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COLLECTIONS

Advisor



Martin Collection, Indiana Historical Society, cropped from original

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What's Inside? Unpacking boxes of collections donations

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Museum staff and volunteers are surrounded by boxes. We use them in exhibits, ship things in them and house collections objects in them. We find them on our doorsteps. Potential donors hand them to us. We work in museums filled with boxes. And, we spend a lot of time unpacking those mysterious donation boxes. Hopefully, the following tips will make your next unpacking job go a little bit more smoothly.

- If possible, open the box in an isolated area. Remember that anything in the box will be introduced into your collections and exhibits areas. If there are moldy documents in the box; you run the risk of contaminating other objects in your collections. Moths damaging textiles in the box will happily move on to your quilt collection. Mice will be glad to make new homes in your storage areas.
- Before you open the box, it's a good idea to put on a pair of disposable gloves. They will not only protect your hands, but will also prevent cross contamination. Anything that gets on the gloves from one object can be transferred onto other objects. Once the gloves have been used put them in a plastic bag, tie the bag shut and throw the bag away.
- If you have upper respiratory weaknesses, you should wear a mask when unpacking the box. A mask will help keep you from breathing in dust and mold.
- Be very careful about how you lift the box. Don't carry it by the flaps or by built-in handles. They may not be secure. Also don't assume that the bottom of the box is strong enough to hold the objects. Tape loses its adhesive properties over time and the bottom of the box may have gotten wet and be weak. Fully support the bottom of the box as you transfer it to your work area.
- Use a clean table to unpack the box. Consider covering the

table with a light-colored cloth so that you can see anything that may fall from the objects. Gather up anything that falls, note the information about its origin on the outside of an envelope and place the pieces inside the envelope.

- Carefully begin to unpack the box, one object at a time. If the objects are wrapped, don't assume that any wrapping contains only one object. Often people pack multiple objects in one piece of paper.
- Before you remove an object from the box, carefully examine the area around the objects. Make sure that the packaging is not tucked in around any other objects. You'll also get a good idea of the shape of the object before you lift it.
- As you lift an object from the box, carefully support all parts of the object. Don't lift by any handles or by the edges. Gently place the object on the work table. Don't assume that any object is empty. People often store things in boxes or tuck smaller objects inside of bowls.
- Unwrap the object slowly and don't tug on the wrapping. Immediately stop unwrapping the object if you feel any resistance. Take time to figure out where the wrapping may be caught or adhered to the object. If you hear any tearing or cracking sounds or the noise of glass breaking, stop and really check the object to try and figure out where damage is occurring.
- After you've unpacked the object, spread the wrapping out on the table and check it for any pieces that may have fallen from the object or smaller objects that were wrapped in the same packaging as the larger object. Don't risk throwing away an object by not checking the wrapping thoroughly.
- Take notes about the condition of the objects. If possible, take pictures for documentation. The notes and photos will help you make decisions about whether you will keep the objects or return them to the person who brought them in for possible donation.
- Expect the unexpected. Sometimes there are surprises in the boxes. There are stories of museum staff and volunteers finding loaded guns, sweating dynamite, live grenades, snakes and all sorts of things in boxes. Sharp and rusty objects can be hiding at the bottom of the box. Old medicines can become unstable and may have leaked. Be cautious.

When you are unpacking any box, remember be very careful. Don't assume anything. And, do no harm.

Resources

- Free On-site collections care training visits are available through April 2013. During the one-day visit, participating sites receive in-depth, specialized training on collections care and fundraising for collections. **Only a few spots are left.** If you are interested in receiving a

visit, email Tamara Hemmerlein at themmerlein@indianahistory.org.

- Connecting to Collections Online Community
www.connectingtocollections.org
- Indiana History Society Lending Resources Center
www.indianahistory.org/our-services/local-history-services/lending-resources

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