

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

by
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*The Collection of Cultural
Material by Historical Societies*

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Foreword

Across Australia there are approximately 700 local historical societies which, as a group, probably hold a greater volume of records about our Australian heritage and culture than our main state and territory libraries. We in the community history movement have proved ourselves very adept at lovingly collecting and preserving a great range as well as this large volume of records and artefacts. Those who come after us will thank us for what we have done.

They will thank us even more if we can ease their task by collecting our present for the future. Modern Australia generates an enormous volume of cultural material which is lost as it finds its way into the recycler or tip or is diffused into the internet or airwaves. There are many societies already attempting to preserve some of this material on a casual basis, and a few have become highly organised. There are obviously limits of space or resources, but the Federation of Australian Historical Societies believes that it is an important part of its role to encourage societies to undertake collection and to advise them how to do so. We should look forward as well as looking back.

The FAHS was founded in 1978 as the peak body of the community history movement in Australia. Its members are the eight state and territory historical societies, which are in turn the peak body in their own regions. The FAHS represents the community history movement at the national level, facilitates communication between historical societies and encourages a national approach on matters of common interest.

In this spirit *Looking to the Future* was commissioned by the FAHS and is distributed without charge to member societies in the community history movement. It is hoped that it will encourage and facilitate the effective collection and preservation of our contemporary cultural material for the future.

DonGarden

President, Federation of Australian Historical Societies

July 2000

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Looking to the future; the Collection of Cultural Material by Historical Societies

Most historical societies are formed with the aim of preserving their local history and cultural heritage. Their mission statements may vary but their purpose remains the same, to protect and preserve the history of their community. Local history is a most valuable asset that contributes not only to the local community but more importantly to our state and national history and our Australian sense of identity.

What is your society collecting and why is material being collected? Do you only collect historical material or have you given thought to present-day material and how that material will in turn become historical record to reflect our society of today?

This booklet aims to encourage you to discuss and actively explore the collection of present-day material within your society. A number of societies around Australia have contributed to the project and their innovative collecting practices will provide stimulating ideas. Case studies from a variety of societies will follow and this may prompt you to review your Collection Policy to incorporate collection of present-day material. General information relating to the care and management of your collection is addressed. However, this is by no means exhaustive and a Reference List is included for further reading together with Online Sources that you may wish to explore.

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Why Collect Material?

The collection of material and objects needs a purpose for there is no reason to collect information and material without an ultimate aim. Collecting objectives may read –

- to contribute to our knowledge and understanding of our culture
- identify particular aspects of our local history
- for future historical record.

To this end each society has its own particular agenda. Some societies only collect historical rather than contemporary material. Others may collect material up to a particular date. One society only collects historical material yet keeps up to date recording articles and items of specific interest relating to their area, from local newspapers.

The Tewanin Heritage & Historical Society Inc. in Queensland is a relatively new society formed in 1998. One of the objectives of its Collection Policy reads: "To collect oral and written records and images representing the history of Tewanin, and the surrounding areas ... from its foundation to present."

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This society is aware that their Collection Policy should include present-day material and not just historical records, as this material in turn will become historical. You do not want a moribund collection that only reflects past history, but a dynamic collection that grows and continues to grow showing the changes that occur within our society. The collection of present-day material should be taken into account and included in your Collection Policy which, should be reviewed from time to time.

Points to address when Collecting

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An historical society needs to operate within its own resources. Guidelines need to be in place when collecting material of any type and generally should consider and include –

- available funds
- number of volunteers available to care for and catalogue collection
 - the collection will outlive those who gather it and there is an ongoing commitment for its care
- space and storage facilities including storage conditions
 - you can only collect what you have space to store
- access for members, researchers and the public
- exhibition space
 - should you have displays and exhibitions or operate only as a research facility
- duplication of material/objects
 - should you duplicate material or items already in your collection
- insurance
 - while most collections will have some form of insurance, if you were given a very valuable item, say an artwork, would you have sufficient funds for on going insurance

The Bunbury Historical Society Inc. in Western Australia for instance has 1988 as the cut-off date for collection of material, except for information that updates existing information on files already held. It agreed on this date because a great deal of change has taken place in that area since that date which has resulted in a mass accumulation of material that the society cannot adequately cover. They do not have the space to house it, or volunteers to cope with it. The Local Studies Collection at Bunbury Library has been active since 1988 collecting material from that date to the present, and so present-day material is not lost.

