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HISTORYNEWS

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ATTACHMENT A

Sharing Authority in
History Organizations

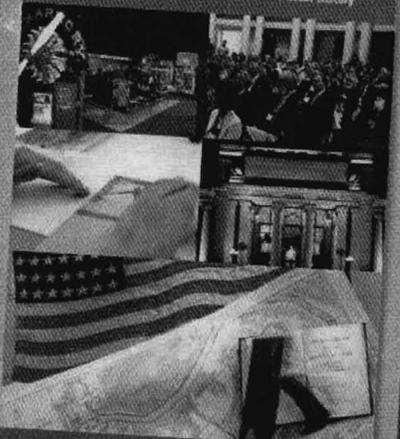
THE ARTISANAL MUSEUM

Local History
No Longer an Island

TECHNICAL LEAFLET:
Documenting Local
African American History

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Development 2012 Programs
Building Leaders in the Field of State and Local History



American Association for State and Local History

A New Day for Local History:

NO LONGER AN

ISLAND

By Lisa A. Anderson, Jody A. Crago, and Peter H. Welsh

In 2009, the Phoenix Museum of History quietly closed its doors and was subsumed by the Arizona Science Center. Only a few lines in our major newspaper, *The Arizona Republic*, recorded its demise. Shortly after this event, in our respective roles as directors of Arizona history museums, we met and tried to understand how this occurred in the fifth largest metropolitan region in the county: What would happen to the collection? Where was the public outcry? Could this happen at our own museums, and what should be our responsibility as sister heritage organizations?

The closure of the Phoenix Museum of History was a dramatic and visible response to a chronic problem in our sector. It could be blamed on many factors, including low attendance, lack of community support, the unraveling of the governing body, and an economic downturn that prevented the city of Phoenix from providing operational support.

A quick review of the Phoenix metro area, or the “valley,” made it clear that these problems were not isolated to Phoenix Museum of History. Rather, almost all of the history museums in the valley had or were experiencing similar downward trends. For instance, the City of Mesa announced that it would no longer fund the Mesa Historical Museum. The Tempe History Museum and the Chandler Museum saw their professional staffs cut by more than half when their cities encountered budget shortfalls. The Pioneer History Museum nearly closed forever until a last-minute



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sale to a new owner saved the day, and the Gilbert Historical Museum, after its public funding was threatened in 2010, is considering opening a for-profit subsidiary to provide funding for its nonprofit museum.

❧ An Ongoing Problem ❧

Further examination showed that nationally, history museums have been faltering. Countless authors have pointed out the difficulty that history museums have had in the last thirty years. Robert Lumley in 1988, noted the struggle that history museums were having: “[art museum] grants make the headlines, [while] the closure of another small local history museum does not.” Twenty years later Cary Carson wrote, “Is the condition of ailing history museums terminal or not? News of dead or dying institutions appears regularly in the public press.”¹

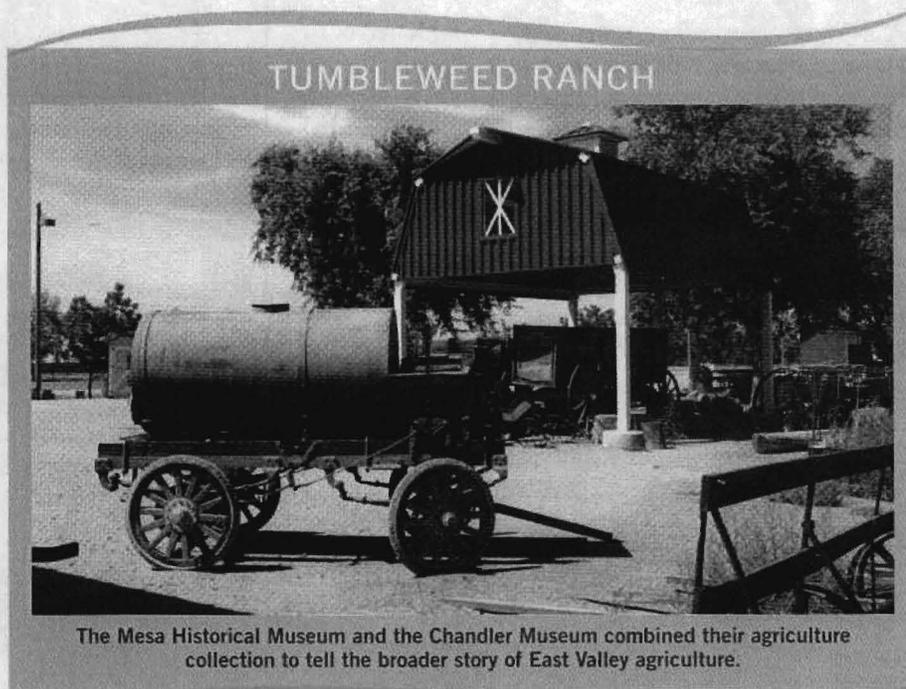
As further proof of their struggles, local history museums remain the least attended and the most undercapitalized museums across the nation. In its 2009 national survey of median attendance at different types of informal learning institutions, the American Association of Museums showed that history museums are the least attended by a significant measure. The average history museum has only 3 percent of the attendance of the average science museum and only 8 percent of that of an average children’s museum. Clearly something is amiss in the ways history museums position themselves in relation to their communities.²

