COLLECTION MANAGERS COMMITTEE

NEWSLETTER

DECEMBER, 1988

OPEN LETTER

I am delighted to be able to be a part of this first newsletter of the Collection Managers Committee of the TAM. I think it is rather remarkable that in less than one year we have by-laws, committees and a quickly growing membership. This is due, in part, to the encouragement we, the acting officers, have received from all of you and to your assistance. I am confident that our committee will become strong and active within the TAM organization and I hope all of you will continue to be a part of our future.

As you receive letters and membership information from our Secretary, Elaine Sullivan and from Membership Committee Chair, Carolyn Spears, I hope you will share it with our colleagues who may not be on our mailing list. It is my hope that we will have more than 100 members by the annual meeting in Beaumont in April. Also, I hope you will feel free to contact any of the officers if you have suggestions for the Agenda of our Annual Business Meeting. The next newsletter, to be out in March, will discuss sessions at the Meeting which may interest you and be of particular importance to those of us who deal with collections. We will also let you know about the tentative agenda for our meeting which will be on Saturday, April 15 at 8:00 a.m.

Finally, if you have any suggestions for nominees for the officers positions please contact Katie Johnson, Chairperson of the Nominating Committee, at the San Angelo Museum of Fine Arts. She and her committee will be sending out ballots in January.

Once again, I thank all of you and look forward to seeing you in April.

Most sincerely,

Richard Casagrande
Acting Chair, CMC

Included with your newsletter are copies of the minutes from the Acting Board meeting of August 8, 1988; the By-laws adopted July 1, 1988; and a list of possible CMC members.

NOMINATING COMMITTEE

The Nominating Committee is searching for nominees for all offices of the Collection Managers Committee. We need two nominees for each of the five Board offices.

The chair and treasurer will serve only one year terms for 1989 since officers terms are staggered. They will be up for re-election in 1990.

Offices of vice-chair, secretary and officer-at-large will be for regular two year terms.

If you would like to be one of the first officers of the CMC, please call any member of the Nominating Committee by January 13. Elections will be by mailed, written ballot in February with results announced at the 1989 TAM Annual Meeting in Beaumont in April.

See the By-laws for your job description and call us:

James Bigley (512) 997-4379
Sam Daleo (409) 832-1906
Katie Johnson, Chair (915) 658-4084
Sally Shelton (512) 471-6090

Remember, only paid professional members of CMC will be eligible to vote.

Thank you,

Katie M. Johnson, Nominating Committee Chair

PUBLIC ACCESS TO COLLECTIONS AND RECORDS
BY
ELAINE SULLIVAN,
COLLECTIONS ASSISTANT,
TEXAS MEMORIAL MUSEUM

When administrated properly, access to museum collections and records can benefit both the museum and the public. A part of a museums function is to educate the public and increase the scholarly knowledge regarding its collections. This goal can be greatly facilitated by allowing students, researchers, and educators access to collections and records for legitimate projects. On the other hand, museums are entrusted with the care and maintenance of their collections and records, and the more people who have access, the greater the chance of damage there is to a specimen. But, with proper policies and supervision, care of collections can be maintained and knowledge increased.

The steps toward creating a policy for access to collections requires some thought and planning and, of course, staff that is willing to supervise and assist the visiting researchers. Who will be granted access is the most crucial question. It is necessary and important to verify that the person requesting access is conducting legitimate research for a paper, an analysis of objects, or a school assignment. A short form requesting information from the researcher will help to separate out the scholars from the browsers. The form should ask questions concerning project supervisor, which collections or records they would like to examine, expected results of research and an abstract of the project.

The most common requests for access come from students, researchers, educators and publishers. High school and college students working on research papers and class assignments will need the most supervision. If possible, coordinate the project with the professor, especially for projects where an entire class of students may be using the museum. Researchers conducting scholarly research or comparative analysis of specimens usually require less supervision. Teachers needing teaching aids (i.e.: slides,) or photographers seeking photo specimens for audio-visual shows or publications should be supervised to protect objects from excessive handling and exposure to light.

All visitors should be given a clear, written guideline stating the importance of proper and careful handling of specimens.

dling should be discussed as well as the written guidelines. When the project is complete the museum should require a copy of the work to add to collection documentation or the museum library for use by future scholars.

