museums must undertake an active role in their local communities to continue to positively preserve and interpret the area's history. Utilizing interviews with museum directors, volunteers, and community members from multiple North Dakota county and local museums, and museum professional and scholarly works, this thesis provides new sources and ideas to present local and county museum directors with different concepts and opportunities to bring their museum closer and generate excitement to the local communities they serve.

To my mother Lisa Olson, who inspired me, my father Paul Olson, who encouraged me, and my sister Shaylah (Olson) Anderson, who motivated me.

County Museums and Historical Societies in North Dakota



County Museums/Historical Societies

 County Museums/Historical Societies

 Counties



Source: Organizational Directory (2016). State Historical Society of North Dakota, Bismarck, North Dakota. URL: <http://his.ory.nd.gov/pdf/MuseumDirectory.pdf> [November 30, 2016].

Preface

James W. Loewen, author of *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong*, explained that history, more than any other topic, is about *us*, and “understanding our past is central to our ability to understand ourselves and the world around us.”¹ History helps us understand who we are, explains the present, and what it means to be human.

Museums hold the keys to unlocking the past, and when done properly, can be an excellent medium to bring history to life, and places where we can learn about each other and ourselves. While interning two summers at the Sargent County Museum in Forman, ND, I witnessed first-hand, despite being in small community and no professional curator, how a well-run museum with dedicated personnel can bring community members together over a common bond of sharing memories and growing as a community. My goal is to provide different ideas on collection building, community outreach programs, and collaboration between museum staff and community members for local and county museums.

The first chapter discusses contemporary debates scholars and museum professionals have over what the future of museums should look like. It also provides the opportunity for more resources that museums may utilize to further develop their community relationships. The second chapter dives into three North Dakota museums, the Sargent County, Myra, and Prairie Village museums’ history and the collections that are in each museum. The third chapter discusses the development of these three museums from only being a place to store and look at

¹ James W. Loewen, *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong* (New York, NY: Touchstone, 2007), 2.

objects, to the directors bridging the gap between the museum and the community. Provided are examples of how they were able to facilitate more community involvement and excitement for the museum. Chapter four focuses on the relationship between the museum's collections and visitor experience. It explores how museum directors and volunteers can exhibit their collections in captivating ways to enhance the visitor's experience. Chapter five compares the Sargent County, Myra, and Prairie Village museums with three North Dakota museums with similar size and market. This is done to demonstrate how the Sargent County, Myra, and Prairie Village museums' effective use of their communities can help other local and county museums grow.

The purpose of this thesis is to help local and county museums not only survive, but to thrive in modern society, and create a strong foundation for the future. History is the study of *us*, and museums can help *us* learn more about *us*, and come together and flourish as a community.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION AND HISTORIOGRAPHY

The International Council of Museums (ICOM), based at the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) headquarters in Paris, France, represents 44,000 museum professionals at 20,000 museums in 138 countries and territories. The current ICOM definition of a museum, which was adopted by the 22nd General Assembly in Vienna, Austria, on August 24, 2007, is as follows: “A museum is a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates, and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment.”² However, among museum professionals and scholars, this definition fueled debate. Arguments on whether to redefine the term “museum” stem from the ICOM attempting to answer the question, what is a museum and its function? In 2016 the ICOM established a committee to decide if the current definition of a museum needed to be reworked.³ The ICOM is still currently discussing if this 2007 definition needs to be revised.

Museum scholars and professionals continue to debate whether museums should be places that exhibit and research artifacts, or ones that have a more active public involvement and engage with political and social issues such as racism, gender equality, and social justice. Rick West, the president of the Autry National Center of the American West in Los Angeles, California, stated

² “Who We Are,” International Council of Museums, last modified 2021, accessed April 10, 2022, <https://www.icomus.org/who-we-are>; “Museum Definition,” International Council of Museums, last modified 2021, accessed April 10, 2022, <https://icom.museum/en/resources/standards-guidelines/museum-definition/>.

³ Alex Marshall, “What Is a Museum? A Dispute Erupts Over a New Definition,” *The New York Times*, August 6, 2020, accessed April 10, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/06/arts/what-is-a-museum.html>.

in the *New York Times* that the main question was whether museums should be just “houses of collections and beautiful stops on the tourist trail,” or actively engage with political and social issues.⁴ In July of 2019 the Standing Committee for the Museum Definition submitted a proposal as a new alternative museum definition:

Museums are democratising [sic], inclusive and polyphonic spaces for critical dialogue about the pasts and the futures. Acknowledging and addressing the conflicts and challenges of the present, they hold artefacts and specimens in trust for society, safeguard diverse memories for future generations and guarantee equal rights and equal access to heritage for all people.

Museums are not for profit. They are participatory and transparent, and work in active partnership with and for diverse communities to collect, preserve, research, interpret, exhibit, and enhance understandings of the world, aiming to contribute to human dignity and social justice, global equality and planetary wellbeing.⁵

This proposed alternative definition has been met with both acceptance and criticism. Some experts believe this new definition is needed to acknowledge that museums have a role to play in society, while others have criticized its political tone and have concerns that it does not address the functions of a museum.⁶ The debates the ICOM committee members are having exemplify the debates museum professionals and scholars have been discussing for years on what roles these institutions have in the public sphere.

The arguments the ICOM highlights the two schools of thought in the museum profession, “old” and “new” museology. Museology is museum science that is concerned with the study of

⁴ Rick West, interview by Alex Marshall, “What Is a Museum? A Dispute Erupts Over a New Definition,” *The New York Times*, August 6, 2020, accessed April 10, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/06/arts/what-is-a-museum.html>.

⁵ “ICOM announces the alternative museum definition that will be subject to a vote,” International Council of Museums, last modified July 25, 2019, accessed April 10, 2022, <https://icom.museum/en/news/icom-announces-the-alternative-museum-definition-that-will-be-subject-to-a-vote/>.

⁶ Suyin Haynes, “Why a Plan to Redefine the Meaning of ‘Museum’ is Stirring Up Controversy,” *TIME*, September 9, 2019, accessed April 10, 2022, <https://time.com/5670807/museums-definition-debate/>.

the purposes and organization of museums.⁷ “Old” museology is characterized by an emphasis on the professional collection, documentation, and interpretation of objects. “New” museology focuses on society with an emphasis on community needs. Scholars who advocate for “new” museology question traditional approaches to issues of value, meaning, control, interpretation, authority, and authenticity.⁸ Stephen Weil, who was a noted museum and art legal expert and served as scholar emeritus at the Smithsonian Institution’s Center for Education and Museum Studies, argued museums can contribute to the health of human communities’, and become institutions where people can be safe and engage with “interchange” and debate.⁹ Andrea Witcomb, author of *Re-Imagining the Museum: Beyond the Mausoleum*, explained how many contemporary museums are incorporating the idea of “new” museology by attempting to build new relations between the museum and their communities.¹⁰ The goal of “new” museology is to open the museum for community members to have a more active role and contribute to contemporary social issues.

Scholars who advocate for “old” museology argue that the shifting attitudes of museums to be more community focused is causing museum curators to abandon a duty to knowledge and scholarship. Josie Appleton in her book, *Museums for ‘the People’?* explained that fewer people entering the museum profession today have the specialized training to study and care for

⁷ G. Ellis Burcaw, *Introduction to Museum Work*, 3rd ed. (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 1997), 21.

⁸ Sheila Watson, ed., *Museums and their Communities* (New York City: Routledge, 2007), 13; Peter Vergo, ed., *The New Museology* (London: Reaktion Books Ltd, 1989); J.D. Harrison, “Ideas of museums in the 1990s,” *Museum Management and Curatorship* 20 (1993): 160-176; Andrea Witcomb, *Re-imagining the Museum: Beyond the Mausoleum* (London: Routledge), 79; R. Mason, “Conflict and complement: an exploration of the discourses informing the concept of the socially inclusive museum in contemporary Britain,” *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 10 (March 2004): 60.

⁹ Stephen Weil, *Making Museums Matter*, in *Museums and their Communities*, ed. Sheila Watson (New York, NY: Routledge, 2007), 105.

¹⁰ Andrea Witcomb, *Re-imagining the Museum: Beyond the Mausoleum*, in *Museums and their Communities*, ed. Sheila Watson (New York, NY: Routledge, 2007), 133.

collections, and this is leading to a decline in authority and scholarship.¹¹ This view believes that contemporary museums are moving away from the main purpose of a museum- to preserve and display objects for studying. Appleton contended that many contemporary museums have replaced the study of objects with the observation of the masses. Appleton stated, “Museums should stick to what they do best-to preserve, display, study, and where possible, collect the treasures of civilization and nature. They are not fit to do anything else.”¹² Scholars of “old” museology argue that contemporary museums must be separate from society and have objects that are not everyday things. For museums to practice “old” museology, they must employ professional curators that have training to preserve, document, and display objects for other scholars and visitors to observe and study.

While the ICOM continues to debate the definition of museums and scholars discuss its roles, the attitudes towards the museums and their functions have started to shift in the United States and around the world. Stephen Weil noted that museums are turning away from only collecting and preserving items to focus more on “an *external*” consideration of the benefits the museum provides to the community it serves.¹³ Museum professionals and scholars are branching away from only being neutral, collecting and preserving institutions, to becoming more active with the public and interpreting history to discuss contemporary social issues. In this sense, more museums are employing more “new” museology. LaTanya Autry, a curatorial fellow at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Cleveland stated in *Time*, “If we are caring about the communities that we serve, then we should be working to undo the histories of violence,

¹¹ Josie Appleton, *Museums for ‘the People’?*, in *Museums and their Communities*, ed. Sheila Watson (New York, NY: Routledge), 120.

¹² Appleton, *Museums for ‘the People’?*, in *Museums and their Communities*, 123, 125.

¹³ Weil, *Making Museums Matter*, in *Museums and their Communities*, 42.

histories of exclusion that have already existed.”¹⁴ Many museums are no longer shying away from social or political issues but understanding that the museum can be used to address the public on these matters. Lonnie G. Bunch III, the 14th Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution and founding director of the Smithsonian’s National Museum of African American History and Culture, discussed that when building the African American museum they learned that the “public has a real interest in the unvarnished truth,” and that these issues and stories will be preserved and interpreted so that the public gets a “fuller understanding of the complexity and the complex” of U.S. history.¹⁵ In England, Liverpool’s International Slavery Museum focuses on the history of the transatlantic slave trade while also spotlighting the issue of modern-day slavery in Britain.¹⁶ Museums like these are addressing contemporary societal issues like race relations, gender equality, and politics through an objective lens. They are not simply collecting artifacts but preserving history and interpreting it in a fashion that benefits the communities they serve.

Stephen Weil explained that museums were established to “raise” the level of public understanding, to “elevate” the spirits of its visitors, and to refine and “uplift” the common taste. Weil stated, “Museums were created and maintained by the high for the low, by the couth for the uncouth, by the washed for the unwashed, by those who knew for those who didn’t but need to know and who would come to learn.”¹⁷ What became of these early museums were celebratory

¹⁴ LaTanya Autry, interview by Suyin Haynes, “Why a Plan to Redefine the Meaning of ‘Museum’ Is Stirring Up Controversy,” *Time*, September 9, 2019, accessed April 10, 2019, <https://time.com/5670807/museums-definition-debate/>.

¹⁵ Lonnie G. Bunch III, interview by Lily Rothman, “The New Head of the Smithsonian Thinks Americans Can Find a Middle Ground in Museums,” *Time*, June 20, 2019, accessed April 10, 2022, <https://time.com/5610742/smithsonian-museum-secretary-interview/>.

¹⁶ Suyin Haynes, “Why a Plan to Redefine the Meaning of ‘Museum’ is Stirring Up Controversy,” *Time*, September 9, 2019, accessed April 10, 2019, <https://time.com/5670807/museums-definition-debate/>.

¹⁷ Stephen Weil, *Making Museums Matter* (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 2002), 196.

histories. The art museum celebrated “acknowledged masterpieces,” the natural-history museum celebrated Western humankind’s place in nation, and history museums celebrated successful politicians, businessman, and military valor.¹⁸ It was “feel-good” history that celebrated the greatness of individuals or the nation. The public’s early role in the museum was one of leisure. The public visited the museum and simply enjoyed the great collections and artifacts.

However, as the public’s attitudes towards museum’s roles have shifted in the past decades, as seen with the ICOM debates, museum professionals are modifying their museums to meet the public’s needs. More interest and identity groups, believing that the mainstream museum has failed to meet their needs and include their history, have developed their own museums to address certain issues. Native Americans, Asian Americans, and African Americans have been active in the establishment of specialized museums. The Mashantucket Pequot Museum and Research Center in Connecticut, located on the Pequots’ tribal reservation, is one of the largest museums in New England. The Museum of African American History in Detroit has “quadrupled” and includes discussions on slavery, a topic most mainstream museums rarely touch in depth. The Japanese American National Museum in Los Angeles is important because it tells the story of wartime internment camps, where Americans, many of whom from Japanese ancestry, were held and treated as prisoners.¹⁹ These histories must be explored for the public to have a full critical understanding of history, and the museum plays an essential role for these voices to be heard. The contemporary museum is no longer a neutral entity, only collecting and displaying artifacts, but one that serves the public and understands its needs. A museum that leaves out certain voices is a disservice to the needs of the community.

¹⁸ Weil, *Making Museums Matter*, 198-199.

¹⁹ Weil, *Making Museums Matter*, 202.

In the United States, history museums evolved from local historical societies. Many were initially private collections, located in historical houses, and were concerned with civic virtue (success in politics, profession, or business) and celebrated local and national heroes.²⁰ As larger museums such as the Smithsonian developed and became important national institutions, the smaller local and county museum remains vital to the preservation and interpretation of local history and community identity. Knowledge of the past is key to understanding the present and one's identity. Local history helps community members form an identity and gives a sense of place and belonging. University of Chicago historian Gerald Danzer argued that public places like churches, libraries, and museums help individuals develop a sense of identity and stress participation in a larger community.²¹ Local history helps one understand who they are, and local and county museums are great institutions to preserve the past and interpret community identity. Local history museums serve their communities, and the community-museum relationship is essential for museums to preserve and explain local history, and equally as important for the institution's survival.

The ICOM is currently debating how to define a museum, and the focal point revolves around the public and the museum. For national museums like the Smithsonian, which receives federal funding, operates on a larger scale, and has the resources to hire professional curators and directors to expertly manage and preserve their collections, are for the public but rely less on the communities they serve for funding and preservation.²² However, the local and county museum

²⁰ Weil, *Making Museum's Matter*, 199.

²¹ Gerald A. Danzer, *Public Places: Exploring Their History* (Nashville, TN: The American Association for State and Local History, 1987), 108.

²² The Smithsonian's federal funding for fiscal year 2021 is \$1 billion and is 62% federally funded from a combination of congressional appropriation and federal grants and contracts. Smithsonian, "The Smithsonian Institution Fact Sheet," Smithsonian Institution, April 7th, 2020, accessed October 26th, 2022, <https://www.si.edu/newsdesk/factsheets/smithsonian-institution-fact-sheet>.

needs public support to survive. These history museums operate for their local communities, and without local support, these institutions will become storage units, collecting items that community members do not want to throw out. County and local museums must apply a community-based approach when preserving and interpreting their history to provide an educational and exciting visitor experience and generate greater community engagement with the museum to remain relevant in contemporary society. This is done with marketing the museum and collaborating with community members to design exhibits and collections that explore community identity and preserve their stories to establish the museum as an essential community institution.

Using the Sargent County, Prairie Village, and Myra museums, interviews, and professional and scholarly works, this thesis presents different arguments and ideas, from collection building to museum-community outreach programs, on how county and local museums can collaborate with community members to better preserve and interpret their local history and generate excitement for the museum. Dr. Sheila Watson, professor of museum studies at the University of Leicester, stated that museums work for the community members.²³ The goal is to present small local and county museum staff with different concepts and opportunities to bring their museum closer to the local communities they serve.

Oral history is a valuable primary source material that allows researchers and historians to hear history as it happened from the people who experienced it. It presents different interpretations and voices to better understand past events and how they have shaped contemporary society. For the museum-community relationship, oral history presents the

²³ Watson, ed., *Museums and their Communities*, 16.

opportunity to discuss with museum staff, volunteers, and community members to fully grasp how community members view their local museum. Interviews with museum staff and community members also help create a dialogue between the two to learn how the museum can better establish itself as an important community institution to the preservation and interpretation of local history. Thus, interviews with Sargent County Museum director Pat Olofson and correspondence with Myra Museum director Leah Byzewski and former director of the Prairie Village Museum Stephanie Steinke are key primary source material on their respective museums, and how they are incorporating different ideas and outreach opportunities for community involvement. Interviews with Sargent County community members presented different opinions community members have of their local museum. Also, it provided details on what the community believes the museum has done well, and highlights what can be done differently to expand the museum-community relationship.

Dr. D. Jerome Tweton, former professor of history at the University of North Dakota, explained that the local newspaper is the most important resource for research on the history of a local community.²⁴ The newspaper is an excellent source to understand the history of local communities. For the local museum, newspapers can provide more insight in museum-community relationship. My research draws on local North Dakota newspapers to learn about the history of the before-mentioned county museums, their past and present roles within their communities, and to understand how the community views their respective museum. These primary sources provide insight on the museum's importance to the community members it serves and drawing from these views will help museum professionals and staff recognize what

²⁴ Tweton, *Guide to Doing North Dakota Local History* (Bismarck, ND: The North Dakota Humanities Council, Inc., 1992), 16.

has been successful, and what can be done to continue to have success and a positive effect with their local communities.

The continuing debates on the relationship between the museum and the public in contemporary society emphasize the need for museum workers, be it in large professionally run museums or a county museum operated with a small staff or volunteers, to assess their own museum-community relationship and what is needed to improve their community status. Highlighting the need for museums to involve the public, Stephen Weil's *Making Museums Matter* is an exceptional work to understand why the public sphere is vital to the success of a museum. Weil compiled twenty-nine of his essays in this volume to argue that museums matter when they are dedicated to the improvement of the lives and well-being of the communities they serve. Weil advocates for the museum to serve their community and work with it to establish its social value. He presents many examples of museums, both large and small, making themselves matter by being becoming involved and working with the public to develop more support for the institution.²⁵ His work helps one understand the need for museums to include their communities in the collection, exhibition, and preservation process for the museum to matter and make a difference to the people it serves.

