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Community Exhibition: History, Identity, and Dialogue

Penderlea is a small rural community in southeastern North Carolina. Its roots can be traced to 1934, when it became the first farming homestead community established by the Subsistence Homesteads Division of the Department of the Interior. As part of the New Deal, the idea was to relocate families suffering from lack of employment to a central area and provide federal assistance to create infrastructure, housing, and truck farming and manufacturing opportunities. Local real estate developer Hugh McRae sold land to the government and acted as its first manager. Families had to apply to live there and meet the requirements; they had to be white, Protestant, married, and poor. They had to demonstrate their respectable moral character and pass a physical exam. The first "settlers" came in 1934, even before the houses were complete. They continued to come in over the next ten years, eventually filling around three hundred homes. Each home had indoor plumbing, electricity, and four to six rooms. The outbuildings included a barn, henhouse, pig barn, and smokehouse. Before the federal government pulled its support in 1944, it had created a school, a furniture factory, and a hosiery factory. Starting in 1944, the federal government began selling parts of Penderlea to private homeowners and companies. The residents dwindled in number as the factories closed or scaled back and small farming became less and less profitable. Today, about one hundred of the homes remain, including one that serves as the Penderlea Homestead Museum.[1]

While critics of the New Deal in the 1940s called Penderlea a failure because the community could not support itself—as its designers had intended—with the combination of truck farming and factory work, residents of Penderlea emphasize its ultimate success as a place where people got

along and raised their children well. Resident Ann Cottle explained community life as she remembered it: "I would ride on the wagon to the mill with my Daddy to pick out the feed sacks I wanted for my clothes. And I was proud of my clothes . . . we all were . . . Penderlea was a wonderful place to grow up because we were all the same. We did not have money, but we were rich in love, food, and shelter. We children had everything we needed; we just didn't realize at the time how hard it was on our parents."[2] A visit to the Penderlea Homestead Museum gives that exact message. The house features a restored and re-created kitchen, bathroom, bedrooms, enclosed porch, and parlor. From the sewing patterns on the porch to the clothes in the closet, each object has a story, and chances are visitors will get a first-person account of having turned a pattern and a feed sack into a new dress.

Current and former residents rely heavily on community memory in the interpretation of all objects. They gather yearly for Homestead Day to tell and retell stories of growing up on Penderlea (the preposition is not "at" or "in" but "on" Penderlea). Guides know the people who wore the

Figure 3.1. Sewing patterns used by women on the Penderlea Homestead. (Penderlea Homestead Museum, Penderlea, North Carolina. Photo courtesy of North Carolina ECHO, State Library of North Carolina, Department of Cultural Resources.)

clothes, went to the dance described in the newspaper clipping, cooked on the stove, and played the piano. Depending on the guide, visitors will learn little about the discriminatory policies that led to a whites-only, Protestant-only living environment; nor will they learn about the criticism the federal government endured as the result of homesteads. They will, however, learn a great deal about day-to-day life on Penderlea, the main staple in historical memory of the town, interpretations that circulate on the wonders of getting a taste of what life was like out of poverty. Residents expressed joy over indoor plumbing and electricity, over plastered walls and modern kitchens. While the federal government went to great lengths to ascertain their poverty, residents felt rich with the new amenities. This feeling stayed in their memories and informed the creation of exhibits at the Penderlea Homestead Museum. Like countless other local history exhibits across the nation, the exhibits at Penderlea represent history from a place-based community's perspective. While local communities all over the nation intersected with the economies, policies, and social and cultural practices of other communities and even nations, the main purpose of community history exhibits is to emphasize community life from the residents' perspectives, not the changes over time in the broader social, political, or economic environment. The community exhibit is not a historical monograph; it is a memoir made tactile and visible.

The visitor experience at Penderlea Homestead Museum demonstrates some key features of the community exhibit. First, community exhibits are conceived and created by people who have lived the historical subject, who descend from those who lived it, or who identify strongly with the place that was shaped by the heritage being presented. Their curatorial choices are informed by experiential knowledge first, followed by more traditional historical methods. The curators are telling "their story." Second, the institutions themselves are flexible, depending on individual guides' memories and interests. Community exhibits take a decidedly informal approach to visitor learning, and at Penderlea Homestead Museum, the guide even sat at the kitchen table with visitors, as if they were guests in her home.

In many ways, the Penderlea Homestead Museum is representative of small museums in the United States: closely identified with place or community, run by volunteers with first-hand knowledge of the history, and visited regularly. When the federal government left its company town, the artifacts, the records, and many of the people remained. Like many sites of social history, the Penderlea Homestead Museum represents a collective memory of a time when industry was present, when jobs, however difficult, were more readily available. Historical display was a logical choice for this community. Many scholars would term this museum, and the many others like it in the American landscape, "local." Its funding comes from the community, the scope of its mission is to educate people about "this

place." Its epistemology is a blend of indigenous and academic knowledge. The term "local," however, has connotations that are not necessarily helpful in understanding this type of exhibition. Being one of "the locals" implies ignorance, naïveté, lack of sophistication and worldview. "Locals" are either derided for their lack of cosmopolitanism or romanticized for their innocence. Either connotation implies disrespect and obfuscates the complicated functions of the past in American communities. The alternative term from anthropology is "indigenous curation," used by Nick Stanley in *Being Ourselves for You: The Global Display of Cultures* in 1998 and adapted from Sidney Moko Mead's 1983 "Indigenous Models of Museums in Oceania."[3] Christina Kreps uses the concept to refer to conservation practices that predate the Eurocentric museum model.[4] The term is also highly useful in understanding history museums created by those not considered "first peoples," those whose heritage dates more recently to the place being interpreted, but who have often been isolated from the dominant culture by geography, ethnicity, or class. "Indigenous," in this usage, refers to the construction of knowledge by community groups. "Curation," in this usage, refers to a community's agency; it is active in its construction of history. Unlike exhibits prepared by professional curators with more academic goals, community exhibits emerge from curators whose identities are profoundly informed by the history presented in the exhibition. They employ, in Stanley's term, "indigenous" curatorial techniques.