Maybe these problems are inevitable given the rapid rise in the number of history museums and historical societies over the middle decades of the twentieth century. A natural outcome of so many historical agencies vying for their piece of the pie—for collections, for members, for funding—is smaller pieces for everyone. Perhaps more problematic has been the “Our Story is Everyone’s Story” ideal. Often, museum founders assume their work represents the public interest, focusing specifically on an event, an individual, or a family with important ties to the past. Unfortunately, this approach often fails to make clear connections to contemporary life. Many history museums struggle under the weight of significant community change. As a community’s story

grows beyond what the founders imagined or collected—their noble pursuit and dedication to preserving the founding story can lead to the individualization of the institution so that “outsiders or newcomers” find little relevance in the organization and its programs.

A new generation of museum employees followed these founders. They work diligently to professionalize the museum and to care for the collection. Entrusted by the founders to carry on their work, these dynamic professionals have been encouraged to preserve the dying community and the vanishing history of the town pioneers. Often they fell prey to the Indiana Jones Syndrome—“That belongs in a museum!”—and collected far too many artifacts for their available resources. Throughout the late twentieth century, countless thousands of objects and archives entered collections of local history organizations unable to provide the staffing, the storage, and the monetary support needed to meet the new rising professional standards.

Ironically the hard work of these generations of community leaders is what has created the problem of their own undoing—ever-increasing costs, dwindling resources, and no apparent solution. The amassed collections continue to consume resources—staff, space, and money—to the detriment of collecting more modern materials. These



The Mesa Historical Museum and the Chandler Museum combined their agriculture collection to tell the broader story of East Valley agriculture.

collections begin to look stilted and isolated, because they no longer reflect the stories the museum should tell. The problem the Phoenix-area museums seem to have is the “somebodies” they were established to be about are not the audience that will sustain them into the future. They have lost their connection to the people of today as they have struggled mightily to preserve the past.

❧ A New Model Needed ❧

Over the course of our conversations about these issues and the situation at our institutions, it became clear to us that history museums, as a whole, and we in particular, need to find new models—interpretive as well as business—and new collaborations. Collectively and individually we need alternative approaches to attract and involve the public in topics important in the present, relevant to the future, and informed by the past. There are significant societal needs that

historically focused informal learning institutions can—and should—address. History studies how communities respond to change. Few times in memory have communities faced such an array of changes to all facets of life, and museums can assume a central role in interpreting and contextualizing these changes for public audiences, yet how many successfully make these contemporary connections to change? In seeking solutions, we were attracted to the idea of collaboration because many of our institutions have strengths in specific areas and weaknesses in others. We were curious to find a way for each institution to share strengths and mitigate weaknesses with strengths from other institutions.

We found several good examples of museum collaborations across the country including those in San Diego's Balboa Park, in Dallas, and in Chattanooga to name a few. The consulting firm Technical Development Corporation (TDC) has also suggested a new business model for historical agencies. TDC cites a new type of collaboration: the history system model, which sees the need for individual organizations to do only one part of what a traditional history museum does, allowing each individual organization to specialize in one type of history or object. These specialized museums are knitted together systemically to allow specialization, interpretation, and education while not being a generalist.³

TDC suggests that a systemic approach to museum collaboration will lead to a group of medium to large organizations telling our history across the nation (much like the national museums of Europe). While this model is successful in Europe and would prevent a feared "national history Alzheimer's," it ignores the desire of many communities to have their own local museum.