To further understand the role the community has with the museum, Jennifer Barrett's work *Museums and the Public Sphere*, and Carol A. Scott's edited work *Museums and Public Value: Creating Sustainable Futures* present new ideas and analysis to the debates of the museum and community relationship. Barrett looks to answer how can the museum be understood as a critical sphere of public debate, and discusses how museums facilitate, respond to, support, and intersect

²⁵ Marc Pachter, forward to *Making Museums Matter*, Stephen Weil, x, xii.

with wider public discourse.²⁶ She utilized case studies to analyze the roles of museums around the world and their relation to public discourse, and explores different ways in which the museum functions as a space of public address.²⁷ Scott's edited work presents essays from multiple museum scholars to discuss public value (the planned outcomes which add benefit to the public sphere) and seeks to empower museum leadership to confidently implement this type of approach in their management, planning, programming and relationship building.²⁸ Scott highlights the importance and benefits of the public to the museum and provides many examples of how museums can successfully implement a public value approach. These authors' works are beneficial to the continued evaluation of the museum and its communities, and for the county and local museum, they present new ideas for how museum staff can better involve their community members to create a museum that matters to the community.

The role of the museum to the communities it serves continues to be debated among scholars and museum professionals. From discussing how to define community, the complexities of the museum-community relationship, and to how much involvement, if none at all, should community members have in the museum is further discussed in Sheila Watson's edited work *Museums and their Communities*. Watson provides case studies from museum scholars and practitioners that examine the debates on the role of the museum in contemporary society. Watson brings together these case studies to consider the concept of the community, and explore key issues relating to ownership, power, identity and memory to help understand the complexities in the relationship between museums and the communities they serve.²⁹ These case

²⁶ Jennifer Barrett, *Museums and the Public Sphere* (West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 1.

²⁷ Barrett, *Museums and the Public Sphere*, 9.

²⁸ Carol A. Scott, ed. *Museums and Public Value: Creating Sustainable Futures* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2013), 1-2.

²⁹ Watson, ed., *Museums and their Communities*, 2.

studies present many complex debates on the relationship between museums and the community, and will help museum professionals examine their institution's community relationship and gain ideas on how to continue to grow and thrive.

Watson stated that her edited work, *Museums and their Communities*, "reflects a conscious decision to focus this volume mainly on museums that work with and for a variety of communities rather than those that arise from, belong to, and are controlled by, one particular community or group. It thus, on the whole, examines the relationship of the paid professional with communities."³⁰ This volume is beneficial for all museum professionals and workers, however, Amy K. Levin's edited volume, *Defining Memory: Local Museums and the Construction of History in America's Changing Communities* is focused on discussing the importance of the local museum. Levin stated that the neglect of local institutions in definitions of museums, accompanied by the gap in the body of published works, renders this collection of essays and case studies an attempt at defining local museums as especially necessary.³¹ The case studies presented highlight the influence local museums have in their communities, and are essential in the greater understanding of contemporary American society. For the smaller county and local museum who survive on either small salaried staff or volunteers, Levin's collection of case studies on local museums is an excellent source to help one's museum continue to grow and be recognized as a valuable institution in the preservation and interpretation of local history.

Museums with little staff and resources must be community minded when developing exhibits and collections to find success. This mindset will help create more excitement for the museum among community members while also preserving the history and telling the story of the

³⁰ Watson, ed. *Museums and their Communities*, 3.

³¹ Amy K. Levin, ed. *Defining Memory: Local Museums and the Construction of History in America's Changing Communities* (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2007), 11.

community it serves. For small museums that have little staff and funding, the following scholars may provide helpful resources on how to use their communities to fundraise, create outreach programs, and better develop collections and exhibits. Timothy Ambrose and Crispin Paine's *Museum Basics* is an excellent resource guide for museum workers. Ambrose and Paine's key purpose is to provide a basic outline of good practice for museums with few professional staff and limited financial resources.³² G. Ellis Burcaw's *Introduction to Museum Work* is another useful resource for museum staff and researchers. Burcaw explained that museums are used as a medium for conveying information and establishing desirable public attitudes.³³ Burcaw does excellent work discussing the basics of museology and provides detailed explanations and definitions of key museum terms that all museum staff and scholars should familiarize with. Gerald George and Cindy Sherrell-Leo's *Starting Right: A Guide to Museum Planning* guides museum workers through the daunting task of starting and operating a museum. They advise museum workers to consider their target audience's interest, and when museum planning consider the community that which the museum serves.³⁴ George and Sherrell-Leo offer advice on museum work from collection building, preservation, and fundraising. These authors explain the importance of utilizing the community to develop and grow the museum.

With small local and county museums, many of the workers are volunteers or a small paid staff with limited background in museum work. To help small museums thrive, Carl E. Guthe's *The Management of Small History Museums* is an excellent resource to help the small local or county museum grow and build more community engagement. Guthe explained that a museum that professes to be a public institution thereby recognizes that its existence depends upon the

³² Timothy Ambrose and Crispin Paine, *Museum Basics* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1993), 3.

³³ G. Ellis Burcaw, *Introduction to Museum Work*, 3rd ed. (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 1997), 33.

³⁴ Gerald George and Cindy Sherrell-Leo, *Starting Right: A Guide to Museum Planning*, 3rd ed. (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2012), 16.

good will of the community.³⁵ The small local history museum relies on the community it serves, and Guthe provides advice and examples on how to build the museum-community relationship, and how to better preserve and interpret the community's local history.

When developing exhibits and designing one's museum, staff must consider how visitors will experience the museum. Providing an entertaining, educational, and memorable museum experience will not only have a positive impact on the museum's reputation, but also place the museum as a vital local community institution. Doctor John H. Falk, director of the Institute for Learning Innovation in Portland, Oregon, explained in his work *Identity and the Museum Visitor Experience*, the museum experience is about the museum and the visitor come together as one. Falk's goal is to answer the question of why people make the decision to visit a museum, and the attributes of museums that the public perceives that makes them such popular leisure destinations.³⁶ John H. Falk and Lynn D. Dierking discuss further in *The Museum Experience Revisited* the relationship between people and museums. Their goal was to create a readable, easily accessible book for the museum professional, particularly new museum professionals, a comprehensive overview of the museum experience, and a guide for thinking deeply about the complex intersection between people and museums.³⁷ These authors provide insight on the importance of understanding what kind of experience visitors have when exploring one's museum. Understanding the visitor experience can help museum staff learn how to improve the museum's exhibits to provide a better learning experience.

³⁵ Carl E. Guthe, *The Management of the Small History Museum*, 2nd ed. (Nashville, TN: The American Association for State and Local History, 1964), 21.

³⁶ John H. Falk, *Identity and the Museum Visitor Experience* (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2009), 36, 37.

³⁷ John H. Falk and Lynn D. Dierking, *The Museum Experience Revisited* (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2012), 15.

A successful museum is one that is continually progressing. It does not become stagnant, but frequently learning how to improve collections, preservation, exhibits, and expanding the museums roles in the local communities. Museums workers must be willing to change with contemporary society. This may seem intimidating, but Graham Black's *Transforming Museums in the Twenty-First Century* provides case studies and examples for museum workers to gain ideas on how to improve on different aspects of the museum. Black presents guides, ideas, and models for both large and small museums to develop and improve on many areas of the museum. Black stated that museums must find new ways to demonstrate what they are for, in terms of being for the benefit of the public.³⁸ Museums, large or small, must not become stagnant, but continue to move forward. Black's work will help museum staff learn new ideas to continue to transform the museum as an important community institution and continue to interpret and preserve local history in contemporary society.

Museums are significant social institutions that "possess a power to shape collective values and social understandings in a decisively important fashion."³⁹ Large museums, such as the Smithsonian Institution, are essential for preserving and interpreting the country or state's history. Museums in large demographic markets, when community focused, can generate significant support and play a meaningful role in education and discussion on contemporary issues. Equally important is the role of county and local museums. These museums play a vital role in the preservation of a community's local history and identity. With "new" museology, the museum works with the public, and county and local museums, operating in smaller markets, need public and community support to survive. Historian David E. Kyvig explained that local

³⁸ Graham Black, *Transforming Museums in the Twenty-First Century* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2012), 5.

³⁹ Watson, ed., *Museums and their Communities*, 1; T.W. Luke, *Museum Politics* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), xiii.

museums “often serve to distill the identity of the community with which people identify, and whether they do it well or badly will affect attitudes toward the locale in question.”⁴⁰ As the ICOM debates the definition and roles of museums county and local museums need also rethink their community roles and develop a community centered “new” museological approach. The county and local museum must have community support and community members enthusiasm for the museum to effectively preserve and interpret the local history. Museums matter if the public believes they matter, and without continued community support, the museum, especially the smaller county and local institutions, will fade.

⁴⁰ Amy K. Levin, ed., *Defining Memory: Local Museums and the Construction of History in America's Changing Communities* (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2007), 3.

Chapter II

Sargent County Museum, Myra Museum, And Prairie Village Museum History and Collections

This chapter presents the background to the three well run museums that are used as a case study on how to operate local and county museums in contemporary society. This chapter is dedicated to the history of how these museums began and provides insight to their collections. These three museums' histories show that previous community members felt a need to preserve their local history. Their collections and exhibits represent their story.

The Sargent County Museum in Forman, North Dakota, located in the southeastern section of the state and only a few miles from the South Dakota border, serves a small population that has much excitement for their local history museum. Curator and museum manager Pat Olofson and the museum volunteers' dedication to preserving the history of the area provides visitors with the opportunity to experience four large buildings filled with interesting and educational exhibits. Here, visitors will spend hours immersed in the history of Sargent County and entertained by the fascinating objects and well-designed exhibits. The staff and volunteers are active in their local communities and Olofson continues to develop different opportunities for community involvement. Because of their hard work, this museum is highly recommended and serves as a model for all county and local museums.

The Sargent County Historical Society was formed in the 1960s to discuss the possibilities of starting a museum to preserve the county's history. In the early 1970s, members of the historical society set up displays in an historic catholic church building on the Sargent County Fairgrounds

in Forman. The displays were then moved into the fairground's exhibit building, where the small museum remained until 1987 when more space was needed, and the museum moved into a former United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Soil Conservation building in Forman.⁴¹ The museum remained in this building for over a decade.

The former USDA Soil Conservation building gave the historical society more room to build on their collections and encouraged residents to donate more items. As community support and interest increased, there became a need again to expand the museum, and, in 1996, community members Lyla and Harlan Klefstad donated \$100,000 to construct a larger, more modern facility.⁴² The USDA building was removed, and a new building was built on its former location. The Klefstads continued to be active in the museum and their large contributions of money provided the funding for additions to the museum. In an article published in the *Sargent County Teller* on May 20, 2000, Harlan Klefstad noted that because the historical society members had volunteered time and talent to improve the displays and identify items, they deserved "a hearty pat on the back."⁴³ A third building was built in 2002 thanks to the Klefstads and community members, Jim and Rudy Rathert, who made contributions of money and items.⁴⁴ With their contributions, the Klefstads, Ratherts, and other community members showed their appreciation to the historical society's members for their dedicated efforts to the museum.

The museum expanded into its fourth building in the Spring of 2013. As with the first three buildings, the fourth was built with donations from community members who appreciated the

⁴¹ "About Us," Sargent County Historical Society, last modified 2016, accessed March 26, 2018.

<http://www.sargentcountymuseum.org/historical-society/>.

⁴² Janet Hansen, *Sargent County Teller*; "Museum Dedicated in Sunday Ceremony," *Sargent County Teller*, April 1997. Harlan Klefstad was a Sargent County Banker and prominent member of the community.

⁴³ "New Addition to County Museum to be Dedicated Sunday at 2pm," *Sargent County Teller*, May 20, 2000.

⁴⁴ Holly Jessen, "Ratherts' Collection of Tractors, Cars Stands out at Sargent County Museum," *Sargent County Teller*, 2008.

historical society members' efforts in preserving the area's history. The historical society received a \$100,000 donation from former Sargent County community member Shirley (Gillgard) Del Furia.⁴⁵ With the last addition, the museum's total square footage is over 30,000 square feet, housing collections on several aspects of the county's history.

The first building exhibits a general history of Sargent County. There are military displays highlighting Sargent County veterans who have fought in World War I to the current conflicts in the Middle East. School items from the former Forman High School. Exhibits with kitchen and living room items from the 1800s to the 1950s. Displays that community members have made for the history of the multiple small communities in Sargent County. This building also has a meeting area where the historical society has hosted many interesting and educational events. There is also an area for visitors interested in genealogical records. Here, visitors may access a database developed by historical society board member and volunteer Jerry Fritzen and view a collection of gravesite memorials in Sargent County. Along with the location of the cemeteries, this collection has photographs of the gravestones, obituaries, and copies of the funeral service program cards. Fritzen's dedication and passion provide visitors a research opportunity one may not expect to find in a county museum, and he continues to work on the Sargent County cemeteries project to ensure every gravesite is documented to preserve the history of the local communities.

When first entering the second building, one is met with an exhibit of historical music players. This interactive exhibit presents music players, such as the Gramophone, and permits visitors to operate many unique items. The next exhibit highlights the history of the telephone.

⁴⁵ Paige Cary, "Sargent County Museum Finished Expansion Project," *Sargent County Teller*, 2013. In addition to Del Furia's financial donations, community members Harlan Klefstad and Charles Tate provided significant donations to build the last addition.

This exhibit displays the evolution of the telephone and visitors can operate the objects to understand how they worked. Visitors will also view exhibits on past businesses, such as the Forman theater, post office, and dentist office. These exhibits provide visitors with an educational and exciting learning environment that for every visitor, no matter the age, will make a trip to the Sargent County Museum a memorable one.

Exploring the second building, visitors will find aligned along the north side of the building machinery equipment unique to the Sargent County Museum. These machines are prototypes and early skid-steer loaders developed by brothers Louis and Cyril Keller. The Melroe Manufacturing Company (presently known as Bobcat Company) located in the Sargent County community of Gwinner, marketed the Keller's skid-steer loaders. Bobcat Company is an essential business and provides employment for many Sargent County residents. This unique exhibit highlights the history of Keller loaders, and how a small manufacturing business in Sargent County developed into a major manufacturing company that produces important machinery sold around the world. This amazing exhibit also presents visitors the opportunity to view prototypes and early models of the Keller loaders that one will only find at the Sargent County Museum.

The third building's main collection is the Rathert Tractor Collection, and this building was specifically built to house these large antique farm machineries. Harlan Klefstad explained to the *Bismarck Tribune* in 2003 that he would donate money to build the third building on the specific condition that Jim and Rudy Rathert "put them (tractors)" in there.⁴⁶ Because of Klefstad and the Ratherts' generosity, this 70-by-182-foot building has rows of antique tractors. The collection

⁴⁶ Associated Press, "Old tractors on display at county Museum," *Bismarck Tribune*, July 19, 2003, accessed March 31, 2019, https://bismarcktribune.com/news/state-and-regional/old-tractors-on-display-at-county-museum/article_75f998af-41a4-5369-9e8e-a3488b5b872a.html.

dates back as early as a 1909 International Mogul, a one-cylinder tractor that Rudy Rathert believed to be one of only two in existence.⁴⁷ This collection also exhibits a 1911 Aultman-Taylor; a 1914 Case 30-60, one of five in existence; a 1916 Waterloo Boy, the predecessor to John Deere, and many more impressive antique tractors.⁴⁸ Visitors also will find fascinating is an early 1900s wooden Elis Champion No. 1 Overshot Thresher & Cleaner. Agriculture is essential to Sargent County's economy and preserving these large farm machineries is important to the historical narrative of the Sargent County community members.

The fourth building is where visitors will learn about smaller horse drawn farm equipment. Here, Pat Olofson and the museum volunteers have pieced together an educational and entertaining collection of unique farm equipment used by American farmers during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Visitors will have the pleasure to learn about McCormick-Deering and International Harvester cultivators, plows, and harrows, and the importance of these antique equipment to the history of Sargent County.

While the collection of horse drawn farm equipment is impressive, it is the information and historical advertisements that Pat Olofson, and the volunteers have added to these exhibits that help make viewing and learning about these objects exciting. Olofson dedicated her time and effort to research and create flip books with information on each object to enhance the visitor experience. Ron Narum, who was a longtime volunteer and cared deeply for the museum, dedicated his talents to fashion wooden stands for visitors to easily read the flip books and develop a deeper understanding of the history of each object in this collection. Because of

⁴⁷ Associated Press, "Old tractors on display at county Museum," *Bismarck Tribune*, July 19, 2003, accessed March 31st, 2019, https://bismarcktribune.com/news/state-and-regional/old-tractors-on-display-at-county-museum/article_75f998af-41a4-5369-9e8e-a3488b5b872a.html.

⁴⁸ "Farm Equipment we have," Sargent County Museum, last modified 2016, accessed March 31, 2019, <http://www.sargentcountymuseum.org/farm-equipment/>.

Olofson, Narum, and other museum volunteers' hard work has enhanced the visitor learning experience. The added information complements the collections and generates an educational environment every visitor will enjoy.

The Sargent County Museum, with its wonderful director and volunteers and magnificent collections is one of the premier county museums in North Dakota. It serves as a model for how small county museums can build excitement for the museum in their local communities. The enthusiasm and strive of Olofson, the Sargent County Historical Society, and volunteers to continue to improve the museum's exhibits and provide visitors with an entertaining experience makes a visit to Sargent County a memorable one.