Evidentiary claims in community exhibits are varied and hybrid. Scholarship, memories, nostalgia, experience, community exigencies, and rumor work together to inform interpretation of artifacts for community exhibits. Some are highly dependent on academic knowledge; others are more suspicious of that knowledge and rely more heavily on experiential evidence or community oral tradition. This hybrid epistemology—uniquely applied according to economic, political, and social conditions—motivates every curatorial and institutional decision of the museum offering indigenous exhibits. Amy Levin notes that nostalgia in particular can drive local museum interpretation: ". . . nostalgia can privilege the past over the present, and it has a complicated relationship with narratives of success and the American Dream. Nostalgia fosters the ideals of the American dream and the self-made man, even as it gestures at a happier, halcyon time, an age of innocence before the fall into the knowledge of urbanism and industrialism."[5] Community exhibits are best understood not by their adherence to professional exhibition standards and guidelines, but by the community desire for sovereignty and/or self-determination and by visitor understanding of it. Community exhibits appeal to visitors in ways that are different from academic or corporate exhibits; visitors see them as more personal, less scripted, and therefore more intimate.

Visitors find this intimacy inviting. The community exhibition's conversational tone encourages visitors to identify, sympathize, or empathize with people telling the details of their lives or of their ancestors' lives. While not academic in the sense of offering a full critique of the subject matter and providing broader context, the indigenous exhibit is valuable in its ability to facilitate intergroup dialogue. While visitors would never pull off the highway, knock on a stranger's door, and ask to be told personal history, visitors will stop the car for a local museum. Community exhibits are the parlors of the locale.

HISTORY OF LOCAL HISTORY EXHIBITION

While local history exhibits in the nineteenth century appeared in settings as diverse as fairs, national museums, and freak shows,[6] the local history museum—with its emphasis on artifacts related to pioneers and founders—emerged in the mid-nineteenth century. The popularity of local artifact displays was related to both settlement and national identity. Writers of local history sought to promote settlement in their communities, while members of the professional class sought to define the "American" character against lower-class immigrant cultures. In 1876, even the president called for increased attention to local history.[7] Historian Patricia West explains middle-class women's efforts in this field as an outgrowth of their prescribed roles as keepers of the home, that during the 1860s and 70s, women created "history exhibits featuring domestic scenes in service of particular social agendas and aligning historic preservation with their conventional roles as reformers." Their efforts in delineating the centrality of white, middle-class women's roles in the formation of the nation continued to gain momentum, and by the 1890s new house museums organized at a rate of two a year.[8] The emergent field of ethnography led credence to exhibitions of locality, even if through the patrician self-image they transformed into pioneer stories, as the Sanitary Fairs and expositions in the latter half of the nineteenth century set the standard for "learned" displays of culture and history.[9]

As career historians in universities increasingly sought to distinguish themselves from amateurs in the first two decades of the twentieth century, museum display of local history came to be seen as the province of amateurs. While the American Historical Association (AHA) formed in 1884 with a collaboration of historians from without and within the university setting, differences began to emerge that eventually split professionals into two camps, differences historian David Russo terms "narrative treatment versus philosophical or analytical treatment."[10] Museum display fell away

from the overview of the American Historical Association by 1940, when AHA members representing historical societies broke from the parent organization to form the American Association for State and Local History (AASLH), which dedicated itself to historical pursuits in museums, libraries, and historical societies outside of academe.[11] AHA members largely ignored museums between 1940 and the birth of the new social history in the 1960s; this period of AASLH's focus on serving the historical needs of nonprofessionals, according to historian Denise Meringolo, "marks the first moment when public historians failed to measure up to history's professional standards."[12] While academically trained public historians focused on history in the National Parks and "viewed all regional histories as potentially contributing toward a sense of national culture,"[13] amateurs continued creating local history exhibits, primarily for local audiences, especially schoolchildren.[14] In the 1960s, local museums began to receive attention from academics interested in community studies, urban studies, and social history. The American bicentennial, and the popularity of the *Roots* miniseries and the Foxfire books reignited interest in local history by the 1970s.[15] At the same time the growth of graduate programs in public history provided a crop of professionals to manage local resources. This process of professionalization of local history is ongoing, creating an eclectic style of American local exhibition. Far from their patrician roots, local history curators are a diverse lot. Some have advanced degrees, while others have little formal education at all. Exhibition styles, however, are just as responsive to community needs whether they are created by professionals or amateurs. What makes community exhibition different from local exhibition is not the educational background of the curator; rather, it is that the historical subject profoundly informs the identity of its curator.

