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*Exploring Our Heritage
Shaping Our Community*

The Virtual Museum: History Activities for the Whole Community

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The most effective local history projects I have seen are activities, not exhibits. Exhibits are usually static experiences, while an activity is....active! The most effective projects of local museums have entailed activities for the community. When an exhibit from the Smithsonian Institution has toured rural Missouri towns, it is the activities that people developed that made the exhibit a success. Activities provide a great way to broaden opportunities for people to participate in something personally meaningful.

This brief report points out a variety of local history projects that consist of activities that are exhibited in a “virtual museum” on the World Wide Web. For very small towns that have no museum and don’t have the financial base to support one, a virtual museum offers an appealing way to continuously involve the population in history activities. Some of these virtual museums are the product of students in local schools. Others are products of partnership with a library. Some are limited to a single theme, while others appear to be open to continual thematic expansion.

The chief appeal of the virtual museum is that the tasks can be defined in a manageable way. The museum can “expand” one page at a time. The collection consists of stories and images as well as video and audio recordings.

When you create a virtual museum, you shape a number of possible experiences for the visitor. Imagine a still picture of a 19th century street scene accompanied by a sound clip of horse-drawn wagons. The sound plays as the visitor looks at the picture. What if a narrator’s voice is included in the sound clip?

What if, instead of merely narrating the known facts of any story, the voice asks a question that requires conjecture and participation on the part of the visitor? And what if the visitor is invited to reply by e-mail or to make a suggestion about the museum? The possibilities are vast.

This report has doubled in size in just one year as more and more museums and tourist destinations make content **portable at any distance, adaptable to small devices such as the iPod, and receptive to uploaded content from visitors.**

The technology of making simple web pages is easily mastered. While the more advanced web sites are based on advanced knowledge of coding, a successful site does not depend entirely on bells and whistles. Mostly it depends on lively content and ease of navigation.

In Section 1 you will find links to a variety of local projects that placed history into a flexible format on web pages. In Section 2 you will find links to discussions and web sites that feature downloadable content.

Section 1 – Virtual Museums

Virtual Museum – The Lewis and Clark Bicentennial Exhibition

When the Missouri Historical Society created the enormous National Touring Exhibition for the Lewis and Clark Bicentennial, an advanced web implementation was placed online so that people everywhere could see the rich and provocative conceptualization.

<http://www.lewisandclarkexhibit.org/> is the Home Page. When you “enter the exhibit,” a new window opens in your browser and an audio/video introduction begins with Native American images and prophecies. There’s a bust of Thomas Jefferson and his own prophecy. While you read Jefferson’s statement, you hear a Native American flute play a well-known Christian hymn tune derived from ancient Gregorian chant and known to many church-goers as “Of the father’s love begotten/e’re the world began to be,/He is alpha and omega,/He the source, then ending He./Of the things that are, that have been,/And that evermore shall be,/Ever more and ever more.” To hear that hymn, to recall its words, to recognize the sound of the Native American flute in connection with Jefferson’s thought is to be thrust into a very complex interpretation. You may wonder what the curator means by asserting the relevance of that hymn to the subject of American exploration of the West, and what further meaning is suggested by having the hymn played on a Native American instrument. Did the curator, possibly, mean to remind “us,” the non-Native visitor to this site, that “we” have roots no less ancient and mysterious than the Native populations who were curiosities to Thomas Jefferson? Or might it have been accidental that she chose to combine an ancient European religious melody with an ancient Native instrument? Whatever the motive, the visitor knows right away that what follows is no ordinary museum experience!

Virtual Museum when there’s no money for a real museum

Sara Ogger, Senior Program Officer with the New York Council for the Humanities, reports, “Corinth is a mill town sited on a large falls in the upper reaches of the Hudson, abutting the Adirondacks. Like many places upstate, Corinth is down on its luck--its main employer, International Paper, closed the last of its operations there about two years ago. A small group headed by a labor historian who grew up in Corinth and whose father worked at the mill has formed a new historical society dedicated to preserving and interpreting the history of paper making in Corinth. They are trying to get a building from IP in which to house, eventually, a traditional museum. In the meantime, they decided to create a virtual exhibition on-line at <http://www.hudsonrivermillproject.org/>

The existence of the site, and positive press about their efforts, seem to have had a good effect on negotiations with IP. At any rate Corinth is now in the midst of redefining itself as a community and as a potential tourist destination.”

Web Site of Scenic Activities: Valley Quest

The Connecticut River Valley, which divides Vermont from New Hampshire, is a large region of very scenic attractions. The Valley Quest project undertook to provide recommended excursions to help people appreciate the scenic beauty.