The Sargent County Museum is an excellent model of a well-managed county museum that operates in a small market. For a county museum that serves a larger market in North Dakota, a great model is the Myra Museum in Grand Forks, North Dakota.⁴⁹

The Myra Museum operated by the Grand Forks County Historical Society, located in the historical section of Grand Forks, North Dakota along the banks of the Red River, is a beautiful museum with multiple historical buildings and exhibits dedicated to the history of Grand Forks and Grand Forks County. Leah Byzewski, director of the Grand Forks Historical Society, along with historical society members and volunteers are dedicated to the preservation of the heritage of Grand Forks County, with the society's mission to contribute to the fuller understanding of the area's history.⁵⁰ Through the society's hard work and dedication, the Myra Museum's exhibits

⁴⁹ According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the 2020 population of Grand Forks County is 73,170, with the city of Grand Forks at 59,166. "QuickFacts: Grand Forks County, North Dakota," United States Census Bureau, last modified 2021, accessed March 20, 2022, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/table/PST045215/38035>; "QuickFacts: Grand Forks city, North Dakota," United States Census Bureau, last modified 2021, accessed March 20, 2022, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/grandforkscitynorthdakota/PST045221>.

⁵⁰ "Grand Forks County Historical Society," Grand Forks County Historical Society, 2020, accessed April 4, 2020, <http://www.grandforkshistory.com/>.

provide the Grand Forks area with many educational and entertainment opportunities, and is a museum that the Grand Forks County communities can be proud of.

The Grand Forks County Historical Society was organized in 1970.⁵¹ The society's grounds and first resorted building, the Campbell House, were made possible by the descends of Thomas D. Campbell, who donated three acres of land, the house, and \$12,000 for restoration.⁵² Society members and volunteers restored the house and added furnishing donated from the Campbell family and Grand Forks residents. The historical society opened the house in 1971 for tours and dedicated the house in memory of Almira Campbell and all pioneer women and is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.⁵³

The Campbell House is the former home to prominent North Dakotan Thomas D. Campbell, Jr., who was born in Grand Forks on February 19, 1882. He graduated from Grand Forks Central High School in 1898 and was the first graduate in engineering from the University of North Dakota in 1904.⁵⁴ In 1910, Thomas and his family moved from Grand Forks to California, where Campbell worked for a farming corporation, and then started his own farming company, Campbell Farming Corporation. He signed leases with the Crow Native American tribe and began farming on the Crow Indian Reservation in Montana. The farm's first full year of production was in 1919. Campbell's farm grew to 95,000 acres, and his corporation grew more

⁵¹ "History of Grand Forks County Historical Society," Grand Forks County Historical Society, 2020, accessed March 30, 2020, <http://www.grandforkshistory.com/history-of-grand-forks-county-historical-society/>.

⁵² "Grand Forks County Historical Society Grounds," Greater Grand Forks Convention & Visitors Bureau, last modified 2020, accessed April 5, 2020, <https://www.visitgrandforks.com/directory/grand-forks-county-historical-society-grounds/>.

⁵³ "Campbell House," Grand Forks County Historical Society, last modified 2020, accessed April 5, 2020, <http://www.grandforkshistory.com/exhibits/campbell-house-2/>. Almira Campbell was the wife of Thomas Campbell Sr., who immigrated to Grand Forks from Perth, Ontario, in 1875. They purchased eighty acres of land and built a sod claim shanty near the present location of the Campbell House on the Grand Forks County Historical Society grounds. In 1879, the Campbell's built a large log cabin, and then an addition on its southern side in the 1890s.

⁵⁴ "Campbell House," Grand Forks County Historical Society, last modified 2020, accessed April 5, 2020, <http://www.grandforkshistory.com/exhibits/campbell-house/>.

wheat than any other farmer of corporation, and became known as “World’s Wheat King,” and in 1928 earned *Time* magazine “Man of the Year” and is the only North Dakotan to earn this honor.⁵⁵ Thomas Campbell, Jr., passed away in 1966, and in 1970 the Campbell Foundation transferred ownership of his family’s house to the Grand Forks County Historical Society.⁵⁶ Because of generosity of Thomas Campbell, Jr. and his family, the Grand Forks Historical Society was able to begin its mission of preserving the heritage and providing a deeper understanding of Grand Forks County.

The Campbell House has six different areas for visitors to explore: the cabin, parlor, master bedroom, summer kitchen, back porch and bathroom, and upstairs of the house. The cabin is the oldest portion of the house, and the furnishings reflect the settlement period of North Dakota and Grand Forks history.⁵⁷ A few of the items in the cabin are a butter churn, bread-making tools, baby highchair with a unique glass bottle, and an 1870s loom used to weave cloth and tapestry. The parlor has artifacts from the 1880s to the 1900s that include an 1880s leather sofa and chair, and stereoscope that projects photographic images, which was a popular form of entertainment in the 19th century. Also on display is an 1870s pump organ and 1900s stringed instrument called a Zither (a stringed instrument with thirty to forty strings and is played with a pick and fingers). The master bedroom displays the original bedroom set to the Campbell family. The master bedroom also displays an 1850s quilt, 1880s baby cradle, antique shaving set and ladies’ combs,

⁵⁵ “Campbell House,” Grand Forks County Historical Society, last modified 2020, accessed April 5, 2020, <http://www.grandforkshistory.com/exhibits/campbell-house/>; “Grand Forks County Historical Society Ground,” Greater Grand Forks Convention & Visitors Bureau, last modified 2020, accessed April 5, 2020, <https://www.visitgrandforks.com/directory/grand-forks-county-historical-society-grounds/>; “Thomas Campbell,” TIME USA, LLC, last modified 2019, accessed April 5, 2020, <http://content.time.com/time/covers/0,16641,19280109,00.html>.

⁵⁶ “Campbell House,” Grand Forks County Historical Society, last modified 2020, accessed April 5, 2020, <http://www.grandforkshistory.com/exhibits/campbell-house-2/>.

⁵⁷ “Campbell House,” Grand Forks County Historical Society, last modified 2020, accessed April 5, 2020, <http://www.grandforkshistory.com/exhibits/campbell-house-2/>.

brushes, and curling irons reminiscent of the late 19th century. The summer kitchen area is not original to the Campbell family's house because the original could not be restored, but the historical society rebuilt the kitchen and has the same dimensions as the original, and was added to the Campbell House in the 1970s.⁵⁸ The Campbell House has three rooms upstairs: children's room, sewing/sitting room, and the loft to the original log cabin.⁵⁹ A few of the items in these rooms are quilting frame, chamber pots (portable toilet), sewing machine, 1700s large spinning wheel, children's toys, and a croup kettle, which is a kettle used to make steam or medical vapor to treat croup or bronchitis.

All these items in the Campbell House are relevant to the settler and early history of Grand Forks and the Red River Valley. When visitors tour the Campbell House, they will gain a greater understanding of settler life in the Red River Valley, and how these items shaped the history of this region.

The Myra Museum was built in 1976 with funds donated from the Myra Foundation.⁶⁰ Named after John E. Myra, the Myra Foundation was established in 1941 and organized according to Myra's will. The Myra Foundation was the first private charitable foundation in North Dakota, and its purpose is to distribute money for "charitable, character-building and educational purposes."⁶¹

⁵⁸ "Campbell House," Grand Forks County Historical Society, last modified 2020, accessed April 5, 2020, <http://www.grandforkshistory.com/exhibits/campbell-house-3/>.

⁵⁹ "Campbell House," Grand Forks County Historical Society, last modified 2020, accessed April 5, 2020, <http://www.grandforkshistory.com/exhibits/campbell-house-3/>.

⁶⁰ "Myra Museum," Grand Forks County Historical Society, last modified 2020, accessed April 5, 2020, <http://www.grandforkshistory.com/exhibits/myra-museum/>.

⁶¹ "Myra Foundation History," Myra Foundation, last modified 2020, accessed April 5, 2020, <http://myrafoundation.org/index.html>.

John E. Myra was born in 1857 in Linden, Wisconsin, and settled in the Dakota Territory in 1883. Myra moved to Emerado, ND, about seventeen miles west of Grand Forks, and started a successful farm machinery and lumber business, and began acquiring land and leasing to farmers. By acquisitions, defaults, and foreclosures, he became one of the largest landowners in the Red River Valley.⁶² Myra passed away in 1939 at age 82, and with no immediate heirs, left much of his estate, worth an estimated \$400,000 at the time of his death, to establish the Myra Foundation. Since the foundation began its charitable contributions in 1941, it has awarded more than \$9.25 million to different programs in Grand Forks County.⁶³ Today, the Myra Foundation continues to help the museum with grants for exhibits and museum improvements. Because of John Myra, whose last will and testament was to establish a foundation for charitable, character building, and educational purposes, a museum bears his name that brings education, entertainment, and joy to Grand Forks County.

The Myra Museum has exhibits representing a wide range of Grand Forks' history. There are exhibits discussing the area's Native America and fur trading history with many fascinating artifacts.⁶⁴ Exhibits on the importance of the railroad to history of Grand Forks, the devastating flood of 1997, and on the popular breakfast cereal, Cream of Wheat, which was developed in Grand Forks in 1893.⁶⁵ Another interesting exhibit is on steamboats and its importance to the city

⁶² "Myra Foundation History," Myra Foundation, last modified 2020, accessed April 5, 2020.

⁶³ Herald Editorial Board, "Our View: Myra's Efforts Bring Much Joy to Region," *Grand Forks Herald*, January 9, 2018, accessed March 24, 2019, <https://www.grandforksherald.com/opinion/4384584-our-view-myras-efforts-bring-much-joy-region>.

⁶⁴ The name "Grand Forks" comes from the early French explorers, fur trappers and traders, who named the area *Les Grandes Fourches* because of the confluence of the Red River of the North and Red Lake River, was a key area between the trade route from St. Paul, Minnesota and present-day Winnipeg.

"History of Grand Forks," Grand Forks County Historical Society, last modified 2020, accessed April 5, 2020, <http://www.grandforkshistory.com/history-of-grand-forks-2/>.

⁶⁵ Cream of Wheat was developed by wheat millers at the Diamond Flour Mill in Grand Forks, ND. Tom Amidon, one of the partners of the mill, took the farina, which is the whitest part of the wheat, and cooked it into cereal. The partners of the mill named the cereal Cream of Wheat and sent samples of the cereal to New York brokers, who enjoyed the cereal and wanted the Diamond Flour Mill to ship more of it to New York. The mill was renamed the

of Grand Forks. Many cities in North Dakota were developed because of the railroad, however, Grand Forks owes its origin to the steamboat, and the Myra Museum's steamboat exhibit will educate visitors on the development of Grand Forks. This exhibit has pictures and information about the people who helped develop Grand Forks, such as steamboat captain Alexander Griggs, who was known as the "Father of Grand Forks," and details the "heyday" of the steamboat era of Grand Forks from 1871 to the 1880s.⁶⁶ These exhibits are wonderfully done and filled with information and items that visitors of all ages will enjoy learning about the rich and diverse history of Grand Forks County.

Other building exhibits on the grounds are the Myra Carriage House and the original Grand Forks Post Office. The Myra Carriage House was added to the grounds in 1986 and displays historic modes of transportation. Some of the historic items include a 1929 Ford Model A, and an 1880s Surrey, which is a four-wheeled carriage and known as the "Cadillac" of buggies.⁶⁷ The post office was built in 1868 by Sanford Cady, who was appointed in 1870 as first postmaster of Grand Forks. This building is one of the oldest buildings in Grand Forks, and a few of the collections in the exhibit are the old mail station, operator's station, and phone booth.⁶⁸

The Blooming Township Schoolhouse is a great exhibit for visitors to learn about education in the early 1900s one room schoolhouse. The schoolhouse was built in 1917 as a township hall

Cream of Wheat Factory, and because of larger demand for the cereal, in 1897 the owners moved their operation from Grand Forks to Minneapolis; Curt Eriksmoen, "North Dakota farmer helps launch Cream of Wheat," *Bismarck Tribune*, September 18, 2016, accessed April 5, 2020, https://bismarcktribune.com/news/columnists/curt-eriksmoen/north-dakota-farmer-helps-launch-cream-of-wheat/article_ba5f3a2c-2fa8-5912-a343-373087d113de.html.

⁶⁶ "History," City of Grand Forks, North Dakota, last modified 2020, accessed April 9, 2020, <https://www.grandforksgov.com/our-city/history>; "History of Grand Forks," Grand Forks Historical Society, last modified 2020, accessed April 5, 2020.

⁶⁷ "Carriage House," Grand Forks County Historical Society, last modified 2020, accessed April 5, 2020, <http://www.grandforkshistory.com/exhibits/carriage-house/>.

⁶⁸ "Grand Forks' Original Post Office," Grand Forks County Historical Society, last modified 2020, accessed April 5, 2020, <http://www.grandforkshistory.com/exhibits/post-office/>.

for Blooming Township, approximately twelve miles west of Grand Forks, and was converted to a school in the 1930s. It was moved to the museum grounds in 1981 to commemorate the centennial year of the Grand Forks Public School District.⁶⁹ Visitors will enjoy learning about different school items like 1920s and 1930s teacher contracts, schoolbooks, lunch pails, desks, maps, and a coal stove. The schoolhouse is also a great exhibit for children to experience school life from an early 20th century one room schoolhouse.

The other two buildings on the grounds highlight the 1930s and post-World War II society. One of these buildings is a 1930s era gas station. This exhibit was moved to the grounds in the fall of 2012 and is a replica of the Mobil Gas Station that was in Tower City, ND.⁷⁰ The historical society staff and volunteers did an excellent work to present an authentic looking 1930s gas station. Visitors will enjoy the nostalgia of viewing many different soft drinks, candy, tobacco advertising memorabilia, and promotional products for automobile parts.

Next to the gas station is the Lustron House. The Lustron at the Grand Forks Historical Society was built in Grand Forks in 1950.⁷¹ A Lustron is a one story, ranch style home with a two-or three-bedroom plan. This house was the first prefabricated home, and is built almost entirely out of steel.⁷² Lustron homes were invented by Chicago Industrialist Carl Strandlund and

⁶⁹ “Blooming Township Schoolhouse,” Grand Forks County Historical Society, last modified 2020, accessed April 5, 2020, <http://www.grandforkshistory.com/exhibits/schoolhouse/>.

⁷⁰ Paddlewheel Press, “New Attraction: an ‘Old Time Gas Station’ Rolls Into Grand Forks,” last modified 2012, accessed April 15, 2020, <http://www.grandforkshistory.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/Paddlewheel-Press-Fall-2012-PDF.pdf>.

⁷¹ “Lustron House,” Grand Forks County Historical Society, last modified 2020, accessed April 15, 2020, <http://www.grandforkshistory.com/exhibits/lustron-house/>.

⁷² “Lustron House,” Grand Forks County Historical Society, last modified 2020, accessed April 15, 2020, <http://www.grandforkshistory.com/exhibits/lustron-house/>. Prefabricated homes, or Prefab, are homes where components are manufactured in a factory or other manufacturing site and completed assemblies or sub-assemblies are transported to the site where the home will be located.

manufactured by the Lustron Corporation in Columbus, Ohio.⁷³ These homes were considered to be low-maintenance and durable, and Carl Strandlund advertised that it offered “new way of life.”⁷⁴ From 1948 to 1950 the Lustron Corporation manufactured approximately 2,680 homes with the purpose to help with the post-World War II housing shortage in the United States.⁷⁵

The Grand Forks County Historical Society and Myra Museum is a county museum that displays the rich and diverse history of Grand Forks County. From antique vehicles, historic buildings, and interactive exhibits, this museum appeals to all ages and offers many learning and entertainment opportunities. The numerous collections, skillfully designed exhibits, and knowledgeable, friendly staff and volunteers make a trip to this museum a must for tourists and community members. The Grand Forks Historical Society’s mission is to contribute to a fuller understanding of the history of Grand Forks County, and because of the hard work and time invested by Leah Byzewski, historical society staff, and many volunteers continue to accomplish their goal and contribute to the preservation and understanding of the county’s history.

The next museum discussed is the Prairie Village Museum located in Rugby, North Dakota. This museum is an example of a well-run, large open-air museum operating in a smaller market, and dedicated to preserving and interpreting the history of the local communities in north-central North Dakota.

⁷³ “Lustron Corporation,” Ohio History Connection, last modified 2020, accessed April 15, 2020, https://ohiohistorycentral.org/w/Lustron_Corporation.

⁷⁴ “Lustron History,” Ohio History Connection, last modified 2020, accessed April 15, 2020, <https://www.ohiohistory.org/visit/exhibits/ohio-history-center-exhibits/1950s-building-the-american-dream/lustron-about/help-for-lustrons/meet-the-lustrons/meet-history>.

⁷⁵ “Lustron History,” Ohio History Connection, last modified 2020, accessed April 15, 2020, <https://www.ohiohistory.org/visit/exhibits/ohio-history-center-exhibits/1950s-building-the-american-dream/lustron-about/help-for-lustrons/meet-the-lustrons/meet-history>.

The Prairie Village Museum, which the *Minot Daily News* appropriately called the “Hub of Local History” and an important asset to the local area, is situated at the intersection of US Highway 2 and ND Highway 3 in Rugby, North Dakota.⁷⁶ This large open-air museum offers visitors the opportunity to step back in time to the pioneer days of north-central North Dakota. The collections and exhibits focus on the history of the local communities of this area, with items that date from the 1880s to the early 1950s. This museum has six exhibition halls and over fifty-thousand artifacts ranging from Native American objects, household items, vintage farm machinery and antique cars. The museum’s village has twenty historic buildings from local communities filled with historical items for visitors to interact with. The village also hosts many historical reenactments that brings history to life to further entertain visitors while they learn about the history of this area. The exhibits, collections, and museum village coupled with the unique educational and entertaining events make every visit enjoyable.

The Prairie Village Museum was founded by the Pierce County Historical Society. The society was organized in 1959 and spent years planning the pioneer village and museum.⁷⁷ Historical society members collected donations from community members around north-central North Dakota, and in 1964 the Pierce County Historical Society changed its name to the Geographical Center Historical Society to reflect the museum’s area of reach.⁷⁸ In March, 1965

⁷⁶ Ashton Gerard, “Hub of local history: Prairie Village Museum important asset to the area,” *Minot Daily News*, April 28, 2018, accessed December 30, 2021, <https://www.minotdailynews.com/special-sections/progress/2018/04/hub-of-local-history-prairie-village-museum-important-asset-to-the-area/>.