The importance of allowing outside researchers access to museum collections should not be understated. When done properly museums can fulfill their goal of educating the public, expanding knowledge of their collections, keeping their records up to date with timely information, as well as stimulating interest in future research and enhancing their publishers and the public.
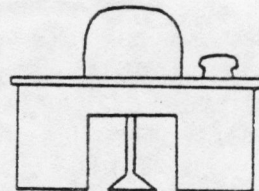
REGISTRARS COMMITTEE, AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF MUSEUMS

The Registrars Committee, a standing professional committee of the American Association of Museums, is another fine organization which has information pertinent to collections managers. You can become a member of that committee by sending $10.00 payable to AAM Registrars Committee, send to: Carolyn Clark DeCato, Secretary-Treasurer, Registrars Committtee, Walker Art Center, Vineland Place, Minneapolis, MN 55403.

TAM ANNUAL MEETING

The CMC Program Committee will sponsor two sessions at the 1989 Annual Meeting. One on Appraising and one on Registration of Natural History Objects (Co-sponsored with the Natural History Affinity group).

CMC NEWSLETTER

This newsletter is the first produced by the Collection Managers Committee. Future newsletters will include information on regional and statewide workshops, provide information, bibliographies, forms and documents related to collection management. If you have any ideas for future articles or if you are interested in writing an article, please write to CMC's officer-at-large & newsletter editor:

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COLLECTIONS AND THE "INCIDENTAL" COMPUTER
BY
TERRY GROSE, REGISTRAR
FORT WORTH MUSEUM OF SCIENCE AND HISTORY

It should come as no surprise that computer salesmen make their living by enumerating the many uses of the computer to potential customers. Most of us who have even considered the possibility of computerizing collections management are familiar with their arguments - the computer could provide all catalogue information, record donors, cross-reference related materials, immediately respond to inquiries, and even display digitized images of artifacts to minimize handling and maximize accessibility. Of course, it's necessary to purchase or lease hardware and software in specialized configurations that lend themselves to such tasks. The price tag on these systems are at times mind-boggling to those of us with limited budgets. The uses have to be legion to justify the expenditures.

It should also come as no surprise that computer salesmen, often the layman's only source of computer know-how, are not really interested in telling others how to use equipment and software that is found rather than purchased. The "incidental" system may be used by a spouse at work or may belong to another department. It may be the electronic legacy of a predecessor, a donation by an interested member or the pet project of a home hobbyist. The incidental system configuration has been selected for tasks other than collections management, but this equipment can frequently be turned to a useful purpose in the museum collection department. This article will deal with the most common types of "incidental" system. It is not meant to deal with full-scale automated cataloguing, but will suggest possible peripheral uses and hopefully provide registrars and curators with the new ideas on time-saving techniques that may be implemented for little or no cost. It assumes a general knowledge of computer concepts and at least passing familiarity with word processing and/or spreadsheet software.

Hardware is not significant to the potential utility of an existing system. The two major types of hardware, those which accommodate DOS (IBM types) and those which accommodate CPM operating systems (Apple types), are frequently used for the same purposes: to do word processing, and to perform spreadsheet operations. Both major types of hardware include keyboards, printers and at least one floppy disk drive in their standard configurations. Software IS a significant consideration. Fortunately there are common design elements shared by all word processors and there are common functions available in all forms of spreadsheet software. These shared features ensure that most incidental systems may be used to implement the suggestions presented here.

A. Word Processors

Word processing programs create files of text on magnetic media. The contents of the files may be easily modified or reproduced. Textual information is usually generated in printed form as well. An existing word processing system may immediately be used for a variety of purposes.

1. Form Generation

Create a text file that duplicates each form regularly used by collections personnel. For example, the accession form file would include all information which would be found on a pre-printed form: explanations of accession policy, the headings "Donor Name," "Address," "Item," etc., and spaces for signatures. Save a copy of each form file using a descriptive name such as "DONATION.FRM." When the situation arises, call up the appropriate form file on the computer, fill in the blanks, and generate TWO printed copies of the completed form. Save the completed form information under a unique name such as "SMITH.DON" to identify a donor form for R. SMITH or "NASA1151.LN" to identify a form for NASA loan number 1151. IBM users should be consistent in the use of the file extension (the three letters that follow the period in the file name). For example, save all donor information with the file extension ".DON". MacIntosh users can accomplish the same effect by assigning all donor information to the same "Donor" folder. One copy of the printed form can be retained for in-house files, the other given to the donor or borrower. The primary purpose of this exercise is NOT to save money on printing - the utility of this technique becomes apparent when it is considered with the next suggested use of word-processed files: off-site storage and backup of collections information.