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Collection Management Policy

A very important responsibility for any historical society that assembles a collection is the Collection Management Policy. This Policy defines issues such as –

- how material/items will be maintained and displayed
- how the material that is collected is made available to members, researchers and visitors
- and in some cases, how material/items will be lent to other museums

If your society collects material and does not already have a Collection Management Policy you should discuss implementing one to ensure responsible management of your collection, whether it is large or small, for the present and future.

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What do we Collect?

Some historical societies make the decision, as stated in their collection policy, to only collect paper-based material, while others include objects. Paper based materials incorporate many types of documents and may include newspapers, correspondence, plans, maps, reports, pamphlets and photographs. These then are made up of many different types of paper, each requiring specific storage, handling and care. To preserve the original document a photocopy is often taken and specific care and storage of the original document as well as the copy is required.

If your society collects objects, you will be aware of the many varied items people donate and collect. Objects may be made of material such as textile, wood, metal, plastic, stone, bone, pottery, glass, organic matter, and, in some cases, may consist of more than one type of material.

Increasingly even small historical societies and museums are using electronic media as a means of providing better access to their collection. This material is contained in floppy disks and hard disks, video and audio-tapes and CD-ROMS and requires specific storage and care. Over time in fact, we may only use this type of material to store all our records.

While all materials will deteriorate over time, we can control the rate of deterioration and you need to refer to the available resources to ensure you have sufficient information to preserve and care for the material that your society collects.

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The Care of Cultural Material

Historical societies and local history museums play an important role in preserving our culture. The diversity of these institutions is also reflected in the material they collect. With most local historical society museums being run and maintained entirely by volunteers, it is important that those volunteers have access to support programs and publications that will provide practical information on issues relating collections and their management.

In 1998 Museums Australia produced *Caring for our Culture, National Guidelines for Museums, Galleries and Keeping Places*. This publication provides information on issues such as strategic planning and operational guidelines and allows you to work through issues step by step. The 'Further Reading' section provides additional references and Online Sources.

Most institutions will have received the Heritage Collections Council's 1998 *reCollections – Caring for Collections Across Australia*. However, if your society has not received that publication, one copy is available to institutions on application. This publication is also available online at the Australian Museums On Line website – <http://amol.org.au>

The six volume publication and glossary provides comprehensive information on caring for your collection whether it be paper based or consist of items and objects of various materials. As the publication states, historical collections collectively tell the story of our history and country and it becomes increasingly important that those people who care for these collections acquire the conservation skills to protect this heritage.

The set of practical guide books covers –

- Caring for Cultural Material (2 volumes)
- Damage and Decay
- Managing Collections
- Managing People
- Handling, Transportation, Storage and Display
- and it comes with a Glossary to define unfamiliar terms

It is a most valuable resource for any museum or historical society large or small that has the care and responsibility of conserving the historical material that it collects.

The internet is another great resource. The Australian Museums Online site has links to many other sites to help you solve general or specific problems that arise with reference to your collection. The National Archives of Australia is another site that provides an enormous amount of information on protections and handling of all sorts of material including paper files, photographs and objects together with information on storage and environment.

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Museums Australia Inc. can also help you with the care of your collection. It has branches in each state and regularly holds professional development forums and seminars. The Australian Council of Archives and the Australian Society of Archivists Inc. also hold archival support programs for local history societies and organisations holding historical documents.

Specialist suppliers of archival storage supplies as well as conservation organisations in your state, are another available source to supply information and specific advice for particular needs relating to your collection.

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Case Studies

To collect and gather together material has no meaning if there is no purpose or guidelines to collecting. That material should tell a story and the following case studies provide interesting and exciting ideas to encourage collection of present-day material.

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Junk Mail and Catalogues

Ainslie Evans of the Katanning Museum in Western Australia collects 'junk' mail. Included in this category are all those advertising catalogues and brochures we receive almost daily in our letter boxes. If you think about this type of material, you will soon realise the vast amount of information it stores for historical societies and curators in the future. This material is readily available, free, and often delivered to our home, making it very easy to collect.

