



INDIANA HISTORICAL SOCIETY COLLECTIONS ADVISOR

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RETHINKING COLLECTIONS

By Karen DePauw, manager, IHS Local History Services

The year 2020 is certainly one for the history books. Every year has its historical events, but for many 2020 has felt a little greedy in its need to make history. As museums have set out to collect this history, many have also set out to reflect back and consider the histories of their towns and regions that have not seen as much focus in their exhibits and programs. But what if your museum collection does not have the objects to support the stories you want to tell? What if you want to tackle ideas of racial equality or the pandemic but own nothing with a direct tie to slavery or the 1918 flu? Well, then it is time to look at things a bit differently.

Let's take a look at three of the major historical events of 2020 as they unfolded and discuss some ideas of seemingly unrelated items that might help open a door to discussing them.

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[Woman wearing influenza mask.](#) (Indiana Historical Society)

THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

As soon as the pandemic began many historians started drawing comparisons to the 1918 influenza pandemic. Although the 1918 flu hit far and wide in America and around the world, like COVID-19 it struck some places harder than others. If your organization does not contain objects or archives directly relating to the 1918 flu, how can you use history to draw the audience in to a conversation about it? Think about other items in the collection that existed around the same period and might have played a role in the life of an individual sick with the flu. For instance, a soup bowl and teacup with saucer can jump start a conversation regarding the care of those with the 1918 flu. A series of soup bowls and teacups through the decades can even provide a basis for a conversation regarding the changes of how people understood and treated illness. This could be brought all the way up to 2020 and end with a discussion of how continued study of COVID-19 has provided increased understanding of the virus and how to treat it.



[Rev. Jesse Jackson and Operation PUSH Protest in Anderson.](#) (Indianapolis Recorder Collection, Indiana Historical Society)

RACIAL UNREST

Conversations about racial unrest, unfortunately, have many potential starting points. For most, slavery immediately comes to mind, as does the civil rights movement of the 1960s, but another potential avenue is the racial injustice done to the Native Americans who originally inhabited the land we now call Indiana. Look into the area's link to Native Americans. How does their story fit in to the story of 2020? Or look at slavery. So many slavery stories are hidden in the everyday activities of pre-Civil War America. A sugar bowl could begin a discussion about the Triangular Trade, or a cotton garment a discussion about southern plantations. The resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s tells a valuable part of the story of racial unrest.

Another option is to go even broader and look at protests in general. Protests have happened throughout American history on topics ranging from racial equality to woman's suffrage. Does the organization hold anything related to either a specific protest or the broader movement the protest was associated with? Objects that represent any of these connected historical events can serve as entry points to a broader conversation of what leads to racial unrest or protests and therefore can be an open door to conversations about what is currently happening.



[Wulf's Hall Relief Station, Indianapolis, Ind., Flood March 1913](#). (Indiana Historical Society)

NATURAL DISASTERS

On top of everything else that is happening in 2020, Mother Nature is also taking her turn. From the wildfires in Australia and California to the Hurricanes in Cuba and the American south, we are constantly reminded that she is, in fact, a force of nature. Exploring the history of natural disasters is something most organizations have objects to represent. Flooding, tornadoes, and even severe thunder storms, are not infrequent visitors to Indiana. But, if you are fortunate enough not to have items that tell those stories, what else might you have? Are there objects that open the door to discussions about water damage or firefighting? Even a table or book in the collection with a bit of water damage can begin a discussion of what happens when water goes where it is not supposed to, a common occurrence during floods and storms. A simple fire bucket can help tell the story of how firefighting has changed over the decades and how firefighters now put their skills to use during large natural fire events.

Sadly, we could go on and on about the historical events happening in 2020. As we try to connect our past with what is happening in our ever-changing present, do not think that you must have the "perfect" object connected to the "perfect" historical comparison in order to take on the discussion. Yes, having a mask from the 1918 influenza pandemic would be a perfect match to a mask made in 2020, if we are lucky we have at least a photograph, but almost all of us have a teacup. The teaching of history is about making connections, they are not always easy to spot, but they are there.

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