

# Collectors and Collections

By David Dewey

The collection is usually a museum's most valuable asset, more valuable historically and financially than its buildings and property. In this first sentence I have presented one of the first dilemmas facing a museum's collection; how does one access its worth? Does the marketplace give the collection or an individual piece worth, or does historical significance or even its relationships to other parts of the collection provide the value?

Why do I even bring up a collection's value? As part of the museum's obligation to care for its collection there is a need to insure against its loss or replacement. There is also a societal need to justify a museum's existence, and its expenditures to care for a collection, that rationalizes that; if something is valuable, it's all right to spend money to protect or preserve it. There is also the "dark side" of a collection's value, where a museum de-accessions (removes from its collection's inventory) and sells its collection (or parts) to raise money.

Let's talk about the last item first. De-accessioning parts of a collection does occur, more frequently in art museums, and it can be unavoidable, especially when a museum finds it cannot care for an item. The difficult aspect of this activity lies in the public perception of museums, and the public's trust. They believe that when they donate something to a museum, it will be kept and preserved for future generations. However, sometimes a museum finds that the item does not fit into the collection, or it is too big to fit in the building. Notice that I haven't mentioned the hypothetical situation where the museum cannot pay its power bill and the item is worth a million smackers. That's because, to fulfill the obligation to the public's trust, any money made from selling a part of the collection is expected to be used to directly enhance the remaining collection. Trading between museums does sometimes occur and fulfills this enhancement obligation. The temptation to sell an artifact to pay bills can be very strong (use the force, Luke--it will guide you).

Getting back to the collection itself, how are collections created? Many collections were started by an individual who collected, not for any monetary value, but for self gratification. This is especially true in the industrial preservation field. The "Grizzly Flats" narrow gauge collection of Ward Kimball's came about because he had some space, the equipment was available, cheap, and a "backyard" railroad sounded fun. Now, some fifty years later, it is a valuable and significant collection.

This brings us to another of today's museum dilemmas; what to collect and what NOT to collect. A museum is not an individual, so should not collect for its gratification, but for the illumination of posterity. To do so, it needs to collect that which will be important in the future. Planned museum collecting isn't a perfect science, it is based on intuition, production figures, surviving examples, taste (which can become tasteless--look at some of the automobiles we thought were so jazzy "back then"), and availability (which sometimes translates to, "Can we raise enough money to buy it?"). One recent major example of a failure to preserve is the ALCO PAs.

Sometimes an item seems so common that it is overlooked by collectors, for instance, the lowly reefer. Once fleets of these moved California's produce to eastern markets, changing forever America's eating habits. Today few of these exist, lost to scrapping, or conversion to storage sheds (like the blue "air tool" car stored at our museum). If you've visited our museum recently, did you notice it?

With the large size of railroad objects, we are immediately faced with the care question. Do we have a place to put it and can we take care of it after we get it? This is another reason so few industrial items are saved; they are usually large and often require long-term care to maintain their integrity.

These are some of the factors that control a museum's collection management policy. By following a defined collections management policy, a museum has a chance of keeping its collection significant, rational, and manageable; in addition it gives the museum a polite reason to turn down the donation of 500 worn-out Fairmont wheels that Mrs. Railroader's beloved deceased husband saved.

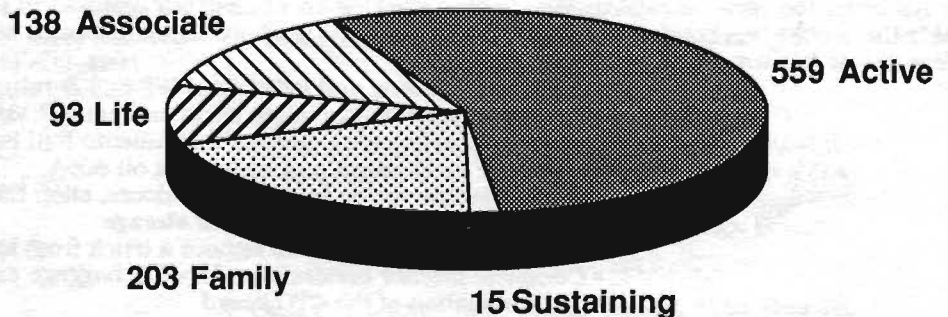
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## More Museum buzz words:

- Accession:** As a verb; accepting objects into a collection, involves recording the object's condition, assigning it an accession number, recording its past history and any other pertinent information (how acquired, from whom, etc.).
- As a noun:** the objects of a single collection.
- De-accession:** The process of removing an object from a collection (not the sale of an object).
- Collections Management Policy:** The guidelines by which a museum collects and cares for its artifacts.
- Mission:** The mission statement defines the purpose of the institution and the means by which the museum achieves its purpose. The statement must be in accord with the purposes of the museum as enumerated in the basic legal documents.
- Purpose:** The museum's broad guiding principle as stated in its governing documents.

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as of February 23, 1993



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