

Case study 5: Sustainable Collections Project, Central West, New South Wales

www.centralnswmuseums.orangemuseum.com.au/movies/c/

www.millthorpemuseum.com

Summary

A collaborative local government initiative in the cultural heritage field has provided the Golden Memories Museum with further support in its progress towards digital access for its collection.

Background

After being established in 1964, Millthorpe and District Historical Society opened the Golden Memories Museum (GMM) in 1965. The museum comprises eight buildings including a former school house, Good Templars Hall and a Museum of Rural Technology. It has no paid staff. There is a team of 20 active volunteers as well as others who do 'duty' on the front desk during opening hours. The themes covered include pioneers, social history of the town and advances in rural technology. There is a large collection of vehicles including working examples. GMM is one of the networked museums of the SCP.

Collection

GMM has a collection estimated at between 10 and 20,000 objects, including paper based archives, photographs, social history items and farm machinery. Almost all of the acquisitions were via donation. Approximately 35% of the collection is catalogued on a 'very old' card catalogue system. This was an early attempt to keep track of the collection. There is also an early collection register that gives some insight into the source of items within the collection. Around 70% of the rural technology collection was catalogued into an Excel spreadsheet more recently, and around 80% of the photographic collection has also been catalogued into a spreadsheet.

Software

In the past 15 years, a grant was received to purchase the Mosaic collections management system. Around 200 items were entered into the database, however, the volunteers interviewed advised that a decision had been made not to continue with the system. The reasons given were that it was only a single user license and could only be used on one computer at the museum. The museum's current plans



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for cataloguing and collection digitisation require multiple volunteers on several computers at one time, entering data at locations that suit them, into an in house developed system.

“To get the old card catalogue onto the new database, someone can be sitting at the front desk doing their duty, and entering the information in the quiet times,” Hayley Lavers, Collections Coordinator.

The museum has developed its own in-house cloud based collection management system, called TangleWeb, which is currently being trialled. The museum volunteers see the benefit of this as being multiple users entering data at one time and controlled in-house. Because it has been designed in house, the system integrates information in a manner that suits the museum volunteers. From trials of the system, they have declared that currently the situation is ‘so far, so good’.

Digital access

The general public will be able to access the collections of the museum via a link that will be located on the museum website. The decision to share collection items on the website, will be made on a case by case basis, but there is concern within the organisation about sharing the collection online.

The first stages of collection digitisation will be the card catalogue, however this will not include photographing of the collection items. The museum also has plans to commence photographing and digitising any new acquisitions as they are catalogued. The museum is not using significance as a method for determining which items should be prioritised for digitisation, stating they do not have the time for undertaking significance assessments and writing statements of significance.

Photographs are digitised as requests for copies are made. They are scanned on a privately owned scanner housed at the museum. They are currently being saved as JPEGs at around 600 ppi. The museum does use a metadata system for identifying items in the photographic collection, using terms such as ‘t’ for town and ‘rt’ for rural technology, when ordering their photographic collections and scanned versions of originals. Other than these two factors of saving JPEGs and categorising image content, there is no identified standard that the museum follows and they ‘making it up as we go along’.

The decision to digitise was borne out of a desire to have ease of use of collection records, which currently make it difficult to match paper-based records with items in the collection. The museum chose not to use the eHive system being used by others across the region and those involved in the SCP, because, in their words, it has no category system, requiring extra work on the part of volunteers to make it user friendly.

Sustainable Collections Project

Since 2007, the Sustainable Collections Project (SCP) has been working with museum volunteers to document and interpret collections and stories from over 15 museums located across the region. The SCP operates across three local government areas in the Central West of NSW— Cabonne, Blayney and Orange — which together serve a population of around 57,000 residents. Administered by Orange City Council, each of the three councils contributes \$15,000 per year.

The SCP is designed to assist community museums with the documentation, assessment and interpretation of collections and to work with councils to improve the planning and coordination of museums. It recognizes that the heritage collections are important community assets that need better documentation and management to sustain their value and significance into the future. A network of museum volunteers meets regularly to advise on training needs, plan workshops, joint projects and events. These programs strengthen co-operation and raise the profile of museums and villages.

The concept was initiated after an analysis of the region's collections and museums was conducted by museum consultant Kylie Winkworth, as Museum Advisor to the region under the Museum Advisors Program of Museums and Galleries NSW. The program has secured over \$600,000 for museum work in the region since its inception in 2007. This includes council contributions, Arts NSW grants and a Regional Partnership with Sydney Living Museums, which has seen \$140,000 of collaborative public programming focused on food and its place in our history and relevance to the community as a 'food bowl' region of NSW.

