

## **Messages, Methods and Machine Madness:**

Lessening the burden on our aged historic resources and preparing them and us for the future.

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We all know the problems encountered when actively using artifacts as interpretive tools. Practical solutions have lessened the impact on our collections. These include making better choices through tiering and by through training of the various team members with the aim to improve safety for the resource, staff and public. Clara Dick and her colleges; Dale Tomasi, and Leo Landis, have developed exemplary programs of good training, chain of communication and thorough documentation that is practiced not just preached. It is time however for all of us demonstrating historic equipment to review of our messages and methods of delivery.

For the sake of thought provocation a number of symptoms of the onset of machine madness, that we sometimes feel afflicted by, to will serve to open the discussion of the choices and challenges ahead of us.

### *1. Myopic outlook:*

It makes good sense to focus our interpretive efforts to recreating narrow bands of time. This allows us to create a more authentic set for the drama to unfold. But at what expense of a greater understanding, the bigger picture? At what expense to the audience making meaningful connections? How does the narrow window address the huge spectrum of industrial heritage?

As an industrious creature humans have and will continue to use ingenuity and creative mechanical smarts to devise simpler and faster ways of getting the job done. We are lazy at heart and quickly tier of menial and repetitious labor. As soon as we were able we trained domesticated animals to carry our loads, drag out implements and turn the shafts of mechanization. Then animals were too slow and unpredictable because they have minds of their own. We discovered how to harness steam and then more directly convert burning fuels with the internal combustion engine. The most efficient method so far is to further convert the energy into the controlled flow of electrons. Today every facet of our working world utilizes micro processing for efficiency. More than ever we live in a push button world where sweat is something we do in a gym. We need to keep the whole mechanical progression in our mind and message. What opportunity do we give our visitor to connect the dots? Should we continue to grind away on a limited number of

resources to illustrate only one popular segment? What about the huge advancement of the combine from the stationary thresher? The more contemporary the obsolete technology the more it is neglected. Good timing for inexpensive and choice pieces. Are our acquisition programs keeping up?

2. *Hearing loss*: We are missing the faint but steady tick of the clock.

Time is passing and with it is a significant element of our audience and staff. It is extremely valuable to utilize the collective skill and intuition of our elder. They have strong emotional connections to the operation of our machines. Although we can never recreate things the way they were for good or bad we can direct older staff and volunteers' vast experience in a way that enriches our interpretation programs. It is sad but inevitable that with the passing of time so too are the individuals and their valuable body of knowledge. The audience with personal connections to our period of interpretation is disappearing as well. Will that change our message? Oh yes. Can we continue to justify consuming our resource first, to provide a meager level of experience while training new and inexperienced staff and then second, get a message across to an audience that may have no clue where their food comes from?

3. *Gee Wiz Junkies*: The heavy reliance on emotional connections to "original" or the "real thing"

There is no denying that the museum should remain the proper home and safe guardian of original material with significant material evidence intact. The public expects this and is also increasingly aware that the uncontrolled environment is a hostile place for artifacts. What message do we present when using originals no matter how careful we are? Our message should begin reflecting an increasing esteem for professional quality reproductions or period rebuilds. A period rebuild means using similar age or make of machinery that are found to be in worse condition then rebuilding and replacing as required. This can range from restoring only the full function of a machine to a total like-new refurbishment. Period rebuilds provided opportunities to studying every piece some of which would not otherwise be seen or researched. The process of complete rebuild is an excellent vehicle for keen and committed students to get work experience. Student programs as well as adult volunteer projects have been tried many times before with mixed results. Volunteer projects can only be successful if highly controlled by museum staff. This is very time consuming for paid staff but the rewards of results and learning are well worth the efforts.

When embarking on rebuilds or complete restoration projects there will dead ends were materials, earlier technologies and products are no longer available. How do we deal with these challenges? How far will we deviate from the museum norm? As example do we consider casting aluminum when it would do the job because it is so much cheaper?

Would we consider inserting a discrete modern lubrication method to minimize future maintenance and repairs? These are radical suggestions relating to what our messages are and how we can achieve them with the limited resources available. Compromise challenges are inevitable and we must make the hard choices over losing what may be the few remaining examples in the unaltered artifacts we have.

#### 4. *Sensory Numbness*

Very potent pathways of recall and understanding the past are found through the senses. Often the most vivid and long lasting memories that a visitor takes from the living museum experience are ones of smell, taste, and sounds that create feels for what was going on. The smell and feel of fresh cut hay cool on bare feet, the itch and weight of freshly threshed grain mingling with straw smoke and horse sweat to name personal favorites. As operators we tend to take for granted the common place or we are just too busy to allow ourselves and others to savor a moment. For an increasing number of visitors this may be a first up-close experience with the agrarian underpinning of our civilized, but out of touch world.

What level of interaction with the non-historic material do we provide or encourage public to discover for themselves? Shifting the message towards appreciating the whole lessens the profile of the historic tools.

#### 5. *Heavy use of “ Oil of old Hay”* (from a spoof on Cowsmopolitan magazine)

It is human nature to be attracted to youthful, shiny and colorful surfaces. We must be very careful not to get caught in the trap of skin-deep beauty. There are dozens of keen hobbyists, frenetic collectors and enthusiastic volunteers busily brushing paint over all kinds of worn surfaces. For the trained eye the results are usually painfully evident and even more torturous when applied over a surface stripped of a wealth of information. As time passes and more and more examples are consumed by the private sector our role, as the definitive resource of unaltered information is critical. We have been slow to heed this calling and have not capitalized on the opportunity. We should be the ones publishing what we find under the microscope and in our research. We should be the ones producing authentic reproductions of water transfer lithographed decals and striping patterns. We should be the ones teaching coach varnishing. The clock is ticking on these trades and crafts and we are the ones with the most to lose. The more we learn about

period finishes the less we will be tempted to fake it on our own and just paint for the sake of a better look.

## *6. Fear of Alienation*

No matter what we end up doing and feeling confident and satisfied with we will always have peers looking over our shoulders. They are the harshest critics. We must strive to demonstrate through our methods that our messages will improve the balance between use and preservation. It behooves us, and our collections, to be as forward thinking and visionary in our messages. The methods usually fall into place with the creativity and drive of the people doing the work. It is not always easy to communicate shifting messages with peers and administration. Living museums too can become lazy, balking at change and comfortable in its own traditions.