WHAT DO I DO WITH THE ROWING OAR? The Role of Memorabilia in School Archives

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All school archivists sooner or later find themselves having to deal with non-archival material of historical interest. These include the expected school uniforms, prizes, trophies, and rare books but can also include such unlikely items as a barber's chair, rowing oars and playground equipment of great sentimental value. At this point we rush to our guides and manuals for help. Clutching *Jenkinson*[1] or *Keeping Archives*[2] we return to our funding body. "These are not archives," we declare. "They belong in a museum." Not surprisingly our funding body is unimpressed with the argument; it is financing an archives. These items are of "historical value". Therefore they are the responsibility of the archivist.

Before going further it is important to consider why schools establish archives. Why are they prepared to expend hard-won funds on employing an archivist and providing space and equipment? If we consider the usual checklist of reasons (1. administrative value; 2. legal value; 3. financial value; 4. public relations value; 5. research value),[3] it is my personal opinion that most schools would place the public relations value high on the list, first or second. The archives are also seen as preserving the history and traditions of the school, undoubtedly a marketable commodity in both private and public schools. This is not to underestimate the administrative value of the archives, which usually soon becomes appreciated, but it is not the motivating force in establishing the archives. If one accepts that one of the primary roles of the archives is public relations, usually to a limited public, i.e. the school community of parents, students, staff and ex-students, this must to a certain extent govern our approach to the management of the school archives. While following traditional archival methods and

procedures, much of our time, often more than we would like, is spent on publications and exhibitions, oral history and documentation programs, meeting donors or visitors, often at the expense of arrangement and description and creation of finding aids.

When we reluctantly add museum curatorship to our role, we also discover there are advantages which are not to be underestimated in maintaining a museum collection alongside our archives. Few schools tended to keep their records in any deliberate or consistent way. Changes of ownership, continual building and a great demand for space usually result in many records being destroyed, and one tries to recover records such as official school photographs, school magazines, and sporting programs by donations. These donations nearly always include "museum material". A typical donation could consist of: programs for the annual sports 1925 and 1926, a newspaper cutting, a photograph of the 1925 football team, a school blazer with football colours, two silver plate sporting trophies and ten photographs taken by the donor. The elderly donor makes no distinction between museums and archives, he has made a special trip from the country to donate his treasured memorabilia to the school archives. It is immediately obvious that it would be exceedingly poor public relations to refuse his "museum" items, especially as his annual sports programs and photographs fill gaps in our collection. The sports programs are especially desirable as they contain complete lists of students attending the school in these years and the official school registers (if they ever existed) for this period have not survived. In moments like these we are relieved that we have a museum and can honestly and enthusiastically thank him for his donation.

The value of our museum collection also becomes apparent when we are asked to assemble a "small" exhibition for a coming reunion. As Casterline tells us in her SAA Manual on Exhibits, "an exhibit is not simply a three-dimensional book. Especially when the exhibit is drawn primarily from documentary sources, you should remember that most people lack the patience to do much reading on their feet. The criteria for inclusion must therefore balance the desire to incorporate the most significant materials with the need to create a visually interesting composition."[4]

Glancing through this excellent manual it is immediately apparent that over half the exhibitions illustrated contain non-archival material. However, beyond suggesting that archival collections may contain "even memorabilia such as badges and medals" little suggestion is made as to where such artefacts may be obtained.

Of course exhibits may be borrowed from other institutions, or members of the school community but the exhibition organisers' life is greatly simplified and much time is saved if such items are already available, researched and identified in the school museum.

How do we deal with running a museum and an archives in harness? What sort of systems can we use that maintain the relationship between items, while permitting us to provide appropriate finding aids and storage conditions for a wide variety of materials?

Ideally, to establish our archives museum we start at the beginning by writing a museum policy, and to our relief we find this is very similar to our archives policy. Indeed it may be identical except for specific terminology. At this point we may well need to decide how actively we are going to collect for the museum. This will be largely governed by the space and time available, and most archivists will be content to sit back and wait for the museum artefacts to come to them.

We next have to decide what differentiates an archive from a museum artefact. Broadly we may decide that anything that is textual or documentary in form, whether paper based or in some other medium, is an archive. There are obviously some overlapping areas where what are basically non-textual items include text such as plaques, trophies and pennants but as our archive and museum will be so closely intertwined we may safely make an arbitrary decision, that all commemorative plaques are archives or all trophies are museum artefacts, without causing too many problems.

The next step is to provide common linkages between the museum and the archives. This may be done by using a common accession register and a common donor card system. These will record the items donated in each specific "accession" or "collection" and their individual processing or identification numbers in the system in use. So, to return to my mythical donation, it will become accession 90/73, consisting of: museum artefacts 210 (next processing number), sub-numbers/1-3: 1. blazer, 2. trophy A, 3. trophy B; photographs 269 (next processing number) sub-numbers 1-10; official photograph 25 (year number)/29 (sport or activity number); private papers Smith. X.Z. (location number).