SOVEREIGNTY AND COMMUNITY EXHIBITION

Like Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen's subjects who focused not on the grand narratives of U.S. history but on the local, personal connections to the past, the creators of community exhibits are motivated to display by the need to "tell the story from our point of view," and are quite candid about not adhering to the historical profession's objectivity values.[16] The collective "our" is most often dictated by place, but it can also be ethnic or religious. Forty respondents to a 2006 needs assessment survey of small history museums and sites offer some clues about the institutional features of local museums.[17] Of the forty respondents, a full thirty-two made explicit mention of place in their mission statements, such as "to preserve the history of, and educate people about the history of, the towns of Gold Run, Dutch Flat, Alta, Towle and Baxter and the surrounding area, all in Placer County, California." Other place identifiers were geological ("the Cherokee Outlet," "coastal Georgia," or "San Bernadino Mountains"), city, town, or region ("Wichita Falls" or "northeast Tennessee") or a place/people combination ("African Americans in the rural communities along the Mississippi River" or the "settlers of Penderlea . . . and local farm history in rural North Carolina.") A few offered missions that stated simply "local history." Of the remaining eight, two made no mention of mission and six cited population groupings ("Czech heritage"), individuals ("the life of Cordell Hull") or industries ("the trolley industry"). The reported staffing levels were just about evenly split among the following types of staffing: entirely volunteer, one paid full-time staff member with any number of part-time staff or volunteers, and two or three paid staff with any number of part-time staff or volunteers. When asked to record their top two sources of funding, 75 percent reported admission fees and donations, while government was one of the top two funding sources for only 35 percent of reporting museums. Other sources included museum-sponsored fundraisers (32.5 percent), endowments (20 percent), grants (15 percent), historical society dues (15 percent), and museum shop revenue (12.5 percent). The place/community missions, paired with the low staffing levels and heavy reliance on revenue from visitors and supporters, affects communication at the community exhibit. The heavy presence of volunteers as well as willingness of staff to engage visitors in face-to-face communication ensures a more intimate exchange than those that occur in larger history museums. This intimacy, museum workers assert, is important to community identity or even sovereignty.

The motivation for people who create community exhibitions is not to contribute to a scholarly dialogue on the topic, the goal of academic exhibitions, articles, and monographs. Instead, community curators believe that exhibits help the community by representing their interests to outsiders, connecting elders to young people, building a sense of shared past, and bringing in tourist dollars. As Kammen so accurately states, "local historians are dependent on the community for information and new materials. An 'unreliable' local historian, one who embarrasses residents or makes them uncomfortable, will soon find documents unavailable and people unwilling to cooperate. . . . To ignore local expectations can be a self-defeating scenario, for we must continue to live among those about whom, or for whom, we write."[18] This reality, however, does not mean that indigenous curators unthinkingly follow community demands. First and foremost, communities are conflicted about their past; there is rarely a historical interpretation with which all agree. Second, community curators are not, as a general observation, meek or squeamish. They are active in promoting their own interpretations. Sometimes this means telling salacious stories of serial killers, while other times it means arranging genteel home tours with the "Gracious Homes Committee."[19] News coverage of historical society

activity in the United States turns up more than one strong personality. The late Gordon Hodgin of Delta, Colorado, was known as "Mr. Delta" for his community activities: "he was a local storyteller, amateur historian, fundraiser and unstoppable civic promoter." Delta County Historical Society Museum Director Jim Wetzel recalled that Hodgin "sometimes didn't have all the facts right. He might embellish a little, but we never minded." Nevertheless, he "made history come alive for me," a friend reported, "He had a flair for storytelling."[20] Elain Egdorf, one of the founding members of the Homewood Historical Society, noted "I disliked history in school. It was memorizing. I figured if I needed a date or fact, I'd look it up." Her early dislike of history notwithstanding, she dedicated a significant portion of her adult life to community history and preservation, serving on local and state historical boards and leading a legal battle to save the house that became the society's museum in 1987. In 1999 she received a service award from the Illinois Humanities Council. Her transformation from unwilling student to history promoter came about with an epiphany on the meaning of history: "As I got into local history, I realized that history is you and me; history is all of us, is what's happening today....Fifty, [a hundred] years from now, people will be studying who we are. Everyone is important in some way to the fabric of their town. [We need to] wake up people to the diversity we have here, in ethnicity, economics, housing, architecture."[21] Marilyn Elliot, curator of the Columbus Historical Society Museum in New Mexico, entered civic work through activities at her children's school. She started at the museum as a volunteer and became curator in 1994. Her motivation is her commitment to communication across ethnic boundaries, modeled by her grandmother, who led the effort to integrate public schools in East Los Angeles.[22]

Community exhibition is often motivated by people who have been historically "othered," people whose histories have been told by those outside the community. For them, historical exhibition is one way to claim local control over heritage resources and to assert sovereignty. Such is the case with the exhibits at the Shoshone-Bannock Tribal Museum. Founded in 1985 as part of an initiative to diversify business activity at the Fort Hall Reservation, the museum is located near the I-15 exit by a restaurant, a gas station, a casino, a grocery store, and a gift shop, businesses dependent on both local and tourist dollars.[23] Like many small historical museums, the Shoshone-Bannock Tribal Museum struggled financially and closed for a short time. In 1993 it was reopened by volunteers, and by 1996, it had a paid manager. Significantly, the current manager attributes the museum's survival to the community's commitment to maintaining control of their history, for they "see a real need to tell our story from our point of view."[24]

This point of view is distinct from the stereotypes of American Indians held by a number of visitors and indeed by American culture at large.

Figure 3.2. Museum assistant April Eschief talks with a visitor about different types of powwow music. Face-to-face conversation is an important educational strategy at the Shoshone-Bannock Tribal Museum. (Fort Hall, Idaho, 2006. Photo by author.)

