

## Museums of Agriculture and Rural Life

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### Abstract:

Museums of many sorts offer opportunities that scholars of rural history can find nowhere else – the tangible and intangible cultural heritage of rural life. Museums, in turn, need the expertise that researchers can provide to make the programming that they must provide to an increasingly disengaged public meaningful. Scholars of rural history can help museums identify what they need to collect to tell stories relevant to their mission and public programming that will draw visitors to exhibits and events. The timing for this conversation at Rural History 2015 is perfect. The increasingly urban and suburban public's familiarity with the rural past (and present) keeps declining as does public support for museums. This session provides an overview to the potential partnerships that exists, some of the pitfalls to be aware of, and the variety of museums available and ready to serve rural scholars. The session concludes with an overview of the things that a rural scholar needs to know to make the most use of the unique resources that museums hold in the public trust – their collections – and a couple of examples about how those collections have contributed to research.

I grew up on a farm in southern Illinois, and earned degrees in historic preservation and history museum studies before I earned degrees in history. I have worked 35 years at open-air museums, living history farms and agricultural museums in 6 states. I have dedicated countless hours of service to professional organizations with international membership (ALHFAM and AIMA). For the past 15 years I have taught history and courses in material culture studies and collections care at Eastern Illinois University (EIU). In 2014 I began working with a research project in rural interpretation with the Walhain Project (EIU's study abroad in Belgium), and in 2015 we started a rural studies program at EIU. I volunteer at the county historical society, advise the boards of two other rural museums, and am writing a book, *Interpreting Agricultural History and Rural Life at Historic Sites and Museums*, for the American Association for State and Local History.

Based on my life's work, and given the goals of this keynote session, I wanted to share some positive comments about the potential for museum-rural history partnerships to shape contemporary understanding of rural and farm life and of rural and agricultural history.

This is important work:

The number of farm operators shrinks annually to the point of near extinction today (see Table). A larger percentage (but still a minority of the population) lives in rural areas. But the percentage of land dedicated to agriculture indicates that European countries remain markedly agricultural despite demographics.

Table

Country	Employment in Agriculture (% of total population)	Rural population (% of total population)	Agricultural Land: Arable & Pasture (% of total land)
<b>Canada (former colony)</b>	n/a [farm population 2% of total]	18	7.2
<b>Denmark</b>	3	12	61.8
<b>Estonia*</b>	5	32	22.6
<b>France</b>	3	21	52.7
<b>Germany*</b>	2	25	47.8
<b>Hungary</b>	5	29	59
<b>Mexico (former colony)</b>	13	21	54.9
<b>Spain</b>	4	21	54
<b>Sweden</b>	2	14	7.5
<b>United Kingdom</b>	1	18	71
<b>United States (former colony)</b>	n/a [1-2 % farm operators]	19	44.7

**Sources:** \*affected by collectivization and restitution; World Bank data. Definitions of farmers differ, i.e. in France a farmer is “Any individual or corporate entity who carries out activities defined as being agricultural and who is affiliated to the *Mutualité Sociale Agricole*. The farmer must: Devote over 50% of his working time to his agricultural activity. Draw at least 50% of his overall income from agricultural and forestry production activities and from tourist or other activities that are an extension of the farming or forestry production action, and which are based on the farm. Be affiliated to the Farmers Health Insurance scheme (Assurance Maladie des Exploitants Agricoles - AMEXA) at the MSA. The share of income obtained directly from production activities may not be less than 25% of the farm's overall income (Decree n°96.462, 29/05/1996 – *Official Journal* dated 30/05/1996)” (<http://www.terresdeurope.net/en/being-farmer-farming-france-agriculture-farmers.asp>).

These statistics can help explain why rural and agricultural history seems to cause people say that they are “not interested” in agriculture and in agricultural history. Those same people, however, might be very interested in food history! In fact, the general public seems more resistant than “not interested” in learning about agriculture and its history, and rural life and its history. Conversations about the agricultural present degenerate into antagonistic exchanges between consumers blaming farmers for industrial scale production, and farmers blaming consumers for their insensitivity to the business of farming. Both sides use inflammatory language and the polarizing conversations do not help the public learn about the complicated nature of industrial-scale production or about the business of farming.