Each of these items will be processed and stored according to its specific system and type. It is important to remember that the linkage between items in a collection is intellectual, not physical, and it therefore does not matter how disparate an accession may be. Each item can be dealt with according to its needs. Large or unusual items such as rowing oars present storage problems rather than problems in intellectual control. It may be necessary to negotiate for storage space or display space outside the archives which is still under the archivist's supervision and control, before accepting such artefacts.

A simple museum artefact card will usually contain sufficient information for the artefacts in a school museum. I have developed the one shown here which has been designed to permit later computerisation. A card is filled out for each individual artefact. Most

entries are self evident, however, the item history allows for the inclusion of those tit-bits so often passed on by donors (for example this blazer was worn by my father, myself and my son), and the printed reference permits comments like "trophy won by school's prize steer, see school magazine 1/2/78 for details".

Museum Accession Register

Item:	Date:

Description: _____

_____

_____

_____

Dimensions: _____ Condition: _____

Item History: _____

Printed Reference: _____

Index Terms. 1 _____ 2 _____ 3 _____

4 _____ 5 _____ 6 _____

Donor: _____ Donation date: _____

Processing: Marked ☐ Described ☐ Indexed ☐ Donor card ☐

Processor: _____ Date: _____

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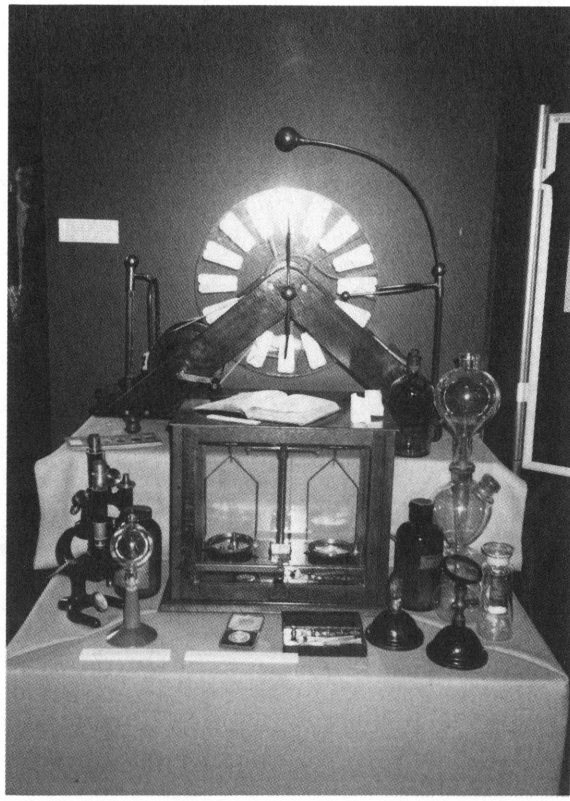
Marking, that is placing identifying marks on artefacts, is probably one of the hardest areas for an archivist to come to terms with. An archivist avoids making any mark on the archives if possible or provides markings that are easily removable. In a museum marking must be efficient, as there is no textual evidence to identify individual items. Therefore while marking used is reversible, it must also be firmly attached to the item. For this reason paper tags sometimes listed in catalogues for labelling artefacts are often not suitable. Paper tags tend to come adrift and one item of school uniform looks much like another of the same period. Two basic methods of marking can be used for most items. Metal and wooden artefacts can have identifying numbers written in indelible ink. White ink can be used on dark backgrounds and the numbering is done in small fine letters on the base, inside or in some other inconspicuous place. It saves time, however, to be consistent in the positioning of the marks. The ink can then be sealed with clear nail varnish. Fabrics can have identifying numbers printed in indelible ink on white cotton tape that is then sewn

to the inside or on the reverse of the garment. Again, consistency in placement saves time in retrieval later.



Memorabilia in an Archives display. Part of the Barker College Centenary Archives Exhibition, 1990.

While museum artefacts need specialised treatment and storage, their basic requirements are almost identical to those of archives and a good archive storage environment will be suitable for your museum artefacts. The acid-free supplies required for archives will also be suitable for the museum artefacts. It may be necessary to obtain some specialised storage containers such as costume boxes, but in the majority of cases suitable storage housings may be improvised from traditional archive supplies. More detailed information on the specific conservation needs and cataloguing of museum artefacts may be obtained from the many publications put out by the Museums Association of Australia. The archivist/curator should consider becoming an institutional member of the Museums Association. This will give access to conservation advice and supplies as well as a large range of publications directed to the amateur curator.

While a purist may argue that memorabilia has no place in an archives, for most school archivists it is a fact of life. Few school governing bodies distinguish between a museum and an archives and fewer still would be prepared to fund these as separate entities. The artefacts precious to a school are rarely of such uniqueness or value to make them viable collection material for outside institutions. If they are to be available to the school, the school must inevitably collect and care for them itself.

The school archivist need not be daunted by this often unexpected role. There are many principles and practices common to the management of archives and museums, and with a modicum of common sense and good advice the archivist can successfully manage a small museum.

REFERENCES

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3. Orlovich, Peter. *Introduction to the Management of School Archives*, School of Librarianship, University of NSW, 1985, p. 6.
4. Casterline, Gail F. *Archives and Manuscripts: Exhibits*, Chicago, II: Society of American Archivists, 1980, p. 14.