Volunteers and staff at the Shoshone-Bannock Tribal Museum report that visitors commonly ask to see the tipis in which the Shoshone-Bannock assumedly live. Museum manager Rosemary Devinney responds to this according to "who we are as a tribe": people who appreciate difference and who approach life with highly developed senses of humor. She explains how Shoshones and Bannocks adapted many areas of their lives to changing conditions, just like visitors do. She is an astute observer of people, and is skilled in responding to individual visitor questions according to the knowledge needs she perceives in each visitor. During an exit interview, one visitor finished the survey with tears provoked by the exhibition. Ms. Devinney noted visitors regularly respond to the exhibition this way. She uses her appreciation of difference to inform this and other interactions with visitors:

> I'm not sure what it is that sets them off emotionally. I've never asked. I have just simply tried to help people through it . . . . Because you know, that's just the way maybe some people react. I know my grandmother always said that "as

> humans we have a certain nature about us." Some people are very emotional, you know, and that's just their nature. And you need to understand that.[25]

Ms. Devinney's approach to visitors is highly personal. She wants visitors to be comfortable enough to ask the questions they're really curious about. It is only in being asked if they live in tipis that she feels she can debunk that particular myth. Ms. Devinney is not the only one at the museum invested in the idea that face-to-face conversation with visitors can help the tribe. Delbert Farmer, former Tribal Chair, current Revenue Director for the tribe, and long-time museum supporter and volunteer, sees the museum's independence as akin to tribal sovereignty; its existence attests to the tribes' ability to self-determine. Explaining sovereignty is one of the keys to maintaining it. He addresses visitor groups about governmental and tribal issues, drawing on his experience in government. Rusty Houtz, museum volunteer, exhibition designer and artist, speaks to visitor groups about what the reservation was like in the 1930s and about his experience as a Hollywood stuntman and rodeo star. These approaches are very different in content, but the delivery is the same: education based on face-to-face conversational exchange with people who are living the results of the history being presented.[26]

The interpretation at the Shoshone-Bannock Tribal Museum responds to more than contemporary visitors' preconceived notions about American Indians. Devinney notes that scholars have had a role in hindering tribal self-determination:

> A lot of books have been written about us and I've read a lot of them; it seems to me that the people who are writing the books are looking through a window. And they are looking at tribes and they're thinking "Well, what are these people doing?" And they make their observations based upon their own values and they don't really understand what the native people's values are. So I think that's our goal here in the museum is to let them know, this is why we did this. This is what we were doing. And hopefully that will give us a better understanding of one another.[27]

Devinney's comments reflect the hybrid epistemology of the exhibitions themselves. Academic scholarship informs the interpretation, but it is filtered through and tested against personal experience and the oral tradition.

The physical structure and exhibit design are consistent with the goal of tribal control of history. The museum consists of an octagonal exhibit area connected to a gift shop/lobby in the center, with office space off from central public space. Visitors come in the front door, pay admission, sign the guest book, and move through the gallery in a circular path. Exhibits are on diverse topics including use of natural resources, the Oregon Trail, art, board-

ing school, language, the Lewis and Clark expedition, and the tribes' history of cattle ranching. Thematic emphasis is on adaptation, both economic and cultural. Exhibits range from scientific (the Oregon Trail exhibit is based on archaeological information and the fisheries exhibition uses biological language) to personal (an exhibit on the mother of one of the volunteers). Objects—taxidermy, beadwork, artifacts left by nineteenth-century Oregon Trail travelers—are either the property of the museum or are on loan from community members. Each case has a different design, which adds to the feeling of eclecticism in the gallery. Manager Rosemary Devinney points out that the eclecticism represents the tribe well, for it was part of their history to use available materials and adapt to various conditions.[28]

Volunteers who curate individual cases leave their own touches. While the labels are written in the third person, it is obvious individual volunteers put personal touches on the displays. The Daisy Ballard St. Clair Collection display includes family photos and items made from animals, each with a label in Shoshone: "Dentso 'Wo, Handgame Bones" or "WE'KWE'NAI'I, Bone Hide Scraper." The display on Effie Diggie Houtz, the mother of exhibit designer Rusty Houtz, includes family photos and items Mrs. Houtz made for the gift shop she ran in the mid-twentieth century. Museum

Figure 3.3. Exhibit cases at the Shoshone-Bannock Tribal Museum. Museum manager Rosemary Devinney explains that the eclecticism of design represents the community's tradition of using all available resources. (Fort Hall, Idaho, 2006. Photo by author.)

Manager Rosemary Devinney reports that this type of curation is consistent with Shoshone views of the material world:

> In our belief system, and our culture, most of the best things are buried with the people. It's our belief that one day when we go to meet the creator that we will be dressed in the finest and those are the things that we accumulate and collect through our lifetime. And after that, if the person has property they want to give, they'll usually give to grandchildren. So it's passed down. A lot of things are very, very special to people and they don't want to part with them.[29]

The lack of personal belongings led the museum to focus their exhibits on resource use, particular phases of change, and major events in tribal history, like the exhibits on schooling, cattle ranching, veterans, and the most recent "The Shoshone Meet Lewis and Clark."

Exhibit development reflects the institution's focus on self-determination. When a new project idea emerges, Devinney organizes the tribe's talents. Delbert Farmer, well traveled and an avid museum goer, provides thematic consultation as well as financial direction. Devinney and volunteers conduct research and develop the idea, while artist Rusty Houtz does design work. Artists and craftspeople from the community provide fabrication and installation services. This development process invests community members in the museum, and, as Devinney puts it, demonstrates "that our people are so talented."[30]

While the Shoshone have traditions relating to material items that differ from traditional Euro-American ones, they also have something in common with other curators of community exhibits: they do not want the belongings of their ancestors commodified by others. The Munising Woodenware exhibit at the Alger County (Michigan) Historical Society Heritage Center demonstrates this same dynamic. This facility features a changing exhibit gallery, a fur trader's cabin re-creation, a gift shop offering artwork from local artists, an archive, and a meeting room with exhibits on the area's historic and contemporary industries. The Munising Woodenware exhibit is among these.