The general public lacks even a basic understanding of farming routines and rhythms. This makes it nearly impossible to grasp the personal and economic investments that farmers make, and the risks and sacrifices required to sustain farming. The urban and suburban public lacks sensitivity to the economic challenges that often come with living in rural places. Rural dwellers must drive comparable distances to suburban commuters, master mechanics as well as science and marketing, and work at physically demanding labor (often in more than one job) to earn what their urban/suburban peers earn. And basic services now essential for success in white-collar jobs (high-speed internet, for example), can be impossible to access in rural locations. As a result, farmers may find themselves struggling with intermittent access to critical information such as time-sensitive market data. Farmers also have to manage the cost-price squeeze when costs to cultivate exceed gross income on sales. Debt threatens all business owner-operators, but add to that the threats from things beyond farmers’ control – the weather, markets, finance, labor. This makes it easier to understand farmer impatience.

Everyone needs to care about the work of people in the countryside because they manage an ecosystem that can sustain the globe (or can contribute to its destruction). Those farming the fertile plains and rocky hillsides must remain on the job or humanity will not survive. Some of the people most needing to understand this are those most distant from it (urban and suburban dwellers). Too few people understand their dependency on this global business of farming.

Museums provide a way to bridge the chasm between the rural and agricultural past and the urban and suburban present. Rural historians can play a critical role in building those bridges.

### Step 1: Historical Thinking Skills

The first step in the partnership involves developing historical thinking skills. Rural historians can help with this. Educator Sam Wineburg, in his book, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts*, says that “Historical thinking requires us to reconcile two contradictory positions: first, that our established modes of thinking are an inheritance that cannot be sloughed off, and second, that if we make no attempt to slough them off, we are doomed to a mind-numbing presentism that reads the present into the past” (12). The best history teachers (and history students) work hard to identify presentism and then replace it with what they identify is different about the past rather than emphasizing the familiar about the past. Wineburg quotes Carlo Ginzburg, author of *The Cheese and the Worms*, to emphasize the point:

The historian’s task is just the opposite of what most of us were taught to believe. He must destroy our false sense of proximity to people of the past because they come from societies very different from our own. The more we discover about these people’s mental universes, the more we should be shocked by the cultural distance that separates us from them (10).

Few people today have a false sense of proximity to farmers; the cultural distance between “us” and farmers today is great, but so is our cultural distance from agriculture, farming, and rural life in the past. A very different societal & cultural milieu existed between the majority of the population then, and the majority culture today (“our own”). Yet, agriculture today and in the past should be just as comprehensible as any other history if we take to heart Ginzburg’s and Wineburg’s advice. Rural historians can reach students in their classrooms with this message, but they can increase their audience by working with museums and the general public that they serve.

Step 2: Finding the right partner:

Opportunities for partnerships abound. Rural historians can work with private collectors individually or through the special interest groups that they create. For example, collectors of historical machinery invest millions of dollars in antique tractors, steam engines and other equipment. They organize antique machinery clubs and coordinate special events to share their collections with the public. Local seed savers indicate the sustained interest in the traditional practice of seed propagation, and this becomes standardized and systematized at the local, regional, national, and international level as the high stakes of preserving genomic diversity becomes more immediate. This range of personal involvement in agricultural collection and preservation indicates real investment. Those clubs would welcome scholars seeking more information, and the outlet that those scholars could provide for the work that the collectors do.

In contrast to private collections, a wide variety of public museums exist. Deciding what type of museum to work with requires knowing a bit about this variety. Some are more relevant to those who study rural history than others. Some meet the needs of particular projects better

than others. The most relevant museums should be in the same place where you conduct your research so logistics should be easy. By way of definition. . .

**museum:** The International Council of Museums (ICOM) defines “museum” as “a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment.” -- ICOM Statutes, adopted during the 21st General Conference in Vienna, Austria, in 2007 (<http://icom.museum/the-vision/museum-definition/>) Accessed 31 July 2015.