2. Off-site storage of duplicate forms

All collection managers are aware of the desirability of maintaining duplicate sets of records at a remote site. Most collections managers have barely enough room to store original paper copies; the identification of a separate location for duplicate records is often a problem. The use of the word processor to generate file information as described above greatly simplifies this task. At various times throughout the year (or immediately if the volume of information warrants) all donor files (those with the ".DON" extension or those stored in the "Donor" folder) or all loan files (those with the ".LN" extension or those stored in the "Loan" folder) can be copied through the use of a "copy all" or "wild card" command to floppy disks. The disks can then be easily stored in a safe deposit box or other secure off-site location.

B. Spreadsheets

The "spreadsheet" is one of the most exciting and useful programming concepts devised for business applications. Many computer systems are sold with spreadsheet sorftware "bundled" (packaged) into the total hardware price. Some spreadsheets (for example, Lotus Symphony) include rudimentary database capabilities; while others may not exhibit this degree of sophistication, all share the capabilities of ranking data in arrays and performing mathematical computations automatically on groups of "cells" (positions) within the arrays. The simplest spreadsheet functions can be turned to good use in collections management.

1. Simple Item Count

Although the spreadsheet is not suitable for use in cataloging operations, the data that it provides may be sufficient to meet the needs of some museum users. "How many?" is one of the most frequently asked questions in collections management. Physically counting catalog cards is a frustrating and time-consuming job. Consider the possibility of making simplified entries for each accessioned artifact in a spreadsheet file. The sheet should include fields for the catalog number, object name, donor name and donation date. If the first cell (A1) is used for the first artifact and no rows left blank, the last row used should indicate the true count of how many records (items) are contained in the file. Therefore, if the last row entered begins with cell "A217", there are 217 items on file. Since there are limitations on the length of spreadsheets this technique is confined to use on small collections. Other methods may enhance the capabilities to accommodate more data in this type of scheme. Create a spreadsheet for each major category of artifact ("how many pieces of 18th century furniture are there in the collection?") or for each year that items were donated ("how many objects were donated in 1988?"). Be sure to give descriptive names to the spreadsheets, such as "FURN18TH" or "DONATE88" and BACK UP THE INFORMATION FREQUENTLY. One of the unfortunate capabilities of a program that is so accessible and easy to modify is that data does indeed get modified, sometimes incorrectly. Once again consider the possibility of copying these files to floppy disks for off-site storage.

2. Estimated Values

There are more sophisticated ways to force a spreadsheet to provide information such as item counts; these involve the use of formulas or "functions" in the spreadsheet cell definition. A rudimentary understanding of the use of functions and formulas can open a new world of potential spreadsheet applications. Start with the spreadsheet fields mentioned above and create a sheet with the following cells:

Column A - catalog number
Column B - object name
Column C - donor name
Column D - donation date
Column E - estimated value

Each row represents one artifact; the entries found in column E represent the item value estimated for insurance purposes. If information for 200 items has been entered to this spreadsheet, the last record represented will occupy cells "A200" through "E200". The sum of all entries found in column E represents the total value of all items calculated for insurance purposes. It can be derived by defining an additional cell using the function "∂SUM" (the example used here is taken from Lotus 1-2-3/ Symphony, but equivalents are used in other spreadsheet software). For example, enter the formula "∂SUM(E1.E200)" in cell "G1". The displayed result will be the total of all values entered in column E. When changes are made to column E information, the total shown in cell "G1" will be recalculated automatically to reflect the new amounts. Remember that the cells to be totaled are those indicated within the parentheses in the "∂SUM" formula. If additional entries are made to the end of the artifact list, the cell numbers in the parentheses must be changed as well.

There are undoubtedly hundreds of ways that general purpose software can be used in collections management. This article presents just a few. Hopefully they will inspire collections managers to consider the time-saving potential of using "someone else's system."

*EDITORS NOTE:
Our author, Terry Grose speaks from experience, coming to the museum field after fifteen years in the computer business.