As part of the SCP, consultant Collection Officers have worked with volunteers in community museums to document and better care for their collections. While the new regional museum and current regional gallery collections will be documented via the Vernon collections management system, community museum volunteers are being encouraged to use the eHive cloud based collections management system to document and store their collections. eHive was created by the same company who created Vernon CMS. The decision to use eHive was made because of ease of use and it is free up to a certain number of entries. After that, a collection with up to 20,000 images would be charged in the region of US\$400 per annum. Community museum volunteers decide how much, if any, of their collection is shared with the general public, as per the control options offered by the system. It is estimated that around 10% of the collections held by museums participating in the SCP have been catalogued, using this method.

Central NSW Museums is one of the featured 'communities' on the eHive site, with 13 identified community members: <https://ehive.com/communities/1083/central-nsw-museums>

These museums have shared 55 objects to the site, ranging from paper archives and objects to books and historical artwork. The collections of the network are also shared via a link on the Central NSW Museums website: <http://www.centralnswmuseums.orangemuseum.com.au/museums/collections/>

The process of cataloguing, digitising and sharing the collections online is an ongoing one, which the Museum Manager and Heritage Coordinator of Orange City Council, Alison Russell, has prioritised for the coming year.



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Challenges

Capacity is an issue and 'not knowing who to ring' for information and support, although through the SCP, the volunteers can swap ideas with other Central NSW museums.

There has been some resistance to sharing the collection online from within the group, as museum volunteers are concerned about the security of the collection once it has online exposure. This issue is compounded by the lack of insurance of the collection, a situation which is common to many community museums. Volunteers are also concerned that if online users have seen all of the collection online, they will not come to Millthorpe to visit the museum.

The museum volunteers have not considered any other sharing platforms, however they do use Trove and were extremely enthusiastic about it as a research tool. They were also impressed with the maps collection at the State Library of NSW, often using them in research.

The greatest challenge facing the museum is the cataloguing and digitisation of a vast number of items across several buildings on their site. This, paired with the significant number of tasks expected of museum volunteers, is a challenge for all community museums and their volunteers. The process of cataloguing must fit in around a range of other museum and fundraising activities.

Opportunities

- With SCP collection officers being re-engaged to catalogue and digitise the collections in the near future, the SCP has a great opportunity to have a thorough understanding of the collections held across the region and demonstrate their importance to the community. A focused approach that sees cataloguers work methodically with museums one on one, should result in complete cataloguing of collections, in the case of some of the smaller museums.
- Sharing these collections online will see greater exposure for the museums from across the museum sector and the wider community.
- The SCP Collections Officers could be adapted to Regional Museum Officers operating out of the newly opened Orange Regional Museum, in the same way that the Museum of the Riverina has a Regional Museum Officer working with community museums across that region of NSW. The increase in Regional Museum Officers across regional NSW and other states (through local government and state government partnership and collaboration) will only serve to strengthen the community museum network, and work towards the sustainability of vulnerable and at risk collections across Australia.

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- Golden Memories Museum has the opportunity to maintain and build an even stronger relationship with SCP and remain engaged with the project and its activities. The process of cataloguing the collection and entering it into the new TangleWeb database can be seen as an opportunity to stocktake the collection and to gain a better understanding of what they hold and the significance of their collection. A basic process of identifying significant objects and prioritising these items for cataloguing and digitisation first, would ensure that the most important items held by the museum were documented for future generations and museum volunteers.
 - Both the Sustainable Collections Project and Golden Memories Museum could explore the potential to share their collections on national collection sharing platforms so that a broader audience searching for national collections can identify those held in the Central West region.

Conclusion

The Blayney, Cabonne and Orange councils have demonstrated a firm commitment to the digitisation and interpretation of community collections across the region, through their ongoing support of the Sustainable Collections Project. This ongoing commitment will see further collections documented and digitised across the region. With encouragement, this will lead to larger portions of the region's collections being shared with a wider audience.

GMM is about to embark on a very important stage of its collections management. The steps and processes they put in place now will establish long term patterns for the museum's collections and future volunteers. With this mind, the current volunteers acknowledge how important it is that they 'get it right' and be as informed about processes as they possibly can. The museum volunteers are still considering how and if they share their collections online and acknowledge that their view on this may differ from other community museums.

The volunteers of the museum have the capability to engage with the process of digitisation through the support available via the SCP. The funds available to the SCP provide the support that enables collections digitisation projects to be undertaken in the museums across the region in a comprehensive manner.