Considering the amount of 'junk' mail most of us receive, it is wise to draw some guidelines should you begin a collection of this type of present-day material. In the case of Ainslie Evans, she only collects material that has the name 'Katanning' on it, as businesses that are not represented in their community, are not represented in their collection. Your guidelines could be similar in that you only collect material that pertains to your town, suburb or district. You should also consider the amount of space you require for safe storage of this collection. If you do not want to collect material continually, think about designating a period of time, say one month a year, as a representative sample for that year. Consider collecting catalogues during a particular time of year for example at Easter, Mother's Day or Christmas. If your museum collects toys you could mount an interesting exhibition in the future with Christmas toy catalogues and toys from your collection. Once you have collected 'junk' mail for a year, or whatever period you decide upon, box up the material in archival storage with appropriate labeling and there you have a glimpse of today's society for future historical record.

Imagine the information that can be gleaned from your 'junk' material. It will provide the names of storekeepers and businesses within a town, district or suburb. The address and type of business operated is generally displayed on catalogues and flyers. The catalogues usually have images to show the types of items for sale, price and often a description of the goods. In the case of clothing catalogues, we will be able to gather information relating to fashion styles pertaining to the era.

Even if you collect this type of material for a period of five to ten years, it will be a valuable resource relating to local businesses showing the changes that have occurred over time. Ainslie Evans says that in the short time she has been collecting this type of material she has already witnessed change. For instance, shops have gone from one telephone number to a fax and mobile phone number. Thus, the spread of communication is just one aspect recorded through 'junk' mail and no doubt many businesses today would also include an email address.

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If your collection relates to particular items or themes, consider just collecting material relevant to that collection. Say you collect just costumes, pottery or even farm machinery you would only collect 'junk' mail relevant to your collection and perhaps only from your local region. In the case of costumes you may be interested in collecting wedding fashion catalogues. Some very successful exhibitions and parades have been held exhibiting wedding gowns in local museums. You could borrow present-day wedding dresses and you may have historical gowns in your collection to display thus comparing styles over time. Wedding photographs and related wedding items would add interest to this type of exhibition. The catalogues you collect today will provide historical record for the future.

Another type of catalogue is the instruction booklet for home and domestic appliances. Collecting instruction booklets between the period of 1960 to 1980 is another project of Ainslie Evans. She says, no museum will want a row of say "Sunbeam" mixers but an informative label for one mixer could be made from the instruction book and advertising material, which would tell us a lot about food and domestic habits of the period. So, keeping all those instructions books, better still with the appliance, will provide the source of future historical information.

'Keeping History, or Keeping Rubbish' is the title of a paper written by Ainslie Evans. I think we can now appreciate the considerable information contained in 'junk' mail. We should all consider initiating a project today to collect 'junk' mail. Perhaps your society could ask for volunteers who would enjoy the task of collecting material that will provide valuable information on our local community. What a story 'junk' mail will tell about particular items that find their way into collections one hundred years from now.

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Real Estate Brochures

Many agents now produce coloured sales brochures and your society could collect those relevant to your town or suburb. These often have a photograph or sketch of the house as well as the name of the property, address and date of auction. However, they generally do not contain the name of the vendor. Telephone books both old and new and rate records are sources that can provide information relating to property owners to collate with your real estate brochures. You could start a 'Properties File' today. Your local real estate agent may even be kind enough to save brochures for you. You do not have to collect brochures indefinitely. You could just collect them for a particular year, perhaps a significant year, or even for one month a year for a certain period of time. You will find a great deal of information can be gathered from just a small collection of brochures.

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Flyers, Posters and Programs

Our letter boxes attract other flyers and brochures which you should also consider collecting. While these can be obtained at no cost, we need to be selective and collect with a purpose. You may collect brochures relating to your local schools, sporting organisations or art and cultural events. Perhaps you have a local drama group where you could start collecting programs from the productions held during the year. Think what a great exhibition or display you could have just focusing on this aspect. Each year you could collect a program, an advertising poster, photographs from the production and maybe even a costume from that production over a particular period. If you focused on one production a year, even in five years time you would have a great collection of material for a wonderful display relevant to your community. The same could be done with local sporting clubs. Present-day material that you could collect relating to these bodies may include team sheets, fixtures, newsletters and events calendar or the year. It may even be possible to obtain a club uniform. You could build on this particular collection by including newspaper articles relating to the club or organisation, team photographs and presentations. Be sure to label and store the material appropriately and if you only collected such information for one year, it will provide historical record of an aspect of your community's sporting history for the future.