⁷⁷ “About Us,” Prairie Village Museum, last modified 2019, accessed March 24, 2019, <https://www.prairievillagemuseum.com/about-us>.

⁷⁸ “About Us,” Prairie Village Museum, last modified 2019, accessed March 24, 2019, <https://www.prairievillagemuseum.com/about-us>.

the Geographical Center Historical Society purchased twenty acres of land to establish a pioneer village museum in Rugby, ND, with the first exhibition hall dedicated in 1969.⁷⁹

Today, the Geographical Center Historical Society continues to own and operate the museum. Their mission is to document, preserve and interpret the history and ongoing story of north-central North Dakota for the people of the region and for visitors from around the world, through educational and entertaining programming and displays of artifacts and historic buildings at Prairie Village Museum.⁸⁰ With a few paid staff members and dedicated volunteers, they continue to preserve the area's history and maintain this museum as an important regional institution.

The museum's village square has historical buildings from the local area furnished with collections and exhibits that will help visitors learn about life on the prairie in north-central North Dakota at the turn of the 20th century. Some of these historical buildings moved from local communities to the museum include a jail, bank, telephone office, train depot, and two local schoolhouses. One of the larger buildings in the village square is the Silva school. In the school building visitors will find exhibits on the history of Pierce County and its many local communities. The museum also has two exhibit halls devoted to antique and classic cars, and another two exhibit halls with antique farm machinery such as threshing machines and tractors. Each building is connected by a boardwalk encircling the village square for convenience and allows all types of visitors to enjoy this wonderful museum.

⁷⁹ "About Us," Prairie Village Museum, last modified 2019, accessed March 24, 2019, <https://www.prairievillagemuseum.com/about-us>.

⁸⁰ "About Us," Prairie Village Museum, last modified 2021, accessed April 13, 2021, <https://www.prairievillagemuseum.com/about-us>.

The Prairie Village Museum also has an excellent museum gallery that exhibits local artists' work, and traveling exhibits, which exhibit different subject matter of the area's local history throughout the year. These traveling exhibits utilize photographic panels and stories to discuss historical topics from immigrant life in North Dakota, World War One and its impact on North Dakota, farming during the late 19th and early 20th century, and others that highlight the history of this area. Recently, the museum hosted a series of exhibits on the immigrant experience in North Dakota. An exhibit titled, "*New Land, New Life: Norwegian Immigration to the Upper Midwest*," detailed the story of Norwegian immigrants who settled in this region, and discussed topics on education, employment, and culture.⁸¹ Another fascinating exhibit titled, "*Women Behind the Plow*," chronicled the experience of individual women on the farm and in rural communities of North Dakota during the first half of the 20th century.⁸² These exhibits are examples of the hard work and dedication the Prairie Village Museum staff and volunteers have to continually preserve and interpret the history of this region. The photographs and stories the traveling exhibits utilize immerse and educate visitors on several aspects of the history of north-central North Dakota and tell the story of its people.

The Prairie Village Museum's village square is modeled after a turn of the 20th century north-central North Dakota pioneer town, and through their many historical reenactments and festivals, this village brings history to life. From having summer camps for kids, to their annual Village Fair, these events utilizing the village square offer visitors entertaining and unique educational experiences and brings the community into the museum. Every August the Prairie Village

⁸¹ Sue Sitter, "'New Land, New Life' Norwegian Immigration to Upper Midwest featured at Prairie Village Museum," *Minot Daily News*, February 24, 2019, accessed March 20, 2022, <https://www.minotdailynews.com/life/arts-entertainment/2019/02/new-land-new-life/>.

⁸² Pierce County Tribune Staff, "Prairie Village Museum opens new exhibit," *The Pierce County Tribune*, November 9, 2018, accessed March 20, 2022, <https://www.thepiercecountytribune.com/news/local-news/2018/11/09/prairie-village-museum-opens-new-exhibit/>.

Museum holds their Village Fair. This large, daylong event has museum staff and volunteers making use of the village square buildings to perform historical reenactments and demonstrations. For example, visitors may order a drink at the saloon and enjoy listening to a volunteer dressed in period costumes playing the piano, sing hymns in the Zion Lutheran Church, or participate in blacksmithing demonstrations.⁸³ These are just a sample of the exciting opportunities the Village Fair offers for community members and visitors to learn about the area's local history.

The Prairie Village Museum continues to be an important local institution. The dedication of the museum staff to preserve and interpret their local history has created excitement for the museum among community members. The museum's vast collections and historical buildings in the village square combined with the many entertaining events and festivals the museum hosts all contribute to the museum's mission to preserve the history of north-central North Dakota.

Many local and county museums share similar beginnings: fascinating collections, a dedicated staff, passionate volunteers, and dedication to preserving their area's history. Unlike many local and county museums, as the next chapter will explore, the Sargent County, Myra, and Prairie Village museums were able to overcome the obstacles of becoming stagnant within their communities to developing into a vital community institution.

⁸³ Sue Sitter, "Prairie Village Museum sees 'large turnout' for rainy Village Fair," *The Pierce County Tribune*, September 4, 2021, accessed April 10, 2022, <https://www.thepiercecountytribune.com/lifestyles/features/2021/09/04/prairie-village-museum-sees-large-turnout-for-rainy-village-fair/>.

CHAPTER III

NEW MUSEUOLGY AND THE COMMUNITY SARGENT COUNTY MUSEUM, PRAIRIE VILLAGE, AND MYRA MUSEUM

The museum that does not prove an outcome to its community is as socially irresponsible as the business that fails to show a profit...This outcome should be no less than the positive and intended differences that it makes in the lives of the individuals and communities that constitutes its target audience.

-Stephen Weil, *Making Museums Matter*

With the current debates on museum roles, one may wonder, what constitutes a “good” or “bad” museum? Most museum directors and staff will proclaim their museum matters to the local communities, but is the museum a “good” museum? Proponents of “old” museology, like Josie Appleton, will most likely argue a good museum is one that focuses on scholarship and the professionalism of museum work. Scholars who argue for “new” museology, as Jennifer Barrett explained, will argue a good museum focuses, intellectually and physically, “for greater proportions of the public.”⁸⁴ “New” museology focuses the museum on a community centered approach, with directors working on how they can utilize their institution to benefit the community it serves. This approach, according to Barrett, “emphasized the need for further modification of museum practices to accommodate and engage with community aspirations.”⁸⁵ For directors and staff of small local and county museums, should they build the museum around more of a focus on professionalism and preservation, or take a more community focused approach?

⁸⁴ Barrett, *Museums and the Public Sphere*, 167.

⁸⁵ Barrett, *Museums and the Public Sphere*, 167.

To begin to answer that question, Timothy Ambrose and Crispin Paine suggest all museum directors “need to ask themselves-what business is my museum in, what overall product or service is it providing, does it stand out in the marketplace, is it accessible in terms of location and price, do people know about it, how do they know about it, do they speak well of it-are they satisfied?”⁸⁶ Pat Olofson, the museum director and president of the museum association, Museums In North Dakota (MIND), explained that many county and local museums in North Dakota are operated by volunteers from the local historical society, and face challenges of obtaining sufficient financial support.⁸⁷ Like many county museums in North Dakota, the Sargent County Museum does not have the resources to hire professional museum staff and rely on local community support. Because of this, local and county museums are dependent on community members to survive and need to have the community view the museum as a vital institution. Stephen Weil explained that a good museum goes beyond education and works to make a positive difference in the quality of people’s lives, and if a “dedication to public service is its driving force, a museum can be a good one in an almost infinite number of ways.”⁸⁸ For local and county museums to best preserve and interpret local history, a “new” museological, community focused approach is best in order for the museum to continue to survive.

Local and county museum staff must utilize the area communities to devise new opportunities to advertise the museum, communicate with community members, and form outreach activities to build support for the county museum. Drawing from interviews with the directors and staff members of the Sargent County Museum, Prairie Village Museum, and Myra Museum, and my experience interning at the Sargent County Museum, this chapter explores the importance of

⁸⁶ Ambrose and Paine, *Museum Basics*, 19.

⁸⁷ Olofson, interviewed by author, Forman, ND, February 23, 2017.

⁸⁸ Weil, *Making Museums Matter*, 73-74.

county museums having a community centered approach to build support for the museum and presents different marketing strategies and community outreach events to increase museum growth.

Pat Olofson explained that several small museums in North Dakota have become stagnant. The volunteers open the museum, sit for a few hours, and then close. Olofson stated that many of these small museums have done little in community outreach.⁸⁹ Anthropologist Marjorie Halpin stated in her article, “‘Play it Again, Sam’: Reflections on a New Museology” that the purpose of a museum is to survive, and whether or not museums “ought to survive is a question that our constituencies will, in the long or short run, answer for us.”⁹⁰ The survival for museums, especially smaller museums, depends on community support, remaining relevant in society, and continually developing opportunities to engage with community members. Having a strong base of local support is essential for county museums. Increasing public and private funding for the county museum depends on if community members see the museum as a public good. Graham Black, author of *Transforming Museums in the Twenty-First Century*, explained:

Museums must either grasp the opportunities offered by our changing society or lose relevance within a generation. They must redefine their roles and discover ways, through engaging with their users, not only to reposition their offer but also to open up new funding streams...If museums do not change to respond flexibly and rapidly changing public demand, that public will go elsewhere.⁹¹

Museums must engage with local communities to build support. Without keeping in touch with local communities, the museum will fade into irrelevancy.

⁸⁹ Olofson, interviewed by author, Forman, ND, February 23, 2017.

⁹⁰ Marjorie M. Halpin, “‘Play It again, Sam’: Reflections on a New Museology,” in *Museums and their Communities*, ed. Sheila Watson (New York, NY: Routledge), 51.

⁹¹ Black, *Transforming Museums in the 21st Century*, 7.

John Cotton Dana, the founder of the Newark Museum in New Jersey, and author of *The New Museum*, explained that museums are public institutions and thus must provide services to the public. The essence of the public service of a public institution, according to Dana, is the public's knowledge of the services that institutions can give. Dana's advice for museums is to "advertise, advertise, and then advertise again. Advertising is the very life and blood of all the education a museum can give."⁹² Museum staff must make their name known and promote the services they provide. N. Elizabeth Schlatter claimed that effective museum marketing compliments the museum's overall mission by strengthening the organization's role in the community, attracting new audiences to the museum, and improving the museum's reputation among community members.⁹³

Contemporary society is reliant on social media and online access for news and information. Because of this, an online presence will help the museum advertise to a large audience. This can be done through social media sites, such as Facebook and Twitter, and having a regularly updated museum website. Presenting people with the opportunity to find information about the museum on the internet or through social media can be effective ways to promote the museum.

I interned at the Sargent County Museum during the summer of 2015 and 2016. The first summer interning, my duties were inventorying and cataloging the museum objects into a computer archiving program. The museum staff did not focus much on advertising the museum. The only main form of advertisement was the museum website and a brochure. The website only listed the hours of operation and some photographs of the farm machinery in the museum. The brochure was wordy and only advertised farm machinery.

⁹² Watson, *Museums and their Communities*, 50.

⁹³ Schlatter, *Museum Careers*, 39.

Pat Olofson took over the duties of museum director and curator in May of 2016. She redesigned the brochure and website. She made the brochure less cluttered and advertised exhibits besides the farm equipment to appeal to a wider audience. She updated the website to include a statement of purpose, photographs of the different exhibits in the museum, past events the museum held, different opportunities for donating money or volunteering at the museum, and links to other local attractions. Now the website is easily navigable and promotes other county businesses.⁹⁴ Also, updating the website to be more community orientated, Olofson has helped the museum become a vital link to the local communities of Sargent County. The updated website and brochure are advertising the museum while also exhibiting its importance to the community. The museum is promoting itself while also being a promoter of local businesses. This helps community members view the museum as not only an important institution for preserving their history, but also vital to the growth of the local communities.

My second summer interning at the museum with Pat Olofson as the director, the museum volunteers became more involved in finding more opportunities to market the museum. I noticed a shift in the museum volunteers' attitudes towards the museum. There was less emphasis on simply inventorying the objects to more of a focus on how the museum can advertise to reach local communities for support. The museum staff reached out to local television stations inquiring about purchasing an advertisement. Many of the volunteers donated money to purchase local and statewide television advertisements helping market the museum to a wider audience. The advertisement was approximately thirty-seconds in length, and it helped people from different areas of the state see the exhibits in the museum.

⁹⁴ Olofson, interviewed by author, Forman, ND, February 23, 2017.

Investing in television advertisements was a financial risk, and when the Sargent County Historical Society held their monthly meetings, one of the main items of conversation was if the society had the finances to fund it. The Sargent County Museum board members were able to fund a television advertisement, however, for some county museums television or roadside advertisements may not be fiscally possible. Having a small budget should not inhibit county museum staff from advertising the museum; thus, they must find other ways to advertise the museum while also incorporating the local communities to increase support.

Communication between the museum staff and community members is key for building support. County museum directors have an obligation to keep community members informed on activities happening at the museum. Dr. Sheila Watson claimed that working with communities either inside the museum or in the form of outreach activities may help the museum become more relevant to community members.⁹⁵ Outreach activities do not have to be expensive for the museum. For example, Pat Olofson writes a weekly column during the summer in the local newspaper, the *Sargent County Teller*, to keep community members up to date with what is happening at the museum. Whether this is explaining new items donated, new exhibits, or upcoming special events being held, Olofson utilizes the local paper to create an inexpensive way to communicate with community members to help build support for the museum.

Pat Olofson calls her weekly newspaper column the “Museum Minute.” This short column in the newspaper keeps community members updated on museum activities. Below is an example of the “Museum Minute” that was in the *Sargent County Teller* for May 5, 2017, and posted on the museum website:

⁹⁵ Watson, ed., *Museums and their Communities*, 11.

It is that time of year when the Sargent County Museum is almost ready for the new season. With the help of Doosan Days in April we now have the tractors and equipment in building #3 up on blocks and not sinking into the ground any longer. We also have new this year Smart TV's that will be showing how farming has been through the years. You will see these in buildings 3 & 4 and we will be adding more video to them as the summer goes on. We also have new hands on exhibits. This is where you can touch what we have out in those areas. You can touch and feel the uniforms and equipment that was used in World War I. You can type a note out on the manual typewriter. Or maybe you want to see what a stereoscope is and how you can see the pictures through it. Then we have the new fossil area in building 4 and when you are done learning there you can do a word search or crossword puzzle on fossils. And do not forget to stop by the phone exhibit in building 2 and sit in the old wooden and tin phone booth and maybe call a friend that is with you and have a party line call. We are improving to meet your needs and make the Museum something new to stop by and visit. Our first event of the season is a Family Health Fair. Stop by Wednesday, May 10 we will be open from 2-8:30 that day with the Health Fair starting at 5:30. Check out our ad in the paper to see who all will be set up for it. We are still looking for money donations for a Smart Tv to put in building 1 so that we can tell the story of the war and oral histories of Vets. Let us know if you would like to be a part of that project.⁹⁶

Olofson's newspaper column provides community members updates occurring in the museum, upcoming events at the museum, and donation opportunities for community members. This simple newspaper column, and a post on the museum's website, is essential in maintaining its relevance in the local communities. Olofson explained the "Museum Minute" has helped community members see how the museum has evolved. It advertises new items and learning opportunities at the museum, and she believes this is helping change perception some community members have of the museum.⁹⁷ To build support, museum staff must have a strong communication link with the community. A small newspaper article, such as Olofson's "Museum Minute," presents to community members that the museum is constantly growing, and there are many opportunities to visit and see something new. It is also another opportunity to open the museum to the community members. It creates a dialogue between the museum and the

⁹⁶ Pat Olofson, "Museum Minute," Sargent County Museum, last modified 2017, accessed June 22, 2022, <http://www.sargentcountymuseum.org/museum-minute/>.

⁹⁷ Olofson, interviewed by author, Forman, ND, February 23, 2017.

community. Simple weekly newspaper columns like the “Museum Minute” or a weekly update post on social media are crucial outreach opportunities to build the museum-community relationship. These small, but essential outreach programs will present to community members that the museum is alive in the community, it is inviting community involvement, and will help develop strong community connections.

Utilizing the local newspaper can market the museum to a wider audience as well. Besides the “Museum Minute,” Olofson has a weekly newspaper article called “Once Upon a Time,” where she provides a picture of an object with a description of what it was used for, and has people try to guess what the object is. Each week she selects unique artifacts in the museum for people to view and learn about its history. Olofson stated she had a man from California who subscribed to the *Sargent County Teller* call the museum inquiring about the object he saw in the paper.⁹⁸ Having pictures and description of objects from the museum in the local newspaper provides an opportunity for community members, and anyone who reads the local newspaper, to learn about some of the museum’s collections.

To have a successful county museum, the director must rethink how the museum works with the local communities.⁹⁹ The museum must not be separate from the community, and directors must devise ways for community members to have opportunities to learn how the museum is growing. The “Museum Minute” and “Once Upon a Time” articles in the local newspaper are a few examples of how Pat Olofson used the local newspaper to market the museum.

Nichole Kenney, former history graduate student at the University of North Dakota, and intern at Sargent County and the Myra Museum, explained that these two museums face many of

⁹⁸ Olofson, interviewed by author, Forman, ND, February 23, 2017.

⁹⁹ Falk and Dierking, *The Museum Experience Revisited*, 296.

the same challenges. Despite the Myra Museum being in a more populous area, both museums have a small staff and are attempting to create more marketing opportunities.¹⁰⁰ According to Kenney, a significant difference between these two museums is that the Sargent County Museum is involved in the community in ways the Myra Museum is not, signaling out Olofson's use of the local newspaper. Kenney stated that the Myra Museum could benefit from reaching out to the local newspaper and have section where they discuss the museum.¹⁰¹ Having a simple newspaper column on new events or museum exhibits is an efficient way to create more museum exposure. The local newspaper is an excellent resource that can be used to bring the museum into the homes of the community members, keeping the museum relevant and demonstrating the growth of the museum.

