

Small museum management seminar held in Juneau

JUNEAU—"Museum Alaska: A Seminar in Small Museum Management," may well have been a milestone for rural Alaskan communities with small museums or heritage centers.

Held at the Alaska State Museum, Juneau, March 23-25, 1976, it hosted more than 30 participants—mostly nonprofessional volunteers—and 19 professional workshop instructors. Problems and ideas on heritage development projects—as varied as Alaska's ethnic makeup—were exchanged in many practicums and lecture sessions.

Organized by Alaska State Museum staff, the seminar was an outgrowth of two surveys held in May and October, 1975, to determine the most pressing needs of bush museum and heritage center personnel.

"More than four-fifths of Alaska's 52 rural heritage centers and museums are staffed by nonprofessional volunteers," said Museum Assistant Robert Flack, a CETA worker and statewide community action program coordinator.

"People desperately need assistance. They want to learn proper care and organization methods for collections and exhibits," he said.

Advise on developing educational programs—through dance, oral history, arts and crafts workshops—also is being sought.

"Many of those involved see their museums not only as artifact receptacles," Flack said, "but as living heritage centers where all generations can participate while learning about their past."

MAJOR CONCERN

A major concern among many Alaskans is that the state's rich and diverse ethnic heritage will be sacrificed to rapid growth, financial exploitation and burgeoning technological development.

The pioneers' past and cultures of such groups as Aleut, Athabascan, Eskimo and Tlingit-Haida, are kept alive in part by those working with community museums and heritage centers. However, while many valuable artifacts need proper care, most volunteers have little or no knowledge on how to preserve them.

Dan Monroe, director of education at the Alaska State Museum, sees Alaska's small museums playing many important roles.

"They can function as historical preservation, education and community heritage centers," he said. "Through museums, Alaska's past, present and future are interrelated."

STATEWIDE PROGRAM

Many of Alaska's rural museums are established for the 1967 Alaska Centennial. One of the 76-year-old Alaska State museum's main functions is to provide technical and program assistance in all phases of museum operations to small communities. Its statewide community action program, made possible by the federal VISTA and CETA programs, does exactly that.

TRUE ACTIVISTS

Some of Alaska's bush museums are true activists—centers for community heritage happenings.

A winter-spring kayak construction project, for

example, recently took place at Bethel's Yugtarvik Regional Museum. Purchase of seal skins was funded in part by an Alaska State Museum grant-in-aid.

"Everyone was involved," said Curator Martha Larsen. "High school students, their families and elderly citizens, sewed and prepared the skins, helped construct the inner shell or just dropped by to watch."

Farther Northeast, Ft. Yukon's Gwitcha-Gwitch'in-Ginkhye Corp., hired Virginia Alexander to begin a regional museum for Athabascan heritage. She wants it to be a living and learning place for the people whose ten villages—places like Chalkyitsik, Beaver, Arctic Village, Venetie and Birch Creek—it will represent.

"We have all the ingredients for a fine heritage center," said the nine-year Ft. Yukon resident, "especially the volunteers." Local artists have offered to repair and restore artifacts there, while carpenters have contributed their services to building the museum. Many residents are on the lookout for valuable artifacts.

"Before we began our museum, people worried about losing artifacts to outsiders who would come and buy or just walk off with them," Alexander said.

Displays, travelling exhibits, Native arts and crafts workshops, photo collections, dance and oral history presentations and a library are planned.

LIVING HISTORY

Executive Director Roy Helms of the Alaska State Council on the Arts and seminar observer, thinks that besides local museums, regional ones like Ft. Yukon's are important to preserving Alaska's Native ethnic heritage.

"Alaska's history originally was not written," he explained. "Prior to the explorers' coming, Native stories and legends were passed by word of mouth, from one generation to the next."

"Artifacts—umiaks, blankets are baskets, for example—are still widely used in day-to-day living. When you deal with oral history and culture, transmitted through objects not designed to last, they are destroyed as the culture fades."

It is predicted that more rural Alaskan communities will want to establish museums and heritage preservation programs as Native corporations expand. Professional training, along with technical and program assistance in museum operations, will therefore be needed.

The Alaska State Museum offers such aid through its statewide community action arm. "Museum Alaska" was one way to do it.

A MUSEUM FIRST

Planning the seminar began in September, 1975. The intensive statewide event was a museum first. Assistance from several state agencies and professional museum staff throughout Alaska was sought and willingly provided.

