Abstract: Museums of many sorts offer resources that scholars of rural history can find nowhere else – the tangible and intangible evidence of agricultural and rural history and life. Museums, in turn, need the expertise that researchers possess to most effectively interpret their collections. Scholars can help museums identify what they need to collect to tell stories relevant to their mission and can help design intellectually engaging programming on current issues. This combination can generate “living history,” described by Carl Becker as “the history that does work in the world.” The timing for this conversation at “Old and New Worlds” is perfect. The increasingly urban and suburban public has less and less familiarity with the rural past (and present) and less interest in rural and agricultural history. Fewer informed visitors translate into fewer potential employees well-versed in the specialized skills required by living history. This paper provides an overview of museums collect, preserve and interpret tangible and intangible rural culture, and the professional organizations that serve them. Tradition bearers hold the key to effective collecting – they confirm authenticity, provide provenance and document the intangible (use and meaning of collections). Case studies provide examples of how scholars in cooperation with museums and tradition bearers can help inform a disengaged public and train the next generation of agricultural stewards.
1. Introduction: Disconnect between the urban present and the rural and agricultural past.

The number of farm operators shrinks annually to the point of near extinction. Industrialized countries in Europe and North America have fewer than 5 percent of the total population employed in agriculture (as of 2012 World Development Indicators, World Bank). Public officials in some countries created national museums of agricultural history during the mid- to late-19th century (i.e., located in Prague, Budapest). Others collected seeds and weeds and bugs and patent models as evidence of national support for agricultural science (Reid, 2011). Individuals collected rural folk artifacts and created major museums of national scope, i.e. Arthur Hazelius, Skansen in Stockholm; Henry Ford’s Greenfield Village in Dearborn, Michigan. As of 2012, 12 to 25 percent of the population in these countries live in rural places, but the majority of land in these countries remains agricultural. Thus, a relatively small number of people today have authority over agricultural resources. In Hungary, for example, 5.2 percent of the population works in agriculture, 29.2 percent of the population lives in rural places, and 59 percent of total land is arable or pastureland.

These statistics can help explain why most people say that they are “not interested” in agriculture and in agricultural history. Those same people, however, might be very interested in food history! In fact, the general public in industrialized nations seems more resistant than “not interested” in learning about agriculture and its history, and rural life and its history. Conversations about the agricultural present degenerate into antagonistic exchanges between consumers blaming farmers for industrial scale production, and farmers blaming consumers for their insensitivity to the business of farming. Both sides use inflammatory language and the polarizing conversations do not help the public learn about the complicated nature of industrial-scale agricultural production or about the business of farming.

The general public lacks even a basic understanding of farming routines and rhythms. This makes it nearly impossible to grasp the personal and economic investments that farmers make, and the risks that farmers assume when they do their jobs, and the personal sacrifices that they make to sustain their business. The urban and suburban public lacks sensitivity to the economic challenges that often come with living in rural places. Rural dwellers must drive comparable distances to suburban commuters, master mechanics as well as science and marketing, and work at physically demanding labor (often in more than one job) to earn what their urban/suburban peers earn. And basic services now essential for communication (high-speed internet, for example), can be impossible to access in rural locations. As a result, farmers may find themselves struggling with intermittent access to critical information such as time-sensitive market data or weather reports. Farmers also have to manage debt and additional threats from things beyond their control — the weather, markets, and credit rates. This makes it easier to understand farmer impatience.

The lack of awareness of agricultural processes and nuances of rural life has a ripple effect. Ignorance causes many to fret about ecological loss due to rain forest destruction, but not realize the ways rural cultures suffer when their raw-rubber sources disappear. Furthermore, one farmer’s lucrative new market (corn or soybeans as the basis for ethanol production) is another farmer’s economic crisis as the costs for corn- or soy-based foodstuffs soar. Farmers take drastic measures to be heard including self-immolation as a form of protest.

