

# Caring for Collections

**A**rcheological sites reveal much about America's rich and diverse cultural heritage. But the only way to know the full, vibrant story of a site is if its artifacts, field and lab notes, archival records, and final reports are saved for study, now and in the future.

The legacy of our ancestors lies in various states of ruin—beneath the earth, under the water, or above the ground—until retrieved and interpreted by archeologists. Often these remains are destroyed by development, looters, or natural causes such as erosion. All this makes preserving what's left all the more important to the education of present and future generations.

Laws have been enacted over the years to protect and preserve the thousands of sites on Federal and tribal lands. The enormous number of materials that accumulates as sites are excavated, looters apprehended, and natural disasters cleaned up—artifacts, soil and floral samples, field notebooks, inventory records, and more—makes the task challenging at best. As a result, this record of our history has not fared well.

Museums and other repositories are often overcrowded, lacking funds to improve even basic needs such as shelving and environmental controls. They frequently do not have an adequate way to inventory their collections—with electronic databases, for example—as well as the resources to preserve their archives. What's more, there is no consistent national policy or set of standards for long-term care.

Fortunately, Federal regulations were recently written to ensure that these collections, records, and reports are preserved and well managed. While this is a significant development, compliance with these regulations demands major initiatives in several areas. These include identifying Federal collections in repositories and museums (Federal and non-Federal), developing policies and standards, creating new repositories and improving existing ones, and providing public access for research and education. Many groups—professional (e.g., the Society for American Archaeology Task Force on Curation), Federal (e.g., the archeological assistance division of the National Park Service), and non-Federal (e.g., numerous state and private museum groups)—are actively trying to remedy these problems.

The volume of Federally owned objects is huge, but often the exact numbers are unknown. When the Department of the Interior found that its museum property was poorly accounted for, it set up an inventory program that ultimately identified well over 50 million artifacts. Other agencies have not even begun to count.

Frequently the scope of a collection is known but the facilities are not adequate to store, conserve, and preserve it. This problem is being dealt with on a number of fronts.

Curation expertise continues to be developed in various Federal agencies, such as at the U.S. Army Corps of

Engineers St. Louis district. From there, SWAT-team-style groups are contracted to assist other agencies. The Bureau of Land Management has supported the building of the Anasazi Heritage Center in order to manage and interpret the huge, multi-agency collections of the Northern San Juan Anasazi. The Department of the Defense, through its legacy program, has funded a number of curation projects such as the one reported here at Warren Air Force Base. Similarly, the Corps of Engineers Portland district has renovated the Bonneville Auditorium, a National Historic Landmark in Washington State, into a curation center.

Establishing a facility is just the beginning. A conservation plan is equally important.

The Fish & Wildlife Service has set an excellent example with its conservation of the 19th century steamboat *Bertrand*. The Service built a visitor center, charted a 10-year plan for the *Bertrand* and its related artifacts, set up a conservation lab supervised by a conservator, and designed several storage chambers tailored to different environmental conditions.

Preserving millions of artifacts is of little benefit if only a few archeologists and curators get to see them. Several of the projects discussed below provide interpretive programs, primarily exhibits and interactive activities, for visitors to their facilities. Many repositories offer even more. The Smithsonian's National Anthropological Archives, for example, has a research room where visitors use finding aids to locate and peruse a whole host of archival records.

With the rise of the electronic age, some facilities have developed database systems so that researchers, curators, and the interested public can dig deep into their collections, without ever handling a fragile object or document. This preserves artifacts even as information about them is made widely available.

Some groups are working to open up this access beyond the confines of individual institutions. From their personal computers, users can call up databases on archeological collections and management worldwide, without leaving their home or office.

Today, curation embraces much more than collecting objects. Collections management, interpretation, conservation, information management, and education are all important. The following articles detail important efforts in all these areas.

—S. Terry Childs  
National Park Service

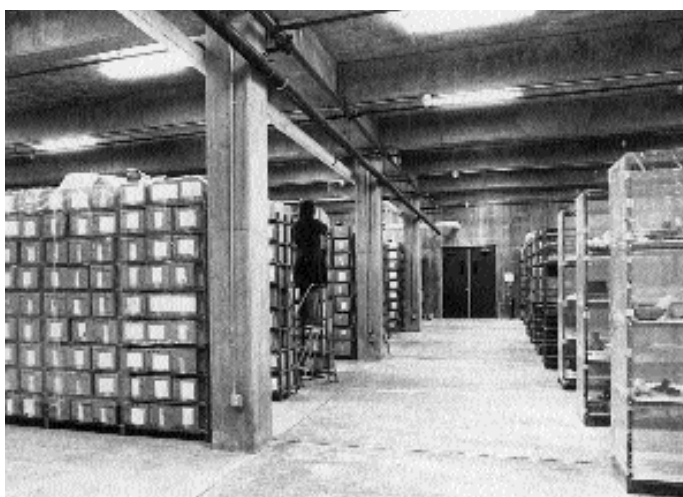
## Preserving the Anasazi's Heritage

The Anasazi Heritage Center, a 40,500 square-foot museum in southwestern Colorado, houses over two million artifacts made by the region's early inhabitants. To manage this enormous collection, the center has installed a system that is setting new standards for the care of archeological artifacts.

