

# Linking the Past to the Future

## Museum Collections and the Bureau of Land Management

**M**useum collections for which the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) has stewardship responsibilities consist principally of archeological, paleontological, and historic materials. The BLM is steward of one of the largest, most varied, and scientifically significant body of archeological, historical, and paleontological resources. These resources include districts, sites, buildings, structures, and objects that are significant to the natural history, paleontology, history, architecture, archeology, engineering, and culture of America. The Bureau manages 3,500 miles of national historic trails including the Iditarod (Alaska), Juan Bautista De Anza, (California), Nez Perce, Lewis and Clark, (Oregon), Mormon Pioneer, Pony Express, and El Camino Real. Substantial collections are associated with these resources.

The Bureau has responsibility for the largest number of museum collections held in non-federal facilities of any Interior bureau. These collections range in size from one object to curatorial lots (i.e., fragments of an object or objects) and

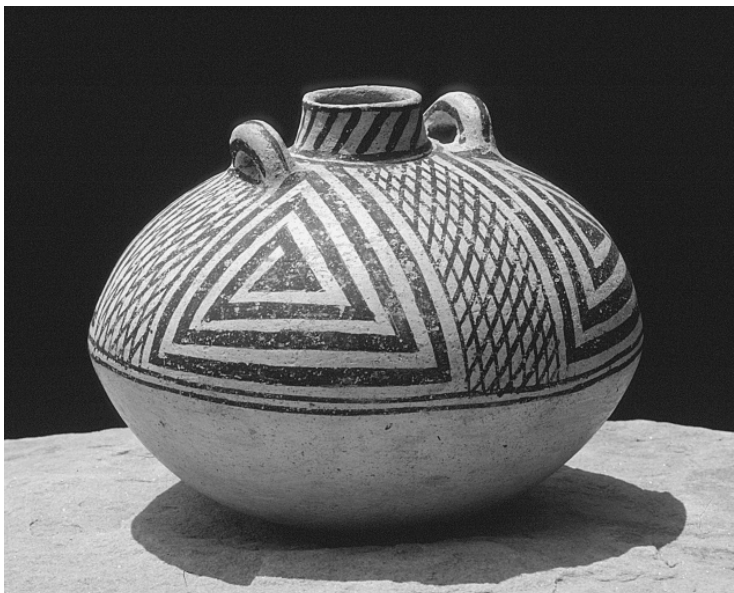
consist of varied materials such as pottery, metal, leather, textiles, wood, stone, bone, glass, paper, photographs and negatives. Bureau collections and their associated records are maintained in professional facilities, both internally and externally, whose mission is to preserve, document, research, interpret, and exhibit the material.

### History

Most of the public lands for which BLM serves as steward were once part of the 1.8 billion acres of “public domain” acquired by the nation between 1781 and 1867. Congress established the General Land Office (GLO) in 1812. In 1946, the GLO and U.S. Grazing Service were merged to become the BLM. The Bureau currently manages 264 million acres in 27 states, about one eighth of the United States’ total land surface, located primarily in Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, New Mexico, Nevada, Oregon, Utah, Washington, and Wyoming.

Since 1812, individuals and institutions have been conducting scientific expeditions, excavating sites and collecting millions of objects on the public lands. Collections were placed in hundreds of non-federal facilities including universities, museums, and historical societies. In the mid-1980s, the BLM obtained authority to issue permits under the Antiquities Act and Archaeological Resources Protection Act for surveys and research on its lands. Subsequently, three bureau collections facilities were opened: the Billings Curation Center (BCC), Billings, Montana, in 1984; the Anasazi Heritage Center (AHC), Dolores, Colorado, in 1988; and, the National Historic Oregon Trail Interpretive Center (OTC), Flagstaff Hill, Oregon, in 1992. In 1990, new departmental accountability and management standards were enacted, requiring BLM to begin identifying collections removed from the public lands since the establishment of the GLO.

*The Anasazi Heritage Center preserves in its state-of-the-art facility fine examples of prehistoric Native American material culture, such as this McElmo Black-on-white canteen.*





*Storage of whole vessels at the Anasazi Heritage Center.*

### **Facilities**

Internal BLM museum collections facilities: **Anasazi Heritage Center.** The AHC is the Bureau's only collection facility and museum. It focuses on the Anasazi and other cultures of the Four Corners region. The museum and its surrounding grounds have permanent exhibits, archeological sites, special exhibits, and events. It also offers traveling exhibits, educational resources for teachers, research opportunities for archeological collections, and an excellent interactive web site <[www.co.blm.gov/ahc/hmepage.htm](http://www.co.blm.gov/ahc/hmepage.htm)>. In 1998, the Center hosted 32,004 visitors and 276 researchers. Collections are estimated to contain three million specimens (principally archeological with some historic and paleontological materials). The BLM is justifiably proud of this cutting-edge facility.

**Billings Curation Center.** Smaller than the AHC, the BCC was established to curate artifacts collected from public lands in Montana and the Dakotas. The primary objective of BCC is to ensure collections (which represent nearly 12,000 years of Northern Plains history) serve researchers, BLM, and other agency personnel. The center has no gallery spaces and no exhibits, but hosted 20 researchers in 1998. Collections are estimated to contain 500,000 specimens, principally archeological with some historic materials. The center's value as an important research and management tool is immeasurable.

