

# INDIANA HISTORICAL SOCIETY COLLECTIONS ADVISOR

A RESOURCE FROM IHS LOCAL HISTORY SERVICES

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## TAXIDERMY AND ARSENIC

By Karen DePauw, manager, IHS Local History Services

Just about every museum collection contains some form of taxidermy, whether pieces showcasing natural wildlife that once roamed the area, or birds adorning 19th and 20th century hats. All of these items require special considerations regarding their care and handling when it comes to their safety and the safety of staff and visitors.

It is very important to be cautious around taxidermy because most items created prior to 1980 likely contain arsenic. Arsenic can be inhaled (wear a mask!) or absorbed through the skin (wear nitrile gloves!). Remember, arsenic is a potent poison and items possibly containing it should be treated with the utmost care.



*File 3-C  
Columbia Club 1908*  
[Informal Dining Room at the Columbia Club, 1908](#). (Bass Photo Co Collection, Indiana Historical Society)

### IDENTIFYING ARSENIC

The best way to initially identify arsenic in taxidermy is simply to look at the object closely. Look for white powder around the eyes, mouth, and where feathers and fur meet skin. Make sure to wear a mask and nitrile gloves if doing an inspection of the item requires you to touch it. Try not

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### ONLINE RESOURCES

[Arsenic in  
Taxidermy  
Collections:  
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(Collection Forum)

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Fragile Feathered  
Friends:  
Introduction to  
the Care of  
Historic Taxidermy](#)  
(Connecting to  
Collections Care)

[Arsenic Health and  
Safety Update](#)  
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[Handling and Care  
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[Bald and Golden  
Eagle Protection  
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[National Eagle  
Repository](#)  
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to move the item, or to move it minimally, until you have identified whether or not arsenic is present. If arsenic is present it can easily become airborne by moving the item, something you should avoid if at all possible.

There are also tests available for purchase that can be used to check for arsenic. If you are not comfortable using one of these tests, reach out to a conservator who may be able to assist in testing for arsenic. You may also try reaching out to see if a practicing taxidermist in the area is willing and able to help identify potentially dangerous specimens in the museum.

### PROTECTING STAFF AND VISITORS

It is best to presume any piece of taxidermy created prior to 1980 may contain arsenic and treat it appropriately. Fully encasing the taxidermic object in a sealed display case can be a good way to protect staff and visitors. This would help reduce the amount of arsenic that might become airborne if the item must be moved and would also eliminate the need to touch the artifact directly. Items that contain or are presumed to contain arsenic should be handled very minimally. If handling them is required, the individual should wear a mask (preferably one with a HEPA filter or an N95 mask), nitrile gloves, and consider wearing a disposable Tyvek suit if the item is particularly fragile. Before moving the item, place a trash bag over it and tie the bottom closed as soon as the item is lifted; this can help contain as many chemicals as possible. Once the item has been moved, thoroughly clean where the item was using a HEPA vacuum with a strong filter and wiping down surfaces. Taxidermic items suspected of containing arsenic should never be used in hands-on programming or activities and all paperwork and records associated with them should be clearly marked.



[Men with Carcasses](#). (Martin Collection, Indiana Historical Society)

### IN THE COLLECTION

If items in the collection contain or might contain arsenic, there are some choices to be made. First, determine whether or not the museum wishes to retain the taxidermy. Some museums choose simply not to have taxidermy in their collections due to the health hazards it poses. If that is the case, once the taxidermy has been deaccessioned as per the

## UPCOMING TRAINING AND PROGRAMS

[CSAAM - Museum Registration Methods, 6th Edition Preview](#)

**August 11 -**  
Association of Registrars and Collections Specialists webinar.

[CSAAM - The Updated General Facility Report](#)

**August 13 -**  
Association of Registrars and Collections Specialists webinar.

[Care and Curation of Archaeological Collections for Museums](#)

**August 26 -**  
Connecting to Collections Care webinar.

[Developing Exhibitions: Planning](#)

**Fall 2020 -**  
American Association for State and Local History online course.

[Caring for Museum Collections](#)

**Fall 2020 -**  
American Association for State and Local History online course.

museum's policies and the museum has cleared title of the item, determine the best method of disposal. As always, auction and transfer of ownership to another museum are options, but it is likely another museum or an auction house will not want to deal with the possible health hazards associated with an arsenic contaminated item either. If the museum chooses to simply dispose of or destroy the item, then the next step is to contact the local county waste disposal agency. Since taxidermy can often contain an entire cocktail of harmful chemicals it must be disposed of according to the hazardous waste guidelines in your community. Work closely with this department to ensure proper disposal.

If the museum chooses to retain the taxidermy item, it can be helpful to have the item formally tested so the museum is aware, without a doubt, if the item contains arsenic. This can often be done by reaching out to a qualified conservator, a current taxidermist, or even by procuring a "home" test kit. As always, remember to move the item as little as possible until you know the results of the test. If the item does not contain arsenic, then simply follow best practice protocol for natural history collections. If it does contain arsenic, there are a few options for the museum to consider. First, the museum could have the item conserved/re-taxidermied in order to have the arsenic removed. Speak with a qualified individual about these options. Second, the museum could encase the object in an air-tight case that is then placed in the museum and rarely, if ever, disturbed. This case will help to contain any airborne arsenic and protect staff and visitors from the harmful effects. In order to encase the item properly, or to remove the casing at a future point, please consult a qualified individual. This can be particularly important when it comes to removing a specimen from its enclosed case. If the case was doing its job then it may be full of airborne arsenic and needs to be opened in a controlled environment with proper protective gear.



[Eagle's Nest.](#) (Indiana Historical Society)

### A SPECIAL SITUATION

There is a special situation that must be considered when dealing with taxidermy, and that is when dealing with a bald or golden eagle. Bald and golden eagles are protected in the United States under the Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act, and this protection does not cease once the animal is no longer living. In order to display an eagle or any part thereof in a museum a special permit is required. Information regarding such

permits can be found [here](#).

If the museum would like to dispose of a taxidermy eagle, or any part of an eagle including feathers as individual items or as parts of larger objects in the collection, they **MUST** first contact the [National Eagle Repository](#). It is the law to offer all eagle specimens (whether whole or in part) to the National Eagle Repository. When contacting the repository, make sure to let them know if the item may contain arsenic as this could affect what they instruct you to do with it. Keep a record in the paperwork of the eagle regarding who was contacted and when, and then what they advised the museum to do with the eagle. Remember, **ALL** eagles and eagle specimens must be offered to the National Eagle Repository first; it is the law.

There is certainly a lot to consider when dealing with taxidermy in a museum collection. While taxidermic objects can offer great educational and historical content to the natural history of an area, they can also cause harm to staff and visitors. By taking the proper steps to identify and deal with possible arsenic within taxidermy, the museum can continue to preserve the history while also preserving the health of their community.

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