

Introductory remarks

Around South Australia there are many local museums that exist to preserve and interpret their districts history. This is of course a huge brief. In reality it is common for museums to concentrate collecting and interpretation efforts on particular aspects of the distant past.

The result is that local museum collections tend to be dominated by items dating from before 1950, and this can give the impression of community's histories having ended abruptly with the end of the Second World War.

Yet community museums could be well placed to address this imbalance. After all, they would seem to be in a prime position to engage with and capture evolving local history.

What might taking an interest in and collecting history of the more recent past – in other words being involved in contemporary collecting - mean for the future of local museums?

I'd like to tell you about two small community museums.

Museum One

The first museum is located in an outer suburban area.

- The original small town has developed over the last few decades into a major locality.
- The districts population has quadrupled since the 1950s, bringing in waves of new residents from near and far.
- Another new housing estate is being built near the museum, and a new school opened last year.

The museum started out in the early 1960s.

- It is incorporated and entirely managed by volunteers.
- The volunteers are, quite rightly, proud of their efforts so far to preserve objects from the districts history.

A modest income is generated by fundraising efforts and entrance fees.

The local council waives the museum's rates and pays the electricity bill.

The museum building was once a small community hall and volunteers have spent countless hours renovating the building and raising money for a new roof.

Like many local museums it has a large, mixed collection of objects.

- There's a lot of glassware and china, a wide assortment of domestic technology items and pieces of furniture.
- Part of the building has been partitioned into rooms. There is a recreated bedroom featuring cots, dolls and lots of ladies underwear; a kitchen with an impressive assortment of pots and pans from various eras along with a number of meat mincers; and a laundry full of washboards and dollies.
- Against the back wall of the museum is a group of blacksmithing tools.
- Many of the objects are of the type that were probably used in the area, and some do have definite provenance.

Everything is neatly arranged, if a bit jammed in in places.

A lot of collecting was done in the first few years of the museum's existence, in a bit of a rush to fill up the available space and open the museum to the public. Descendants of the district's early residents donated much of the initial collection.

A deliberate emphasis was, and still is, placed on collecting items that relate to stories about the foundation of the district. Consequently, there are relatively few objects in the collection dating from after the 1920s.

Donations of objects and photographs have increased greatly in the last decade as older locals sell up their properties and look for a 'home' for their ancestors' treasures. It's quite common for boxes of old things to just turn up on the museum's door step.

The museum has an acquisition policy, but it's not actively used. Instead, the museum tends to see its practice of accepting all historical items offered to it as a sign of goodwill to the community. It is reluctant to say no to donations for fear of missing out on further objects. There are still plenty more objects in the community that can help the museum to tell establishment history – the history it values and feels comfortable with. Donors mostly only offer the museum the older items anyway, so collecting in an ad hoc fashion isn't questioned.

The museum deals with donations by sorting through them and adding the most attractive items to the existing displays. What can't be squeezed onto display is kept in various cupboards, under the bedroom display bed and behind the laundry display washtubs, ready for the day when more display space is found. Most items collected in the last ten years have been 'stored' in this way.

The museum is applying to the local Council for a grant for a new shed. They hope it will be obvious to the council that an overflowing museum equals a desperate need for more space.

The history of the museum's district is one of significant social and economic change but community complexity and diversity isn't evident in the collection. There is limited scope within the collections with which to tell a balanced view of the past - what everyday life was like in the district - or to demonstrate how the district has developed over time, especially in the last 60 years.

The museum committee is well entrenched in the museum

- Max has been president for twenty five years and Daphne has been secretary for almost as long.
- There is a small, core group of volunteers, most of whom have a deep personal connection to the district and have been associated with the museum for a long time.
- Some new volunteers have joined the museum group over the years, but they've tended not to stick around for very long.

The museum committee feels the Council isn't interested in the museum and wishes it would do a bit more for them. Getting the interest of school groups to visit hasn't been successful either.

Pressures on the museum to answer public enquiries, be open regular hours and care for the collections are increasing. But public support for the museum is low and the committee bemoans the lack of interest by locals in their district's history.

The museum's volunteers are getting older and diminishing in number.

It's all the committee can do to keep the museum doors open three afternoons a week.

If only they had more space!

Museum Two

The second museum is also run by a dedicated committee of mostly long-serving volunteers. Its district, too, has experienced very significant population growth and the landscape of the area is quite different to it was even 20 years ago.

This museum was also established in the 1960s, has developed in much the same way as the first museum, has experienced the same sort of challenges, and is located in the same sort of building.

Until quite recently, the way it approached history and collecting was very much the same too.

The museum collection includes a wide variety of objects relevant to the districts past. There are a lot of items dating between about 1890 to 1940, but there are also items from the 1950s, 60s and 70s, including a couple of television sets and a few small household appliances. There are quite a lot of pieces of costume – mostly special occasion outfits from the 1930s and 40s, but also an example of the high school's uniform from 1963 and one of the last shirts made by a small local manufacturer only 5 years ago.

A few years ago the museum committee became aware of the limitations of the collections. Collecting had always been done passively and this had resulted in significant biases in the collection.