Munising Woodenware was a company operating in Munising from 1912 to 1955, creating a wide variety of hand-crafted wooden products from bowls and platters to tent stakes. Recently, Munising Woodenware became "collectible," making the exhibit difficult to create. While the other exhibits of local industry employ the prescribed professional authoritative voice, the Woodenware section breaks through the guise of objectivity to make direct appeals to the visitor, such as this label: "Unfortunately, there are many examples of Munising Woodenware which are not part of this exhibit. If you own a piece we don't have, we hope that you'll consider donating or bequeathing it to the museum for public display and preservation."

Figure 3.4. Products in the Munising Woodenware exhibit at the Alger County Historical Society. (Munising, Michigan, 2004. Photo by the author.)

Other interpretation also features the act of collection: "Munising Woodenware has become a popular collectible around North America. It is not unusual to find it on 'E-Bay.' Especially prized are pieces in their original packaging or those with "Munising" brand burned into them." What follows, and is given equal typographical weight on the label, is a list of people who contributed their pieces to the collection rather than selling them on a lucrative national market. Interpretation of World War II tent stakes also gives equal typographical weight to the fact that the donor bought them on eBay and donated them.[31] Interpretation that gives such prominence to the act of acquisition conceives of the visitor as a possible partner in the competition between the people who (in some cases literally) *made* this history and those who seek to use it as a market investment. It is tension between social classes as well as a battle between the rural, local creation of history and the national economy's appropriation of it. The exhibition practice of giving equal weight to the local control of history makes the exhibit an act of community assertion as much as an act of public education.

Sometimes local history museums with community exhibits emerge out of a lack of multiple perspectives in local history resources. Community museums of African American history sometimes fall into this category. Despite being a museum only large enough to accommodate twenty-five

visitors at a time, the River Road African American Museum in Donaldsville, Louisiana, attracts visitors from all over the United States because it offers "information about slavery and freedom from a local perspective."[32] Visitors appreciate such efforts significantly, as one visitor wrote admiringly of the River Road Museum's founder Kathe Hambrick, under the subheading "Passionate Historian":

> Another shining local star is Kathe Hambrick. Hambrick founded the **River Road African American Museum**, which is also located on Donaldsonville's main street. A former corporate gal, she left the suit world behind to start a museum that would showcase the contributions of African Americans in Louisiana's Mississippi River Valley. She dedicates much of her time to working with school children, teaching them about the hardships of slavery and the realities of the Underground Railroad. It's evident the museum and its mission are Hambrick's passion.[33]

Such unique offerings have emerged in areas in which the supply of opportunities for learning African American history in an informal setting has not kept up with the demand.[34]

Church anniversaries and memorabilia displays demonstrate a congregation-focused approach that emphasizes continuity in community values. Christian churches celebrating anniversaries will have memorabilia displays along with "old-time" days in which congregants dress in period clothing. When First Baptist in Fairmont, North Carolina, celebrated its 200th birthday in 1992, its members came to church dressed circa 1792, which meant men spent weeks cultivating the right beards and moustaches. The celebration included horse-drawn carriage rides, artifacts, a dinner, and "historical 'show-and-tell' gatherings." The event took on features of the family reunion, with a diagram of members and their lineages described by the church's pastor: "'You've heard of a family tree. Well, this is a church family tree.'"[35] Congregations rarely wait for two hundred years, however. The Holy United Methodist Church in Houston, Texas, created a memorabilia display for its fiftieth anniversary in 2004.[36] The Second Church of Newton, Massachusetts, used an anniversary display of church-related artifacts to launch an art gallery in 1981. The Chapel Gallery hosts one show per month organized by a church committee.[37]

Rather than using temporary displays, the Hebrew Union Congregation in Greenville, Mississippi, maintains a permanent exhibition in the library of the temple. Like the Shoshone-Bannock Tribal Museum displays, it mingles national and international events with community and personal history and is less nostalgic than the "old-time" celebrations held by Christian churches. Covering over a century, the display teaches about the Jewish community of Greenville in the late nineteenth century and its significant contributions to the town's growth, including its first mayor, a member of

Hebrew Union Congregation. The displays, intermingled with reference works in the library, compellingly cover World War II and the Holocaust. Several of these are organized by collectors, who provide artifacts and first-hand accounts of their experiences in World War II. Of particular interest in this exhibit are cases displaying the belongings—weapons, medals, newspaper clippings of Melvin Lipnick, who participated in the liberation of Dauchau in 1945.[38] Congregation Beth Ahabah in Richmond, Virginia, offers highly professionalized displays related to its two-hundred-year history. Located next to its sanctuary but operating as a stand-alone museum, the Beth Ahabah Museum and Archives offers exhibits that blend personal, community, national, and international history.[39]