Criticism of agricultural practices has increased recently on topics as wide ranging as nitrogen run-off causing red tides, and livestock producing methane (a greenhouse gas). But everyone needs to be more informed about the work of people in the countryside because they manage an ecosystem that can sustain the globe (or can contribute to its destruction). Those farming the fertile plains and rocky hillsides must remain on the job or humanity will not survive. Some of the people most needing to understand this are those most distant from it (urban and
suburban dwellers). Too few people understand their dependency on this global business of farming. The critical need rests in conveying a “living” history of agriculture that influences understanding. Historian Carl Becker explained it this way: “The history that lies inert in unread books does no work in the world. The history that does work in the world, the history that influences the course of history, is living history, that pattern of remembered events, whether true or false, that enlarges and enriches [society’s] collective specious present.” (“Everyman His Own Historian,” 1932, 234-235). Living history museums provide a way to bridge the chasm between the rural and agricultural past and reach the urban and suburban present by providing “the history that does work in the world.”

2. Defining Living History; Itemizing Living History Techniques

Living history engages all five senses; plays out in three dimensions, and thrives on use of and intellectual engagement with evidence from the past. Arthur Hazelius, the Swede who formed Skansen, described it in 1900 as a “living museum, a museum which not only shows buildings and household goods, tools and implements of the most different types, and memorials such as runestone. . . and an endless number of other things. . . It tries to depict folklife through its living characteristics” (Rentzhog, 2007, 10-11). Jay Anderson, who wrote the history of living history, defined the interpretive technique as a “simulation of life in another time. Usually the time is in the past and there is a purpose for the simulation: research, interpretation, play, or perhaps all three” (Living History Sourcebook, 1985, 459). Anderson, identified three major approaches: 1) using “simulation as a mode of interpreting the realities of life in the past more effectively,” 2) using “simulation as a research tool. . . testing ethnological theories or generating new data about material culture,” and 3) identifying “particular, real, or composite individuals of the past . . . and fabricat[ing] ‘impressions’ of them” (Time Machines, 1984, 12).

Effective living history interpreters, as Stacy F. Roth explained in Past into Present, “possess both a broad and a specific understanding of history, material culture, and related subjects, and they must convey that information effectively to the visitor” (Roth, 1998, 10). To gain this knowledge they must read historical monographs and conduct their own research to document historical content. They must be able to evaluate diverse sources including personal and collective memory, archival evidence, and tangible and intangible cultural heritage including material culture (artifacts) and traditions and rituals as historic evidence. They must analyze this multi-dimensional evidence and translate it into multi-sensory historical interpretation. This requires experience with the design and development of educational programs (i.e. setting goals, aligning content with goals, delivering content in ways that engage learners / visitors, and evaluating the program as part of ongoing review and refinement). It takes time to learn these steps and practice them. And that is just the start of the process.

3. Developing Historical Thinking Skills about Agriculture and Rural History as the basis for Living History

One of the most difficult tasks of developing living history programming (or any museum interpretation, for that matter) involves the ability to distinguish between personal and collective memories of the past and the meaning of evidence about the past. This involves historical thinking skills. David Lowenthal addressed this in The Past is a Foreign Country (Lowenthal, 1985, 193-259). Educator Sam Wineburg, in his book, Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts, says that “Historical thinking requires us to reconcile two contradictory positions: first, that our established modes of thinking are an inheritance that cannot be sloughed off, and second, that if we make no attempt to slough them off, we are doomed to a mind-numbing presentism that reads the present into the past” (Wineburg, 2001, 12). The best history teachers (and history students) work hard to overcome presentism. Carlo Ginzburg, author of The Cheese and the Worms, emphasized this point: “The historian’s task is [to]
destroy our false sense of proximity to people of the past because they come from societies very different from our own. The more we discover about these people’s mental universes, the more we should be shocked by the cultural distance that separates us from them” (quoted in Wineburg, 2001, 10).

Few people today have a false sense of proximity to farmers; the cultural distance between “us” and farmers today is great, but so is our cultural distance from agriculture, farming, and rural life in the past. A very different societal and cultural milieu existed between the majority of the population then, and the majority culture today (“our own”). Yet, agriculture today and in the past should be just as comprehensible as any other history if we take to heart Lowenthal’s, Ginzburg’s and Wineburg’s advice. Rural historians can reach students in their classrooms with this message, but they can increase their audience by working with museums and the general public that they serve. Living history interpreters take this information, augment it with their own research and material evidence, and translate that into meaningful history lessons in authentic environments.