- There was a predominance of certain types of items and absences of others.
- Items that had been donated – by donors with their own biases – were not necessarily the most significant or the most useful for telling inclusive community history.
- People just didn't tend to keep everyday items and so there was less chance of such items and their stories eventually finding their way into the museum's collection.

The museum committee was concerned that by passively collecting and focusing on the distant past it may not be capturing the most relevant or important aspects of the communities history or developing a collection that would allow it to interpret changes over time.

History was moving ahead but they were not collecting it. How could they claim to represent the districts history but ignore the recent past?

They decided to do some contemporary collecting.

The museum started by writing a new acquisition policy to guide future collecting efforts. The process raised some issues:

- if they were to collect items from a broader period of time they would quickly run out of space at the museum.
- They may have to be more choosy than they had been.
- Perhaps they would need to give up some of the display space to make collection storage areas and start managing their collections in new ways.
- They might need to entirely rethink their displays to better reflect changes in the district's history
- There was also concern that a stricter collecting policy may put potential donors off-side - if the museum didn't agree to take on Mrs Smith's shell collection, she might not bequeath them the trowel her grandfather used to lay the Town Hall foundation stone

But there was an even bigger issue.

Collecting objects and stories from the distant past – a history that was well known and accepted – seemed easy to do because historical significance was already established. But how would they know what in contemporary history was significant?

The museum committee was in unfamiliar collecting territory.

They simply didn't know what they should be trying to collect.

Jean, the museum's long-serving secretary, got the ball rolling on this dilemma by doing some research and putting together a list of important themes in the community's history over the last 60 years.

She included on the list things that had very local relevance, but also things that showed how the district fitted into the wider historical record.

It was a very long list.

It would need to be narrowed down or the museum would end up collecting everything!

The museum undertook some community consultation.

- They targeted a range of people of different ages and from different backgrounds to provide them with perspectives on the museum's current and future collections.
- Consultation was challenging for the museum – it was confronting to find out that people weren't interested in visiting, or being involved with the museum, because they felt the history it kept and told wasn't relevant to their lives.
- But it was rewarding too, because through the consultation process the museum gained valuable insights into what history was important to the community both now, and in the recent past.

The museum used these insights to shape their contemporary collecting policy.

They set out to try and address some of the collecting gaps that would allow them to present a fuller view of local history.

To give you some examples of how they applied their new policy:

- The community had raised the history of small businesses as an issue of interest. A small hardware store was closing and the building was going to be demolished. The store had been run by four generations of the same family and was an iconic local shop. At one stage, during a housing boom in the area, a bank had operated a branch from the back of the shop, and many local people of all generations had memories of making purchases in the quaint store over the years. The store was finally closing down because it could no longer compete with bigger businesses. The museum decided to collect the 1950s cash register, which had been in use until only a few years ago, and also several boxes of shop records, mostly ledger books documenting orders and sales over an almost 70 year period. It also documented in photographs the interior of the store and recorded an oral history with the store owner.
- The changing local landscape was also an issue of great interest to the community. Two museum volunteers led a project to photograph all of the public buildings. They included everything from the first church built in 1891 to the new council chambers, constructed only a couple of years ago. It was a big job, but two keen local photographers, who had never been involved with the museum before, heard about the project and volunteered to help.

The museum is active in the local community.

It has started a program with local schools where children are encouraged to collect and record items significant to them and display them at the museum.

The museum is well supported by the community.

The district council also provides a range of support and recognises the museum as an important community asset.

The number of core museum volunteers is steady and many other people are involved as occasional volunteers working on short-term projects.

The museum feels confident about its future.

Concluding remarks

In case you've been wondering, neither of these museums is any museum in particular.

But, assuming they were, in 50 years time, which museum will be able to tell the richer community history?

Through the second museum's experience we can see that:

- The decision to actively look at collecting evolving history was a fundamental starting point for the museum to change its approach to developing and managing its collections
- Engaging with the community enabled the museum to track what the community felt was significant about that evolving history and therefore set directions for collecting
- They discovered that they were well placed to capture local history as it evolved and to address the gaps in their collection

So what might taking an interest in and collecting history of the more recent past mean for the telling of history?

- The second museum is deliberately gathering important local artefacts and stories and building a contemporary picture of their community.
- In contrast, the First museum's approach to collecting means they will continue to only collect artefacts and stories from a distance, thereby missing out on capturing contemporary significance, and this has important implications for fully interpreting history.

It therefore seems logical that being involved in contemporary history collecting will indeed allow local museums *to* tell a richer history.

Of course there are challenges in doing contemporary collecting:

- There is the challenge of deciding what to collect, and making choices about key areas of history to collect as change is occurring, rather than with the benefit of hindsight,
- There is the challenge of dealing with vested interests, existing structures and systems, and established ways of doing things
- There is the challenge of resourcing collecting activities and balancing collecting with other museum priorities
- There is the challenge of physically collecting and housing more items
- and there is the challenge of being inclusive in the history told in display interpretations

These challenges are not vastly different to what small local museums already deal with, and established museum practice can be used to overcome them.

For example, museums already select and narrow themes in history, and make choices about objects and stories to collect, in order to manage collecting.

So maybe museums shouldn't be put off by the challenges, but embrace the opportunities that contemporary collecting presents.