Sometimes local history museums assert community identity based on folklore. Such is the case with the Hell's Belle exhibit at the LaPorte Historical Society Museum in LaPorte, Indiana. Belle Gunness was a Norwegian immigrant who lived in the rural area outside LaPorte from 1902 until her disappearance in 1908. She lured men to her house (some through ads in Norwegian newspapers), stole their belongings, murdered them, and buried them in the hog pen behind her house. When a farm hand burned down the house in 1908, investigators found the remains of eighteen people, including Ms. Gunness's children, on the farm. Subsequent legend raised the number to forty.[40] The Belle Gunness farm became the stuff of local legend, a tourist attraction, and a place teens dared each other to enter late at night. The wheelbarrow, in which Ms. Gunness presumably carried bodies to the hog yard, is on display, as well as one exterior wall of her cabin, where those who dared carved their initials in the years between Belle's disappearance and the museum's accession of the wall. Personal belongings from the murdered men were recovered from her house and are on display. The interpretation covers the investigation and subsequent growth of the legend of "Hell's Belle," "The Gunness Monster," "Bluebeard in Skirts!" and "The Case of the Butchering Widow." One label mentions that postcards featuring Belle Gunness are on sale at the gift shop, and asks visitors to "Buy one—if you dare!"[41] The Gunness story and its attendant folklore is an important feature of the small museum located in the courthouse building, and the museum is planning events to mark the anniversary of Belle's disappearance, "with dignity and taste, hopefully," in the words of the museum's assistant curator. Grave markers for the victims and well as forensic inquiry into the identity of the body in Belle Gunness's grave are on the commemoration agenda.[42]

The prominence of this story in the town's history speaks not just to the gruesome events on the Gunness farm between 1902 and 1908 but the changes in local historians' foci. Such exhibits directly confront the notion that local history exhibits will necessarily tell the stories that put the community in the best possible light. The growth of ghost tours is evidence that

Figure 3.5. Human model depiction of serial killer Belle Gunness through a window in the wall of her house. Note the initials carved onto the house by generations of "those who dared" get close to it. (LaPorte County Historical Society, LaPorte Indiana, 2005. Photo by author.)

some local historians have departed significantly from genteel boosterism. Historical society members at museums commonly repeat the tragic and horrendous events of the community, especially if it has the makings of a ghost story. Drug addiction, child abuse, murder, and even amateur midnight exhumations are subjects local historians highlight. One Illinois historical society has rich material: "So many frightening incidents have taken place in McHenry County that the historical society re-enacts them—a hodgepodge of homicides, suicides, and other tragic deaths. The McHenry County Historical Society Museum is dark as a ghoul leads visitors through vignettes that illuminate an aspect of the area's past."[43] Unlike the plantation museums that romanticize or minimize slavery,[44] ghost walker tours give gruesome details of the horrors and tortures of slaves.[45] This trend indicates a decidedly different direction in local history away from civic promotion, although it does not always have the educational goal of making visitors question the systems that allowed and encouraged humans to mistreat each other. The lesson is generalized on the human condition, such as that provided by McHenry County Historical Society administrator Nancy Fike: disturbing occurrences of the past "tell us that there has always been human misery and there has always been a seamy side and a tragic side of life."[46] Often it is about appealing to visitors' senses in an age when the gruesome is a significant feature of movies and primetime television.[47]

Not only are curators of community exhibits willing to get personal in matters of death, addiction, and abuse, they are also rather candid on their views of religion. In their national survey of American conceptions of the past, Rosenzweig and Thelen found religion to be a significant force in shaping many Americans' relationship to history. The authors could identify about 5 percent of their national sample as evangelical Christians "for whom a Christian identity both shaped and was shaped by a particular understanding of the past."[48] Community exhibits reflect fewer concerns about reaching the religiously diverse audiences of larger museums, and some even use the exhibition as evangelical medium. The Billy Sunday Visitors Center uses a curatorial voice that conceives of its audience as fellow Christians, or even as fellow evangelical Christians. Located in Sunday's former tabernacle near the Billy Sunday Home in Winona Lake, Indiana, the Visitors Center houses exhibits displaying the markers of professionalism: a short documentary introduction, conservation-minded mounts, a full re-creation, interactive elements, a radial-random floor plan, and immersion experiences. Like most professional exhibits, the introduction area delivers the main theme: in this case, that Billy Sunday overcame a life of sin to devote his life to preaching, eventually reaching a hundred million people. The emphasis on numbers indicates curatorial assumption of the audience's familiarity with a major goal of evangelism, saving the masses from sin. The main theme text from the label *Billy Sunday: America's*

Baseball Evangelist notes he spoke to one hundred million and "saw over one million come to faith in Christ." The central object in the introduction, a Plexiglas box full of salt, reinforced the importance of numbers. The label explains:

> **How Many is One Hundred Million?**
> This cube contains approximately one hundred million grains of salt. If each grain was a living, breathing person, one could see the number of people to whom Billy Sunday preached over the course of this life. No human being, before or since Billy Sunday, has spoken to as many people without the use of television, radio, or public address loudspeakers. He typically spoke to groups of about five to ten thousand, two or three times per day, six days per week during his campaigns.[49]

Such an approach is consistent with the professional practice of building on visitors' existing knowledge. Relying on visitors' adherence to the goals of evangelism, the curatorial voice makes consistent connections to the positive value of Sunday's work. The only section that recognizes diverse viewpoints is the display of objects found in the Sunday home that provide evidence the Sundays may have partaken of drink, dance, and agnostic literature. The label interpreting a 78 record of dance music, cordial glasses, a brandy snifter, and an agnostic text with Sunday's notes reads: "All of the items in this case were found in the Sunday's [sic] possessions in Mount Hood. While none of these artifacts offers conclusive evidence to support Billy's critics, the presence of these objects in the Sunday home does raise new questions."[50] Even as it conforms to the more academic practice of acknowledging opposing views, it also departs, however, by privileging an interpretation that serves evangelical goals.

