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THE INFLUENCE OF EARLY ETHNOGRAPHIC CONSERVATION IN ALASKA

Scott Carrlee and Ellen Carrlee

The state of Alaska spans a terrain as wide as the continental U.S. and occupies one-fifth the total landmass of the lower 48 states, yet contains a population only slightly larger than the District of Columbia. Almost 60% of these people live in the three largest cities: Anchorage, Fairbanks, and Juneau. The struggles of a small population in a vast land have always colored the history of the state. Isolation has always been an important factor in the geographic and cultural development of Alaska. A visitor behind the scenes in many small, remote Alaskan museums may be surprised, however, to find unusually good collections care, awareness and respect for preventive conservation, a long history of contact with conservators, and a sophisticated attitude toward the role of the museum in the community. Certain key events contributed to these successes.

Civic consciousness paired with financial boom times influenced museum development in Alaska in the second half of the 20th century. When statehood came to Alaska on October 18, 1959, there were only six museums in Alaska. In 1967, the Purchase Centennial celebrated the bargain once called “Seward’s Folly”. Alaska was purchased from Russia in 1867 for $7.2 million, the equivalent of $84 million today. A federal block grant to the State of Alaska Purchase Centennial Commission was distributed throughout the state for community projects. Many communities identified a need for local museums, and the number of Alaskan museums doubled during the events surrounding the centennial celebration. In 1968, oil was discovered on the North Slope. Construction began on the oil pipeline in 1974, and by 1975 the economy of the state had doubled. The first oil was pumped in 1977. The Alaskan Canadian Highway (often called the Alcan Highway), built during WWII by the Army Corps of Engineers in response to Japanese attacks on American soil, underwent upgrades and improvements in the 1970s to support pipeline construction. Improvements led to a boom in adventure tourism as well as opening up the interior to further settlement. Alaska’s population grew by a third during that decade. The 1976 United States Bicentennial celebrations raised national consciousness about history and the importance of preserving artifacts. Many museums nationwide began to implement preservation policies and hire conservators. Cruise ship tourism in Alaska was steadily on the rise in the 1980s, but exploded in the 1990s as a result of the Gulf War and American fears of traveling abroad. By the end of the decade, tourism in the state increased by threefold.

Today there are more than 60 museums and cultural centers in Alaska. Even with the advent of “industrial tourism” the typical small Alaskan museum struggles to keep its doors open. Admission tickets pay for only a fraction of the operating expenses, and the meager staff are often unpaid volunteers. Professional training is rare. The exhibits of these small museums can be hard to distinguish from the curio shops on every town’s Dock Street, hawking pseudo-Alaskan antiques and featuring bear skins and moose antlers on the walls. Old-fashioned museum cases are over-filled with artifacts and memorabilia, often with a yellowed label typed on an index card.

Behind the scenes, however, collections care, with an emphasis on preventative conservation, is surprisingly up-to-date. Shelves are lined with closed-cell polyethylene foam, windows and lights have UV-filters, gloves are worn, and objects tend to be securely housed. The staff generally understands conservation and has specific ideas about what a conservator can do for them.
Indeed, 15 museums in Alaska (nearly 25%) have had Conservation Assessment Program surveys to date. In 1990, during her time as conservator at the Alaska State Museum, Helen Alten conducted a conservation survey of the state. She noted that over half the museums which responded had been visited by a conservator. Over 80% stored their collections in acid free materials and nearly 90% regularly sought conservation and preservation advice from the Alaska State Museum. Today, there appears to be a unified conservation philosophy among the small museums of Alaska. It is based on good fundamental collections care, preventive conservation and contact with professional conservators for advice and treatment when necessary. This is remarkable, considering a grand total of only four museum conservators ever held permanent positions in Alaska before the year 2000. What is the origin of this preventive conservation legacy? Why did it stick so well in these small museums?

The first big wave of conservation appears to have hit Alaska in the year 1975. Bethune Gibson, head of the Smithsonian’s Anthropology Conservation Lab, was invited to the Sheldon Jackson Museum in Sitka to perform what seems to be the first general conservation survey done in the state. Her report outlined the basic conservation condition of the collection, illuminated the environmental factors that were creating problems, and made recommendations for improvements. It appears likely that her report, and the connection with Smithsonian’s Anthropology Conservation Lab, led to the grant obtained by the Sheldon Museum to hire Toby Raphael as an ethnographic conservator for three months in the summer of 1975. Raphael was studying at the George Washington University ethnographic and archaeological training program headed by Carolyn Rose, and internships at the Anthropology Conservation Lab were part of the program.

Conservation treatments were carried out in a makeshift lab in the staff lounge of the Sheldon Jackson college library. In his report at the end of the summer, Raphael noted that a large percentage of his time was devoted to the Eskimo mask collection since it was considered one of the most valuable in the museum.

During the same period of time, one Alaskan was becoming increasingly interested in preserving collections. Mary Pat Wyatt was the Curator of Collections at the Anchorage Museum of History and Art. She was also working on a master’s thesis, “Problems in Conservation of Alaskan Ethnographic Material,” when she met Smithsonian conservator James Silberman. Silberman was traveling with the “Far North” exhibition, a large exhibit covering 2,000 years of Eskimo, Indian and Aleut culture that had been organized by the Smithsonian Institution. He encouraged Wyatt to pursue an internship in conservation at the Smithsonian. She contacted Bethune Gibson and organized an internship year at the Anthropology Conservation Lab starting in August of 1975. This internship at the Smithsonian formed the backbone of her conservation education. Wyatt returned to Alaska in 1976 to take a nine-month conservation position at the Alaska State Museum funded by the National Endowment for the Arts. This was the first conservation position at any Alaskan museum, and remains the only conservation position in any institution in Alaska, despite the fact that both the University of Alaska Museum at Fairbanks and the Anchorage Museum of History and Art have considerably larger collections.

