

## Ways for Visitors to Share Their Stories

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### *Why collect stories in museums?*

Stories are as important to collect as artifacts. Without the context of the story, objects lose their significance, their meaning and their relevance. Collecting and sharing stories from the community can provide this context.

Stories will give your objects meaning beyond what they can, or what we think they can, convey on their own. Stories can give voice to members of your community who have previously been missing from the museum and can provide a stronger connection to those who are already there. Stories will add depth to exhibits and objects, and help convey to your visitors why your museum and the objects it contains are special, unique, and worthy of their time.

Erik Schilp defines “museum entrepreneurship” as the creative and strategic process with which one effectively and sustainably translates a story to the largest possible audience<sup>1</sup>. This trend can be seen in museums around the world from the new Canadian Museum for Human Rights’ exhibit of stories for Canada 150<sup>2</sup> to the Science Museum in London, England which uses stories to engage website visitors with collections not on display<sup>3</sup>.

### *Collecting Stories in Your Community*

#### *Identifying the stories of your community*

Communities are full of stories; telling stories is part of being human. However, to make your exhibition relevant and meaningful, you need to collect the “right” stories. Having a clear purpose for collecting the stories will help guide your collecting efforts. Without clear collection guidelines there is the potential for the project to either grow too large or remain so narrow that nothing new is added to the understanding of the object.

Knowing your community will help you select the people to approach about contributing stories. Every community has good storytellers, who have good memories and an interest in local history. However, do not exclude community members that do not have a close relationship with the museum as their stories can be just as important and relevant. Choosing stories and contributors that add new dimensions of knowledge and meaning to objects is best. However, sometimes soliciting stories in an open-ended manner can bring up aspects of objects, events or places that you would not have thought of. For example, asking for stories about a sports arena can produce stories of concerts, festivals, community events and memories that have nothing to do with the building’s primary purpose as an arena.

There are several ways that stories can be collected in your community and objects in your collection are the most obvious jumping-off point for many of them. Look through your collection for objects that you do not have much written information, but that you know is relevant to the community. For example, a leaflet for an event, an advertisement for a store, a pin from a festival or event, a promotional item for a fundraiser... the possibilities are endless. The object selected should help to tell you something about YOUR community and should be unique.

Not everyone will have a great story about your object, but it is surprising how many people will have memories about a place or thing.



## Collecting Stories in Your Museum

Erik Schilp, in his blog on museum entrepreneurship, requests museum staff to ask themselves what visitors can leave behind<sup>4</sup>. One answer to this question is stories; they provide visitors a way to engage directly with, and leave an impact upon, the museum. Your visitors will be a great source of stories. Providing them easy, accessible ways to leave their stories behind will add to your exhibit and collection, as well as generate discussion among visitors and between visitors and staff.

Some tips for soliciting stories from visitors include:

- Talk to your visitors as they come into your museum and let them know you are collecting stories about a specific topic.
- Provide feedback points throughout the exhibit, not just at the exit.
- Collect contact data (respecting all relevant data protection regulations) to allow you to follow up on interesting stories.
- Engage with people on social media, noting that not all visitors will have access to this mode of communication.

There are various ways for visitors to provide their stories. These can be incorporated into the exhibit or data can be solicited for later story collection. Some ideas that can be easily incorporated into the exhibit are:

- Feedback stations throughout the exhibit.
- Simple story prompt forms throughout the exhibit and/or at the end.
- Response boards that people can add their story to with post-its or erasable marker.
- Recording stations with audio or video recording equipment (depending on available resources). These will need detailed instructions to help visitors record their stories.
- Through social media, by incorporating a hashtag relevant to your exhibit.
- Using the museum's blog as a digital place to tell stories and respond to objects not currently on display. (See The British Museum's "pleasant vices<sup>5</sup>" series as an example.)
- Exit surveys to find out what else visitors would like to know and what stories they can share.

## Recording Stories

When storytellers share their stories, it is important to make sure they know the significance of their story. Let them know why their story is important and why they were chosen, and if they will be quoted in exhibits, if you want to use their name with the quotes, how the story will be stored, etc. The same ethical and legal considerations should be followed for collecting stories as for collecting oral histories.

Recording stories is very similar to recording oral histories. The Museums Association of Saskatchewan (MAS) has produced a Tip Sheet entitled *Collecting Oral Histories*<sup>6</sup> that provides information on the practicalities and legalities of collecting oral histories. This Tip Sheet, as well as the sample release forms which are available from the MAS website in the Member's Area, should be used to ensure that your stories are appropriately and ethically collected. If you plan to name storytellers in exhibits, their permission should be explicitly sought at the time of recording, as with oral histories.