According to the 2016 Sargent County Museum visitation numbers, the Sargent County Museum had 492 visitors, and of that total 113 were from Sargent County. Rudy Rathert, a resident of Forman, who has been donating to the museum for many years stated:

Quite often, it's hard to get somebody [to visit the museum] for the first time. But once they [visit], they come back. I don't care if they are 500 miles away, when they come back, most of the time they bring someone with them. Most people when they drive by [the museum] they don't realize what's in here. But once they get in here, even if they aren't interested in certain [objects], they get interested.¹⁰²

Orville Nelson, a longtime member of the Sargent County Historical Society, asked Rathert what percentage of the people in Forman have visited the museum. Rathert responded and Nelson agreed that less than half of the residents of Forman have visited the museum. Rathert also stated

¹⁰⁰ Nichole Kenney, e-mail message to author, December 27, 2017. The Sargent County Museum has one main staff member in Pat Olofson, and the Myra Museum has one full time member-the director and employ a part time position as well.

¹⁰¹ Kenney, e-mail message to author, December 27, 2017.

¹⁰² Rudy Rathert, interviewed by author, Forman, ND, February 23, 2017.

that he knows of some Forman residents that have never been inside the museum.¹⁰³ County museums must have the support of the local communities, and a significant challenge for the Sargent County Museum is trying to have more community members visit the museum.

Peter Davis, author of *Ecomuseums: A Sense of Place* explained, museums do not work with communities, but with individuals within those communities.¹⁰⁴ A county museum exists for the community members, and because of this, community members are the most important visitors for county museums. Carl E. Guthe, the New York State Museum director from 1944 to 1953 stated that a museum which professes to be a public institution must recognize that its existence depends on the good will of the community.¹⁰⁵ Guthe advised small museums to offer “supplementary” services that will encourage more frequent use and aid for the museum.¹⁰⁶ To increase local support, county museum directors must develop opportunities that extend beyond having visitors view the museum exhibits. Timothy Ambrose and Crispin Paine explained in *Museum Basics* that museum involvement in the community may go beyond a casual museum visit, and extend into fundraising programs, volunteer work, oral history, anything that will build public interest and support.¹⁰⁷ Building public interest and support is essential for future success of museums, and directors must develop new strategies to have community members, who may not have a high interest in the museum, visit the museum.

When Pat Olofson became museum director, she understood there was a need for the museum to build relationships with people to help the museum grow. Olofson believed that county

¹⁰³ Orville Nelson, interviewed by author, Forman, ND, February 23, 2017; Rudy Rather, interviewed by the author, Forman, ND, February 23, 2017.

¹⁰⁴ Peter Davis, *Ecomuseums: A Sense of Place*, in *Museums and their Communities*, ed. Sheila Watson (New York, NY: Routledge), 18.

¹⁰⁵ Guthe, *The Management of Small Museums*, 21.

¹⁰⁶ Guthe, *The Management of Small Museums*, 76.

¹⁰⁷ Ambrose and Paine, *Museum Basics*, 17.

museum directors need to “think outside the box” to build local support.¹⁰⁸ Salvatore G. Cilella, Jr., stated in *Fundraising for Small Museums* that museums are in a desperate need of reinventing themselves with newer and more creative ways of building support. Cilella, Jr., continued that membership, annual giving, and special events create an intimate relationship, and faster the museum directors recognize the connections the more successful the fundraising will be.¹⁰⁹ Olofson expressed the desire for the museum to become not only a place where community members come to view exhibits, but also be recognized as a place where local businesses or organizations can utilize for conferences or other related events. To accomplish this, Olofson worked with many local businesses and organizations to hold outreach events at the museum.

Olofson stated that the county museum is for community members, thus must think of ways to give back to the community.¹¹⁰ One outreach activity she organized was having the Sargent County Museum host a health fair. This provided many community members an opportunity to have a free and quick health check-up. The health fair had many organizations such as the Blue Cross Blue Shield of North Dakota, the Sargent County District Health Unit, and the American Cancer Society coming to the museum to provide services for community members. People who came to the museum could have their blood pressure checked, learn about different wellness programs and physical therapy services, while being able to view the museum exhibits. This event provided a valuable service to community members, helped promote area health organizations, and brought awareness to the museum and how it can be utilized for events other than a casual visit.

¹⁰⁸ Pat Olofson, interviewed by author, Forman, ND, February 23, 2017.

¹⁰⁹ Cilella Jr., *Fundraising for Small Museums*, ix, 133.

¹¹⁰ Pat Olofson, interviewed by author, Forman, ND, February 23, 2017.

While interviewing the museum volunteers, I asked what they believed are the main challenges for the future of the museum, many expressed the need to gain younger support. Olofson also expressed the need to have younger people visiting the museum. To increase younger community members' support, she has been active with the local schools building relationships to create school events at the museum. For example, she gave one of the local school's principal a tour of the museum. The principal, she stated, was amazed at how much the museum could teach students not only about history, but also music, home economics, and geography. She explained how the museum can educate students outside of the textbook and relate better with the content.¹¹¹ Becoming involved with local schools is important for building younger generations' support for the museum. The museum director must be proactive with schools to demonstrate the multiple learning opportunities the museum can offer because having this connection will help build present and future younger support.

The directors of the Myra Museum and the Prairie Village Museum both discussed the need for more youth to visit the museum and have been creating different opportunities to reach out to younger community members. Leah Byzewski, director of the Myra Museum, and the museum volunteers host a "Legends of Terror Haunted House" in October.¹¹² Stefanie Steinke, the director of the Prairie Village Museum, have offered a "Kid's Camp" where the museum is opened for kids to come and learn about different histories and explore the museum.¹¹³ Hosting a "kid's camp" or haunted house at the museum are unique events for younger community members to have opportunities to experience something different at the museum. It is essential

¹¹¹ Olofson, interviewed by author, Forman, ND, February 23, 2017.

¹¹² Leah Byzewski, e-mail message to author, March 1, 2018.

¹¹³ Stefanie Steinke, interviewed by author, Rugby, ND, January 18, 2018.

for future growth of a museum that staff create different opportunities for younger community members to generate interest and involvement in the museum.

Another method to create community involvement is providing historical presentations. Presentations are an effective form of educating people about local history. These presentations and discussions can bring what one may read in a textbook to life. It brings new aspects to presenting and learning history, thus, can be an important form of outreach to increase community involvement.

Pat Olofson recognized the importance of agriculture, which is one of the main economic forces in Sargent County. With this understanding, she planned presentation events hosted at the museum on early to mid-1900s farming practices in Sargent County. These events were led by museum volunteers and had many community members come to the museum to speak about their history. Community members, who were over 90 years of age to teenagers, came together to learn about an important facet of Sargent County's history.¹¹⁴ These events provided opportunities for community members to come together and discuss their history. It helped the younger generations learn from the elderly population about how farming practices have evolved. More importantly, it helped the people of Sargent County understand how one's own history is impacted by their community.

¹¹⁴ Olofson, interviewed by author, Forman, ND, February 23, 2017.



Figure 1. *Standing center*, Orville Nelson; *sitting center*, Ron Narum, led a discussion on farming practices of the early to mid-1900s. Photograph by Pat Olofson, <http://www.sargentcountymuseum.org/events/past-events/>.

Historical presentations and discussions present opportunities for county museums to build connections beyond the local communities. It is also important to incorporate people from other counties to present different aspects of history. Having people outside of one's county come and speak at the county museum presents unique marketing and learning opportunities for community members. For example, the Sargent County Museum hosted demonstrations on wheat weaving, and a professor from the University of North Dakota presented a discussion on North Dakota corn husking contests from the late 1930s and early 1940s. While the presenters discussed history that was not explicitly about the community members of Sargent County, it sparked dialogue between the presenters and community members on local history. Events such as these help community members connect their history to state and national history and help market the museum to a wider audience. The county museum made connections with people and organizations outside of the county, creating a wider outreach, and leading to further growth for the museum.



Figure 2. *Standing front*, University of North Dakota and Chester Fritz Distinguished Professor of History, Gordon L. Iseminger presents on North Dakota Corn Husking Contest of 1939-1941. Photograph by Pat Olofson.
<http://www.sargentcountymuseum.org/events/past-events/>.



Figure 3. *Standing center*, Holly Froemke, from Lisbon, North Dakota, demonstrates wheat weaving to Sargent County community members. Photograph by Pat Olofson,
<http://www.sargentcountymuseum.org/events/past-events/>.

Local businesses are one of the main resources to build support for the county museum. These businesses present donation opportunities and can be used for community outreach activities. Pat Olofson explained she would like to open the museum to businesses to host their events. According to Olofson, many of the local businesses have employee gatherings and other events at locations outside of the county, and she has been contacting businesses explaining that the county museum would like to host business events.¹¹⁵

One event Olofson organized was with the Bobcat Company, a major manufacturer and retailer of construction equipment, and an important economic industry to Sargent County. Bobcat is a major manufacturer of the “Skid-Steer Loader,” and the museum hosted one of the inventors of this loader to give a discussion about the history and progression of this type of construction equipment. Olofson also contacted a local television station to broadcast the presentation. This event brought recognition to the museum from a wide audience, helped the community members learn about the history of an important local business, and increased support for the museum from a successful company. The Bobcat Company is one of the primary employers in Sargent County and having the support of this business is important for the future success of the museum. Contacting and creating outreach activities with local businesses will help the museum have a more active role in the community and create more opportunities for community involvement.

¹¹⁵ Pat Olofson, interviewed by author, Forman, ND, February 23, 2017.



Figure 4. *Left*, Cyril Keller, one of the inventors of “Skid-Steer Loader,” is being interviewed by a member of the KVRN Television Station based in Fargo, North Dakota. Cyril Keller presented on the history of the development of the “Skid-Steer Loader.” Photograph by Pat Olofson, <http://www.sargentcountymuseum.org/events/past-events/>.

Myra Museum director Leah Byzewski explained that events held at the museum work as marketing tools as well as fundraising programs. One popular program the museum presents is called “Entertaining History.” It is a winter lecture series and has become a popular community activity. Byzewski stated that the rising popularity of this event has the museum staff searching to find more room for the audience.¹¹⁶ The “Entertaining History” lecture is a free event presented by the Grand Forks County Historical Society hosted in the Myra Museum. This event allows community members to come together at the museum to discuss and learn different aspects of their local history. Byzewski stated that one of their latest “Entertaining History” event brought in about 125 people to the museum.¹¹⁷ Historical presentations, discussions, and

¹¹⁶ Byzewski, e-mail message to author, March 1, 2018.

¹¹⁷ Byzewski, e-mail message to author, March 1, 2018.

lecture events help the county museum create community excitement for local history and the museum. As these events gain popularity, so does the museum. Byzewski noted that their “Entertaining History” event costs the historical society some money, however, it has become popular with their long-term members and fits the museum’s historical mission.¹¹⁸

One of my interview questions for Stephanie Steinke was how she and the Prairie Village Museum volunteers are working to generate more support and community involvement in the museum. Steinke responded that museum staff need to “trick” community members to visit the museum. She explained that providing events such as presentations and lectures held at the museum have been popular among the local community members as well.¹¹⁹ According to Steinke, some of their museum community members have not visited the museum in years, because they believe that little has changed. Outreach activities are allowing Steinke and the volunteer staff to show the community members that the museum has changed and that they are working hard to create new novel visiting experiences¹²⁰ “Tricking” community members into visiting the museum might be needed at first and continuing to create outreach events that provide more opportunities for community members will help generate excitement for the museum.

Outreach activities have a positive outcome for the local communities. Olofson realized there was a specific community need and utilized the museum to aid the community. Jennifer Berret explained in *Museums and the Public Sphere*, that museums should, and can, be a productive cultural public sphere in social life.¹²¹ The health fair promoted local businesses and

¹¹⁸ Byzewski, e-mail message to author, March 1, 2018.

¹¹⁹ Steinke, interviewed by author, Rugby, ND, January 18, 2018.

¹²⁰ Steinke, interviewed by author, Rugby, ND, January 18, 2018.

¹²¹ Barrett, *Museums and the Public Sphere*, 171.

organizations, the health of the community members, and the museum. Involvement in local schools will build support from younger generations and present more educational opportunities for educators. Presentations, discussions, and lecture events bring community members together in a fun environment to learn about their history. These events create positive services for community members, and demonstrate to local businesses and organizations that the museum is more than a place for viewing objects, but an institution where the community can come together.

The future success of a county museum relies on local support and creating opportunities for community members who normally would not visit the museum to walk through its doors. Continuing to provide unique outreach activities for community members will allow the museum to flourish for years to come.

In contemporary society, county museums cannot afford to only be a museum. Funding for the museum comes back to meeting community needs, and without local support the museum will fail. Community members must find evidence that the museum is providing a positive public service.¹²² When I first arrived at the Sargent County Museum for my internship in July of 2015, I was blown away by the size of the museum and number of antique farm machinery. However, when I returned the following summer to continue my internship, I was impressed with the number of ideas newly appointed museum director Olofson had for the museum. Her ideas revolved around creating activities that incorporated community members. She jumped at any opportunity for more people to visit the museum, whether it was through a health fair or having

¹²² Falk, *Identity and the Museum Visitor Experience*, 245, 247.

community oral history events. She was continually “thinking outside the box” to find ways to promote the museum.

Before Pat Olofson was appointed museum director in 2016, the Sargent County Museum was stagnant. The previous museum directors and staff helped build the museum to a large four building museum, but then became stuck. There was little in the way of community involvement. Olofson ended her interview with me stating, “Every museum has the ability-a good base- to succeed. [Museum directors] need to think outside the box to get to the next level.”¹²³ The Sargent County Museum volunteers created an excellent base but needed some new ideas and a new approach to help the museum grow, and Olofson is leading the way. Leah Byzewski and the volunteers at the Myra Museum have created a positive reputation with community members, and they are working towards growth.¹²⁴ Stephanie Steinke and the Prairie Village Museum are becoming more involved in their local communities to increase support. Everything the museum does is for the community, it promotes the local businesses, organizations, and preserves the area’s local history. Now, these county museums are becoming more than only a museum, but a vital institution to local communities.

Stephen Weil explained that the emerging museum can be of “profound service, to use their competencies in collecting, preserving, studying, and interpreting objects to enrich the quality of individual lives and to enhance their community’s well-being.”¹²⁵ Local and county museums can, and must, use their institutions to not only preserve and interpret local history, but also work to improve, as Weil stated, the community’s well-being. These small museums are special and essential institutions for the preservation of local history and the health of the local communities.

¹²³ Olofson, interviewed by author, Forman, ND, February 23, 2017.

¹²⁴ Byzewski, e-mail message to author, March 1, 201.

¹²⁵ Weil, *Making Museums Matter*, 49.

The Sargent County, Prairie Village, and Myra museums have directors that are hardworking and forward thinking, and friendly volunteers who dedicate their valuable time to the museum. Because of their hard work, the future of their respective museums is bright. To bring one's county museum to the next level the museum director and volunteers must be proactive in the community. County museum directors cannot become complacent. The future success of county museums relies on museum directors continuing to develop unique opportunities for community involvement with the museum. County museums will always face challenges, but with a staff that "thinks outside the box" the museum will continue to find success and be an essential local community institution.

CHAPTER IV

NEW MUSEOLOGY AND THE VISITOR EXPERIENCE EXHIBITS, COLLECTIONS, AND COMMUNITY MEMBERS

Too many small history museums still believe the name of museum. Many are little more than depositories of historical objects. Their collections are not adequately cataloged or are not cataloged at all. Their methods of preservation do credit to attic storehouses. Their exhibits are little more than organized confusion.

-Carl E. Guthe, *The Management of Small History Museums*

Merriam-Webster defines the word “change” as to “make different in some particular, to alter, to make radically different, to transform.”¹²⁶ For many, it is a word that is feared for it may lead to something different and unknown. It is a word that some would prefer not to experience and continue to live in what has always been. It is also a word that can lead one out of their comfort zone to experience something beautiful. For the small local and county museum worker, change is a word that can be intimidating. The long-time museum board member or volunteer, who had been dedicating their own time, energy, and money to operate the local museum for years may be apprehensive when some no name graduate student suggests they change the way they preserve and interpret their local history and offers new ideas on how to improve their museum.

As the ICOM and scholars continue to debate the changing museum roles, the local and county museum must be willing to change and transform to contemporary society. LaTanya Autry previously stated that if “we”, meaning museum directors and professionals, care about the communities they serve need to objectively present the area’s history, which may include

¹²⁶ “Definition of Change,” Merriam-Webster, Incorporated, last modified 2022, accessed June 22, 2022.

histories of violence and exclusion that have existed.¹²⁷ This is done by including all community members in the preservation and interpretation of the area's local history.

The Strong National Museum of Play (Strong Museum) in Rochester, New York, was established in the mid-1960s and created by gifts of very large private collections of Margaret Woodbury Strong, and her collections mainly focused on American history from 1830 to 1940. As time passed, the museum staff recognized that its ties to the community were becoming progressively weaker with falling attendance, declining public interest, and nobody below the age of fifty could make any meaningful connection with the museum's end date of 1940.¹²⁸ To learn how the museum could rebuild its reputation and community interest, staff went into the local community to ask if there was something else, something different, something the museum could change that the community might find more useful. With this, they found that the community desired a museum orientated toward contemporary issues and more family friendly. The community wanted a museum where parents might take their children to learn important lessons. Since 1992, the Strong Museum has created exhibits dealing with AIDS, the cold war, racism, alcohol and drugs, and the history of play and children's lifestyles.¹²⁹ Because of the museum staff recognizing that they need community involvement in the museum, it continues to expand and placed itself as an important community institution. The museum embraced change to help better preserve and interpret history for community members to make meaningful connections with.

¹²⁷ Autry, interview by Suyin Haynes, "Why a Plan to Redefine the Meaning of 'Museum' Is Stirring Up Controversy," *Time*.

¹²⁸ Weil, *Making Museums Matter*, 209.

¹²⁹ Weil, *Making Museums Matter*, 209-210.

