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Advisor



Martin Collection, Indiana Historical Society, cropped from original

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Conservator's Holiday: A Volunteer Program

By Martha Bladen, director
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Love of history and the willingness to work to preserve it is the common bond that brings together a group of volunteers for a week of learning, camaraderie and meaningful work, otherwise known as *Conservator's Holiday*. The Switzerland County Historical Society started the annual event in 2008 as a way to focus volunteer efforts on specific projects, some related to our collection, some to a new site development and some to general maintenance of museum grounds and buildings.

Conservator's Holiday educates staff and volunteers on various preservation and conservation topics that can be utilized not only in the museum setting but also on personal projects. The week-long event kicks off on a Monday with a guest speaker who works with the group for the day and gets them started on a project they continue working on throughout the week. The interests and skills of the volunteers vary, as do the needs of the historical society. So, after the first year we started having a second guest speaker on Tuesday who works for two days on conservation issues at the museum.



Organizing documents



Rebuilding a fence

The first year set a standard of excellence that continues to the present. Jeff Harris, director of Local History Services with the Indiana Historical Society, presented a program on accessions and collection management. Gaby Kienitz, conservator with the Indiana State Museum, has been a return consultant for the last three years guiding us on the preservation of our textile collection. Their services have focused on the museum collection and provided invaluable expertise for a small organization with a very limited budget.



Repairing a window

The Switzerland County Historical Society is developing the Agriculture Museum Center, which includes a farmstead with a Greek Revival house and a hay-press barn. This project has been a physical challenge for those willing to work at hard labor. Efforts over the last four years have been guided by:

- Link Ludington, architectural historian with the Indiana State Museum
- Rudy Christian, timber-frame expert and educator
- "Ol' House Experts" Rhonda Deeg and Jack Patchin, window restorers
- Clint and Jan Bush, dry laid stonewall experts
- Chris Baas, assistant professor in the Department of Landscape Architecture at Ball State University, preserving rural resources
- Darrin Rubino, associate professor of biology at Hanover, dendroarcheology

The results of the program have included organization and conservation of thousands of documents and letters, transcription of letters, repainting of a state historic marker, repair and cleaning of textiles, learning proper storage techniques and construction of custom mannequins. General fix-it projects and landscaping have also been accomplished.

Work at the Agriculture Museum Center includes removal of 20th-century renovations to the 1850s house, beginning restoration of windows, removal of debris and deteriorated section of the barn, reconstruction of stonewalls and removal of invasive vegetation. The work process revealed construction details that explain how

the house and barn have changed over time. This information is helping to develop interpretation of the farmstead.

The volunteers are an amiable and hardworking group, contributing more than 300 hours in the five-day work week. Some are able to commit to helping all week long, while others give a few days or partial days as their schedules allow. Owners of local vacation rental homes donate lodging for our out-of-town members. The week always includes a pitch-in dinner and a visit to a historic location or artisan's studio.

Much work lies ahead for the Switzerland County Historical Society, made easier now by the tremendous resources available in the talents and expertise of a team of educators unknown to each other yet bound by their participation in *Conservator's Holiday*.

How to do it yourself:

1. Choose a project.
2. Organize a panel of experts.
3. Determine the supplies and lodging that will be needed.
4. Raise funds to purchase materials and/or ask for donations of supplies and lodging.
5. Market the program and invite community volunteers.
6. Carry out the project.
7. Send thank-you letters to donors and experts.
8. Review the program and discuss what worked, what didn't work and begin planning for next year.
9. Celebrate your success!

Resources:

- American Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works (AIC) – provides informational brochure and list of conservators in a particular region www.conservation-us.org
- Connecting to Collections Online Community - helps smaller museums, libraries, archives and historical societies quickly locate reliable preservation resources www.connectingtocollections.org
- Indiana Historical Society Conservation Lab – has

an outreach program that offers a variety of services to nonprofit organizations and the public
www.indianahistory.org/our-services/conservation/conservation-lab

- Indiana Historical Society Lending Resources Center - provides program and technical resources to organizations and individuals who collect, preserve, research and/or interpret Indiana's history www.indianahistory.org/our-services/local-history-services/lending-resources
- Indiana Landmarks - offers tools to help individuals, organizations and communities preserve and restore historic places www.indianalandmarks.org

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