

Museum Times

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The Life of an Artifact

The life of an object begins long before it is received by a museum, though its life as an accessioned and cataloged artifact begins upon acquisition. An artifact can enter the museum's care in a number of ways, the most common being by donation. A donated artifact must meet certain criteria in order to be accepted into the collection. The Museums of Western Colorado which includes the Museum of the West, Cross Orchards, and Dinosaur Journey has a wide variation in the scope of the collections; each site has specific criteria that have to be met for new acquisitions. Here are the three general rules of thumb that all sites follow:

- 1. Does the item being considered support the Museum Mission Statement?
- 2. Has the item retained its physical integrity, historic value, and authenticity?
- 3. Do we have the resources to properly care for and preserve this item?

If the answer to all three is a resounding "Yes!", then the item moves on to accessioning and cataloging and begins its life as an artifact.



Did you know that most museums only display up to 4% of their collections at a time?

First the artifact is brought into a processing area for accession and cataloging. It is labeled with its accession number or object id, photographed, and assessed for cleaning. Next, an accession record is created in our collections digital database and everything about the artifact is written down. Dimensions, provenance, acquisition notes, care instructions, and much more. The more detail the better, as this will help in future inquiries about the artifact. From here, the artifact is moved into a collections area for storage. There are many different categories of objects that determine where it is best to store the object. Many artifacts will spend most of their lives in Collection storage. Direct light, temperature, and handling of any kind increases an artifact's exposure and degradation. An artifact only has so much "display life" (meaning time that it can be displayed continuously) before it starts to become damaged. Artifacts on exhibition need to be rotated out to help preserve them. The life of an artifact continues on after acquisition, with longevity and preservation as the main goal. The proper care of artifacts helps to ensure they will be around for many generations to come. *Written By: Matti Fisher*

J a n u a r y / F e b r u a r y

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Old ≠ Historic

Working in a history museum has called into question my understanding of the historic value in objects. I have learned just because something is old, does not make it historic. Historians value the significance of things, by often asking “**what can this tell me about the past?**” or “**why does this matter?**”



Institutions cannot take in every “old” object because of the limited amount of space we struggle with. Taking in new collections requires what museum professionals call “provenance:” the context, previous ownership, and historical background of an object. This information adds to the object’s interpretation and historical significance. The Museum of the West is not able to accept every brand of clothing iron or shoe or railroad tie or typewriter from every decade. The object needs to match our mission statement.

The Museums of Western Colorado inspires and connects our community by championing the scientific and cultural heritage of the Colorado Plateau.

How do we recognize the potential significance in common objects that should be preserved? The Museum of the West has a handful of typewriters ranging from older models, different brands, and those of unique provenance. One item, accessioned as 2011.0003, is an IBM memory typewriter, and was owned by Wayne Aspinall, a congressman who grew up in the Grand Valley. Throughout his career, Aspinall’s policies would shape the American West and impact environmental policies; he also remains one of the most influential water leaders in Colorado history. He retired in 1972 and returned to practicing law in Palisade. This machine was most likely used in his Palisade law office until his death in 1983. Knowing what we do about this typewriter allows historians to view this machine as the bridge between the present and the work Aspinall engaged in in the past. His correspondence with President Gerald Ford, whom he stayed in contact with when he retired, was likely typed up using this typewriter. The ideas he wrote about alternative energy sources and numerous documents he wrote while practicing law within the Grand Valley ran through this instrument.

Objects within a Museum’s collection need to have interpretation opportunities, like Wayne Aspinell’s typewriter. When an object has significance and resonates with the Museum’s mission statement, we are able to tell a more complete and meaningful story with it.



Written By: Vida Jaber Pictured: Wayne Aspinell



Meet the New Curator of History Vida Jaber

I have done a lot of exciting things in my life: jump horses, dig for hominids in Olduvai Gorge in Tanzania, travel to the Caribbean to participate in underwater archaeology, and for the last three years, work at the Museum of the West. I have been trained by some amazing museum professionals who have encouraged me and pushed for my promotion. While I was born and raised in Grand Junction, every day at the Museum of the West makes me appreciate my hometown and its significance even more. I look forward to bringing this appreciation to my new position.

I started at Museums of Western Colorado in January 2018, in my final semester at Colorado Mesa University. I completed an internship under the Curator of Archives and did odd jobs, working in collections, and learning the local history. By May 2018, I had graduated from CMU with a BA, majoring in history and double minoring in archaeology and public history, and was offered an assistant position at the Museum of the West.

Over the course of the last three years, I have worked as the volunteer coordinator, researched numerous topics, and assisted in exhibit installation, among taking on many other tasks and responsibilities. As the museums have begun preparation for the reaccreditation process, I have assisted with inventorying and managing collections. Currently, in addition to acquainting myself with my new position, I am in the process of applying for the Exhibits/Museum Studies program at Western State in Gunnison, CO, where I look forward to earning my master's degree.

My goal as the new Curator of history is to revamp parts of the exhibit gallery at Museum of the West by adding exhibits exploring common research. Once the COVID-19 pandemic has subsided, I want to add interactive experi-

ences that will add depth to the exhibits. Additionally, I would like to experiment with creating 3-D models of objects from our collections and make them available on the website.

As the new Curator of History, I look forward to working within my community and engaging in discourse regarding local history. My goals are to bridge the gap between academia and the public, compare the written word with the physical evidence, and create interesting, meaningful, and tangible stories. We have so much in our archives and collections to do this with. I'm excited!



Pictured: (Left) David Bailey retired in December 2020, and (Right) Vida Jaber is taking over his vacated position as Curator of History



Museums of Western Colorado

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