We believe a systemic approach can be particularly successful at a regional level. In Phoenix, many formerly isolated communities have now become bedroom communities enfolded into the larger whole. Each has its own historical society, museum, or both. In the Phoenix metropolitan area there are over thirty museums with a historical focus, and many tell essentially the same story of the community's founding, early agriculture, population rise during the late twentieth century, and boom economy of the 1980s and 1990s. While some specifics differ from community to community, most of the history is shared across the valley. In other words, desert farming was essentially the same in Mesa, Phoenix, Scottsdale, Chandler, and Tempe.⁴

Collaboration in Action

We are slowly wading into the waters of a collaboration that embrace some of tenets of the systemic approach. We

Photos Daniel Buckley, courtesy of the Arizona Historical Society



Play Ball at the AHS Museum at Papago Park.

are suggesting a coalition of regional museums that work together, utilizing the staff and other resources of each organization for the betterment of all the museums in the coalition. This type of collaboration goes much further than just marketing or ordering supplies in bulk. It entails staff from one organization working on another's projects. For example, staff from one institution would assist a collaborating museum in the development of an exhibition at the latter or collections staff from a third might assist in artifact selection from all collaborating museums for the exhibit. Yet another partner might assume marketing and public relations responsibilities. We realize this approach will be multi-faceted with many parts and partners constantly working to become more comfortable with each other.

Our initial forays have been successful. We have focused on areas of strength of resources, identified areas of growth potential between the coalition members, and sought projects that lead to the betterment of the entire local heritage community. The Mesa Historical Museum (MHM), a private nonprofit, transferred its agricultural equipment collection to the City of Chandler's Chandler Museum because the city has an outdoor learning environment that focuses on the heritage of desert farming. This alleviates MHM's burden of caring for a large outdoor collection and

allows Chandler to expand its interpretation to tell a more complete story of agricultural development. Each museum participated in the crafting of this story. Chandler relocated the items with the support of the City of Chandler and cooperation from staff and volunteers in Mesa. This is a first step toward a coalition-led plan to consolidate collections, to collaboratively determine which coalition museum collects certain materials, and to develop regional stories that have more relevance and that help better preserve the collections within the coalition. Chandler staff is also serving on the Mesa collection committee and board of directors to help guide these activities. The City of Chandler is allowing staff to donate hours to this work.

In yet another example, the Salt River Pima Maricopa Indian Nation's Huhugam Ki Museum partnered with the Mesa Historical Museum on two exhibitions in 2008 and 2011—*Wallace and Ladmo* and *Best Place in The Country*. The Huhugam Ki Museum allowed its staff to curate, design, and fabricate the exhibits and donated printing services for graphic displays. They allowed staff to help with conservation issues at MHM, providing materials and people to create special mounts and storage containers for objects and also allowed MHM to treat objects at their state-of-the-art conservation lab.

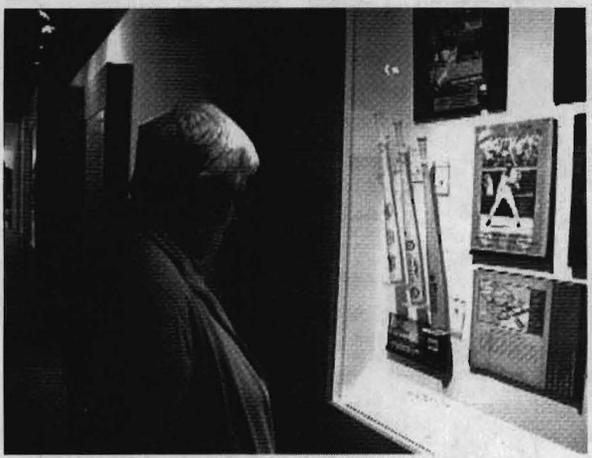
Playing Ball

The Mesa Historical Museum has also worked with the Arizona Historical Society (AHS) in Tempe and two other valley museums to expand its popular baseball exhibit and program *Play Ball: The Cactus League Experience*. Since 2008, this project has grown from 100 objects and a 1,000-square-foot exhibit in Mesa to more than 2,000 objects and over 5,000 square feet of exhibition space in three cities/museums (with additional expansion expected in 2012). As the project has grown into a successful brand, it has expanded beyond the facilities at the Mesa museum site. Armed with broad community support, the project is now destined for a permanent location in the east valley. But MHM needed a larger space and fabrication assistance to expand the project.

