

70% Boring: Creating More Meaningful Stories

Linda Lacey – Cultural Heritage Project Officer, City of Charles Sturt.

A sense of the past is fundamental to sense of place, identity, civic pride and strong cohesive communities. This does not mean though that history inspires waves of passion for everyone!

What to do with local history was a question Charles Sturt Council grappled with for almost a decade. In 2004, Council was continuing to support a number of local historical societies in the traditional ways. The ongoing investment was made without the guidance of a strategic vision or any overarching sense of what local history means to residents – if it means anything at all!

In 2005 we sought to develop a new approach to local history. This presentation looks at our approach to turning a subject we were told by people was boring into something more meaningful.

The City of Charles Sturt is situated in Adelaide's West, bounded by the River Torrens, 11km of coast and Port Adelaide/Enfield council. The City's population is just over one hundred thousand people. It is considered the sporting and entertainment hub of Adelaide, and key areas of the City are Hindmarsh, Woodville, West Lakes, Henley Beach and Grange.

To start solving the issue of 'what to do with local history', we needed to develop a clear management framework. Central to developing the framework was identifying the importance of local history to our diverse, urban community.

Local historical societies had shared with us the difficulty in attracting people, and on the surface, it appeared that aside from preserving neighbourhood character residents weren't overly interested in local history. If this really was the case, then was it appropriate for Council to continue to invest in this area?

In finding out about people's thoughts on local history, it was important to gather the views of not just those with a declared interest in the subject, but the majority of the community without any special interest in it. This part of the process included meetings, workshops, and importantly a random sample survey of Charles Sturt residents. The results showed that people believe local history is important and that local government should have the key responsibility for preserving and promoting it.

Residents gave us many reasons as to why they think local history is important but, overall people said preserving local history is important because:

- we learn from history;
- for children;
- because we have a responsibility to;
- because it gives guidance for the future;
- because it contributes to our sense of place and community;
- because it is connected to our identity and our culture;
- for tourism and visitors.

However, while they said it was important most people also said they don't really know what local history is. When asked to describe local history, half of the survey respondents said they were unsure about what local history was, or they said it was boring!

So it seems we had stumbled upon the crux of the issue, and possibly why community participation and interest in local history was so low. Aside from local history being about the past, people didn't really have any concept or understanding of what it is.

Of those that could describe local history, many said "Old buildings". Other descriptions included:

- Settlement and onwards
- What you grow up with
- Something that's been around for years
- Anything over 30 years old
- How it used to be 50/60 years ago
- Last century

The management framework we developed based on these results and other research has provided council with the basis for moving forward in the area of local history. The fundamentals of our new approach are:

- Residents are the primary target audience;
- Local history should be accessible and appealing to large numbers of residents;
- There must be an emphasis on telling the stories of local history that differentiate and are unique to the area, and that residents can connect with opportunistically and on an emotional level;
- Interpretation of local history should be via a range of mediums, and be interactive, open to interpretation, and specifically target and engage people;
- Local history initiatives should add value to existing services, activities and infrastructure of council; and
- Local history initiatives should also aim to deliver one or more additional community benefits (such as social capital, civic pride, public safety, and community development).

We wanted the approach to have authenticity and to be sustainable over the longer term. It was, therefore, important that we worked with the community to develop and action it. We established the Local History Partnership, a reference group comprising representatives of historical societies, cultural heritage professionals, and residents with a passion for local history to assist and advise us.

Identifying the themes of the City's heritage that have real meaning for the local community was the first step in rolling out the new approach. Getting this right was important as it was about taking 'local history' from being an abstract idea, and making it something more relevant and meaningful. Again we went back to our community to find out what they felt was important about our past.

A range of consultation methods were used in order to reach a broad range of people. The information gathered through this consultation and research was then analysed and some broad subject areas identified. We then linked these together into themes (our thanks to Dr Peter Cahalan, Lyn Leader-Elliott and Dr Susan Marsden who assisted us in this process). In the end, nine themes that represent what residents as a collective have identified as being 'the stories of the City' were developed:

- '*Sport is our life (and how we have fun)*' reflecting Charles Sturt's strong sporting traditions;

- *'Coming, Staying and making this place home'* which explores our diverse migrant community and how the City has been settled;
- *'Misery in a mosaic pot – tough times, community action and local identity'* which brings together the perception, and in some cases the reality, of 'the bad side of town';
- *'War'*;
- *'Blue Demin blood – celebrating our manufacturing heritage'*;
- *'Sand, swamp, and clay'* which tells the stories of the relationships between people and the landscape;
- *'The beach is our place'* acknowledging the beach as an important feature of our culture and environment;
- *'Charles Sturt People'* celebrating local people and businesses;
- *'Pubs and local politics'* sharing the organisational history of Charles Sturt Council.

Part of identifying the themes also included working out who our audience for local history is, and what themes and types of products appeal to them. Our community is made up of over 100 different cultures, and is slightly older and not as wealthy as the rest of Adelaide. What impact does this have on people's interest and ability to participate in local history?

Six audience segments were identified as the key target markets for local history. The types of products or history experiences would best capture the interests of each segment were also identified. From a strategy document which sets out the actions for telling the stories of local history was developed. The actions are based on 5 main areas:

- Digital (website, online exhibition etc);
- City landscape & built heritage (preserving city character and creating situations for everyday encounters with local history);
- Collections & resources (how we manage and use our historical collections);
- Printed; and
- Tours & living history (providing creative opportunities for people participate in local history).

Through our new approach to managing local history we are aiming to achieve the following objectives:

- Improved sense of place and shared identity;
- A more sustainable local history sector;
- Provision of high quality local history experiences and products that engage and inspire residents and visitors;
- Enhanced community partnerships;
- Intergenerational interaction, life-long learning and social capital building;
- Equitable access to local history, including its stories, assets and collections; and
- Preservation of local history and historical assets.

Our approach really isn't rocket science. Fundamentally it is about knowing who our audience is and what it is that captures their interest and inspires their participation.

Some people may think that in doing this we are 'popularising' history. But is that really a bad thing? Regardless of a subject's academic historical significance, if local history does not mean anything to local people then they will question whether their

rates should be legitimately be spent on it. Would a council invest in a pool if its residents had no interest in swimming?

Our approach is also about creativity and innovation in preserving and presenting local history. It is based on sharing our history in a way that connects with people on a deeper, more emotional level than we have done in the past. We don't want local history or how it is presented to be boring. We want it to be engaging and relevant, now and into the future. The next time we ask our community to share their thoughts on local history, I don't want them to say 'boring'.