

Being Small is not a Problem at All...



CAGING THE COLLECTIONS MANAGEMENT BEAST

Tips from CCI's Care of Objects in Indigenous Cultural Centres Workshop

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I'm sure that I'm not alone in admitting that, although collections management is one of my favourite tasks, it unfortunately ends up at the bottom of my to-do list. I would love to spend a portion (or all) of each working day immersed in the collection rooms of the Agassiz-Harrison Museum (AHM).

The collection, which includes a variety of archival items and material culture objects, all of which have been accumulated over the past four decades, continues to grow as community members downsize their residences and our organization embraces a "contemporary collecting" approach, documenting events as they happen within our community. Further, as both the composition of the community and the required services to meet its needs continues to change, it is time for the Agassiz-Harrison Historical Society (AHHS) to evaluate its mission and collection policies.

Where do I Begin?

As the only full-time employee, my time is devoted, by necessity, to the most "urgent" tasks. Working with the AHHS and within the Agassiz-Harrison Valley for over a year now, it is clear that these include: acquiring and managing money, engaging with visitors, community members and organizations, and promoting heritage tourism. I feel that I am finally able to "handle" these tasks, and any curveballs that may come with them and that I can now start to turn my attention to organizing and managing our collection. But where do I begin?

My investigations of, and experiences with the collection and its documentation over the past year have identified the following:

- 1.** We do not have a master inventory of any kind (don't even ask about a functional and user-friendly database!);
- 2.** Collection item information is spread amongst different resources: donor/ agreement card, photo card, photo binder, accession record, collection item;
- 3.** Collection item information is only available in single hard copy form – nothing has been digitized or duplicated for safekeeping;

4. Until halfway through 2018, nothing was documented about the use or meaning of individual items to their donors and our community;
5. The location and condition of individual collection items is not recorded anywhere;
6. "Recent" items (i.e., representative of the post-1950 period) have not generally been accepted into the collection or have been actively sought out, and hence we have huge gaps in our community's story.

Does any of this sound familiar?

CCI to the Rescue!

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Textile storage at the Agassiz-Harrison Museum.
Photo credit: Lindsay Foreman





While I have extensive experience working with and managing archaeological collections from across Canada, my knowledge of handling, storing, and exhibiting items dating to the past 200 years is limited. I have gained some experience and understanding through the *Caring for Museum Collections* course, part of my training towards the Cultural Resource Management Diploma at the University of Victoria. This knowledge has now been enhanced by my participation in the *Care of Objects in Indigenous Cultural Centres* workshop, delivered by Monique Benoit and Jill Plitnikas of the Canadian Conservation Institute (CCI), and hosted by the BCMA and Cowichan Tribes in Duncan on October 16 and 17, 2019.

During this workshop, the concept of preventative conservation was emphasized, and participants were provided with the knowledge to identify and mitigate the ten agents of deterioration. We looked at real collection items, completing condition reports for each, and learning how to identify the effects of the different agents. Participants also learned about appropriate methods for handling, transporting, and storing different types of objects. We even had the opportunity to “guess” which materials were used for padding and protecting items in storage and on display in exhibits. Finally, we participated in an emergency preparedness module, with financial and human resource limitations, to determine how we would respond to different types of museum “disasters” and how best to prepare for them before they even happen.

Items that shouldn't be used for collections storage identified at the CCI workshop.

Photo credit: Lindsay Foreman

Archival storage at the Agassiz-Harrison Museum.

Photo credit: Lindsay Foreman



I feel confident diving into the AHM's collection rooms this winter. While I have already managed to do some preliminary sorting of like items, improved the security of collections storage, and dedicated specific areas for storage purposes, I have a long way to go. My volunteers and I will be working to inventory and record the condition of our different collection items and digitizing that information as a backup. We will also be updating our collections policy and identifying documentation areas in need of improvement to ensure that we can better care for and share the stories of each item with our community. And of course there is also the importance of rehousing the items in a safe and cost-effective manner.



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Are you looking for resources to help you tackle some of your collections management tasks?

CHECK OUT THE BCMA BRAIN

museumsassn.bc.ca/brain/tools-and-resources/collections-management-menu/

OR CCI'S WEBSITE

www.canada.ca/en/conservation-institute.html

We are also encouraged to contact CCI's conservation experts with questions and concerns (<https://www.canada.ca/en/conservation-institute/services/conservation-experts.html>). They are a wealth of knowledge, so use them!

Bad