**Oregon Trail Center.** The OTC features exhibits, living history areas, theater, outdoor amphitheater, interpretive trails, and a picnic area. It provides unique vistas of the historic ruts of the Oregon Trail and majestic scenery. Its goal is to interpret the story of the Oregon Trail and its impact on western American history. Artifacts, along with artwork, text, videos, sound effects,

and dioramas, present well-rounded, fact-filled exhibits and programs. In 1998, the Center hosted 101,372 visitors and maintains an excellent interactive web site <[www.or.blm.gov/NHOTIC](http://www.or.blm.gov/NHOTIC)>. Collections are estimated to contain 1,520 specimens, principally archeological, historical and natural history materials. The OTC provides an engaging and educational experience for its many visitors.

External facilities hold numerous collections from BLM-managed lands. Since new collections are being continuously excavated from the public lands, the Bureau is unable to quantify precisely the scope of these collections but is certain that they are increasing in number every year. The Bureau estimates that collections are maintained in approximately 189 professional facilities: 123 holding archeological materials, 84 holding paleontological materials, 6 holding historical materials, 4 holding biological materials, 2 holding ethnological materials, and 1 holding artwork, in 34 states and Canada. These facilities hold millions of museum objects and are located from Alaska to Florida and from large institutions, such as the Smithsonian, to small local historical societies. Individual collections range from thousands of objects to only a few specimens.

### **Personnel and Funding Resources**

Personnel principally devoted to museum collections issues in BLM currently number five individuals: the national curator, the curator and a museum specialist at AHC, the curator at BCC, and the historian/curator at OTC. These individuals also deal with many other issues. The state leads for BLM's 12 Cultural Heritage Programs and the three regional paleontologists normally spend little time on collections-related issues, and field office personnel generally do not have responsibilities for managing collections. Cultural Resource Use Permits are issued from state offices and excavated collections are transferred to museums by permittees. Limited BLM funding is allocated for costs strictly associated with museum collections. Funding for work at the state level is sent to each BLM state director and allocated according to state priorities. The remaining funding covers the work of the national curator and support for projects administered by the Washington Office.

### **Issues Affecting BLM Collections**

The following issues affect the BLM's ability to manage its museum collections.

**Resources.** Limited funding and staff severely restrict the Bureau's ability to develop meaningful, proactive efforts with facilities.

**Changes in Land Status.** Dealing with museum collections in BLM is complicated by significant changes in land status as land is regularly acquired and conveyed by the Bureau. Stewardship obligations for collections are tied to land ownership at the time the collection is excavated or removed from the land. For example, in 1997 alone, 69,338 acres were received by BLM and 85,618 acres left BLM ownership.

**Nature of Cataloging.** All museum facilities have cataloging backlogs. The number of items or lots cataloged do not represent the total number present in the facility. Also, in cataloging, no distinction on land ownership is usually made because the information does not contribute to the research, educational, or exhibit potential of the collection. This makes identification of collections originating from BLM lands extremely difficult.

**Role of Federal Agencies in Museum Collections Management.** Since 1990, there has been increased attention by federal agencies on collections issues resulting from the passage of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act. This Act requires agencies to inventory and repatriate certain materials. Many collections have been curated in private museums which have not received funding or other support from agencies now conducting inventories. Only substantial funding will allow museums to be responsive to federal requests for information and program objectives.

**Control and Access.** The majority of BLM collections are stored in non-federal facilities over which BLM has limited control and access and to which the Bureau provides little or no funding. The BLM does not have the personnel, expertise, or resources to care professionally for these collections.

**Funding Agreements.** As there is no guarantee of funding from year to year, BLM operates under cooperative agreements, memoranda of understanding, or assistance agreements. Costs associated with collections generated by projects on public land are paid for by permittees who pass costs onto clients for collections generated in response to Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act.

#### ***The Past Coming to Life***

Despite obstacles, BLM has a number of accomplishments which bring the past to life and are a tribute to creative professional staff, dedicated volunteers, and interns. Some of these accomplishments include: technical assistance provided to other museums, agencies and departments; creation of illustrated brochures and posters on collections, exhibits, and facilities; publication of popular, scientific, and technical reports; production of outstanding exhibits; creation and distribution of educational programs, teacher curriculum guides, teacher activities, and sponsorship of teacher workshops; receipt of grants; development of interactive websites; and sponsorship of internships and volunteer programs.

Without question, BLM faces a unique challenge. The Bureau will continue to enhance its limited resources through proactive, creative low-cost or no-cost solutions and partnerships with state and federal agencies, universities, and museums. Bureau efforts can also benefit from interns and volunteers. This pragmatic approach recognizes that progress will probably be accomplished within the constraints of existing or lower funding, requiring a great deal of creativity and time to accomplish.

The people of the United States have an abiding thirst for knowledge about the past and treasure their heritage. By bringing the past to life, we are linking the past to the future.

---

*Stephanie M. Damadio, Ph.D., is National Curator for the Bureau of Land Management in Sacramento, California.*

*The Anasazi Heritage Center's Discovery Area encourages learning through interaction.*



Photos courtesy Anasazi Heritage Center.