

HELP WANTED: HISTORY MAJORS TO DISPLAY TALENTS IN MUSEUM WORK

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DR. TRUMAN WARNER

Pushed by the 1975 job market to seek a variety of vocational options, more college history majors are beginning to inquire about the possibilities of employment with historical societies and museums. Unfortunately, these vaguely posed questions are reminiscent of old radio soap operas asking if a small-town girl can find love and happiness in the big city. To be helpful, there is need for greater precision -- which small-town girl, which particular city and what definition of love and happiness. As applied to historians appraising the job potential in museum work, parallel questions might be: What are the possibilities for museum work and where are the potential positions located? What kind of person appears most employable? What are the job expectations, working conditions, and rewards?

In recent years local historical societies and museums have proliferated throughout the entire country. Many, however, are very inadequately financed and housed and operate almost entirely through volunteer help. Consequently, reference to published lists of such organizations may prove deceptive in terms of job possibilities. Many of these small associations are in need of professional help, but members feel they cannot afford to hire a full-time staff. However, there does exist the possibility of several small societies combining their financial resources and sharing the services of the same director-curator, but seldom has such collaboration occurred. An enterprising job hunter might even investigate the possibility of creating a position of this type.

Medium-sized museums, of which the Danbury Scott-Fanton Museum and Historical Society and the New Canaan Historical Society are good examples, nor-

mally have a small professional staff, due to the range of activities they undertake demanding full-time personnel in addition to volunteers. Moderately large museums of this category probably offer the greatest opportunities for those seeking positions for the first time, especially if they are willing to serve as assistants while gaining experience on the job. (However, large institutions as the Museum of the City of New York, the Connecticut Historical Society or Sturbridge Village fall outside the scope of these remarks, for the demand for specialized training effectively eliminates most beginners.)

Versatility and adaptability are the keys to success as a director-curator of a small or medium-sized museum. A knowledge of history, especially local history as it intersects with national trends, and research skills are indispensable but not sufficient. The director of a museum such as the one in Danbury plays a multitude of roles. For instance: (1) He should have sufficient administrative skills to organize an office so that routine paper work and financial records are handled efficiently. (2) He must direct and encourage the work of volunteers. (3) He is in charge of most correspondence, including wide-ranging requests for historical data. (4) He receives and catalogues collections of artifacts, books, pamphlets, pictures and manuscripts. (5) He must have imagination, especially if the local community expects changing exhibits. (Remember: the smallest museum rarely possesses a large storehouse of display items so he must improvise by arranging temporary loans from area residents. For example, an exhibit depicting the evolution of the rocking chair in American Society, while utilizing those in the museum collection as a core, must be augmented by other examples begged and borrowed from members and families.) (6) He must have skill in mounting the exhibits themselves -- skills in categorizing, in arranging, in labeling. A sense of design is a "must". (7) He must like and deal smoothly with people -- people of all kinds and personalities. Museums today are, first and foremost, educational institutions; and so community members must be encouraged

to visit, to ask questions, and to learn. Visiting school groups, in particular, demand special attention if "field trips" are to be more than a joyous respite from the classroom. (8) He should have sufficient writing ability so that he can publicize the museum, prepare news releases, and write brochures. It also helps if he is at ease when speaking in public, for community organizations often turn to the local museum for aid in planning their programs.

Obviously no candidate for a museum position will be equally qualified in all of these characteristics. However, strengths in some areas must be balanced by a willingness to try to develop at least minimal capabilities where they are weak or missing. It is not a job for someone unwilling to "stretch" himself. However, larger museums do encourage specializations with less emphasis on the multi-faceted individual.

Would a history major with many of these qualifications be happy in a job of this nature? The answer will vary according to his expectations.

Is he seeking uninterrupted hours of serious research on historical topics of his own choice? In an active society most of his own research must be undertaken on his own time.

Does he expect a large salary? Most small museums can pay only modestly. A recent survey by the American Association for State and Local History reports that the salary for beginning professionals in local societies averaged \$800 monthly. Salaries at state museums are slightly higher, but national and regional museums average over \$100 less for beginners.

Does he like to hide away from the public? The museum will disintegrate if he follows such a formula.

But if he really likes history and wants to share his enthusiasm in a non-formal atmosphere with people who are not forced to sit in a classroom to hear him expound -- then museum work merits further investigation.

If he is seeking a career in this field rather than looking for a temporary alternative, graduate study is a necessity. Co-operative programs such

as those between the Farmer's Museum at Cooperstown, New York and the State University of New York at Oneonta, or else, between the University of Vermont and the Shelburne Museum, provide the student with excellent formal study opportunities as well as much-needed on-the-job experience. In a related area, George Washington University offers an MAT degree in Museum Education. The University of Delaware's program in American Studies includes museum experience with the Winterthur Museum, the Eleutherium Mills-Hagley Museum, and Sturbridge Village. The Deerfield (Mass.) Summer Fellowships permit students to take courses directed by these museums.

When planning for his advanced studies, a potential museum worker should consider the possibility that perhaps too narrow a specialization for the beginning professional may eliminate him from consideration for the more generalized job opportunities at the local museum level. More specialized training can parallel or follow broad-based preparation, however.

If the idea of museum work intrigues you, investigate the possibility of a student-directed study program in conjunction with the Wesconn History Department. Currently two Wesconn students are involved in such a program -- their field work began with the Scott-Fanton Museum. But an immediate step might be to become active in a local museum itself. By volunteering your services, you can see what it is like on the inside. Most local societies will welcome such assistance. On-the-job training of this sort will prove invaluable either in providing the experience a job of this nature often demands or by convincing a student to look into other directions for the utilization of his historical knowledge and skills.