**agricultural museum:** agricultural museums include museums of agricultural technology, the food industry, forestry, horticulture, viticulture, fishing, hunting and other agricultural servicing and processing industries. Many agricultural museums began as national collections during the mid- to late-19<sup>th</sup> century as repository of patent models, of flora collected by agricultural scientists, and of specimens used in international exposition exhibits. Funding came from “the state” and audiences familiar with farming and rural life understood the objects on display with little to no interpretation required. But times changed, public funding decreased or dried up, and visitation declined as fewer and fewer members of the population had any direct knowledge of rural life or experience with farms and agricultural production.

Agricultural museums have been concerned about their relevance for years. But researchers can find comprehensive collections documenting place-specific practices over many years. Staff, in turn, would welcome historians as allies in the long-term process of making their collections more visible.

Association internationale des musées d’agriculture (AIMA), an all-volunteer organization and an affiliate of ICOM, serves agricultural museums and museum professionals

that are committed to the conservation, transmission and communication of the agricultural heritage, present and future, tangible and intangible. During the Cold War, AIMA began as the conduit for conversations between directors in some of the most enduring institutions in eastern Europe (Budapest and Prague for instance), and curators responsible for the premiere collections in Sweden, Denmark and Great Britain (the Museum of English Rural Life, for instance), and staff working in institutions rebuilding in Poland and Germany and Estonia, for instance. AIMA facilitates cooperation by hosting triennial congresses and publishing the proceedings, encouraging governing bodies to sustain support, and providing opportunities for staff to discuss collecting and documentation initiatives and plan traveling exhibitions. AIMA seeks to stimulate research and exhibition activity so museums interpret not only the development of agricultural production but also changes in the work and way of life of the rural population (the social background) over time. AIMA has working groups that focus on stewardship of living animals in museums, and educational strategies to make the agricultural collections most meaningful, and a group to explore digital means of sharing information as nations require public access to collections.

**ecomuseum:** a term coined by French museologists that described museums operated by local volunteers, sustained through community engagement and focused on local cultural heritage and documentation *in situ*. The museum is often not about the past per se, but about the multi-layered present with a community and landscape management system in place to ensure the integrity of the cultural heritage. This may take the form of a plan that involves diversified agriculture, rural tourism, and environmental management. The project is not national but based in community agreement.

**open-air museum:** The encyclopedic history, *Open-Air Museums: The History and Future of a Visionary Idea* (2007), by Sten Rentzhog, former director of the National Museum of Sweden (and Skansen), defined these museums as “sites mainly comprising translocated buildings.” They could be described as full-size dioramas of a nation’s rural and agricultural past. The grand-daddy of these museums, Skansen, in Stockholm opened in 1891, the project of educator Arthur Hazelius. He reached out to Swedes to help him collect Sweden’s rural and farm history. He involved everyone in documenting, collecting, and preserving THEIR history while making their history part of a national story. But after World War I, Rentzhog indicates that open air museums lost “contact with the public” (p. 100). The Skansen model spread across Europe and across continents because it offered a proven approach to collecting living memory and crafting a national story, emphasizing the unity. The public not engaged with the history to learn may visit these institutions today for the activities offered (petting animals). Some criticize open-air museums for embracing “lite” history -- emphasizing living history demonstration of daily chores (“process” interpretation) such as butter making rather than taking a critical and provocative stance about the past through provocative exhibits. Others criticize them for moving buildings out of context (even though many structures would have been destroyed if left *in situ*). Rentzhog addresses these criticisms, particularly the tension between the need for accuracy and pressure to appeal to the public (p. 165). Yet, the complete environments these museums interpret allow visitors to experience rural spaces, farmyards and barnyards that they can access nowhere else. The living collections (heritage breeds of plants and animals) add complexity and offer additional opportunities for visitors to understand a past not available to them in any other venue. But to take full advantage of their potential, the open-air museums must move beyond the role of collective memory maker and embrace the responsibility of history scrutinizer, to provide



opportunities for the public to visit that foreign country which is the past, to investigate it and gain meaning from it. They need scholars of rural life to work with them on this major project. The Association of European Open Air Museums exists as an ICOM affiliate and as the professional organization serving directors of these museums.