Partners at the City of Mesa's Arizona Museum for Youth (AMY), Sky Harbor Airport Museum, and AHS all expressed interest in highlighting the *Play Ball* collection at their sites. Rather than just loaning out the exhibit as a traveling show, Mesa Historical Museum and its partners created cooperative arrangements that allow each institution to gain significant benefit. AMY sought to tap into its youth and family audience by creating a highly interactive, family-based exhibition that its staff designed and fabricated and MHM staff curated. Mesa Museum assumed responsibility for all collections-related work and provided most of the marketing and public relations. MHM also developed strong partnerships with sponsors and shared these resources with the Arizona Museum for Youth, using its money to support exhibit marketing and promotion at AMY. MHM oversaw all resource development activities, provided educational programming for AMY, and coordinated fundraising opportunities wherein the institutions shared proceeds with the express purpose of creating a second, all-new exhibit at AMY.



Entrance to the Arizona Historical Society Museum at Papago Park.



In 2010, the Arizona Historical Society approached the Mesa Historical Museum to develop a 2,000-square-foot *Play Ball* exhibit at their space in Tempe. MHM contributed resource development, marketing, and public relations; loaned objects; and both museums' collection staffs worked on transporting, documenting, and mounting the collection for the new exhibit. AHS secured funding for the installation, and implemented design and fabrication with full input from MHM. For over a year, staff from both museums and outside stakeholders worked together on every aspect of development. From the beginning, the parties agreed to assume lead roles in specific areas that reflected their relative strengths. For example, MHM continues to oversee and control the development and growth of the exhibit's brand. The museums participated in several fundraising opportunities in which they shared revenue and agreed to share expenses that will improve the project in the future.

The staff of the City of Phoenix's Sky Harbor Airport Museum wanted to highlight the history of baseball in

Arizona for all the visitors coming to Phoenix for the 2011 MLB All Star Game. They asked MHM and AHS, who were already collaborating on the exhibit in Tempe, to partner to develop a new exhibition for Sky Harbor Airport. The three institutions expanded the curatorial work to incorporate a new version of the exhibit

at the airport that supported the main project at AHS. Sky Harbor provided space, design, and fabrication; Mesa Historical Museum and Arizona Historical Society collaborated to provide collections and curatorial support. The three worked together on marketing and produced materials that benefited all locations of the expanded franchise.

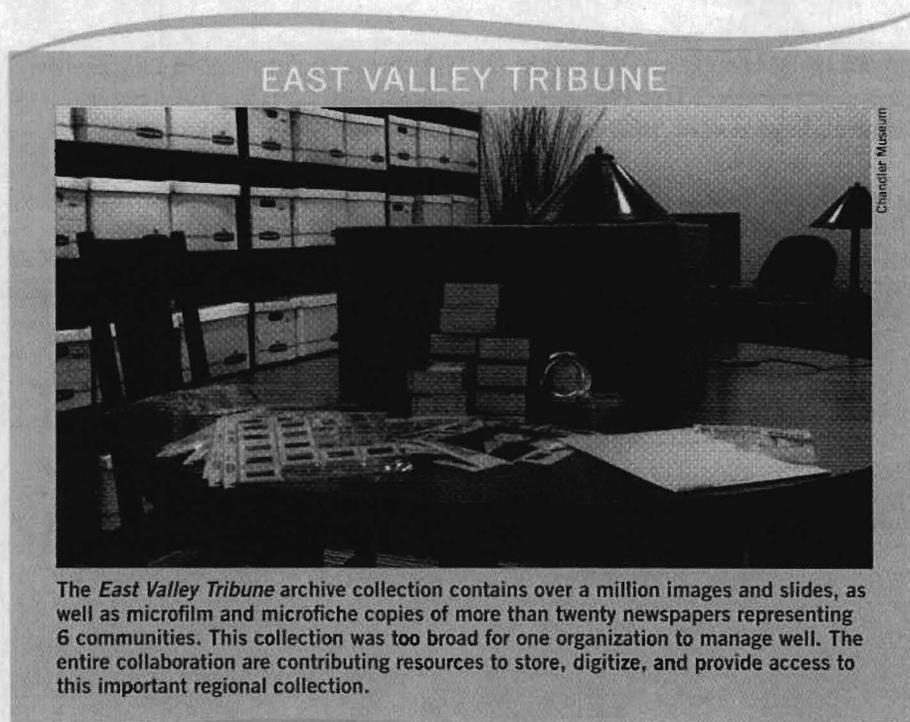
These partnerships have allowed MHM to grow a significant program and brand in multiple locations and with multiple museum partners, which are all successfully reaching new audiences. More than 200,000 people have now seen *Play Ball*. (About 20,000 people visit MHM annually.) The project collaboration has addressed a deficit that each museum was facing and has set the stage for future collaborative large-scale projects that broaden our ability to tell a bigger regional story.