If your society holds historical material relating to a sporting club or other organisation in your town, think about collecting present-day material relevant to that body. By putting together the historical material from you collection with the present-day material, you could create an informative exhibition. Such an exhibition would attract community interest, particularly from the club or organisation involved, who may not have otherwise visited your museum.

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Newspapers

The present and recent past is just as important as the distant past and it is much easier to collect contemporary material. Local newspapers provide current news, which will become valuable historical record at a later date. You need to set certain parameters and guidelines when collecting this type of material. Boundaries relating to the area from which you wish to collect information need to be defined. These may be Shire or town boundaries or the area covered by your society. Whichever, it is a good idea to have certain predetermined categories for collection of items and articles from newspapers, perhaps the same as your local history index.

Some societies have volunteers who work at home each week clipping relevant items from local newspapers. These items are then filed and indexed recording information relating to source and date and entered on to index cards or the computer data base by societies using computer programs. If you do not have sufficient number of volunteers to collect all categories of articles, perhaps you could collect just a specific category of local news. These could relate to people, businesses, heritage issues and the like relating to your town or district. See if you have a society member who may not wish to attend meetings but might be quite happy collecting this type of present-day material for your society.

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Commercial Documents and Organisation Records

Do you collect any present-day commercial documents from your town or suburb? Consider collecting invoices, receipts and various documents relating to the businesses in your area for a defined period or maybe just a few representative documents each year. These in turn could be collated with your property files and will provide names, addresses and types of businesses that exist at a particular time. In some cases the only present-day material of this type collected by societies may be their own documents and records including agendas and minutes of meetings.

A society may collect Minute Books, newsletters and associated material from local organisations within their region. Local organisations may be willing to donate these to your collection for safekeeping. Interact with your local community groups and see if they will collect present-day material relating to their group, for your society. From these sources you will be able to determine what activities, events and functions are held by various organisations together with names of members. This information can then all then be indexed providing a valuable resource.

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Photographs and Photography

Think about some of the following photographic projects and ideas to stimulate interest in your society and perhaps encourage you to undertake a specific photographic project.

Many societies take photographic records of all their events and in some cases use a video camera to record these occasions. However, if you do not have a video camera you could consider borrowing one for a very special event. It is very easy to take photographs of current events, displays, exhibitions and outings as well as photographs of speakers and guest lecturers. These photographs can then be indexed and collated with information pertaining to that event. Perhaps with text from a talk, exhibition programs or an itinerary from a day trip. It is worthwhile taking photographic record of present-day events and when indexed with accompanying relevant material the photographs will complete a particular story.

Several years ago Janet Hawkins from the Woodend & District Heritage Society Inc. in Victoria, photographed a local family over several weeks, at different times of the day, going about their everyday life. When photographing families we mainly tend to record special events and more often than not people pose for the camera. We seldom record routine family life. 'Inside Woodend' which was the title of the exhibition that resulted from the project, captured images of domestic life in the home. In these photographs you see the interior setting of the home, the furniture and furnishings, domestic appliances and family life. One image includes a child lying on the couch wearing roller-blades and watching television. Just think what a wonderful historic record this will be of family life in a particular place at a particular point in time, and the information that can be gained from the visual images of the interior domestic scenes.

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Take photographic records of your town, the main street, shops and businesses at regular intervals and this will create an interesting photographic record for the future. Be sure to date these photographs and record the sites, names of businesses and proprietors. These visual images will record the changes that occur over time as some businesses disappear and new ones emerge. The Leongatha & District Historical Society has a project this year to make a major photographic record of their town and district as a reference base for the next century.

Another interesting project instigated by the Knox Historical Society Inc. in Victoria is a 'School Photograph Project'. The society has collected around 12,600 photographs from fifty-four schools in their area. Some historical photographs date back one hundred years. While this is an ongoing project for this society, perhaps your society could embark on a similar project for a shorter period of time, perhaps just for a year.

This project documents and identifies children who lived and grew up in the area and provides a valuable resource for anyone researching family history. The society has a room in their museum to house their collection of school photographs and they also display copies of these at community events and school reunions. If they have unknown faces in a photograph, they can often be identified at such occasions.