Wyatt converted a darkroom in the basement of the Alaska State Museum in Juneau into a conservation laboratory and even managed to find a fume hood that is still in operation today. Her primary concern, however, was outreach. She visited 15 museums and cultural agencies around the state where she gave presentations and workshops on general collections care. The following year the conservation position continued to be funded with another grant from the National Endowment for the Arts as well as a National Museum Act grant. The focus of the lab continued to be statewide outreach. Museums and cultural agencies around the state were invited
to send objects to Juneau for conservation treatment. Three regional workshops were held in Juneau, Fairbanks and Homer with a total of 68 participants. Topics covered included grant writing, exhibits development, collections care and preservation.

In 1977, John Turney of the Valdez Heritage Center met Matilda Wells of the National Museum Act, who put him in touch with Caroline Keck of the Cooperstown Graduate Program in Conservation. Arrangements for student interns to work in Alaska were discussed, but did not materialize.

In the summer of 1978, four graduate students from the George Washington University/Smithsonian Conservation program came to Alaska to do conservation work. The National Museum Act provided the funding and Mary Pat Wyatt coordinated the work. The four conservators were Alice Hoveman, Melba Myers, Susan Paterson, and Thurid Clark. They worked in teams of two at four museums for one month each. The four museums were the University of Alaska at Fairbanks, the Baranov Museum on Kodiak Island, the Sheldon Museum in Haines, and again the Sheldon Jackson Museum in Sitka. In addition to treating the objects most in need of conservation at each museum, the teams also wrote reports providing recommendations for general conservation care of the collections. The communities were impressed with the Smithsonian conservators and there was local press coverage of the projects. One of the students, Alice Hoveman, returned to Alaska after graduation to volunteer her time at the Sheldon Jackson Museum in Sitka. The following year, Hoveman would take the position of State Conservator at the Alaska State Museum following the departure of Mary Pat Wyatt. Wyatt returned several years later to become the curator at the Juneau-Douglas City Museum, a position she held for almost twenty years.

The State Conservator position was financed through grants until 1980, when a permanent full-time position was funded by the Legislature. The nascent Conservation Services Program also had political implications. Juneau was constantly striving to prove itself of service to the rest of the state in order to fend off attempts to move the capital closer to Anchorage. Statewide outreach became a major mission of the Alaska State Museum. Alice Hoveman presented a talk at the 1981 American Institute of Conservation meeting in Philadelphia about the Alaska State Museum's Conservation Services Program. According to Hoveman,

There existed a serious lack of understanding concerning preventive care for collections; i.e., inadequately controlled environments, limited security, and improper handling, storage and exhibit techniques. These conservation problems are complicated by the physical isolation and remoteness of Alaskan museums and the limited financial resources many Alaskan museum personnel are faced with (Hoveman 1981).

The approach included on-site assessments, environmental monitoring kits and conservation literature available on loan, assistance for emergencies and disasters, and individual treatments for objects stable enough to be shipped to Juneau. Hoveman also initiated the Conservation Wise Guide, a booklet about collections care for Alaskan materials which included appendices listing conservation suppliers and conservation related organizations. This booklet, funded by a grant from the Institute of Museum Services, has been distributed free of charge to Alaskan museums and cultural centers since 1985. It is now in its revised second printing funded by the Institute for Museum and Library Services and is available on the internet. Alice stayed in the position until February 1987, when Helen Alten took the position.

In advertising jargon, people speak of certain campaigns having "legs," meaning that they
achieve a longevity that goes beyond the initial appearance of the message in the media. The conservation message that was carried by the core group of early ethnographic conservators in Alaska had “legs”. The message seems to have gotten through and stuck with many of the smaller museums that had early conservation contact. The message was carried on even with numerous staff changes. We may never know why this is so, but a few ideas can be postulated. First, all of the early conservation participants during the formative years were trained at the same place, the George Washington University program led by Carolyn Rose and/or the Anthropology Conservation Lab at the Smithsonian. Second, the message was simple and effective. It emphasized preventing damage and the fundamentals of good collections care, not the treatment of artifacts. The concepts presented were meant to be understood by staff without specific conservation training. Indeed, it may be that the museum workers lacking professional training were more receptive to this message. Some of the larger, better-funded institutions in the state have not made conservation a priority, even today. Third, the plans and recommendations could be carried out in the absence of continual conservator input. The conservators came, but no one knew when they might return.

Ethnographic conservation at its core is neither an art nor a science but rather a philosophy. It is a philosophy firmly rooted in preventive conservation, and distinct from traditional fine arts conservation that is rooted in individual treatments. The ethnographic conservators who studied at the George Washington/Smithsonian program were trained to care for large and diverse collections, to do the most good for the most artifacts with the resources available, and to look at the big picture before considering individual treatments. According to the National Needs Assessment Survey conducted by the IMS in 1992, 75% of U.S. museums a budget under $250,000 and are defined as small museums. Most of these museums, like those in Alaska, do not have a conservator on staff. Yet these museums house the majority of our cultural heritage. Individual conservation treatments save individual pieces, often the spectacular and priceless ones. But for the bulk of our historical material, it is the unspectacular realm of preventive conservation that will carry our treasures, great and small, into the future.

Richard Beauchamp spoke at a museum workshop in Juneau in 1976. In his talk he quoted Canadian conservator Phil Ward, and the words have great strength today as well: “Only the material specimens of humans and natural history are indisputable; they are the raw materials of history, the undeniable facts; the truth about our past. Conservation is the means by which we preserve them”.

References


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