4. Finding the right partner

Authentic environments abound, as do opportunities to development partnerships between museums, historians and living history interpreters. Sometimes all three align in one place and with one person, but usually it takes some time to identify the best partners for the most stable and meaningful relationship. Rural historians and living history interpreters can work with private collectors individually or through the special interest groups that collectors create, i.e. antique machinery clubs or seed savers exchanges. They can also work with museums most relevant to rural history, most likely to have collections to document the living history programming envisioned to feature rural and agricultural subjects.

Agricultural museum: Many agricultural museums began as national collections during the mid- to late-nineteenth century as repository of patent models, of flora collected by agricultural scientists, and of specimens used in international exposition exhibits. Funding came from “the state” and audiences familiar with farming and rural life understood the objects on display with little to no interpretation required. But times changed, public funding decreased or dried up, and visitation declined as fewer and fewer members of the population had any direct knowledge of rural life or experience with farms and agricultural production.

Agricultural museums include collections of agricultural technology, the food industry, forestry, horticulture, viticulture, fishing, hunting and other agricultural servicing and processing industries. Researchers can find comprehensive collections and staff who welcome them as allies in the long-term process of making collections more relevant.

Association internationale des musees d’agriculture (AIMA), an all-volunteer organization and an affiliate of ICOM, serves agricultural museums and museum professionals that are committed to the conservation, transmission and communication of the agricultural heritage, present and future, tangible and intangible. During the Cold War, AIMA began as the conduit for conversations between directors in some of the most enduring institutions in Eastern Europe (i.e., Budapest and Prague), some of those rebuilding after war (Poland) and curators responsible for the premiere collections in Sweden, Denmark and Great Britain. AIMA hosted triennial congresses and published proceedings, encouraged governing bodies to sustain support, and provided opportunities for staff to discuss collecting and documentation initiatives and plan traveling exhibitions. AIMA members try to interpret changes in the work and way of life of the rural population (the social context) as well as the development of agricultural technology. AIMA members discuss issues related to stewardship of living animals in museums and to increasing public access to collections using digital means.
ecomuseum: a term coined by French museologists that described museums operated by local volunteers, sustained through community engagement and focused on local cultural heritage and documentation in situ. The museum is often not about the past per se, but about the multi-layered present with a community and landscape management system in place to ensure the integrity of the cultural heritage. This may take the form of a plan that involves diversified agriculture, rural tourism, and environmental management. The project is not national but based in community agreement.

open-air museum: “sites mainly comprising translocated buildings” (Rentzhog, 2007, 2). They could be described as full-size dioramas of the rural and agricultural past. The patriarch of these museums, Skansen, in Stockholm, opened in 1891. Founder and trained educator Arthur Hazelius reached out to Swedes to help him document, collect, and preserve THEIR history. As they donated, he constructed a national story. After World War I, however, open air museums lost “contact with the public” (Rentzhog, 2007, 100). The Skansen model spread across Europe and across continents because it offered a proven approach to collecting living memory and crafting a story that emphasized national unity. Some criticize open-air museums for embracing “lite” history -- emphasizing living history demonstration of daily chores (“process” interpretation) such as butter making rather than taking a critical and provocative stance about the past through provocative exhibits. Others criticize them for moving buildings out of context (even though many structures would have been destroyed if left in situ). Yet, the complete environments these museums interpret allow visitors to experience rural spaces, farmyards and barnyards that they can access nowhere else. The living collections (heritage breeds of plants and animals) add complexity and offer additional opportunities for visitors to understand a past not available to them in any other venue. But to take full advantage of their potential, the open-air museums must move beyond the role of collective memory maker and embrace the responsibility of history scrutinizer, to provide opportunities for the public to visit the foreign country which is the past, to investigate it and gain meaning from it. They need scholars of rural life to work with them on this major project. The Association of European Open Air Museums exists as an ICOM affiliate and as the professional organization serving directors of these museums.

living history farm (ALHFAM): a term used in North America to describe a distinct museum genre that developed in the United States. They collect and preserve the tangible and intangible evidence of farming, including buildings, landscapes, historical artifacts, and living collections (floral and faunal). In the ideal situation, living history farm staff collect, preserve and interpret once-common practices of animal husbandry and crop cultivation; manage collections to preserve originals and use replicas or duplicate artifacts to present authentic traditional agricultural routines in complete environments to museum visitors (and researchers). The Association for Living History, Farm and Agricultural Museums (ALHFAM), an all-volunteer professional service organizations, began in 1970 to support these museums.