## Using Stories in Your Exhibits

Stories can be used either on their own or in conjunction with objects in your exhibits. They should always be relevant and clearly contributing to the overall aims of the exhibit. The examples given here are only a select few of the many available. They highlight the ways in which stories can be used in exhibits or with exhibits and objects. In exhibits and their accompanying publications, storytellers are credited for their story.

### Small, one-off exhibits with accompanying publications – collecting stories in advance of exhibits

*150 Stories/Récits & Pieces of Canada: 150 Objects, 150 Stories*<sup>7</sup>

This exhibit and accompanying booklet was produced by the Office of the Lieutenant Governor of Ontario for Canada's 150th anniversary of Confederation. The exhibit consisted of 150 photos, each accompanied by a story in the booklet. The stories were told from the perspective of the person featured. The booklet provided a tangible take-away for visitors.

The Niagara Falls History Museum completed a similar project for Canada 150: 150 objects were selected to tell the story of the Niagara Falls community and “to tell the story of what it is to be Canadian”<sup>8</sup>. The accompanying booklet (available for use in the gallery or for purchase) told the 150 stories from multiple perspectives: either a story told by a community member or a story based on curatorial and historical research by the museum.

Many other examples of this type can be found including the World in the East End project by the Victoria and Albert Museum of Childhood<sup>9</sup>, Our Lives: The Second World War and its Legacy in the Northwest and Causeway Regions<sup>10</sup>, and many examples in the book *Museums and Source Communities*<sup>11</sup> among many others.

## “Museums as Contact Zones”<sup>12</sup> - stories about objects

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The collection of stories about specific objects, rather than on a theme for an exhibit, is similar, although sometimes with surprising results. James Clifford, as part of a research project with the Portland Museum of Art’s Northwest Coast Indian Collection describes how, in a session set up to learn more about objects linked to the Tlingit culture (Pacific Northwest Coast of North America), the objects became memory aids for the Tlingit Elders to share stories and sing songs<sup>13</sup>. He continues by describing how the Elders emphasized that they were sharing important information with the museum and were trusting the museum to behave appropriately with it<sup>14</sup> and how the museum was told that specific Elders’ voices should appear in the exhibits<sup>15</sup>. The museum also agreed to joint control with the Elders for the information obtained from the sessions.

This example highlights the importance of respect, trust and clearly defined roles in the control of the material obtained.

Although the sessions produced stories rather than the expected technical information, the Elders were able to provide additional significance to the objects in the care of the museum. The stories provided information on why the objects were special, unique and important.

## Museum Stories and Intangible Cultural Heritage

Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) consists of the stories, skills, traditions, ways of doing things, ways of speaking, and ways of interacting with each other and the environment<sup>16</sup>. UNESCO’s 2003 Convention for Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage gives four ways ICH can be safeguarded: documentation; recognition and celebration; transmission; and use in community development. Museum stories are an excellent way to engage with ICH and incorporate it into community development<sup>17</sup> through exhibits. Heritage Saskatchewan provides an excellent introduction and resources on ICH on their website. Additionally, Heritage Saskatchewan employs Kristin Catherwood, as their Director of Living Heritage and includes on their website Kristin’s work including the “Living Heritage of Coal in Coronach Project”<sup>18</sup>.

## Conclusion

Stories are essential to museums. Without them, and without effective ways to solicit them from and share them with visitors, museums are missing important elements of what makes their collections significant. Incorporating story collecting into exhibit design and ensuring there are ways for visitors to share their stories about objects, events and exhibits will help create a museum that is inclusive, representative and uniquely local.

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## Further Reading

These resources provide some interesting case studies of museums using stories in exhibits and working with local communities to collect stories.

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2 <https://humanrights.ca/explore/exhibitions/rights-passage-canada-150/stories>

3 <https://www.sciencemuseum.org.uk/objects-and-stories>

4 <http://museumentrepreneurship.com/#definition>

5 <https://blog.britishmuseum.org/baked-beans-to-ambergris-the-top-5-weird-and-wonderful-aphrodisiacs/>

6 Museums Association of Saskatchewan & Kimberley Moore

7 Office of the Lieutenant Governor of Ontario (2017) and Niagara Falls Museums (2017)

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