The Anasazi, as they are called, began to develop their distinctive culture around AD 1 in the Four Corners area, one of the richest archeological regions in the United States. As agriculture became the mainstay of their economy, they developed into skilled architects and craftspeople, creating fine baskets, pottery, ornaments, woven goods, and tools.



Anasazi Heritage Center (photo by J. Fleetman/courtesy Bureau of Land Management).



Main storage room at the Anasazi Heritage Center (courtesy Bureau of Land Management).

The center, set in a hillside near the remains of the 12th century Escalante and Dominguez ruins, was established to store Anasazi artifacts discovered during construction of a nearby dam by the Bureau of Reclamation. The Dolores River project, the largest archeological contract ever awarded in the United States, brought together archeologists from the University of Colorado, Washington State University, and other institutions. The Bureau of Land Management supplied the staff to manage the artifacts, drawn from the dam project and others on land under the Bureau's jurisdiction.

Today, the center's primary goal is to preserve, manage, display, and interpret the culture of the Northern San Juan Anasazi, who lived in southwestern Colorado—including Mesa Verde and the lower Dolores River Valley—as well as parts of Arizona, New Mexico, and Utah. The center's policy is to accept only those materials that have been systematically collected and professionally documented. Exceptions are cases where unproven material would enhance research, exhibits, education, or outreach to the local community.

In keeping with these priorities, the center has divided its collections into four categories: 1) Research Series, 2) Exhibit Series, 3) Education Series, and 4) Comparative

Series. To control the sprawling collection, the center installed the ARGUS collections management system designed by Questor Systems of Pasadena, California. ARGUS is a relational database system with features designed specifically for large archeological collections. The center also utilizes the Questor Systems SITE FILE data management system. The two programs link the management of collections and archeological resource data, providing a unique service to the center's researchers and other users.

The curation program, defined by a scope of collections statement focused on the Northern San Juan Anasazi, is evolving to ensure compliance with new laws and regulations. For facility staff, the challenge is maintaining the program in the face of the resource and management issues inherent in a multiple-use, public lands agency. For now, the center is at the forefront of Federal curation efforts, helping the Department of the Interior outline a curation policy consistent with the Bureau's many goals.

For information contact the Anasazi Heritage Center, Dolores, CO 81323, ph. 303-882-4811.

## A Boatload to Preserve

Who would have thought that preserving one 19th century boat would have to satisfy the standards of two states' historic preservation officers, the President's Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, and the Fish & Wildlife Service?

But then this is no ordinary vessel.

In 1865, the steamboat *Bertrand* sank in the Missouri River. Subsequent changes in the river's route buried it intact until rediscovered and excavated in 1968-69 by two Nebraska businessmen searching for treasure trove under the direction of National Park Service archeologists. Today, the Fish & Wildlife Service maintains a visitor center created specifically to house, preserve, and exhibit the 200,000 objects recovered from the wreckage. The collection provides a telling glimpse of the material culture of the mining and agricultural frontiers of the 1860s.

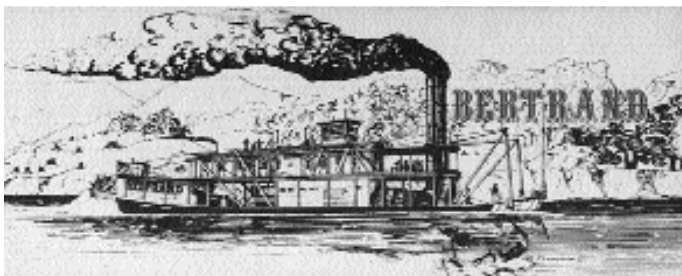
Preservation of the collection follows a 10-year comprehensive conservation plan, developed in 1990. Since the boat and its cargo are on the National Register, this document forms the body of an agreement among the Fish & Wildlife Service, the Advisory Council, and the preservation officers of Iowa and Nebraska, drawn up to satisfy Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act.

The staff of the center, located in the DeSoto National Wildlife Refuge, includes a registrar, a museum curator and, more recently, a conservator. Besides exhibits, the facility houses a research library and conservation labs. Artifacts are preserved in three separate storage chambers, each with independently controlled heat and air conditioning units to maintain the diverse environments needed for the mix of organic and inorganic objects. A cooler protects foodstuffs in historic containers from microbial contaminants.

The collection is catalogued according to National Park Service standards developed in the late 1970s. Using dBase IV software and utilizing *The Revised Nomenclature for Museum Cataloging*, a computerized



Excavation of the steamboat *Bertrand* at the DeSoto National Wildlife Refuge in Missouri Valley, Iowa (courtesy *Woodmen of the World* magazine, Omaha, Nebraska).



inventory was recently completed containing registration information on the collection.

For information contact the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, DeSoto National Wildlife Refuge (Attn: James O'Barr), Rt. 1, Box 114, Missouri Valley, IA 51555, ph. 712-642-4121.