Our latest coalition venture is the *East Valley Tribune* newspaper project. Following the purchase of the more than 100-year-old paper, its new corporate owner decided to divest itself of its archival responsibilities. Yet the paper represents the conglomeration of numerous community papers throughout the east valley, and concerned *Tribune* employees approached coalition members to save the paper's archive. Rather than breaking the collection up into its community components, coalition partners decided to jointly manage the project, utilizing individual coalition members' funding, staff, and volunteers at a single physical repository. We are in the process of working to catalogue and digitize the collection in order to make it a regionally accessible resource.

Lessons Learned

Adopting a collaborative approach with so many moving parts is not easy. There are difficulties with this approach. Two stand out. First, a museum should have other organizations in a fairly close proximity for collaboration to work. If

you are a lone professional in a small town with your closest museum neighbor hours away, a systemic collaboration might be difficult and object sharing impractical. Even though technology has made it possible to manage relationships remotely with email, wikis, and virtual meetings, there is no substitute for being in person at the museum. We



The *East Valley Tribune* archive collection contains over a million images and slides, as well as microfilm and microfiche copies of more than twenty newspapers representing 6 communities. This collection was too broad for one organization to manage well. The entire collaboration are contributing resources to store, digitize, and provide access to this important regional collection.

believe that our approach to collaboration may work best in a metropolitan area.

Second, it takes real, radical trust among the collaborating organizations and staff. It is critical that each organization in the coalition views this as a deep collaboration, not a merger. So many organizations view the idea of merger as the death of their individual organization or the watering-down of their institution's identity. It is our goal to create an overarching collaborative structure that adds value to each individual organization, but does not consume them. A community can be fiercely attached to its local museum (even though monetary support and visitation might not demonstrate it). No community wants their local museum to be taken over by another organization because it feels like just another local resource that has been outsourced.

Still, success in today's economic climate requires coalition members to recognize that the need to create sustainable futures for our collections and programs outpaces some individual concerns. Our mutual desire to respond to change and participate in contextualizing that change in our community in a meaningful way takes precedence over continuing unworkable isolated activities. For instance, it may be necessary for some museums to hand over some traditional museum functions so that a coalition partner can better contribute toward a regional story. This involves giving up some institutional independence to the degree that the staff of a community-based organization will be working on other museums. Therefore the staff of the various partners has to trust that each of the other partners is going to work equally hard for all the organizations that make up the coalition. Everyone involved must believe that in giving up some autonomy they are ultimately gaining in capacity and sustainability.

We believe that this collaborative approach maximizes disparate (and sometimes isolated) resources systemically, thus reducing the short- and long-term undercapitalization issues threatening sustainability. None of our individual organizations has the resources to develop the full complement of functions necessary to sustain a truly successful and vibrant museum. We have lost the capacity to fulfill core functions. The business model that encourages multiple independent institutions, each responsible for its own survival, for developing its own support base, and for distinguishing itself among audiences, cannot be sustained. Instead of being unspoken competitors for audience, funding, membership, and attention, our coalition is an effort to collectively formulate new ideologies, interpretive models, and community "inreach" that can position heritage as a vibrant component of our region's future. ●

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¹ Robert Lumley, *The Museum Time Machine: Putting Cultures On Display* (London: Routledge, 1988), 99; Cary Carson, "The End of History Museums: What's Plan B?" *The Public Historian* 30:4, 9.

² American Association of Museums 2009, *Museum Financial Information* (Washington, DC: American Association of Museums), Table 10.2, 43.

³ Elizabeth Cabral Curtis and Susan Nelson, *Building a Sustainable Future for History Institutions: A Systemic*

Approach – An Introduction to the History System Project, Technical Development Corp www.tdcorp.org. Others include: Southern Arizona Arts & Cultural Alliance; Minnesota Alliance of Local History Museums; Greenville (PA) Museum Alliance; The New River (VA) Heritage Coalition; Oklahoma Museum Network Fairfield / Westchester Museum Alliance (NY, CT); and the Chattanooga Museum Collaborative.

⁴ Map of Phoenix metro area heritage museums.