Working Museums

By Jamie Eves • May 19, 2019

The Windham Textile and History Museum – a.k.a., the Mill Museum – is what I think of as a working museum, meaning that the staff and volunteers are continually engaged in doing actual history. The Museum accepts, preserves, and catalogs new artifacts. It engages in ongoing historical research. It frequently changes its exhibits. It is dynamic.

I got to see another kind of museum a few years ago when my wife Kit and I took an organized bus tour of seven national parks in and near the Rocky Mountains. Because interstate highways in the Rockies tend to run east-to-west, and not north-to-south, our bus spent a lot of time navigating back roads as we traveled from Glacier National Park in the North to the Grand Canyon in the South. The bus made frequent stops for food, gas, restrooms, and shopping. Among the many stops were several little museums in small towns. Typically, each of these museums had a gift shop staffed by elderly volunteers, restrooms, and an exhibit room featuring professional signage and artifacts of local history sealed inside hermetical glass cases. Occasionally, there was also a small theater with a professionally made film. There were no paid staff, no archives or collections department, and no changing exhibits. The museums had been created by federal grant funds, but they lacked the finances to operate as working museums. They were static, with exhibits frozen in time.

These static museums were disappointing. Kit and I noticed that our fellow travelers rarely bothered to explore the exhibits. Other than being neat and tidy, the exhibits did little to engage visitors. They attempted to tell a version of each town's founding by settlers in the nineteenth century. The artifacts all looked the same. There was rarely any attempt to depict change over time. Instead the exhibits presented a "bipolar" history of then and now. Now was visible outside the museum. Then was inside. None of the volunteers were doing any kind of ongoing research. Exhibits never changed. History was presented as unchanging.

Working museums are the opposite of these static museums. They portray history as dynamic. Change over time is depicted as constant, with different eras blending into each other. A collections department continually seeks out new artifacts, and then builds new stories around the new acquisitions. Changing exhibits find new stories to tell. Staff and volunteers discuss and debate what happened in the past. Community members join in lively discussions. History is continually reinterpreted and represented, as new information comes to light.

Compared to static museums, working museums can appear noisy, chaotic, and sometimes messy. Sometimes new acquisitions pile up faster than the staff can catalog them. Exhibits rooms are in flux, as new artifacts are added to permanent exhibits (which are never really permanent), and as older changing exhibits are dismantled and replaced with new ones. There is bustle and excitement.

Working museums are not as neat and tidy as static museums. Here at the Mill Museum, volunteer curators constructed a changing exhibit that included an artificial crow. When they struck the exhibit weeks later, they forgot about the crow. It was a few months before a visitor noticed it and asked what it had to do with the current exhibit. In another example, visiting school children were given tufts of raw cotton; most kept their pieces of cotton, but others tossed them on the floor, and it would not be until later that day that volunteers had the time to pick them up.

Working museums share spaces. The staff has to explain to visitors that today they will be sharing the museum with seventy-five active third graders, that the exhibit they came miles to see has already been taken down (savvy museum goers know always to check the website for dates), or that the artifact they most want to see is currently in storage (although, if the volunteer collections manager is there that day, it can be pulled out for inspection). Working museums change their signage frequently, which increases the chances of stray typos. Guest speakers may say something controversial (which is kind of the point of having guest speakers), and attendees might find themselves face-to-face with people who disagree with them. Working museums serve both the local community and visitors from away, each encountering the others' narratives in the same space. Folks taking lessons in the weaving classroom chat animatedly as they clack their looms. School children sitting in a circle excitedly (and noisily) speculate about what that rug beater might be (a common guess: a swatter for giant flies). Different languages are spoken. All the while, staid elders glide quietly from room to room, self-guided tour booklets in hand.

Working museums are not neat, tidy, quiet static museums. They are so much better.