The ideal living history farm can provide immersion experiences into agricultural history distinctive to a time and a place. Visitor cannot gain this experience anywhere else. The living history farms (and working farmsteads at open air museums) provide unique opportunities for visitors to use oxen or other draft animals, to learn about relationships between soil nutrients, heritage seeds and the symbiotic relationship between plant and animal. Visitors can gain cursory information by talking with interpreters, or they can participate in a special program, or they can subscribe to an in-depth workshop, or series of workshops to become more skilled. The workshops provide opportunities to butcher and preserve meat, harvest and store root crops, and process meat, milk or vegetables into foodstuffs. The most effective living history farms are those dedicated to interpreting a specific time and regional cultural identity. They
also provide unique opportunities for staff to gain depth of knowledge and visitors to be introduced to heritage agricultural practices.

In Europe, the International Association of Archaeological Open-Air Museums (EXARC) defines the archaeological open air museum as a “non-profit permanent institution with outdoor true-to-scale architectural reconstructions primarily based on archaeological sources.” Each “holds collections of intangible heritage resources and provides an interpretation of how people lived and acted in the past; this is accomplished according to sound scientific methods for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment of its visitors.” The recreated structures and landscapes become laboratories to practice “archaeotechnology.” The staff use the spaces to “research... ancient techniques such as handicrafts, hunting and agriculture, and demonstrate them to the public in a museum or Living History site” without risk to original objects. EXARC, founded in 2001, exists to advocate for these sites of experimentation to understand ancient techniques, including agriculture.

Living history museums provides resources that facilitate conversations about the historic in relation to scientific, environmental, and cultural interpretation. They support multidisciplinary educational approaches drawing on theories and methods associated with history, anthropology, plant and animal sciences, engineering, biology, physics, ecology, etc. The three-dimensional, multisensory setting allows staff unparalleled opportunities to learn these while doing them. Staff, visitors (and researchers) reenact past practices to get a sense of the rhythms of life, and the changing relationships of plants, animals, technology and people across the seasons, and over time. Critics claim that the interpreters gain the most from doing the work, and that casual visitors often just observe processes: feeding hogs, milking cows, cooking on a wood stove, and hoeing the garden or cutting hay. It takes commitment to conduct the scientific research (experimental archaeology) at these sites.

5. Identify common concerns and mutual benefits

Museums operate in the public trust. They operate in the cross-hairs of public opinion. Museums become the place where the politics of public memory become most obvious, where the heated arguments about the past occur. Rural historians may get a very different impression of attitudes about their subject by engaging in discussions among antiquarians, museum staff and interested volunteers about the subject. Furthermore, museum staff do not have the same sort of “academic freedom” that historians in academic positions have. Boards direct the institutions, and institutional goals define the work to be done. Sometimes pressures beyond the control of any individual force decisions about sponsors for exhibits, whether or not to interpret controversial subjects, or whether or not to collect a specific item.

Rural history draws on humanists and social/behavioral sciences while agricultural history requires additional talents in the sciences. Scholars can provide historic context for topics important for a public far removed from their food sources and living at considerable distance from rural and country life to understand. Lessons in agriculture range from basic information on plant propagation and animal gestation to more complicated and controversial subjects such as genetic modification. Current research in biofuels offers opportunities to discuss non-renewable energy sources and its implications for rural life over centuries. Studies of water quality, environmental conservation, and soil science have increased understanding of fertilizer needs and have reduced runoff and helped mediate the real threats of red tides in oceans far from the fields on which farmers first apply the chemicals. Debates about the humane treatment of animals should engage knowledge and skills based in ethical reasoning, scientific research and social and behavioral sciences. The potential for public programming seems limitless with partners to help provide the content.
6. The Collections and Research Potential

With this overview of the potential for partnerships between museums and rural history experts, and the range of institutions available, let’s shift direction to discuss one of the unique assets of museums – collections (tangible and intangible). Historians can learn a new technique of historical research, “reading” material culture as historic evidence (Reid, 2012; Saffell, 2014). Adding artifacts to research plans requires proactive steps. Living historians need to know what museum curators call things. Nomenclature identifies standard names for artifacts that perform the same function (because calling a manure fork a manure fork separates it from other things that might look similar but that performed very different chores, i.e., the frog or fish gig and the potato digger). Incorporating agricultural artifacts into rural history research is really a life’s work. Success depends on developing the mindset to seek agricultural artifacts as legitimate historical sources, to become astute at analyzing them, and then using the findings to document historical mindsets and change over time. Living historians have to do this to interpret “the history that does work in the world” (Becker, 1932, 234-235).