My experience interning at the Sargent County Museum revealed that despite the museum having four large buildings filled with numerous objects, did not necessarily mean this museum was having success. The museum had lots of objects, but that was it. The volunteers have helped the museum grow into this beautiful large county museum. However, as Candace Matelic explained in “New Roles for Small Museums,” having a successful museum means more than building new buildings, museum staff need to think of new opportunities that focus on the future, both short and long term, of the museum.¹³⁰ The museum was large, but its collections were cluttered and had little to no information for visitors to learn about it. The Sargent County Museum has grown externally but the staff had become complacent, perhaps because of lack of experience and knowledge, with its collections and exhibits.

The previous chapter discussed how museum staff can work with local communities to gain support and build the community-museum relationship. This chapter focuses on “new” museology with the museum’s collections and the visitor experience. Drawing from interviews with museum staff at Sargent County, Prairie Village, and Myra museums, this chapter explores what can be done inside the museum to continue to have visitors enter through its doors. For the county museum to be successful, the staff must work to improve the museum visitor experience. This entails working with and learning more about the museum’s collections, how to present these objects in captivating ways, and communicating with community members and museum visitors on approaches to improve the museum to better preserve and interpret the areas local history.

¹³⁰ Candace Matelic, “New Roles for Small Museums,” in *The Small Museum Toolkit*, ed. Cinnamon Catlin-Legutko and Stacy Klingler (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2012), 142.

The local and county museum serves the community members and because of this must engage with the local communities to improve, change, and adapt to contemporary society. Graham Black explained, “Museums must either grasp the opportunities offered by our changing society or lose relevance within a generation. They must redefine their roles and discover ways, through engaging with their users.”¹³¹ Future success depends on museum staff not becoming complacent with what the museum has, but to continue to provide exciting and educational visitor experiences.

When I arrived in Forman, North Dakota for my internship at the Sargent County Museum, many of the museum volunteers gave me a tour of the impressive four buildings that make up the museum.¹³² They were eager to educate me about the many antique tractors and farming machinery. Listening to the volunteers and learning about their collections became a blessing for me because many had little to no information about the objects in exhibits, except what the object is and who donated it. If visitors had questions about certain pieces, the only information I could give them was what I learned from the volunteers or what I could find before their visit was over. The lack of collections information, I believe, was created with the lack of realization by the volunteers that more information would help visitors understand the significance of the objects to the community. Due to the volunteers’ lack of understanding of the potential in which museums can enhance the local communities, led to objects being placed in the museum with no story behind it, but only the name of the object and the donor.

¹³¹ Black, *Transforming Museums in the Twenty-First Century*, 7.

¹³² I started my first internship at Sargent County in July 2015.

As explained in the previous chapter, Pat Olofson, a ten-year volunteer at the museum, became the new director and curator of the museum during my second summer interning.¹³³ With Olofson as the director, there was a burst of innovative ideas that followed, and one of the main areas of focus was dealing with the museum objects. Olofson stated that one cannot assume everyone is going to know and recognize the name of the donor on an object. She emphasized that museum staff need to be well informed about the museum's collections. Thus, objects should not be displayed without knowing information on it first.¹³⁴ John H. Falk and Lynn D. Dierking explained in *The Museum Experienced Revisited*, that twenty-first century museums need to maximize the creativity, flexibility, and ingenuity of their relationships outside *and inside* the organization. An important measure of success will be how well the institution supports the continued learning and growth of its staff, including volunteers, and board. In a knowledge society, the single most important asset any organization possesses, particularly museums, is the intellectual "capital represented by its staff."¹³⁵ For the museum to grow, the staff must grow as well by continuing to learn about who the museum is for, and what the collections and exhibits convey about the local area. Museum staff must do more than inventory and display objects. Researching and having knowledge about the museum's collections will help the staff educate visitors on the importance of different artifacts to the history of the area that tell unique stories about the local communities.

Andrea Witcomb, professor of cultural heritage and museum studies at Deakin University in Victoria, Australia, worked with many small, local, volunteer run museums in Australia. At one small museum she worked with, the staff believed they should be doing more cataloguing and

¹³³ I started my second internship at Sargent County in May 2016, and this is also the time Pat Olofson was appointed curator and director.

¹³⁴ Pat Olofson, interview by the author, Forman, ND, February 23, 2017.

¹³⁵ Falk and Dierking, *The Museum Experience Revisited*, 297.

improving their displays. Witcomb explained that she helped the staff see a new way of looking at the history of the community, by understanding a little more about their collections, they could use them to tell stories about its history.¹³⁶ This situation parallels the Sargent County Museum. Some of the museum volunteers believed they should focus more on cataloging, and this was needed, but more was needed to be done with the objects in their museum to improve the visitor's experience. When displaying an artifact, museum staff and volunteers must do more than only name and label who donated it. The collections and exhibits serve a purpose to preserve and interpret the history of the local communities for community members to build connections with their history and tell the story of the area. Simply placing an object in a museum with its name and donor creates a negative visitor experience and is a disservice to the local communities because the visitor is just seeing discarded material culture.

Pat Olofson is also the current president of Museums in North Dakota (MIND), and works with many county and local museums, large and small, to help museum directors and staff in North Dakota grow. However, regarding museum collections, Olofson explained that some museums “just take items in and feel that that is enough, and they are doing what they should.” Olofson then stated that sometimes, “museum staff do not know better.”¹³⁷ Regarding the Sargent County Museum staff before Olofson was director, they may have believed that their job was to take objects in, label the objects, state who donated it, and set it out for public viewing. Olofson reiterates this point by stating many museums in North Dakota with small budgets and space think it is “okay to put things in and just leave them there forever.”¹³⁸ Stephanie Steinke, the director of the Prairie Village Museum in Rugby, North Dakota, explained that, for many

¹³⁶ Witcomb, *Re-Imagining the Museum*, in *Museums and Their Communities*, ed. Sheila Watson, 150.

¹³⁷ Olofson, e-mail message to author, November 1, 2017.

¹³⁸ Olofson, e-mail message to author, November 1, 2017.

years the staff took objects in and displayed them without providing information on its history and relevance to the local communities.¹³⁹ A county museum must convey through its collections the history of the local community members. Placing an object out for display is not enough to educate museum visitors and will not help visitors build connections.

Museums have an important role in education and play a vital role in providing an understanding of identity and a sense of belonging to a place or community.¹⁴⁰ The aim of museum education is to connect visitors with the history and story the exhibits convey. Museum staff must do more than present facts, but to use museum atmosphere to sow a seed of interest and spark interaction between the visitor and object.¹⁴¹ Once the museum staff learns more about the artifacts in their museum, they must use this knowledge to turn the museums displays into educational, interactive exhibits. Working to improve exhibits will help the museum staff develop their museum into more of a learning organization. Candace Matelic explained that there are three paradigm shifts in the museum field, with the third being museums “becoming learning organizations.” According to Matelic, museum staff are using their knowledge and experience to become more effective by going beyond the status quo to grow and evolve.¹⁴² With this, small museums must do more than “say” they are educating visitors about the history of the area they serve, but also embrace new ideas and experiment with different ways of interpreting museum objects to help improve the visitor experience.

Interpretation of objects means explaining what it is and its significance to the area.¹⁴³ G. Ellis Burcaw explained in his work, *Intro to Museum Work*, “the essential requirement in a good

¹³⁹ Stephanie Steinke, interviewed by author, Rugby, ND, January 18, 2018.

¹⁴⁰ Ambrose and Paine, *Museum Basics*, 3.

¹⁴¹ Ambrose and Paine, *Museum Basics*, 67

¹⁴² Matelic, “New Roles for Small Museums,” in *The Small Museum Toolkit*, ed. Catlin-Legutko and Klinger, 143.

¹⁴³ Ambrose and Paine, *Museum Basics*, 67.

history museum is that objects must be collected to serve the purpose of public education.”¹⁴⁴ The object must have relevance to the local communities and be exhibited in a way that helps educate museum visitors and the local communities about the history of the area. When I toured the Prairie Village Museum in Rugby and worked with Pat Olofson at the Sargent County Museum, there were some objects that felt out of place or irrelevant to the communities these county museums serve. Burcaw explained, “Collecting only impressive objects of the past without a serious intent to be engaged in social science is antiquarianism. Collections must be useful in an active program of public education.”¹⁴⁵ Olofson explained that with the museum’s collections, staff must strive to create exhibits that visitors and community members are able to relate with and see the progression of how the local communities have evolved.¹⁴⁶ Having antique pieces, while impressive it may be, if there is no relevance to the history of the area or attempt to explain its significance to the community members, the artifact is being misused.

The Prairie Village Museum acquired a dress that once belonged to Queen Victoria of England. This is impressive, but without any information about how the dress came to that area of North Dakota, there is no real learning; visitors are simply viewing a dress. However, Steinke and the volunteers at the Prairie Village Museum have done extensive research to understand why this dress is in North Dakota, and how this relates to the area’s history. They found records that the dress was a gift to Queen Victoria’s personal dresser when she left England to homestead in north-central North Dakota. This exhibit does more than state facts about the dress, it tells the story of a homesteading family in North Dakota.¹⁴⁷ The museum staff of Prairie Village

¹⁴⁴ Burcaw, G. Ellis, *Intro to Museum Work*, 39.

¹⁴⁵ Burcaw, *Intro to Museum Work*, 70.

¹⁴⁶ Olofson, interviewed by author, Forman, ND, February 23, 2017.

¹⁴⁷ Steinke, interviewed by author, Rugby, ND, January 18, 2018.

Museum did extensive work to create an exhibit that had information about the dress, and how it was relevant to North Dakota history and the history of the local area.

Pat Olofson stated, “items given by residents have ties nationally. Items from Sweden, Norway, Germany, it is their heritage.”¹⁴⁸ Olofson explained that museum staff can take objects and create informative exhibits that tell the story of how the local communities fit in the national narrative. Researching the museum’s objects and creating an informative exhibit will help community members understand how larger historical events have helped shape their history. Olofson stated that museum staff must somehow mix past with present to help people relate to the objects. Especially younger visitors, they need to have emotional contact to relate with objects.¹⁴⁹ The history the local and county museum presents is the history of the community members it serves. Witcomb stated that it is important for museums to establish connections with their contemporary audiences.¹⁵⁰ When developing exhibits, staff need to remember they are providing the story of their local communities and present the information for visitors to connect with the history.

A large exhibit that Olofson assigned me to improve was with their small, antique farm machinery. Before we worked on this exhibit, many of the pieces were displayed with no information. Through extensive research, Olofson and I created flip books for visitors to view the antique machinery while also learning about its history and relevance to the area. Much of the farm machinery in this exhibit are not exclusive to Sargent County, but, with these flip books,

¹⁴⁸ Olofson, interviewed by author, Forman, ND, February 23, 2017.

¹⁴⁹ Olofson, interviewed by author, Forman, ND, February 23, 2017.

¹⁵⁰ Witcomb, *Re-Imagining the Museum: Beyond the Mausoleum*, 165.

visitors are able to understand how this exhibit tells one part of the story of the Sargent County community members.

The Sargent County Museum and Pioneer Village Museum are both working to take the next step and elevate their respective county museums to the next level.¹⁵¹ Having knowledge of the contents in one's museum is the first step to sharing the story of the community members it serves. The next step is taking this knowledge and using it to educate not only museum visitors from outside the locale, but also educating the local communities on their history. A local history museum has the unique privilege and responsibility of serving as the tangible expression of the living memory of the community by giving its citizens "the opportunity to see and understand the objects that once played a part in its past experiences."¹⁵² Exhibits serve as interpretive tools to explain to the public the significance of objects to the local communities. Salvatore G. Cilella, Jr., remarked that if small museum directors and staff are clever and wise with their resources, they can not only survive but also thrive. The key to future success, according to Cilella, Jr., is the relevance of the museum's programs and the authenticity of genuine objects that tell a story, plus tell its story effectively.¹⁵³

Having a small museum budget is not an excuse to only display objects without providing information. Olofson and Steinke both stated that one of their future goals is to continue to turn displays into exhibits by providing more information on items.¹⁵⁴ Do not become complacent with what one's county museum has, but research to find more information about what is in

¹⁵¹ Steinke, interviewed by author, Rugby, ND, January 18, 2018; Olofson, interviewed by author, Forman, ND, February 23, 2017.

¹⁵² Guthe, *Management of Small Museums*, 76.

¹⁵³ Cilella Jr., *Fundraising for Small Museums*, xii.

¹⁵⁴ Steinke, interviewed by author, Rugby, ND, January 18, 2018; Olofson, interviewed by author, Forman, ND, February 23, 2017.

one's county museum. By doing this, the museum director, staff, or volunteers are helping to illuminate the story of not just the community members, but the land, the area, and people of the past.

The museum visitor's experience is an important factor for the success of a museum. A thriving museum is one where visitors will experience something different each time they enter the building.¹⁵⁵ Creating educational exhibits is the first step to improving the visitor's experience; the second is communicating with visitors and community members to continue to expand museum exhibits and help the museum grow.

A second paradigm shift in the museum field is a focus on making interpretation, programs, and community engagement everyone's business.¹⁵⁶ The museum director and volunteers are all important to the success of a museum and must be actively involved in the museum's affairs. Olofson echoed this need for museums, specifically small county museums, to have staff and volunteers be more involved in the museum. According to Olofson, many volunteers run museums throughout North Dakota by simply opening and closing with little to no internal change throughout the years. Olofson stated that county museums need to keep evolving and moving with the times and change so people who come in multiple times have something new to learn.¹⁵⁷

To understand how the museum can improve their collections and exhibits, the director and volunteers must communicate with museum visitors. One of the most effective ways to do this is working with visitors and community members on interpretation of objects. Museums can use interpretation as a powerful way to engage people and facilitate dialogue and deep reflection

¹⁵⁵ Schlatter, *Museum Careers*, 33.

¹⁵⁶ Matelic, "New Roles for Small Museums," in *The Small Museum Toolkit*, ed. Catlin-Legutko and Klingler, 142.

¹⁵⁷ Olofson, interviewed by author, Forman, ND, February 23, 2017.

about important issues.¹⁵⁸ Therefore, it is important for museum directors and volunteers to engage with visitors-discuss exhibits, ask questions, and learn about each visitor to help them connect with the museum's objects to create a more fulfilling visitor experience.

The museum experience is about the museum and visitor coming together as one.¹⁵⁹ John H. Falk explained in *Identity and the Museum Experience*:

The key to ensuring that visitors leave our museums as satisfied customers, eager to return as well as give positive word-of-mouth recommendations, is to provide high-quality, personally engaging museum visit experiences.¹⁶⁰

The job of the museum director and volunteers is to create a memorable museum experience, one that connects the museum and the public's interests.¹⁶¹ This can be accomplished with a museum staff that is highly involved in the museum, who continue to improve the museum's exhibits, and interact with visitors to unlock the stories the museum's collections hold.¹⁶²

Small museums have a great opportunity to draw on existing community connections to deepen relationships. This can be done by communicating and listening to community members and visitors, and then realigning programs and services to communicate output needs.¹⁶³

Understanding that Sargent County Museum needed to improve the museum visitor's experience, Olofson is working to expand museum exhibits by having volunteers communicate with visitors to understand what they liked and how the museum can improve. Communication is relationship building, and from her time volunteering at the Sargent County Museum and now being the museum director, Olofson learned that the museum staff needs to build relationships

¹⁵⁸ Matelic, "New Roles for Small Museums," in *The Small Museum Toolkit*, ed. Catlin-Legutko and Klingler, 142.

¹⁵⁹ Falk, *Identity and the Museum Experience*, 36.

¹⁶⁰ Falk, *Identity and the Museum Experience*, 215

¹⁶¹ Falk and Dierking, *The Museum Experience Revisited*, 305.

¹⁶² Graham Black explained that for a museum to truly engage its users, it must work with its uses and communities to unlock the stories its collections hold, *Transforming Museums*, 11; Lynch, 2001.

¹⁶³ Matelic, "New Roles for Small Museums," in *The Small Museum Toolkit*, ed. Catlin-Legutko and Klingler, 161.

with people to help the museum grow and has made talking with museum visitors a priority, which means more than simply giving a tour of the museum.¹⁶⁴ The main reason for making communication with museum visitors a priority, Olofson explained, is to get comments about the museum. When making some changes or creating new exhibits, she will talk to visitors to help them relate with the objects, ask questions on how they came about to the museum, and what they liked and noticed about the museum.¹⁶⁵ Olofson strives to learn from the museum visitors on how they can improve their museum so that they continue to have people come and enjoy visiting and learning about the people of Sargent County.

Olofson has made engaging with visitors a priority with all museum personnel. Previously stated, many volunteers run county museums by simply opening and closing them, and the Sargent County Museum was no stranger to this. The volunteers would open the museum, sit in the main lobby area for a few hours, and then close it. If the museum had visitors, the volunteers would greet them and ask if they would sign the museum guest book. There was little communication between volunteers and visitors. If visitors had any questions, the volunteers were and are more than willing to help; however, much of the communication was visitor facilitated. Olofson desired to change this.

Throughout my last summer interning, Olofson made it a priority for the volunteers to interact with visitors, discuss a few of the projects the museum is working on, highlight new pieces and exhibits, and to ask about some of their interests. This has opened the museum to more dialogue and learning between volunteers and visitors. Volunteer Ron Narum expressed the need for the museum volunteers to communicate more with visitors. Narum explained that there needs to be

¹⁶⁴ Olofson, interviewed by author, Forman, ND, February 23, 2017.

¹⁶⁵ Olofson, interviewed by author, Forman, ND, February 23, 2017.

more sharing of ideas and come together-volunteers, community members, and other museum visitors-to grow the museum.¹⁶⁶ With this new philosophy, more volunteers are speaking with visitors, explaining some of the new exhibits, and asking them questions. It is this type of engagement that helps the museum grow in providing fulfilling museum experiences.

One of the main goals for the museum staff is to create positive museum visit experiences each time a person comes through the museum doors. For this to happen, museum leadership must be willing to let go of old-school museum models; they must be willing to change.¹⁶⁷ Every visitor is different, but for many, a museum visit includes the pleasure of recognizing the familiar, as well as the shock of encountering something new.¹⁶⁸ It is important for county museum staff and volunteers to communicate with museum visitors and learn how to improve the museum. Making changes and asking visitors whether they liked these changes or not is essential, because communication is a key component to helping museums thrive in their local communities.