Think about collecting school photographs from your district for a specific period of time. Even a small society could initiate such a project and in turn have a valuable resource recording names of students and teachers of schools in their district at a particular point in time. Naturally boundaries would need to be set for such a project and the period of collection would also be bounded by storage and display facilities. A great display could be mounted, particularly if you have historical school photographs to compare with more contemporary school photographs. Interesting comparisons could be made creating an engaging display and discussion, especially for present and past pupils and local schools. You could incorporate in an exhibition of school photographs items relating to a student such as a uniform, school books and perhaps a school diary. These could be collected now for a future exhibition.

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Electronic Media

Video Tape

The video recording of events has been previously mentioned and another interesting project using this media has been undertaken by one society. They have used a video recorder to take present-day visual images of their area and written an accompanying book to record the history of that area. It would be interesting to see what remains and what has disappeared from the cultural landscape when comparing the historical data with the contemporary images.

There is always a vast amount of film footage recording major sporting events and occasions celebrating Australia's history nevertheless, it is worth recording local celebrations relating to such occasions, for posterity.

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Audio Tape

Many societies record talks by guest speakers and in some cases transcribe them for future reference, while others simply keep the tapes. Of course it must be remembered that audio-tapes deteriorate over time and care must be taken to maintain equipment and store the tapes correctly. A great source of information in this regard is the resource already mentioned, *reCollections – Caring for Collections Across Australia* which has a section devoted to 'Electronic Information and Media'.

Some societies interview older local identities who may have spent their entire life in one place. The oral tapes and transcriptions are kept to record local history, as the person recalls life in that place over time. However, they can also allow us to appreciate what that person thinks about life in the present. Therefore, we need to consider what questions to ask when gathering oral information relating to our town and community, in order to record the changes that have occurred.

The Cooroy-Noosa Genealogical & Historical Research Group Inc. in Queensland conducted an 'Oral Histories of Pioneer Families of Cooroy and District' project. This project was made possible by a grant and they conducted fifty-eight interviews covering seventy-two local families. The interviews will be transcribed and held in their Resource Centre providing a great resource for researchers and those tracing family history.

This type of project is certainly very worthwhile and many resources are available to assist in the collection of oral history. Another present-day project of interest, would be to interview young members of your community to gain an insight into their views of present-day life in your town or suburb.

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The Internet

An increasing number of historical societies are using the internet as an information source. While 'surfing the net' I discovered many societies had home pages and many had links through other sites. Interestingly I discovered that the Geraldton Historical Society had a homepage on the internet in 1995 and believed that it was the only local historical society in Western Australia at that time to display a home page. It goes on to say, that this opportunity marks a milestone in the development of their Society and other small historical societies, which now have the chance to promote and advertise their society, thereby creating interest in local history, historical landmarks and local tourist attractions to Australia and even the world. The Geraldton Historical Society homepage provides a short history of their society, information regarding membership and historical information about Geraldton and its present tourist attractions.

The Living Museum of the West in Maribyrnong Victoria is currently working on a project called 'Heritage Online'. This project aims to bring other Societies in the Western Region Historical Societies on line. There are twelve member societies covering the west and northern suburbs of Melbourne. The benefits of this project will allow the public to be more aware of what societies have to offer. As this web sites says, local historical societies provide information for all kinds of researchers including students, those interested in family history, historians, journalists, councillors and even developers. Projects such as this will provide access to the historical material held by these societies.

The Federation of Australia Historical Societies has a website providing information about what the Federation does, its office holders and how to contact them and links to State based constituents. It also intends to publish the results of its projects on its website.

If your society does not have the finance or knowledge to create your own homepage think about a regional webpage creating links with other museums and societies in your area. The internet provides a valuable resource for co-operative promotion. The Dromana and District Historical Society Inc. has an informative webpage about their society's activities. It also suggests a 'Circuit of Museums' as you drive around their area, and then lists these museums and provides links to them.

The Australian Museums Online directory is another resource that can provide you with a listing for your museum on their site. A listing will include details about your museum such as address, admission charges, opening hours, facilities and collection strengths and holdings. In some cases visual images are included.

Your local Shire, Tourism Association and other such bodies may also assist with links from their particular web site. And if you do not have access to a computer to discover just how many historical societies now have sites on the internet, take a visit to your local library to discover the 'world wide web.'