Once read, artifacts offer new insights. John Schlebecker, former curator of the Smithsonian Institution, explained that “personal examination of a museum object often saves the historian from blunders. . . [Edward Kendall’s] interest in seeing John Deere’s earliest plows led him to discover that they were made mostly of iron and had only a small strip of steel along the edge of the share. The whole story of plows and related implements will have to be rewritten in the light of Kendall’s discovery. What is strange about this is that it took historians more than a century to make this fundamental discovery. Had they examined objects as carefully as they studied documents, they would have written more accurate history in the recent past” (Schlebecker, 1966, 208).

The lack of historians’ engagement with material evidence troubled many. Darwin Kelsey explained to agricultural historians at a 1970 meeting that some disciplines such as art history, archaeology and anthropology “have long relied on material objects as the core of their documentary evidence. . . . [but] professional historians . . . have done little to augment written documents with artifacts” (Kelsey, 1972, 107-108). Kelsey urged historians to become conscious of the benefits of adding artifacts to their primary sources, and to become astute analysts of the material evidence. Then collections would realize their full potential as historical documents. For example, the well-documented furnished interiors of a farmhouse could contradict oft repeated statements attributed to historian Percy Wells Bidwell, that rural New Englanders were self-sufficient in the 1790-1840 era. Interdisciplinary research confirmed that house interiors, including the furnishings at the Pliney Freeman Farm at Old Sturbridge Village, illustrated in three dimensions the consumer goods secured from international markets that kept New Englanders comfortable during the early national era (Kelsey, 1972, 110-111, and note 15).

7. Putting the Hand to the Plow: Learning by Doing

Reading objects is the first step of analysis. Sometimes understanding requires “putting the hand to the plow” literally. The replicated domestic environments and working landscapes at living history farms provide laboratories that researchers can use to learn more.
Historians can interact with experts who practice traditional animal husbandry and crop cultivation methods in a landscape and with the crops and the stock species appropriate to the time period. ALHFAM and EXARC and AIMA exist to facilitate this sort of exchange, to help connect partners. Each of these organizations advocates for the value of using replicas in complete environments to learn about the physically demanding tasks of stoop labor and other routines of rural life (yoke oxen, drive multi-horse hitches, repair wagon wheels, bake bread – this just touches the surface of experimental archaeological opportunities).

Ecomuseums in France function daily, but they also provide a setting to practice traditional ox drover culture. Drovers may live in close proximity to each other, but they use very different yoking systems. Some also use technologies millennia old, following multi-ox yoking systems documented in pre-historic rock art, for instance. Researchers must interact with traditionalists to grasp the long heritage of a technology, and to understand the nuances of use and change (or continuity) over time, and to translate that into something that uninformed residents of the globe can value (Griffin-Kremer, 2014).

Sometimes replicas can help researchers understand historic use of originals too fragile or rare to test. The curator of the McCormick collection worked with International Harvester mechanics and the Romance of the Reaper film crew to learn from a replica. IH mechanics in Chicago produced 100 replicas in recognition of the 100th anniversary of McCormick’s experiments in Virginia (Reid, 2011). These reapers made their way into agricultural collections all over the world, i.e., in the Conservatoire de l’Agriculture (COMPA), Chartres, France. During the 1990s, as staff at Greenfield Village reconditioned harvest machinery for use at the Harvey Firestone Farm installation, they learned how reaper-binders from the 1880s operated.

More examples exist, but these selected case studies indicate that museum collections will realize their potential only when they become essential tools to studying the past. Living history starts with this careful examination. It realizes its potential when interpreters master the knowledge and skills needed to deliver authentic multi-sensory minds-on experiences that help “make a history that does work in the world” (Becker, 1932, 234-235).

REFERENCES

Electronic Resources:

Knowledge database (live-text searchable database of articles and short videos developed for ALHFAM members).


Publications


Publications Forthcoming