<http://www.vitalcommunities.org/ValleyQuest/ValleyQuest.htm>

Now look at this idea applied to sample itineraries for historic driving tours in Pulaski County, Missouri: <http://www.visitpulaskicounty.org/auto-tours.html>

Neighborhood History, Cultural Diversity: Old West Durham Neighborhood

A North Carolina mill town that became the home of Duke University has created a very fine web site about the evolution of a place and the distinctive people who are part of the history. Of special interest is the focus on Italian stonecutters who settled in Durham to help build the University's magnificent gothic cathedral.

<http://www.owdna.org/history.htm>

Local History and Cultural Diversity as School Project

The Texas 2000 Project, Tx2K, entailed local history web sites created by high school students in many Texas towns. I found the Wall High School exhibit worth a long look, especially for the way the students represented the cultural diversity of Wall.

<http://www.wall.netxv.net/TX2K/main1.htm> is the Home Page

<http://www.wall.netxv.net/TX2K/MandyandJessica.htm> is the very happy page about ethnic traditions in the town, complete with recipes.

Virtual Museum of the City of San Francisco

Here's a museum with no collection! It's well organized and easy to use.

<http://www.sfmuseum.org/hist1/index0.html>

A Timeline as Organizing Principle

The town of Exeter in England has a timeline that spans centuries, so their history web page helps the visitor jump in to a large historical era and compare themes with other eras. But if you don't want to explore that way, the Exeter web site also invites you to explore specific themes. The result is a rather busy page with too much material, but you can see that this community is bending over backward to make history come alive for the visitor.

<http://www.exeter.gov.uk/timetrail/generic/index.asp>

The Theme of Local History and Folklore as Community Theatre

Laura McCarty, Vice-President of the Georgia Humanities Council, describes this project in Colquitt, GA, which didn't have a museum or really much infrastructure. "What it did have was a local banker and his wife who were leaders in starting an arts council, and she traveled to various seminars around the country on models for doing so and promoting community redevelopment. Somewhere along the way, she ran into the community theatre model, and she got quite interested in bringing that model to Georgia. They got a grant from the GHC to do oral history training and collection in 1992. Really what they collected was more like

stories or folklore than "pure" oral history. But they hired a playwright to weave the stories into a production piece, for which a local woman also composed music and lyrics.

Their play is called "Swamp Gravy", based on a local food (sort of like stone soup--you take the drippings from frying fish and combine it with whatever vegetables you have, potatoes, etc, to make a stew)--but also based on combining the local stories into this production piece. They had community members perform the piece. It was one of the few activities in the community that was interracial and it really brought a lot of people together.

Subsequently they have done all kind of things based on the success of this play (which they do 2 months a year). They restored a cotton warehouse on the square for the venue. They also restored an inn on the square for lodging (there were no other motels in the county and very few restaurants except for a Hardees). Having this banker and her husband and their private foundation helped a lot in these economic development efforts.

But it has been a wonderful example of what a small town can do. When Welfare reform hit later in the 1990s, the arts council established a workshop where local people could produce and market wares, ranging from jellies to quilts to baskets, etc. So they have applied the arts and humanities to preservation, economic development, and self-empowerment.

<http://www.swampgravy.com/main.html>

The Theme of Shared Experience: Holocaust Survivors

In 1999 the Jewish Community Center in New Orleans received a grant from the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities to produce a web-based exhibit on six Louisiana Holocaust survivors. The web site contains their personal stories, audio of their stories, images of their family pictures and documents, and links to resources for further study.

<http://www.holocaustsurvivors.org/>

The Theme of Distinctive Culture: Francophone Creole Echoes

In 2001 the LSU Center for French and Francophone Studies created an online exhibit on Creole culture in New Orleans, with an emphasis on Francophone music and literature. This was also supported by the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities.

<http://www.lib.lsu.edu/special/exhibits/creole/homepage/>

The Theme of a Community Disaster: The Great Baltimore Fire of 1904

The Maryland Digital Cultural Heritage organization produced a fascinating web site that uses a map to demonstrate the progressive destruction and the efforts to battle the great fire.

<http://www.mdch.org/fire/>

Teacher-Friendly Online Exhibit: Women of the West

Women of the West Online features a well-organized, downloadable PDF file with complete information on selected women. The document is organized by theme. Each section contains recommended classroom activities and an explanation of how the unit meets Colorado education standards.