An important aspect to improving the museum experience and keeping the museum relevant is working to update the museum. Whether it is creating more interactive exhibits, providing climate-controlled buildings, or making the museum wheelchair accessible, museum staff must continue to work at providing the best possible visitor experience. When Olofson became the Sargent County Museum director, she desired to move the museum into the 21st century. She explained that many county museums in North Dakota, including Sargent County, need to recognize that some changes are needed to stay relevant with contemporary society. She

¹⁶⁶ Ron Narum, interviewed by author, Forman, ND, February 23, 2017.

¹⁶⁷ Matelic, "New Roles for Small Museums," in *The Small Museum Toolkit*, ed. Catlin-Legutko and Klingler, 161.

¹⁶⁸ Dawn Casey, "Museums as Agents for Social and Political Change," in *Museums and their Communities*, ed. Sheila Watson (New York, NY: Routledge, 2007), 297.

provided an example of the North Dakota Heritage Center in Bismarck, North Dakota, and how the staff are continually providing new experiences for visitors and working to present their collections in new and exciting ways.¹⁶⁹ For a museum to have continued success, the staff must provide visitors with the opportunity to experience and learn something new. Because, if visitors believe there is nothing left to see in the museum, it will be viewed as old news, and consequently lose community interest.

Some of the major changes Olofson is working on is with the museum exhibits. Once she provided more information to the displays, she added television monitors to further highlight a few of the exhibits. Olofson stated that “tv monitors were not even around years ago and now you can put them in [the museum] and use them to help the visitor experience.”¹⁷⁰ Nichole Kenney interned at Sargent County Museum in the summer of 2017 and in each of the four buildings of the museum had a television with videos on different exhibits. The first building had videos on their World War I display, and the second building had videos on a local prominent business.¹⁷¹ Kenney worked on videos for the third and fourth buildings highlighting the larger steam powered farming equipment and smaller horse-drawn farming equipment. Olofson and Kenney also worked on a phone exhibit. They worked to get these phones operating to allow visitors to handle the phones, so they can talk with each other. Kenney stated that the guests enjoyed this exhibit, especially children.¹⁷² These interactive exhibits are helping visitors connect with the objects and improving the visitor experience.

¹⁶⁹ Olofson, e-mail message to author, November 1, 2017.

¹⁷⁰ Olofson, e-mail message to author, November 1, 2017.

¹⁷¹ Nichole Kenney, e-mail message to author, December 27, 2017. The local business being highlighted in the second building of the museum is the Bobcat Company located in Gwinner, North Dakota.

¹⁷² Kenney, e-mail message to author, December 27, 2017.

Museums are living institutions that must continually cope with the present and anticipate how to prepare for the future.¹⁷³ A museum that does not accommodate to this is doomed to fail. That is why it is important for museums of all sizes to update the museum to provide something new for visitors to experience. Whether it is someone who has not visited the museum in years, or a community member who frequently visits, the thought of experiencing something new with each visit will continue to spark public interest and support.

Another key component to the museum visitor experience is preserving the museum's objects, and for many small museums this presents challenges. Many of the volunteers who operate county museums do not have education in museum studies or curating, and this is true for the Sargent County Museum. Olofson has a degree in education and none of the museum volunteers have formal education in museums or curating.¹⁷⁴ The museum cannot afford to hire someone who has a formal education in museum studies. The volunteers have done their best with the knowledge and skills they have acquired; however, this has led to some objects not being correctly preserved. The Pioneer Village Museum in Rugby has experienced the same challenges. The volunteers do their best with preservation but lack the knowledge needed to correctly preserve an object.¹⁷⁵ Fortunately, Steinke and Olofson are working to find opportunities to learn better preservation methods to take proper care of their respected museums' collections.¹⁷⁶

Olofson has taken time out of her schedule to attend conferences on preservation. She explained that many conferences are not in North Dakota, and some of the North Dakota State

¹⁷³ Alice Parman, "The Museum's Community Role," *Culture Work* 10, no. 1 (February 2006): 1.

¹⁷⁴ Olofson, interviewed by author, Forman, ND, February 23, 2017.

¹⁷⁵ Steinke, interviewed by author, Rugby, ND, January 18, 2018.

¹⁷⁶ Steinke, interviewed by author, Rugby, ND, January 18, 2018; Olofson, interviewed by a uthor, Forman, ND, February 23, 2017.

Historical Society events are expensive to attend.¹⁷⁷ Because of this, coupled with Sargent County's proximity to the North Dakota-South Dakota border, she has attended some conferences that were held in South Dakota. She then shares what she learned with MIND (Museums in North Dakota) members. Olofson also searches for webinars and other online resources to help her, and the museum volunteers learn better preservation methods, and worked to have the Sargent County Museum host events and workshops for other museum staff to have more opportunities to learn about preservation.¹⁷⁸

At the Prairie Village Museum, Steinke worked to have the museum host preservation workshops to help the staff learn to take better care for their collections. Steinke has worked on grants to help bring in professional conservators to come to their museum to offer training on preservation. Bringing in museum professionals to teach the volunteers how to take proper care for their collections will help the museum better preserve items for future viewing. Steinke also has worked on grants to help the museum acquire better preservation tools to create proper storage and displays for items.¹⁷⁹

Despite Sargent County and the Prairie Village museums not having staff with proper training and education in museum studies, both new directors are actively searching for opportunities for them to learn and acquire better preservation methods and tools. For small volunteer run museums to continue to offer worthwhile visitor experiences they must be able to properly care for their collections. A museum staff without formal education can provide the necessary means to preserve their collections, but they must be willing to reach out and learn researching over the internet, finding a book on preservation, or looking for workshops to attend, because a county

¹⁷⁷ Olofson, interviewed by author, Forman, ND, February 23, 2017.

¹⁷⁸ Olofson, interviewed by author, Forman, ND, February 23, 2017.

¹⁷⁹ Steinke, interviewed by author, Rugby, ND, January 18, 2018.

museum's goal is to present the history of the local area. With a dedicated staff the museum will accomplish this goal for future generations.

Nichole Kenney interned at the Sargent County Museum and the Myra Museum and explained that these museums share similarities and differences. The main difference, according to Kenney, is that the Myra Museum is more specific to the city of Grand Forks than other parts of Grand Forks County, and the Sargent County Museum has more objects from all county communities. The Myra museum does have some artifacts or buildings from other parts of Grand Forks County; however, as Kenney stated, "It is a Grand Forks museum."¹⁸⁰ Kenney also explained that with the location of the Sargent County Museum and how well it has collected objects representing the local communities, it could be located anywhere in the county and it would belong.¹⁸¹ County museum directors and volunteers are tasked with telling the story of all local community members, not just one specific area. Having a county museum that is more dedicated to one specific area of the county alienates other community members. To be successful, one must incorporate communication with all local communities.

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines community as a body of people living in the same place under the same laws.¹⁸² Candace Matelic defines community in relation to museums as, "people who live in the geographical area of one's museum."¹⁸³ This idea of community is important for county museums because they serve as representations or condensations of the geography and history of the area.¹⁸⁴ Ambrose and Paine explained that museums have a key

¹⁸⁰ Kenney, e-mail message to author, December 27, 2017.

¹⁸¹ Kenney, e-mail message to author, December 27, 2017.

¹⁸² Merriam-Webster, Incorporated, *The Merriam-Webster Dictionary* (Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, Incorporated, 2004), 146.

¹⁸³ Matelic, "New Roles for Small Museums," in *The Small Museum Toolkit*, ed. Catlin-Legutko and Klingler, 144.

¹⁸⁴ Nelson Graburn, "A Quest for Identity," in *Museums and their Communities*, ed. Sheila Watson (New York, NY: Routledge, 2007), 128.

task to play in providing an understanding of identity and a sense of belonging to a place or community.¹⁸⁵ Nelson Graburn expanded on this by explaining that one of the primary functions of a museum is to preserve and display the heritage of the specific social groups which form the clientele.¹⁸⁶ This means that the county museum staff must try to provide the history of all communities the museum serves. The specific social groups a county museum serves are all the communities in the county. No matter how large or small the local communities are, every community's history is important to tell so visitors and community members can learn how each has contributed to the development of their county.

In Grand Forks County, the city of Grand Forks is the dominant community with much of the county population. Grand Forks has the most clientele and influence in the county, and it is understandable that the Myra Museum focuses more on Grand Forks. Kenney described that the Myra Museum is a county museum, but the theme is Grand Forks, and she believes it would be difficult for the museum to focus attention to other smaller communities because of the museum's established theme.¹⁸⁷ If a museum proclaims to be a county museum, the staff must attempt to include the history of all the communities. Something as simplistic as reaching out to other communities is attempting to tell the whole history of Grand Forks County. By doing this, one might even be surprised by the relationships that may possibly develop with the smaller communities.

Dawn Casey, former director of the National Museum of Australia, explained there are many different types of museum critics, one being the "Traditionalist." These critics, according to Casey, are bothered by a museum that does not present a "master narrative." Traditionalist value

¹⁸⁵ Ambrose and Paine, *Museum Basics*, 3.

¹⁸⁶ Graburn, "A Quest for Identity," in *Museums and Their Communities*, ed. Watson, 129.

¹⁸⁷ Kenney, e-mail message to author, December 27, 2017.

a narrative that provides a strong, authoritative voice with a simple chronology of civilization and progress.¹⁸⁸ However, history has no one viewpoint, it is complex with many narratives and fields of perception.¹⁸⁹ For county museums to continue to gain support, it must not become revolved around one object or theme but work to present the many different stories that make up the history of the community members.

Author and sociologist Dean MacCannell claimed that modern humanity lives life like a tourist, increasingly dependent on representations of reality, and society is turning to institutions such as museums to find authentic truths not only about the worlds of the past, but to understand our own predicament.¹⁹⁰ In other words, museums help people understand life around them. Specifically, local or county museums help define the identity of the community members. For museum staff, this means they have the responsibility of defining the community being represented. The museum director is more than an organizer of objects, the role is more demanding. The director must work to educate the public and tell the stories of all cultures in the local communities.¹⁹¹ A focus on displaying one theme is not representing the whole community. The museum director that works to capture the many histories of the community members will help the museum appeal to a greater number of people, and more important, to the individually different members of the community.

In Sargent County, agriculture is important for the community members, and because of this, the museum has a large focus on agricultural history. Two of the four museum buildings are

¹⁸⁸ Casey, "Museums as Agents for Social and Political Change," in *Museums and their Communities*, ed. Watson, 293.

¹⁸⁹ Casey, "Museums as Agents for Social and Political Change," in *Museums and their Communities*, ed. Watson, 293.

¹⁹⁰ Dean MacCannell, quoted in Nelson Graburn, "A Quest for Identity," in *Museums and their Communities*, ed. Watson, 131.

¹⁹¹ Witcomb, *Re-Imagining the Museum*, in *Museums and their Communities*, ed. Watson, 153-154.

dedicated to farming equipment, and this theme is important to showcase because of the impact of historical value it has to members of the community. Yet, the museum staff have worked to include other areas of the county's history. They have exhibits on businesses, both past and present, that are important to the people of Sargent County. There are exhibits that highlight the physical geography of the area, the many small local communities, and the family histories of the area. When Olofson became the museum director, she continued to work on expanding the exhibits that highlight both the agricultural aspects and other important historical benchmarks of the area. For example, Olofson worked on an exhibit that presented a local woman's artwork.¹⁹² This may not be a large exhibit but is important to have for visitors and community members to view and learn about something new besides the agricultural history of the county. Most of the museum objects are on agriculture, but the museum staff continue to exhibit the multiple different histories of the local communities, helping visitors learn about all aspects of the history of Sargent County.

Everyone, both past and present, who lives in the area represented by the museum have made important contributions to the area's history. There is possibly one aspect of the area's history that is dominant, but the museum staff must work to include the smaller stories, because these stories provide a different viewpoint to the area's history. In Sargent County, these other stories exhibit to visitors that the community members are more than farmers, but also artists, factory workers, or businessmen. Local museums, such as county museums, allow people to work and imagine ways to represent the divergent voices and uncertainties of our own lives.¹⁹³ Casey

¹⁹² This exhibit displayed the art of Ida Prokop Lee. The North Dakota State Historical Society (NDSHS) has collections on her work and history. The NDSHS published a book about her titled *North Dakota's Sculptress and Artist Ida Prokop Lee Presents Sculptured Portraits of the Major North Dakota Indian Tribes to the State*, that contains pictures of her artwork.

¹⁹³ Levin, *Defining Memory*, 263.

explained that museum staff have to challenge or surprise their visitors, push beyond the comfortable or familiar, and keep reminding visitors that their experience in life is not the only one.¹⁹⁴ If the county museum hopes to grow, presenting the many different voices that make up the local area is key. Casey stated that what unites the traditionalist museum critic is the reluctance to concede museums have changed.¹⁹⁵ The history of an area is made up of many stories and points of view and including these many different stories in the county museum makes the museum a place where all community members can come to discuss and learn about their history.

Completing my tour of the Prairie Village Museum, I asked Steinke about the future of the museum and some of her plans. One area, she stressed, was having a better collections policy. Steinke explained that the museum has objects on loan from community members, which is a challenge because she does not know if it is museum property or if community members, who loaned items, will eventually collect it. Some of the objects on loan, Steinke believed, are not needed because they are not relevant.¹⁹⁶ Olofson and the Sargent County Museum have encountered this problem as well. During my internship, Olofson and I found the museum had many duplicates of objects that are collecting dust in storage. That is why it is important to develop and follow a collections policy.

County museums are important for the education and growth of the local communities they serve. They are places where community members and outside visitors can come together and learn from one another. However, county museums and museums in general are not the

¹⁹⁴ Casey, "Museums as Agents for Social and Political Change," in *Museums and their Communities*, ed. Watson, 298.

¹⁹⁵ Casey, "Museums as Agents for Social and Political Change," in *Museums and their Communities*, ed. Watson, 298.

¹⁹⁶ Steinke, interviewed by author, Rugby, ND, January 18, 2018.

community storage attic. Particularly, as Gerald George and Cindy Sherrell-Leo, authors of *Starting Right: A Basic Guide to Museum Planning* explain, a museum is not a dumping ground for “white elephants” or things that people no longer want but cannot bear to throw away.¹⁹⁷ If there is no need for a potential object in one’s county museum, do not acquire it. Acquiring objects without assessing how it will help the county museum educate visitors about the history of the area is not fulfilling the duties of a county museum, but instead becomes a glorified community storage room. Carl Guthe noted that many small museums are little more than depositories of historical artifacts. Too often small museum staff are proud to own relics and exhibit pieces because of their sentimental value to a few or to its donors, not because they “illumine the human process of the past.”¹⁹⁸ This creates an environment where the county museum is seen only as a place to view a few of the community members’ “stuff” and not an organization to learn about the history and development of the local area.

For the future of the Prairie Village Museum, Steinke explained she does not want to be Rugby’s “junk-drawer” or have objects that the museum does not need, and people do not want.¹⁹⁹ For a county museum to survive and have continued community involvement, the museum staff must consider how every object is going to convey the history of the local communities. Collecting objects that are interesting or have sentimental value to a few will lead to a county museum’s demise. It is imperative that county museum staff, both the director and volunteers, evaluate the museum objects to determine what is and is not needed, and create collections policies that reflect the museum’s mission statement.

¹⁹⁷ Gerald George and Carol Maryan-George, *Starting Right: A Basic Guide to Museum Planning* (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2012), 79.

¹⁹⁸ Guthe, *The Management of Small Museums*, 6

¹⁹⁹ Steinke, interviewed by author, Ruby, ND, January 18, 2018.

Determining if certain museum objects are needed does present problems. Steinke explained she is concerned that by changing, adding, and taking objects, some community members or museum volunteers may experience emotional pushback on some objects that have been in the museum for a long time.²⁰⁰ Kenney explained that Olofson could do a lot more at Sargent County Museum, but she believed the museum board, made up of museum volunteers, are holding her back. Kenney stated, “in order for the museums to grow, the board needs to trust the directors and give them more of a free reign on what happens at the museums.”²⁰¹ County Museum objects are supposed to tell the story of the community members. Thus, museums director and volunteers must work together to develop a collections policy and follow it. Some items may need to be placed in storage or even disposed of to create new exhibits, and loaned items may need to be returned. If a community member would like to donate an object that is not needed, politely decline. Museums, whether large or small, are not community storage rooms.

What visitors experience while attending one’s county museum is an important factor for the museum’s success. To keep visitors returning to the museum, the staff cannot become complacent with what the museum has. The staff should be working to think of different opportunities they can implement to improve the museum and help visitors have something new to experience with each visit. Creating engaging and educational exhibits that tell the story of the community members, communicating with visitors on how they can improve the museum, working to include all local communities’ history in the museum, and having a collections policy that help the museum present relevant objects on the county’s history, are all ways museum staff can provide new and exciting visitor experiences.

²⁰⁰ Steinke, interviewed by author, Rugby, ND, January 18, 2018.

²⁰¹ Kenney, e-mail message to author, December 27, 2017.

Alice Parman explained that nationwide there are community-focused museums, such as county museums, that are making a difference for people of all ages and backgrounds. The important factor is having exhibits and programs that invite visitors and members to explore common interests and engage in dialogue about current issues. She also explained that once community members gain confidence in the museum as a safe space where all viewpoints are welcome, there is potential for fruitful conversations on different issues in contemporary society.²⁰² The main factor is having a museum staff that continues to be active inside the museum. As the directors of the Sargent, Prairie Village, and Myra museums have shown, complacency will not allow the museum to grow. They are continually developing new opportunities to enhance the museum and provide visitors with memorable museum experiences.

Smaller museums with staff that are clever and wise with their resources cannot only survive but also thrive. The key to future success is the relevance of the museum's programs and the authenticity of genuine objects that tell a story and tell its story effectively.²⁰³ To have success, the museum staff must look at what their museum has and determine how they can improve. This may mean change, whether that is removing objects, creating different exhibits, or communicating more with visitors and community members on how to progress the museum. A little change may be what the museum needs to grow, because if museum staff opt for business as usual, or even try to please everyone, the result is unlikely to be successful, and the museum may be viewed as outdated.²⁰⁴ But, the museum staff that embraces the challenge of improving the museum's interior will help provide new experiences for visitors. In other words, learn more about the museum's collections and create interactive exhibits that visitors can connect with,

²⁰² Parman, "The Museum's Community Role," 5.

