

ARCS 2015 Conference Session Review

What I Did on My Summer Vacation: Museum Cataloguing in Zimbabwe

Presenter:

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People do different things on their summer vacations. Some like to relax and unwind with their friends and families. Some people chase the sun and go to the beach, perhaps meeting a young John Travolta and beginning a romance that subsequently becomes the subject of a catchy musical. Some of the crazier ones even fly halfway around the world to New Orleans for a registrar and collection specialists' conference. It's a rare few, however, who are willing to devote five weeks of their summer to completing eight hours a day of data entry and image correction in a developing country. Lisa Tillotson, though, did just that. As part of a project undertaken by the University of Calgary, Lisa travelled to Zimbabwe to undertake an ambitious cultural preservation project. For those of us who attended the first day of the 2015 ARCS Conference, Lisa's presentation on that project was an enlightening and inspiring experience.

Working with the Zimbabwean Museum of Human Sciences, the aim of the project was to improve the cataloguing, storage and display of their collection, as well as to encourage appreciation of both the museum's holdings and the museum itself through podcasts, a website and a series of public lectures. The museum's collection consists primarily of Stone Age archaeological artefacts, but the number of artefacts held by the museum is difficult to determine. Upon Lisa's arrival in Zimbabwe, the collection consisted of about 3000 boxes of material and enough extra material to fill another 300. Minimal data had been recorded about these objects, with only paper records available as a resource. Even just from a cataloguing perspective, there was clearly a lot which needed to be done.

As Lisa pointed out, there are a number of reasons for object data being skeletal in this situation. Zimbabwe is a very poor country that has to grapple with things such as low life expectancy and hyperinflation, which means that tasks such as collection preservation and documentation necessarily fall a fair way down the list of priorities. Visitation to the museum itself is quite low, as visiting museums is not a common part of the lived experience in Zimbabwe. This means there is little external pressure to improve the museum's situation. There are also issues for the museum with the provision of - what some of us might consider to be - basic services. Internet service in the area of the museum is either spotty or non-existent, and the lighting within the museum is often not working, which means the museum can be in total darkness at times. Whilst many of us collection-oriented folk might often applaud a lack of lighting as a benefit in terms of collection preservation, I think we can all agree that a complete lack of lighting is taking things a bit too far!

It was pretty clear by this point that there were a lot of issues at play in Zimbabwe, making it quite a challenge for any registrar to deal with. Lisa told us that from the beginning, the project brought her out of her comfort zone, and it's easy to see why. Where would

someone even begin in trying to deal with these circumstances? As it turns out, the answer to this question was pretty simple – start at the beginning, and just do as much as you can.

Thankfully, Lisa didn't have to complete the entire project on her own. Six to eight students from the local university volunteered to assist with the project, many of whom showed amazing dedication by managing to scrape together bus fare for a month just to get to the museum every day. They may not have been experienced in museum work, but they were certainly keen to be involved. Lisa noted that a particular source of enthusiasm amongst the students during the project was the digital camera Lisa's team provided as part of their work. Most of the volunteers had never used one before, and it proved to be a great learning experience that quickly became the hottest ticket in town. The project itself also stimulated interest in the field of Stone Age archaeology for a few of the volunteers, which was very pleasing to hear.

Over the course of their five-week project, Lisa and her team managed to complete basic cataloguing, photography and storage for 5000 objects, which was an astonishing effort. As Lisa pointed out, though, the important part of the project was not the raw numbers, but the setting up and implementation of a cataloguing and documentation process for future use. Ah, process! Guidelines! There are few words more pleasing to the ear to a dyed-in-the-wool registrar than these, as evidenced by the numerous nods and murmurs of approbation around the room in support of Lisa's comment to this effect. Due to ongoing issues with internet access and the high rate of computer viruses in Zimbabwe, it was not possible to implement a CMS into the museum's work, but an Excel database was created as well as a basic cataloguing sheet for project volunteers to use when processing objects. These tools will be absolutely invaluable to the museum in providing a consistency of approach for the rest of the collection going forward.

As impressive an effort as 5000 objects was, Lisa's project barely scratched the surface of the museum's holdings - there is still decades of work ahead. Having a system, however, means that this work will be able to be appropriately tackled. New objects will also be able to be adequately catalogued upon arrival at the museum, which should be enormously beneficial in retaining accurate object records. Lisa and her team haven't been content to rest on their laurels, either. They went back to Zimbabwe the following year to continue the project, and hope to do so again.

Lisa concluded her presentation by giving us all some very valuable advice. I don't think I'm stepping too far out of bounds when I say that we registrars can be a very particular bunch – the more orderly and controlled that things are, the better. When it comes to something like Zimbabwe, however, you have to be prepared to cede some control and throw some of your carefully formulated ideas out of the proverbial window. With Internet access in Zimbabwe spotty, Lisa wasn't able to get the answers to all the questions she wanted to ask about the museum before arriving for the project, which necessarily meant she was unprepared for what she got on arrival. It can't have been an easy thing to say to a room full of registrars, but Lisa told us that in such circumstances, you have to forget about best practices (gasp!) and just do the best job you possibly can, otherwise the situation could easily overwhelm you.

From a practical point of view, this meant being pragmatic with things such as tissue paper, where sourcing it locally and not insisting on bringing the best in archival tissue halfway across the world is a better use of limited resources. Lisa also advised that the

best approach to such a challenging situation is to come in with your eyes open and be prepared to think on your feet, rather than attempting to bend circumstances to fit a preordained plan and trying control everything from the very beginning. It's the kind of thinking that could cause some registrars to wake up in a cold sweat, but it was a great reminder that a little flexibility isn't always a bad thing. This flexibility was evident in Lisa's acknowledgement that the project had been overambitious in attempting to include a website, podcasting and public lectures in the initial brief. Circumstances on the ground meant that these aims were simply not achievable, which meant that these plans were shelved.

Lisa pinpointed her time in Zimbabwe as one of the most rewarding experiences of her life, and her clear passion in outlining the details of her project to those of us at the conference demonstrated the truth of that statement. Lisa's compelling account of her time in Zimbabwe was a very pertinent reminder to me - and I'm sure many others at the conference - that whatever issues we might be facing at our institutions, we're actually pretty lucky. There are much bigger challenges out there than those we generally have to contend with on a day-to-day basis. What's a gripe about a location error, compared with a place that doesn't even have reliable electricity? The project undertaken by Lisa and her team at the University of Calgary has clearly been a fantastic boon to their Zimbabwean museum partner. It's also the type of thing that I think there should really be more of. As a community, we have a vast array of knowledge and experience that is often left largely untapped. Lisa's presentation showed us that there are opportunities out there for all of us to make a real difference, if we are prepared to take them on. With that in mind, you may well find - as I do - that the question as to what to do on your next summer vacation is now even more thought-provoking than ever.