Personal histories mingle with other types of history in collections displayed to the public from collectors' homes. These represent the ultimate in public/private confusion through historical display. Bruce Davis of Framingham, Massachusetts, opens his home, an 1890s Colonial painted pink, to visitors on the local historical society tour. No scion of genteel decorating, Davis instead highlights his collections. He has rooms full of Mickey Mouse items, cowboy artifacts, dolls, sleds, and even an Egyptian room, complete with a pharaoh mural he painted himself. His collections policy? "I'm addicted to pretty things . . . It has to have an expression, character. It has to be interesting or I don't want it."[51] Mickey McGowan's rented home was known in 1989 as The Unknown Museum, a collection of twentieth-century popular culture artifacts including dolls, televisions, "a group of toy atomic reactors from the 1940s that proclaim 'You can measure fallout radiation and survive!'," games, lunch boxes, and bathroom scales.[52] Journalist Paul Liberatore recently found McGowan living in San Rafael, California, having moved "the fifty truckloads of vintage stuff he hauled away when

Figure 3.6. Central object at stop wall: salt grains representing the number of people to whom Sunday preached. (Billy Sunday Visitors Center, Winona Lake, Indiana. Photo by author.)

he left Mill Valley" in 1989 when his rented house was demolished for a new condominium project. Liberatore called the Unknown Museum a relic from when Mill Valley was "undiscovered and inexpensive, when a bunch of eccentric artists could rent a storefront downtown for $200 a month and leave the place unlocked day and night and nobody took a thing." McGowan took the gentrification as a sign to scale back the public side of his collection. While still collecting, he rarely gives tours.[53] His collections policy continues to be guided by nostalgia: "It's all the things that people have lived with . . . it's really about what these things meant to us. Nostalgia is nothing to be afraid of. There's a comfort in the past."[54]

As can be seen in these examples, community curators are not always worried about the objectivity issue. They are quite honest about exhibiting history as "our story" or even "my story." Whether collective identity is defined by religion, place, ethnicity, or even individual eccentricity, community curators openly express the ways in which that identity informs the interpretation. It is this articulation of identity that visitors find compelling.

COMMUNITY EXHIBIT VISITORS

The epistemological hybridity that characterizes the community exhibition is appealing to visitors. They understand the exhibition in comparison to other, larger exhibits and mass media, seeing the indigenous exhibit as more "authentic" or "real" because it emerges from the people whose identity is profoundly informed by this history. This does two things. First, it demonstrates that visitors may be oversaturated with highly polished cultural products.[55] Second, it places historical exhibition within the same frame of understanding as other cultural tourism, the phenomenon in which "the locals" display an identity while simultaneously living it, something Nick Stanley terms "being ourselves for you."[56] Identity is more than a topic of conversation between visitors and curators, though; curatorial identity is one of the reasons visitors engage the exhibits. These identities could be placed within the context of subverting the traditional relationships between museums and ethnographic subjects. Indeed, scholars of museums have produced a great deal of work on performance and the ethnographic artifact.[57] These studies, however, typically focus on ethnographic objects managed by large, dominant culture institutions. Scholarly overemphasis on the tourist gaze and the ethnographic performance of the visited, however, downplays the complicated dynamics of curator-visitor communication. In the private history exhibit, the exchanges between curator and visitor about identity complicate the traditional ethnographic dichotomy between those doing the gazing and those being gazed upon as well as the unequal power relationships traditionally informing the curator/

visitor relationship. The very fluidity of these categories in the private history exhibit contributes to a visitor experience that is significantly less formal than a visit to a larger museum.

The Shoshone-Bannock Tribal Museum exhibits provide a useful case study for analyzing these issues of visitor/curator relationships. Interviews with visitors and curators demonstrate that, in the space of the small museum, curators and visitors engage in conversations that challenge traditional curator/visitor and self/other hierarchies.[58] The small museum is a public space in that any one can come in and use it, but it has a more private, informal character than most large museum exhibits, however, and visitors are more likely to start conversations with curators.

Visitors were not making the Shoshone-Bannock Tribal Museum their main objective for the day. Three-quarters saw the sign on the highway and decided to stop, validating the museum's decision to advocate for more directional signage on the state highway.[59] Other visitors had read about the museum from a guidebook, brochure, or map, while others had heard about it by word of mouth. Visitors reported multiple reasons for deciding to visit, most of which were general curiosity or an established interest in American Indian history or history in general. Of the whole sample, only one was a repeat visitor.

Visitors spent about forty minutes on average in the exhibit room. Most spent an additional five to fifteen minutes talking with staff or looking at books in the lobby. When asked the main theme of the exhibits, more than half (N=14) said that the main theme had to do with features of tribal history, but visitors cited different features. Typical responses included: "To honor the life and the way and the art of the people," "To show the various ways people made a living," "There is a lot of local pride here," "There was a great culture," "How hardy they were," and "To inform you of Indian culture, history, and artifacts." Six visitors cited the Lewis and Clark expedition as the main message or one of the main messages, probably due to the dominance of the special exhibit on that topic. Four visitors cited cultural difference as the main theme, which reflects that these visitors picked up on the dominant themes cited above and blended them into one cohesive theme. One visitor noted "Indians were a wonderful people who lived with the earth and got short ended by the white man. White men try to change everybody and that's not right. People should be loved for themselves." Another responded with "The differences between the two cultures and the little effort that was made to connect. All the effort was made by the Indians."[60] Visitors reported being motivated to learn history. When asked to rate their interest in learning history on a 1–10 scale, they reported an average interest of 8.88. They reported being interested in a diversity of objects, with the highest number (N=9) citing beadwork as the most interesting photo or object, while others cited animal displays, Lewis and Clark, and photos of ranches or schools.