²⁰³ Cilella Jr., *Fundraising for Small Museums*, xii.

²⁰⁴ Parman, "The Museum's Community Role," 2.

communicate ideas with community members and visitors, work to present all the museum community's story, and do not fall into the trap of being the community attic.

CHAPTER V
HATTON-EIELSON MUSEUM, BOTTINEAU COUNTY MUSEUM,
AND PIONEER VILLAGE HISTORICAL MUSEUM

This chapter focuses on comparing and contrasting local and county museums in North Dakota. I used my experiences interacting with museum directors and volunteers at the Sargent County, Prairie Village, and Myra museums as a foundation on how to grow one's museum in their communities. With these experiences, I traveled to three other North Dakota county and local museums, the Hatton-Eielson Museum, the Bottineau County Museum, and the Pioneer Village Historical Museum, which are similar in market and size to discuss how these museums are performing in their communities.

The Hatton-Eielson Museum in Hatton, North Dakota, about forty miles southwest of Grand Forks, is a small, beautiful, well-run museum dedicated to the history of Hatton and famous aviation pioneer Carl Ben Eielson. Hatton Historical Association President Gary Lillemoen's and the museum volunteers' hard work to preserve the history of the area and tell Eielson's story provides visitors with memorable and educational experiences. The staff is active in their community to promote the museum and present multiple opportunities for community involvement.

The museum is in the childhood home of Carl Ben Eielson, and despite its small size, it is filled with fascinating exhibits that are not cluttered but pieced together in a thoughtful and organized manner. The area that made my visit most memorable was touring the museum with Gary Lillemoen and listening to him passionately describe every exhibit. It is important for staff and volunteers to have knowledge about the museum's collections in order to provide visitors

with informative tours. A museum tour that is both enlightening and personal aids in helping a visitor have a more enjoyable experience, and one that will entice them to make return trips. The museum board and volunteers are working to make the museum “alive” by creating an intimate setting and having conversations with their visitors. The discussions I had with Lillemoen created a memorable visit, and a tour from Lillemoen or any of the volunteers is worth a trip to the small town of Hatton.

The Hatton-Eielson Museum board and volunteers are active in their community as well in other areas throughout eastern North Dakota. Lillemoen explained that one cannot expect a museum to survive by simply opening it and waiting for visitors to come. Directors and museum workers being active in the local communities is essential for growth and success.²⁰⁵ The museum board have made it a priority to promote the museum at local schools to build younger support. They spoke to schools in the local small communities, as well as traveling to Fargo, North Dakota, to promote their museum and the history of Carl Ben Eielson to a larger audience. Lillemoen specified that if kids cannot come to the museum, they will go to them.²⁰⁶ Other community events the museum has held are wedding showers, community meetings, and an annual 4th of July dinner that feeds around 300-500 people. According to Lillemoen, the museum is open to and for anyone, and they strive for the museum to be a viable community institution to spread the story and maintain the culture and heritage of the community.²⁰⁷

The previous chapters have discussed the importance of directors, curators, and volunteers not becoming complacent with their museum, and continuing to work with their local communities to provide more opportunities for community involvement. The passion Lillemoen and the

²⁰⁵ Gary Lillemoen, interviewed by author, Hatton, ND, May 19, 2018.

²⁰⁶ Lillemoen, interviewed by author, Hatton, ND, May 19, 2018.

²⁰⁷ Lillemoen, interviewed by author, Hatton, ND, May 19, 2018.

volunteers exhibit for their museum exemplifies how a small museum can find success in contemporary society. The continued hard work of the Hatton-Eielson Museum volunteers will help tell the extraordinary story of Carl Ben Eielson and history of Hatton be told for generations to come.

Despite the success of this museum, there are areas that can be improved to better the visitor experience and expand the museum's audience. According to Lillemoen, a problem the museum board has faced is that some members are intimidated by the possibility of having to present museum tours. Lillemoen explained that a few members believe they do know enough to provide "good" tours.²⁰⁸ To help some of the members feel more comfortable with presenting tours, they created "cheat sheets" that have some information about each exhibit for the tour guide to follow. However, more can be done with their exhibits to help board members provide educational tours and elevate the visitor experience.

The Sargent County Museum, Prairie Village Museum, and the Myra Museum have made it a priority for their respective museums to provide informative and interesting exhibits to visitors. They continue to create interactive exhibits for visitors to better connect with the material and have a more enlightening experience. Many of the objects in the exhibits at the Hatton-Eielson Museum do not have information about them. Much of what the visitors learn about each exhibit is from the tour guide and having more visual information allows for greater visitor-object interaction. For example, the informative flip books the Sargent County Museum staff created for their small tractor exhibits help visitors to not only view an object, but also learn more about its history. For the Hatton-Eielson Museum, creating more interactive exhibits will help alleviate

²⁰⁸ Lillemoen, interviewed by author, Hatton, ND, May 19, 2018.

the stress or intimidation of providing tours, and lead to a heightened learning environment in an already impressive local museum.

For years, the Bottineau County Museum has been mismanaged and suffered from a lack of updating the buildings and poor preservation methods. However, over the past two years new board members and president are motivated to turn the museum into a thriving community institution.

The Bottineau County Museum is in Bottineau, North Dakota, approximately ten miles south of the United States-Canadian border. This community is also close to the popular tourist destination Lake Metigoshe and Bottineau Winter Park. The Bottineau County Museum is in a prime area to attract tourists and generate community excitement for the museum.

I toured the Bottineau County Museum with museum board president Tim Davis, who expressed that the museum is a work in progress.²⁰⁹ Davis explained that the museum first began operations in 1982, and it was active in the community, but over the years began to fade. Through years of neglect and inactivity, the museum acquired a musty odor, the displays became cluttered, and no longer had a positive reputation in the community. The museum was in dire need of help, and one of the major first steps was the board investing in a new air system.²¹⁰ Davis discussed how the museum was damp, moldy, and the air quality was poor that it created an unbearable environment for visitors. The board installed an eighteen-thousand-dollar air system to combat the odor and make the museum more visitor friendly and help preserve their collections.

²⁰⁹ Tim Davis, interviewed by author, Bottineau, ND, June 16, 2018.

²¹⁰ Davis, interviewed by author, Bottineau, ND, June 16, 2018.

The collections and displays, according to Davis, had no “rhyme or reason.” The displays were cluttered, messy, and did not effectively convey the story of Bottineau County.²¹¹ The objects are displayed with little to no information about the county’s history and its community members. Comparing the Bottineau County Museum and the Sargent County Museum will help Davis and his staff learn how to develop fascinating and educational exhibits. Olofson and the Sargent County Museum volunteers are working to make their exhibits more interactive to enhance the visitor experience and better help visitors and community members to connect with local history. At the Bottineau County Museum, however, many of the displays are disorganized and have too many objects. The museum has a lot of “stuff” and has become more synonymous with a community storage attic. Davis and the museum board need to go through their displays and determine what is significant to the history of the area and what is simply taking up space. Then, they need to turn their displays into exhibits. This is done by providing visitors with the opportunity to gain experience about this history of the area by presenting visual information. Presenting more information about their collections through text, video, or audio format allows visitors more opportunities to interact with the objects and make connections with the local history. This offers a more enjoyable and memorable visitor experience.

A successful museum is one that is active in their local communities. This is done through organizing community events and outreach programs for the museum to be a visible institution. The museums discussed in the previous chapters have all developed unique events to entice community members to visit the museum. According to Davis, the museum board is working to have the Bottineau County Museum become an active museum. They have contacted local schools to give tours, created displays for local artists, and held community events at the

²¹¹ Davis, interviewed by author, Bottineau, ND, June 16, 2018.

museum. One event that brought many businesses and community members to the museum was their “Clueseum” event. Davis explained that they created a role-playing game at the museum, based on the popular board game *Clue*. The primary focus of this event was to bring the community into the museum to see what it has to offer.²¹² Davis and the other museum board members and volunteers are trying to build a better museum reputation in the community and show that changes are being made.

With years of neglect, areas of the Bottineau County Museum have fallen into despair. The air quality was poor, the museum was moldy, and the objects were not properly displayed or preserved. However, with the continued hard work and dedication of the museum staff and volunteers, the museum can become a vibrant community institution. The changes the Bottineau County Museum staff and volunteers are having a positive impact to physically rebuild the museum and improve its reputation within the local communities. Davis stated that around three years ago, the museum only had approximately fifty visitors. In 2017, five hundred people walked through the museum doors.²¹³ Davis hopes that with their continued community outreach events and museum improvements will help produce more enthusiasm for the museum and for the community members to be proud of their local museum.

Davis and the museum staff and volunteers inherited a mess. The museum had been forgotten and left in despair. But, with their continued dedication to the improvement of the museum and work with community members to build the museum, this museum will find success and continue to grow.

²¹² Davis, interviewed by author, Bottineau, ND, June 16, 2018.

²¹³ Davis, interviewed by author, Bottineau, ND, June 16, 2018.

The Ward County Historical Society’s Pioneer Village Historical Museum in Burlington, North Dakota, is a large museum composed of twelve buildings, each dedicated to a particular theme of Ward County history. One of the larger buildings in the historical village is the Samuelson House. This house was owned by John Samuelson, who owned a shoe store in downtown Minot, and was donated by the Samuelson family.²¹⁴ In this house, visitors will have the pleasure of exploring many rooms filled with antique furniture and objects that explore life from the early to mid-20th Century. Another impressive and beautiful building is the Immanuel Lutheran Church. This former country church served its local community eleven miles northeast of Minot until it held its last service on August 28, 1966. Now, at the Pioneer Village Historical Museum, it serves to tell the story of the Ward County community members, while still being available to host weddings and other community events.²¹⁵ Other historical buildings include a township jail, post office, blacksmith shop, one room schoolhouse, and the Sawyer Railroad Depot. All these buildings preserve the history of the local area, provide visitors the opportunity to build connections with the past to understand the present, and describes the story of the community members of Ward County.

Since 1951, the Ward County Historical Society has been dedicated to preserve and interpret the history of the Ward County region.²¹⁶ However, it is the museum’s recent history that has presented the staff and volunteers with hardships, challenges, and working to rebuild the museum physically and its reputation with community members. The museum, previously located at the North Dakota State Fairgrounds in the heart of Minot, now situated along North

²¹⁴ “Samuelson House,” Ward County Historical Society, last modified 2022, accessed June 21, 2022, <https://www.wardcountyhistoricalsociety.com/samuelson-house>.

²¹⁵ “Immanuel Lutheran Church,” Ward County Historical Society, last modified 2022, accessed June 21, 2022, <https://www.wardcountyhistoricalsociety.com/immanuel-church>.

²¹⁶ “About Us,” Ward County Historical Society, last modified 2022, accessed June 21, 2022, <https://www.wardcountyhistoricalsociety.com/about-us>.

Dakota State Highway 2/52 between the city of Minot and the town of Burlington, survived a flood that devastated the area in 2011 and greatly damaged many of the museum's historical buildings. It has also recently been through a long legal struggle with the North Dakota State Fair Association that left the museum searching for a new home.²¹⁷ When I toured the museum with site director, Bryan Goetsch, these events have left the museum ill-equipped and underfunded, and they have the challenge of re-establishing their reputation in the community.²¹⁸

Advertising is one of the best opportunities for museums to increase their name recognition in the local communities, and Bryan Goetsch has embraced this concept. Goetsch has reached out to local television and radio stations to promote different events and exhibits at the museum. He has gone to other community organizations and discussed advertising opportunities all in an attempt for the Minot and other local communities to embrace the museum.²¹⁹ Goetsch has been redesigning the museum website and has the museum more active in social media. Goetsch, a graduate from Minot State University, is working to build a relationship with the university to have history students intern at the museum. Doing this will help ensure future success of the museum through having younger generations become involved. The museum has also been working with North Dakota State University history faculty and students to offer a field school

²¹⁷ Andrea Johnson, "Historical Society Trial Concludes; Ruling Not Expected Until March," *Minot Daily News*, February 2, 2018, accessed July 1, 2018, <http://www.minotdailynews.com/news/local-news/2018/02/historical-society-trial-concludes-ruling-not-expected-until-march/>.

The Ward County Historical Association and the North Dakota State Fair Association have been in a civil trial for the past four years, and the case has been heard by three different judges over this time. The State Fair Association served an eviction action to the historical society in December 2013. The State Fair Association argued that the state owns the land, and the Ward County Historical Society's Pioneer Village Museum is only allowed to remain on their property with permission. The Ward County Historical Society contends that it has a right to remain and cites the terms of a 1966 agreement between the North Dakota State Fair Association and the Northwest Agricultural Livestock and Fair Association, which stated that the State Fair Association will allow the historical society to maintain and operate its buildings located on the fair grounds. Arguments in the civil trial concluded on January 31, 2018 and ruled in the favor of the North Dakota State Fair. As of 2022, the museum has relocated to an area close to Burlington, North Dakota.

²¹⁸ Bryan Goetsch, interviewed by author, Minot, ND, June 29, 2018.

²¹⁹ Goetsch, interviewed by author, Minot, ND, June 29, 2018.

for students to come and work at the museum to gain experience studying and working with local and public history.²²⁰

When touring the museum, I found that many of the exhibits are dedicated to more of the Minot area. There are items that pertain to all of Ward County's history, but there could be more done with the other smaller communities that dot the county. Much like how Grand Forks County Museum is catered towards the city of Grand Forks, the Ward County Museum feels more of a Minot history museum than a county. Goetsch mentioned they are underfunded, by reaching out and including other smaller communities they can build relationships and connections to further advance the museum's progress.

Through different ideas and commitment to the success of the museum, Goetsch and the Ward County Historical Society board members and volunteers are working to connect the museum and the community together. Progress has been slow, but with their continued dedication, the Pioneer Village Historical Museum will become an important institution in Ward County.

The Hatton-Eielson Museum, Bottineau County Museum, and Pioneer Village Historical Museum each have areas that they are doing well, but also have areas of needing improvement. The Hatton-Eielson Museum will do well to use the Sargent County Museum as an example for developing more educational and interactive exhibits. This will enhance the visitor experience. The Bottineau County and Pioneer Village Historical Museum both are working to improve their community reputation and generate more community involvement. The Prairie Village Museum

²²⁰ Andrea Johnson, "NDSU History Field School to be held May 31-June 11," *Minot Daily News*, May 9, 2022, accessed June 22, 2022, <https://www.minotdailynews.com/news/local-news/2022/05/ndsu-history-field-school-to-be-held-may-31-june-11/>.

is an excellent guide for developing ideas for community involvement. It has community events year-round that offer community members opportunities to visit and interact in the museum. The staff at the Bottineau County Museum and Pioneer Village Historical Museum have a good start, and with the Prairie Village Museum as a guide, they will continue to build and grow.

The staff of the museums discussed in this chapter are committed to progress their respective museums. Each faces their own challenges, but with their commitment and passion, the history will be preserved.

CONCLUSION

Museums hold a key to the past. These institutions are areas where different cultures can come together and learn from one another, share ideas, and discuss different aspects of contemporary society. County and local museums are unique because they represent the history of all members of a specific geographic area. The county and local museum staff are tasked with presenting the variety of identities and voices that make up their museum community. These types of museums help community members learn more about their local history, identity, and can be beneficial to the health and growth of local communities.

The ICOM and museum scholars will continue to debate the museum's role in contemporary society. The role of the local and county museum, however, is clear-to serve the local communities by preserving and interpreting local history. County and local museums must apply a community-based approach when preserving and interpreting their history to provide an educational and exciting visitor experience and generate greater community engagement with the museum to remain relevant in contemporary society. The museums used as models, the Sargent County Museum, Prairie Village Museum, and Myra Museum continue to develop different opportunities for community involvement and expand their respective museums to provide better visitor experiences. Many county and local museums are limited financially and operated by a small staff, many of which are volunteers. Because of these challenges, future museum growth depends on the dedication of everyone involved in the museum. The success of a museum relies on a dedicated staff that is willing to try new things, break out of their comfort zone, and learn different ideas to help the museum grow.

Through the dedication of the museum directors, board members, and volunteers discussed in the previous chapters, their respective museums' futures are bright. Each understood their museums needed to change to gain greater community support. They are expanding their museums' community role by developing community outreach activities and more involvement in the local communities, continuing to learn more about their collections and creating exhibits that are educational and engaging, and communicating more with their visitors on how to better create memorable experiences. Also, these museum directors are not allowing their respective museums to become stagnant but are continuing to research and develop opportunities for how they can better preserve and interpret their collections and grow the museum for future generations.

The Sargent County, Prairie Village, and Myra Museum serve as excellent models for any county or local museum searching for ideas to improve their museum-community relationship. The examples these museums employ for community outreach programs, collection and exhibit development, and different ideas on interpretation and preservation of their local history, will help any museum director searching to improve and grow their museum. The key with the three model museums is that the director and staff not becoming satisfied with one's museum but continuing to develop new ideas to help generate community excitement for the preservation and interpretation of their local history.

County and local museums matter, but their future success depends on community support. As contemporary society's values and interests change, museums must change as well to continue to build connections between history and community members. A last word from Stephen Weil, "everything museums do, they must remember the cornerstone on which the whole enterprise rests: to make a positive difference in the quality of people's lives. Museums

that do that matter—they matter a great deal. And their crowning glory is that they can matter in so many marvelous ways.”²²¹ The museum will not grow if the directors, workers, and volunteers do not grow as well. Do not become discouraged or intimidated when planning community events or developing exhibits. Start small, for even the smallest project is a beginning to building connections and generating community excitement for the museum. Always be willing to learn new ideas to improve the museum, search for new opportunities for community involvement, recognize areas where the museum can expand, and present the museum as a place for all community members’ voices to be heard and history explored.

²²¹ Weil, *Making Museums Matter*, 74.

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