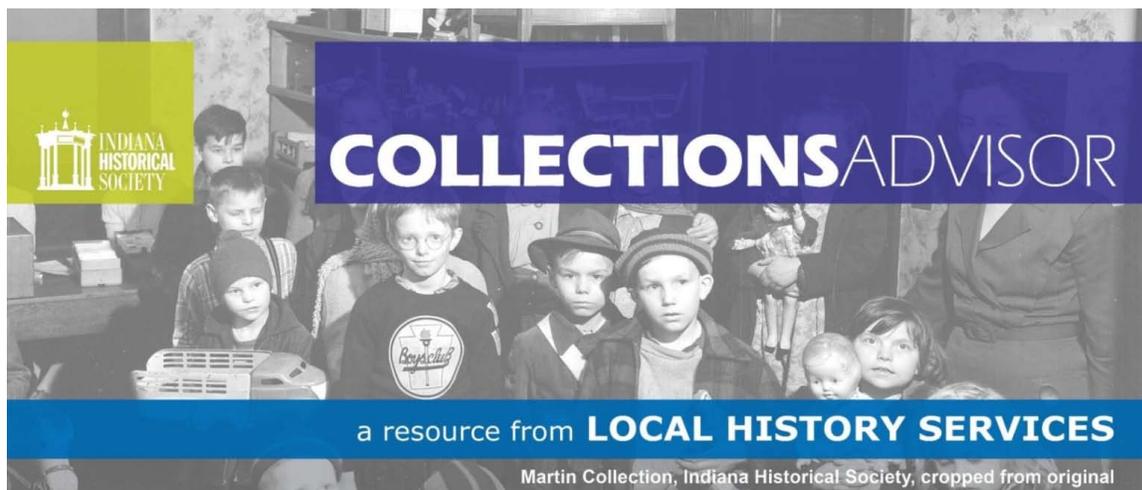




This publication is a service of the [Hoosier Heritage Alliance](#)
Connecting to Collections project.



Issue 28, February 2014

Transfixed Teenagers! Connecting Teens to Collections

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Article originally appeared on [Indiana Historical Society](#).

When I'm on site visits, the question about how to get younger people interested in history almost always comes up. There's no magic bullet. But, there is an answer for each museum. I recently visited a museum that had found it.

I took a group of nine teenage Girl Scouts on an overnight trip to Cincinnati. On Saturday, we visited the [American Sign Museum](#). As we drove up to the building, right away we noticed the big, quirky, flashing signs outside. The girls were all about taking pictures from the minute they left the cars.

Our tour was conducted by the founder, Tod Swormstedt. He introduced himself and the museum by talking about his personal connection. As he discussed the signs, Tod didn't just focus on techniques and materials. He talked about the designers, the sign painters, the salesmen and the business owners. From the beginning, there were "real people" stories that went along with the objects.

When we entered the very bright and shiny part of the museum, painted glass, blinking lights and neon were everywhere. The girls were transfixed. The amazing part was that they were listening to the tour and asking questions while they were surrounded by distractions. Tod included stories about sign makers, graphic art, history, sign painting techniques, technology and pop culture. He connected the museum objects to just about every interest the girls had.

At the end of the tour, the girls asked where all of the signs were stored. Tod responded by giving them a special peek into the sign prep and storage areas. The girls were fascinated by how the museum acquired the signs and what happened to them once they were at the museum. One girl asked if the museum ever switched signs out of the exhibits. That led to a question and explanation about how the



Teens at the American Sign Museum

museum installed the signs, some of them weighing tons, in the exhibits. Another girl pointed out signs hanging from the ceiling that were leftover from the days when the museum had been a factory. She asked if they were going to be part of the exhibits someday. The questions had changed from questions about the signs themselves to questions about how the museum worked.

Tod engaged the girls by making connections between the signs and the world that the girls live in. He didn't separate the objects from the people who made and used them, and he made the girls feel special by taking them "behind-the-scenes". The girls became interested as we drove up, stayed interested for two hours at the museum and were still interested after we left. I would definitely say that the folks at the American Sign Museum had their "how to get younger people interested in history" answer.



This publication from the Indiana Historical Society is a service of the Hoosier Heritage Alliance. This project is made possible by a grant from the U.S. Institute of Museum and Library Services.

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Collections Advisor is provided for the benefit of local historical societies and museums throughout Indiana. It is emailed to a subscriber list maintained by the [Local History Services](#) department of the Indiana Historical Society, 450 W. Ohio St., Indianapolis, IN 46202, (317) 232-1882.