<http://www.autory-museum.org/explore/exhibits/wwmonline/>

Section 2 – MP3 downloadable education

Museums and the MP3 Experience

Here's a link to a New York Times feature from May 2005 that describes a downloaded guided tour of the Jackson Pollock exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art. The visitor didn't download the tour from the Museum's web site, though. She got it from another source, and it was spicier than the museum would have risked.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2005/05/28/arts/design/28podc.html?ex=1274932800&en=db1ced6873dcc4b6&ei=5090&partner=rssuserland&emc=rss>

The Museum of Modern Art, naturally, produces its own audio tours, but this link provides an invitation for the visitor to create an individualized audio tour.

http://www.moma.org/visit_moma/audio.html

Here's a link to "Art Mobs," a web site that create a project to write a new set of downloadable tours of the Museum of Modern Art. They invite people to "help us hack the museum experience."

http://mod.blogs.com/art_mobs/

Here's a link to "The Wooster Collective," where you'll see all sorts of web-site jazz and fun from New York City.

<http://woostercollective.com/>

Music Downloads from the Museum of Computer History

Yes, that's right, you can download recordings of musical selections that various nerdy guys programmed old computers to play.

<http://www.computerhistory.org/exhibits/highlights/>

Music and Images from the Belly Dance Museum

This museum was found with a Google search for the words "Museum" and "MP3." You can see all sorts of images across many national styles and you can download musical samples.

<http://www.belly-dance.org/index.html>

Hackers Discuss MP3 Tours

<http://www.whynot.net/ideas/444> This is a discussion web site where people can post links to sites that implement what they're discussing.

Blogger Doc Searls Talks about Do-It-Yourself MP3 Museum Guides

<http://www.itgarage.com/node/779>

Samples of Museum Audio Tours

Antenna Audio is a business specializing in the production of audio tours. There are many samples on its web site.

http://www.antennaaudio.com/content/section/2/23/lang.en_GB/

Kansas Museum of History's "Blazing Guns and Rugged Heroes" exhibit on Kansas in the Westerns

<http://www.kshs.org/places/museum.htm> Click on the exhibit and go to its own page, and you'll find a link to download an MP3 version of the audio tour. Cool!

PodTrip.com – guide to audio tours for portable digital players

<http://www.podtrip.com/english.html>

American Museum of Natural History's Audio Tours

<http://www.amnh.org/exhibitions/dioramas/audiotours.php>

Colonial Williamsburg's Podcast Page

<http://history.org/media/podcasts.cfm>

Dubuque's National Mississippi River Museum and Aquarium

Hear the Executive Director talk about the plans for the museum...

<http://partners.dubuque365.com/peninsula/discovery.html>

Davis Museum's Podcasts at Wellesley College

<http://www.wellesley.edu/DavisMuseum/whatsnew/podcast.html>

Audio and Video at Sidney, Australia's Powerhouse Museum

http://www.powerhousemuseum.com/whatson/event_archive.asp

BBC Audio Tours of Museums

http://www.bbc.co.uk/sn/tvradio/programmes/take_one/

Podcasts at the Chicago Museum of Contemporary Art

<http://www.mcachicago.org/MCA/exhibit/current-txt.html>

Phoenix Art Museum's Audio Tours Page

<http://www.phxart.org/programs/audio.asp>

Music is part of the Don Quijote Virtual Museum!

<http://www.donquijote.org/vmuseum/>

Chihuly Podcast Walking Tour at the Tacoma Art Museum

<http://www.tacomaartmuseum.org/page.asp?view=5508>

Chelsea Museum Invites Visitors to Contribute MP3 Love Songs for Exhibit

<http://chelseaartmuseum.org/exhibits/future-exhibits.html> This “Baby Love” exhibit was conceptualized as interactive from the start. On display from November 30, 2006 to January 13, 2007. Here’s the exhibit description:

SHU LEA CHEANG Babylove

A mobile network installation



In collaboration with the Palais de Tokyo, Paris, the National Taiwan Museum of Fine Arts , Taishung, the San Jose Museum of Art and with the support of the Taiwan Council for Culture Affairs, Executive Yuan, and the Taipei Cultural Center, New York

Baby Love is a mobile wifi installation that consists of 6 large size (160 diameter) teacups and 6 clone babies (70 cm tall). The teacup modelled after the spinning teacup of the old-time playground is designed into an auto-spinning unit. On each of the teacup, a hand-made clone baby in silicon rubber.

Baby Love invites the public to upload mp3 love songs for baby's ME-data. Through the web interface and on site card reader (reads from i-pod, mp3 player or any memory cards), the uploaded mp3 files are recoded for ME-database and retrieved by baby machine via wireless network.

The public invited to ride the teacup can set the teacup movement in manual mode. The turning of wheel and the changing of also shuffle the mp3 files back and forth and in various speed. Like a DJ's scratch of an LP, the altered

soundscape is generated by human and baby interaction as teacup spins.
Baby Love situates human and its baby clones in a perpetual spin of
fairground teacup ride. Tea and sympathy, love and ME-motion.