A consultant service grant from the American Association of State and Local History brought Richard Beauchamp, chief deputy conservator at Victoria's British Columbia Provincial Museum, to the seminar as an instructor. He conducted practicums and workshops in artifact conservation.

Consultants set aside regular responsibilities to be part of the "Museum Alaska" experience. They included Lu Rowinski, director, University of Alaska

Museum, Fairbanks; Pat Wolf, curator of education, Anchorage Historical and Fine Arts Museum; Ellen Lang, superintendent, Sitka National Historical Park; Wally Olson, instructor in anthropology, University of Alaska, Southeastern Region; Bob Nichols, planner, U.S. Park Service; Esther Billman, curator, Sheldon Jackson Museum, Sitka; Phyllis DeMuth, director, readers' services and Pat Wilson, reference librarian, Alaska State Historical Library, Juneau; plus the entire Alaska State Museum staff.

ALL BASES COVERED

The seminar covered all bases of museum operation. A resource center divided into five primary sections—collections, exhibits, education, administration and grantsmanship—was distributed to each participant.

"The 'Museum Alaska' resource center is a cardboard file box," Flack explained. "Fifty were donated to the Museum by the Alaska State Archives. We wanted them to be the start of museum reference libraries."

Each resource center has a bibliography and how-to materials on the most important areas of museum management. One is on file with the Alaska State Historical Library, Juneau.

COMMON PROBLEM

Conservator Beauchamp thinks a hinderance common to all rural Alaskan museums is isolation from resources in other states.

"It's a long hop from Alaska to the lower 48. This distance presents a problem to Alaskan museums that those in other states don't have to cope with."

"For now, they'll depend on the Alaska State Museum and other state agencies for information and other liaison services," he said.

Alan Munro, chief Museum curator, believes heritage center and museum development in rural communities will play an important part in contributing to people's self worth and identity. "When people feel good about themselves," he said, "it goes a long way toward solving problems." A \$10,000 Museum grant-in-aid made travel to Juneau possible for several seminar participants.

ALTERNATIVES

Community museums may derive partial support from municipal government, private corporations

and regional or village Native corporations. But not all rural areas can afford a museum or heritage center.

On Kodiak Island, for example, Steve Cole, executive director of the Kadee Area Community Development Corp., plans to sponsor exhibit case construction for community centers in each of the island's six villages. Blueprints designed by Alaska State Museum Curator of Exhibits Ed Way, will be used.

Way's design is expected to be copied by many of Alaska's rural museums and heritage centers. What's more, high school industrial arts students, carpenters, or anyone familiar with blueprints and basic cabinet making principles, can construct the exhibit case.

A model was made especially for "Museum Alaska" at Juneau-Douglas High School by three young volunteers—Hugh Burton, Butch Rose and Joe Taylor—with a little help from industrial arts instructor Bob Peele.

"This shows that young people in small communities can play an active role in developing heritage programs," Way said. The exhibit case was designed to meet the special needs of rural Alaska. Many dollars will be saved in material and mail order costs.

IMPORTANT CONSIDERATION

For many Alaskan cities, tourism is a vital part of economic life. May through September are peak income periods. Kay Sheppard of the Whittier Historical and Fine Arts Museum said thousands visit Whittier annually. A natural stopover for people is the city's museum.

"I wanted to find out how I could make our exhibits more versatile," Sheppard explained. "This seminar has given me some excellent ideas."

Valdez' city council recently appointed an historical board to develop a new museum. The city has a rich past, dynamic present and very promising future. Now terminus for the trans-Alaska pipeline, Valdez once was home for the state's third judicial district and a chief transportation center.

"We're struggling to preserve our past," board member Polly

Browne said. "Alaska's culture is more varied than any other state's. It has an important Native heritage and settlers from all the world."

PAST, PRESENT, FUTURE

"Museum Alaska" proved an important point—rural Alaskan Communities share a deep concern about the state's past and relating it to present and future events.

Through developing museums and heritage centers, those involved are keeping it alive. They want to do a good job and need adequate resources and assistance. A post-seminar survey rated "Museum Alaska" as excellent and indicated participants wanted more of the same.

Alaska State Museum staff organized the event as a basis for future training sessions, and saw it as a source from which educational materials in museum operations could develop. More seminars, perhaps regionally oriented, video taped training cassettes for educational television programming, on site assistance and published instructional material, are planned for the future.

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