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*Helping preserve heritage collections*



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## Californians Connecting to Collections

### Collections Stewardship Guide for Trustees

*Collections can be a ready source of income and audience expansion. Here are a few proven strategies for utilizing your most enduring asset.*

#### Invite the public to sponsor a purchase.

The Museum of Photographic Arts in San Diego displays a photograph in their lobby that they wish to purchase. With a donation box located just underneath, a text panel explains the significance of the photograph and how it would add to the museum's collection and asks for a contribution. This simple display communicates to visitors that they can play a part in helping strengthen the organization's collection.

This approach can also be used to invite sponsorship of a collections storage area. Post a photograph of a crowded shelving unit, or outdated storage furniture (as the "before" shot) next to a photograph of a new item or storage furniture with fresh archival boxes (as the "after" photograph), which can come from a supplier's brochure or other institution) and invite the public to contribute to upgrading that space. The visuals make the difference, and you can even offer naming rights!

#### Let a cultural community invest in its own story.

The Fresno Historical Society (FHS) partnered with a photographer, who documented the local Hmong community. Once the community was engaged through a process of having their daily life documented, Hmong community members came forward to offer historic photographs and documents to the Society's collection and to support fundraising. Public presentations of the work FHS was doing in the Hmong community were used to draw support for documenting other cultural communities. The California Council of the Humanities funded the initial photography and the Irvine Foundation supported the exhibition and community presentations. FHS is now following this same model to engage other ethnic communities in Fresno. Finally, ethnic community members are joining the FHS board and seeking funding to have their own heritage documented and preserved.

#### Invite the public to sponsor conservation treatment.

The Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County (NHMLA) spearheaded a very popular "sponsor a bone" program. Sponsorship amounts varied greatly (thousands of dollars for the largest bones and couple hundred for a toe, for example). Visitors could watch the staff

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prepare the T.rex bones and a text panel explained how the funds from the “sponsor a bone” program were directly helping the museum put the artifact on display. Donors were promised to always have their name associated with the bone they selected and they received a memorable gift (a cast of a T.rex tooth!).

A similar strategy worked for the California State Railroad Museum in its campaign to restore their famous Sierra No. 3 locomotive, housed at Railtown 1897 State Historic Park in Jamestown, CA. The restoration campaign focused on Sierra No. 3’s “star” status to attract donors for this restoration campaign, and by extension, for the museum itself. By highlighting movies the locomotive was featured in and celebrities who acted in them, the campaign turned the locomotive into a celebrity itself, bringing glamour to the act of supporting the museum.

## **Show how you’re unique.**

The Alpine County Archives received a collections assessment grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities. Their grant application stressed the exceptional nature of Alpine County - by far the least populated county in California with a total population of around 1200 - its scenic mountain surroundings spanning the Sierra crest, and their agricultural and mining history. This netted an assessment grant, the results of which will be the foundation for a campaign to fund a new building.

## **Demonstrate the regional importance of your collection to a local company or community foundation.**

The Doud Fund for Historic Preservation, a local community foundation, supported the Monterey Public Library’s Shades of Monterey Community Days, in which the public was invited to have family photos scanned and added to library archives. This was so popular the public wanted to tell their family stories to the Library as well, and the Doud Fund supported an additional grant to produce oral histories. People who participated in the oral histories, including historically important figures such as mayors and representatives of many local ethnic groups, became invested in the project and went on to join the library endowment council to raise new funds.

## **Simple steps to create a culture of collection stewardship:**

- Make stewardship of the collection part of any new board member’s orientation.
- Create a fact sheet or list of frequently asked questions about the collection.
- As part of a board meeting, take board members on a “field trip” to see collections storage. Don’t be afraid to show the problem spots.
- Feature collections care topics regularly in board meeting agendas and information packets.
- When new acquisitions are presented to the board, ask for information on conservation and storage needs.

*The Californians Connecting to Collections Project* a two-year, statewide preservation project that provides information, education, and training to California heritage institutions. For more information, see [www.calpreservation.org/services/c3.html](http://calpreservation.org/services/c3.html) or email [info@calpreservation.org](mailto:info@calpreservation.org).