Should your society have a website, remember to keep a printed copy of that site each time you update the information, to record the changes over time.

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The material and information that local historical societies possess and collect generally pertains to their local area and may not be widely recognised beyond their community. Websites and links to other societies and relevant organisations will allow the spread of historical information on a regional, state and national basis. The internet will provide a vast data-base of historical information relating to local societies and their collections. It is a valuable resource to promote and advertise your society, its collection, your current events program and projects.

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Personal Writings

Have you ever considered asking members of your society to write a personal account of a particular event in your town or suburb. The Woodend & District Heritage Society Inc. has embarked on a project titled 'Millennium Project 2000'. It is asking their members, and any interested members in the community, to describe in detail an aspect of present-day life. For example this could be a visit to the dentist, a trip to the post office, collecting the children from school or a shopping trip. The possibilities are endless, and this project will be a valuable reference even twenty years from now. While we may have photographs to view life at a particular time, personal writings will allow for a greater understanding. Can you imagine how those writings will read one hundred years from now? This type of project costs nothing and can be achieved by even the smallest society.

Recently a visit by children from the Romsey Primary School in Victoria to the Romsey & Lancefield Districts Historical Society's Sidney Seymour Cottage resulted in a collection of personal writings. The children wrote 'thank-you' notes to the society and many interesting stories emerged drawing on their visit, comparing the life of the family who lived in the historic cottage to their present-day. This is just another aspect of personal writing that you can draw on, collect and store for the future or include in a display to create a point of interest and discussion. Use your imagination to think how you can use personal writings of present-day life, events and people to contribute to the historical record.

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Display and Exhibitions

Exhibitions and displays communicate and convey ideas and stories. Each display or exhibition is a new story and you should give some thought to the audience that you hope to attract to your exhibition. For example do you wish to attract a local audience, a special interest audience, tourists to your region or just everyone. You need to re-think your display all the time as you certainly want visitors to return to your museum and they may not return if the display remains static. Historical societies want to reflect their local history and community in their exhibitions but sometimes the material remains unchanged. The display could relate to any location with visitors unaware of what is unique, distinctive and of particular interest in that place. This reinforces the need for dynamic Collection Policies encompassing present-day material, even if that material is not displayed for many years to come. Think about having a permanent historical display with information relevant and unique to your community and then have changing exhibitions to attract a wider audience and repeat visitation.

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Conclusion

I hope this booklet has encouraged your society to collect present-day material. The case studies have shown that even a small historical society can collect some form of present-day material. Being surrounded by vast amounts of material, we must be selective in our collection practices as we gather information to reflect our ever-changing society. A small dynamic collection that continues to grow will contribute to our cultural heritage.

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REFERENCE LIST

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ONLINE SOURCES

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Federation of Australian Historical Societies – <http://www.history.org.au>

Australian Society of Archivists Inc. – <http://www.aa.gov.au>

National Archives of Australia – <http://www.naa.gov.au>

National Library of Australia – <http://www.nla.gov.au>

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This publication has been made possible through grant money provided by the Commonwealth Department of Environment and Heritage - Environment Australia. The contribution of the Department is gratefully acknowledged. However the views expressed herein are not necessarily those of the Commonwealth. The Commonwealth does not accept responsibility for any information or advice that it contains.

List of Societies that contributed to this Project

Thanks to the following societies for providing information for this project.

Avoca & District Historical Society Inc., Vic.
Bunbury Historical Society, W.A.
Cooroy-Noosa Genealogical & Historical Research Group Inc., Qld.
Gisborne & Mount Macedon Districts Historical Society Inc., Vic.
Historical Society of the Northern Territory Inc., N.T.
Katanning Museum and Ainslie Evans, Katanning, W.A.
Leongatha & District Historical Society Inc., Vic.
Tatura & District Historical Society, Vic.
Tewantin Heritage & Historical Society Inc., Qld.
Woodend & District Heritage Society Inc., Vic.
Romsey & Lancefield Districts Historical Society Inc., Vic.

Information obtained from the following societies' internet sites:

Dromana and District Historical Society Inc., Vic.
Geraldton Historical Society (Inc.) W.A.
Keilor Historical Society Inc., Vic.
Knox Historical Society Inc., Vic.
Melbourne's Living Museum of the West, Vic.

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