### Classic Facility

The stripped classical style is not often associated with the rustic Pacific Northwest, but the region's premier curation facility just happens to be housed in a prime example of it: the 1934 Bonneville Auditorium.

The Corps of Engineers Portland district converted the building after they found that regional museums could not provide cost-effective, long-term curation for the 630,000 archeological and historic artifacts recovered between 1977 and 1979 at North Bonneville, Washington, on the Bonneville Lock and Dam project.

By installing the center in the basement of the auditorium, a National Historic Landmark, the Corps helped satisfy the Federal mandate that agencies seek to pre-

serve and re-use significant historic buildings. At the same time, they ensured that the artifacts would be preserved for future generations to study.

The Corps upgraded the auditorium's mechanical and electrical systems, renovated 3,400 square feet into three secure rooms with state-of-the-art components, and added computer catalogs for curation and collections management. One room contains a general storage area, another provides climate controlled conditions, and a third serves as a research center. Storage areas utilize custom designed quality, high-density mobile storage units.

The facility places the Corps in the forefront of Federal agencies in the Pacific Northwest as far as meeting mandated responsibilities for the curation of Federally owned archeological collections.

For information contact the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, North Pacific Division, CENPD-PL-ER (Attn: Dr. William Willingham), P.O. Box 2870, Portland, OR 97208-2870, ph. 503-326-5609.

### Managing Interior's Museum Objects

In 1990, the Inspector General reported that there was inadequate accountability for museum collections throughout the Department of the Interior. Today, just four years later, the situation has improved dramatically, thanks to the newly formed Interior Museum Property Program.

Program staff surveyed the entire department, identifying approximately 70 million objects for which Interior is responsible (57 million are archeological). New standards were set for storing artifacts, even as current conditions were studied. Under the program's guidance, all Interior units drafted descriptions of collections to improve their management.

As a result, all of the bureaus at Interior (except the new National Biological Survey) have plans for complying with the standards. In most offices, these efforts mesh with parallel plans for complying with 36 CFR 79, "Curation of Federally-Owned and Administered Archeological Collections," and the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act.

Last January, program staff launched a survey of Federally associated collections in non-Federal institutions, in association with the Interagency Federal Collections Working Group. Mailed to over 12,000 museums and academic departments, the survey is designed to locate collections that Federal agencies may be legally accountable for.

The staff of the program provides data management services, training, and technical assistance to help Interior bureaus achieve and maintain collections standards. For more information, contact program coordinator Ron Wilson, National Park Service, Curatorial Services Division, P.O. Box 37127 (Suite 230), Washington, DC 20013-7127; ph. 202-523-0268.

### Archival Legacy

When John Wesley Powell brought the research of several Federal agencies to the Smithsonian 115 years ago, he might not have expected his legacy to endure well into the next century and beyond. The National



Curation of artifacts at the Corps of Engineers Portland district (courtesy U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Portland district).

Anthropological Archives, housed in the National Museum of Natural History, continues to thrive.

The official records and manuscript collections housed in the archives currently measure over 6,300 linear feet—more than a mile of paper. Photographic holdings constitute an estimated 350,000 images, including a large series relating to the archeological work of the River Basin surveys as well as portraits of Native American leaders.

The first description of the archives appeared in 1881 and snapshot summaries of individual collections have been issued sporadically since then. But until James R. Glenn published his *Guide to the National Anthropological Archives*, a full overview had not appeared in print. The guide, a picture of the collection as of October 1992, is now available.

For more information, contact the National Anthropological Archives, National Museum of Natural History, MRC 152, Washington, DC 20560, ph. 202-357-1976.

### **From Edibles to Artifacts**

It may seem like a stretch—converting a place for storing vegetables into a state-of-the-art curation center—but actually this project is just one of the inventive ideas underwritten by the Department of Defense legacy program.

For the 90th Civil Engineering Squadron, headquartered at Cheyenne's Warren Air Force Base, the conversion was a natural. The underground storage bunker, reached by a long tunnel dug into a hillside, was perfect for controlling temperature and humidity. Security came courtesy of foot-thick concrete walls and floors—remnants of the bunker's World War I era heritage—covered by several feet of earth.

The base, originally called Fort D.A. Russell, was founded in 1867 as an Army post to protect Union Pacific Railroad workers and the residents of Cheyenne, about two miles to the east. Renamed Fort F.E. Warren in 1930, it was transferred to the Air Force in 1947. Today the base is a National Historic Landmark, with over 200 historic buildings and an equal number of prehistoric and historic archeological sites.

The engineers divided the bunker's interior into three large fireproof walk-in vaults for storing documents. Legacy funds will be used to accession artifacts and documents from the base. Once these materi-

als are consolidated, the facility will serve as a regional research center for Wyoming and surrounding states.

Meanwhile, the engineers have taken care to preserve perhaps the most telling remains of the bunker's earlier life: the World War I graffiti that covers the tunnel walls.

For information contact Rick Bryant, 90 CES/CEV, 300 Vesle Drive, F.E. Warren AFB, WY 82005-2793, ph. 307-775-3667.