In most ways, they were museum visitors engaging typically with exhibits, but visitors' interactions with the exhibits themselves were only part of the process, and perhaps the less important part. The museum is set up so that visitors do not enter or leave the exhibit space without passing a volunteer or curator. Staff members at the Shoshone-Bannock Tribal Museum are proactive in encouraging conversation. When visitors emerge from the gallery, staff members ask "What do you think?" or "What are your questions?" The intimate space of the gallery/lobby/gift shop is a place in which people feel comfortable talking. It took little prompting for conversations to begin. This could result in something as brief as a two-minute discussion of colors in the beadwork or as extended as a forty-minute, reference-work-assisted discussion of the relationship between a nineteenth-century Danish photographer and her Shoshone-Bannock subjects. The presence of gift shop items like books, artwork, or CDs prompted some discussion, like one conversation about different types of powwow music. Others were more personal and philosophical, with staff and visitors discussing different Americans' perceptions of heritage and its relationship to personal responsibility.[61] The willingness of museum staff members to present themselves as individuals and not as unquestionable institutional authorities provoked visitor engagement. The exhibit content, which is honest and epistemologically hybrid, the close and intimate space of the lobby area, and the proactive approach to communication taken by staff resulted in a high level of visitor engagement.

A 2006 survey of small museums confirmed the reasons visitors like learning history in these settings. When asked "What do visitors like best about your museum?" most responded citing specific artifacts, collections, or exhibits. Some cited specific experiences, like being able to climb to the top of a lighthouse, ride a streetcar, or pan for gold. One mansion museum staff member noted that visitors get insight into affluent lifestyles (lifestyles they do not have): "Our museum is located in an affluent neighborhood. I believe visitors think that our museum is a glimpse into what the adjacent houses might be like inside."[62] Insider knowledge was important to visitors in other cases as well. One museum reported visitors enjoyed "artifacts . . . relating to our heritage."[63] The Great Plains Welsh Heritage Museum reported that "one of our best programs is a re-enactment of early settlers telling their first person stories (by actual descendents standing by their ancestors' gravestones in the Welsh cemetery)." Many cited services that appealed to more basic human needs: connection to other people. "Friendly staff members and volunteers," "staff friendliness and knowledge," and the "small size, friendly volunteers and staff" are what appeal to visitors in these settings.

The IXL Museum in Hermansville, Michigan, is a case study in the personal interaction so common to the community exhibit. Hermansville,

Figure 3.7. Familial intimacy in the museum setting. This label reads "NIDDY NODDY. A reel to wind and measure yarn. This was made by Mrs. Joseph Birgy's Grandfather." (Fife Lake Area Historical Society, Fife Lake, Michigan, 2005. Photo by author.)

a town near Michigan's Wisconsin border, had a population of 1,041 in 2000. It has two museums: the Vietnam Veteran's Museum and the IXL Historical Museum. They are only open in the summer, when tourists begin to roam the area looking for camping, hiking, and fishing opportunities. Two weeks before the opening in 2006, I visited the IXL museum to find it still closed, but a volunteer opened the building, stated there was as yet no heat, but that we were welcome to give ourselves a tour. She handed us a tour book and pointed toward the first stop, the front entry room. We learned that the imposing building was an office of the Wisconsin Land and Lumber Company of Fond du Lac, Wisconsin, built in 1882–1883 to provide lumber to C. J. L. Meyer's sash and door company. We learned that "IXL" was the name of this branch company and was Meyer's way of asserting just that: "I excel." We went from room to room, learning how clerks distributed checks to lumbermen, how the secretary used a dictaphone, and that employees wore metal tags to identify themselves. We learned about billing and accounting in the Work Room. We looked at the switchboard and read how the company hired an operator who handled not only company calls but calls for other area businesses. Mimeoscopes and copypresses provided additional insight on late nineteenth-century office work. We went to the basement to learn about the family who lived there and provided all janitorial services for the building. We toured the upstairs, living quarters for clerks. The abundance of woodwork attested to the dominance of the lumber industry, as did the mill artifacts displayed in two rooms. In the company vault, we marveled at the abundance of company records: account books, maps, and journals.[64]

This "self-guided" tour turned out to be rather "other guided" as well, for in each area, volunteers and museum staff were working to prepare for the tourist season. At each stop, they ceased working to talk with us, sharing their insights not only into the history of IXL but also their own history of working there and discovering interesting features of the house and its history. They also shared their opinions on the process of curation. These conversations went even further when we met one volunteer who had grown up in this company town, her father an employee of IXL. She let us into the lone example of worker housing, a small house set up as it would have looked in the 1920s, and told us that it was difficult for her parents to be dependent on the company store, a childhood memory that still appeared vivid. The interactions throughout the building with people who descended from the earlier workers made this exhibit all the more present. The face-to-face conversations implied that the events depicted here shaped the lives of friends, not strangers, creating intimacy with visitors.

Behavioral observation and visitor surveys at the Shoshone-Bannock Tribal Museum as well as visitor identification of interaction with staff as a high point of their visit to small museums affirm the unique role com-

munity exhibits play in American life. While they are in public institutions, they encourage rather private conversations among strangers. Curators make personal connections to visitors, letting them into their experiences. Visitors, in turn, feel a shared sense of the past or gain sympathy for another's perspective. While objectivity may not be a dominant characteristic of community exhibits, dialogue is.

This dialogue is supported by its relationship to tourism. The highway sign that brought us to Hermansville and the IXL Museum—"Fine Food and History Museum"—indicates a significant role for the small museum. It is one way small communities can support their businesses. Even as the community exhibit works toward community self-definition by controlling its own heritage resources, the small museum cannot escape its dependence on funds brought from without the community. Intergroup dialogue functions to create better understanding among diverse groups of people. It is also salable. The exhibits that draw more heavily on salability are the subjects of the following two chapters.