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COLLECTING DIFFICULT HISTORY

By Karen DePauw, coordinator, IHS Local History Services

History is difficult...so let's talk about it!



[Indiana Equality Protest, 2011.](#) (Courtesy of NUVO, Indiana Historical Society)

While originally writing about this topic for the IHS blog, I started thinking how difficult history sometimes becomes difficult to collect history. From the community stories we may wish to forget, to the tragedies that befall those who live there, how do we collect items that represent the hardest times in our past?

The Local History Services team recently hosted an In Your Neighborhood lunchtime meeting in southern Indiana. We host our lunchtime meetings in order to get folks from local heritage organizations together to eat, meet and chat about a topic of the host institution's choosing. A few weeks ago our host, the Working Men's Institute, chose Dealing with Difficult History as the topic of discussion.

In preparation for facilitating this meeting, I read a few articles and, most helpful, one of the newer books from the American Association for State and Local History's Interpreting History series with Rowman and Littlefield. The book *Interpreting Difficult History at Museums and Historic Sites* by Julia Rose was immensely helpful in seeing all the things that must be considered when tackling a difficult topic.

The discussion at our meeting ranged from what qualifies as "difficult" history, to how to help organizational staff be prepared for questions and potential conflict that might arise in public spaces when difficult topics are broached. We talked about the fact that there are all different types of difficult histories and they can be difficult in different ways and to different extents. There are difficult histories that might invoke conflict due to opposing opinions, such as



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discussing which state can claim Abraham Lincoln; those that may be hard to digest based on a visitor's own life experiences or the traumatic nature of the event, for instance terrorist attacks or school shootings. There are also those that might be hard because they challenge our understanding of a historical figure, like the new discussions of slavery at Thomas Jefferson's Monticello.



[Demonstration Against Apartheid in South Africa, 1985.](#) (Indianapolis Recorder Collection, Indiana Historical Society)

These types of historical topics can pose challenges when dealing with how to collect the artifacts that speak to the event or emotion. One of the first questions to ask is how many sides are there to the story? What is the story we want to collect for the historical record? This part can be a bit difficult, because regardless of individual feelings, many events have multiple sides and all must be equally documented in order to teach future generations. For instance, if the organization is collecting items to tell the story of the fight for gay marriage, then it does not matter whether the individual staff members fell on the "for" or "against" side, the organization has a responsibility to collect and preserve collection items that tell both sides.

Another question to deal with is, what will be done with the items once they are collected? The museum may decide to place restrictions on certain items collected because they invoke emotions that seem too raw at the time, but the item still needs preserved for the future. Certain images from events like 9/11 might fall into this category. There may be things worth saving but, unless done very carefully, are too raw to interpret just yet. These items should be collected and cared for like any other object, even if it might be a decade or more before the museum is ready to display and interpret them.

Some of the most difficult histories to collect items from are those that do not reflect the communities current values, but rather those held in the past during a different time. For instance, a very open and welcoming community in 2017 may find it hard to collect items that speak to the history of the Ku Klux Klan in their community in 1920. Collecting items that illustrate caricatures of minority groups, such as early 20th century black face, are another set of items that consistently feel difficult to collect, discuss, and display because of increased awareness of different cultures. Saving these things for the future and reconciling the context of their creation with current understanding of their meaning, can be difficult.



[Ku Klux Klan Hood, circa 1923.](#) (Indiana Historical Society)

Questions like this are important to ask about modern difficult topics, but they are also equally important to ask about historical topics. Topics that may already be covered by a portion of the museum collection. Although it can sometimes be difficult to wrap our minds around the idea that certain things we may not consider controversial now were, in their day, quite controversial, it is still important to look at our community stories through those difficult lenses. For instance, we think back now regarding the idea of woman suffrage and assume it was a battle fought along gender lines. Yet there were adamant anti-suffrage organizations that contained members of both genders. It might be difficult to discuss the idea of women being against the right for women to vote, but it still deserves to have the ephemera of the other side saved. Without having items depicting both sides, it becomes nearly, if not entirely, impossible to adequately tell the story of either side. You cannot fully understand the struggle of the Irish immigrants in the 19th century if you do not also understand the anti-Irish feelings so prominent at the same time. By collecting items from both sides, museums solidify their place in telling difficult history in a way that promotes discussion and learning.

Risks are certainly involved with collecting, interpreting and tackling difficult histories. However, there are also risks involved in not tackling them. By keeping hard-to-discuss historical narratives outside of the realm of the historical organizations, we risk them not being truly discussed at all. As the keepers of history and those charged with making all historical topics accessible to the public, we must present all sides of a narrative and teach visitors to think critically and study the facts to inform their present and future decisions.

Again I say...history is difficult, so let's talk about it!

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[Local History Services](#)

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