**living history farm (ALHFAM):** a term used in North America to describe a museum with preserved buildings, landscapes, historical artifacts, living collections (floral and faunal). The buildings, original structures on their original settings or relocated and exhibited in the open air, provide a foundation for active interpretation of farm life. Staff (paid and volunteer) complete the picture by donning recreated historical clothing and performing routine tasks using period-appropriate technology, plants and animals, all within the recreated environment. The living history farm collects and preserves the tangible and intangible evidence of farming, and manages collections to preserve originals and make use of replicas in active interpretation. The Association for Living History, Farm and Agricultural Museums (ALHFAM), an all-volunteer professional service organizations, began in 1970 to support living history farms.

In Europe **archaeological open air museums (EXARC)** provide recreated environments and emphasize research potential. EXARC defines this type as a “non-profit permanent institution with outdoor true-to-scale architectural reconstructions primarily based on archaeological sources. It holds collections of intangible heritage resources and provides an interpretation of how people lived and acted in the past; this is accomplished according to sound scientific methods for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment of its visitors.” The recreated structures on a recreated landscape allow “archaeotechnology” -- “research into ancient techniques such as handicrafts, hunting and agriculture, and demonstrating them to the public in a museum or Living History site”— to occur without risk to original objects (EXARC

Charter, <http://exarc.net/about-us/charter>). The “International Association of Archaeological Open-Air Museums” (EXARC), founded in 2001, and chartered in the Netherlands in 2009 “support[s] the investigation, contextualisation, presentation and interpretation of archaeological and experimental archaeological heritage” (EXARC Charter, <http://exarc.net/about-us/charter>).

These museums facilitate conversations about the historic in relation to scientific, environmental, and cultural interpretation. They support multi-disciplinary educational approaches drawing on theories and methods associated with history, anthropology, plant and animal sciences, engineering, biology, physics, ecology, etc. The three-dimensional, multisensory setting allows staff unparalleled opportunities to learn these while doing them. Staff, visitors (and researchers) reenact past practices to get a sense of the rhythms of life, and the changing relationships of plants, animals, technology and people across the seasons, and over time. Critics claim that the interpreters gain the most from doing the work, and that casual visitors often just observe processes: feeding hogs, milking cows, cooking on a wood stove, and hoeing the garden or cutting hay. It takes commitment to conduct the scientific research (experimental archaeology) at these sites.

In addition, other museums have relevant collections. Historic houses, even those in the middle of cities, often interpret their origins as homes to farm families. Local, county, and state historical societies feature photographs of horse-drawn carriages and farm families at work. The buildings collected and interpreted in historic villages indicate the role of rural market centers. The agricultural equipment rusting in the sheds document the technology that ended back-breaking physical labor on farms but that also made hired help obsolete. Some zoos have added heritage livestock breeds (chickens, cattle, horses and hogs) as part of the collections, and have installed farm houses and barns to create the natural environments for the domesticated animals.

### Step 3: Identify common concerns and mutual benefits:

WARNING: Museums operate in the public trust. They operate in the cross-hairs of public opinion. Museums become the place where the politics of public memory become most obvious, where the heated arguments about the past occur. Rural historians may get a very different impression of attitudes about their subject by engaging in discussions among antiquarians, museum staff and interested volunteers about the subject. Furthermore, museum staff do not have the same sort of “academic freedom” that historians in academic positions have. Boards direct the institutions, and institutional goals define the work to be done. Sometimes pressures beyond the control of any individual force decisions about sponsors for exhibits, whether or not to interpret controversial subjects, or whether or not to collect a specific item.

Staff in European museums that collect and interpret rural life often have advanced degrees in ethnography. In other words, they are trained at understanding culture and cultural history. They should be natural allies. In contrast, an anti-intellectual can surface in the United States where tension exists between practitioners trained in museum studies (more than 130 public history and museum studies and historical administration programs exist) and “academics.” The term “public history” indicates the regrettable separation.

Interdisciplinary approaches can inform the collection, preservation and interpretation of the rural past. Museums can benefit from humanists and other scholars of rural life to advise them (and scholars can benefit from the collections and from the public engagement). Scholars can provide historic context for topics of increasing interest to a public far removed from their food sources and living at considerable distance from rural and country life. The expertise of an

outsider can also prove invaluable to staff as they wrestle with decisions and debate the focus of a public program, seek partners for grant projects, or struggle with exhibit scripts and label copy.

Interdisciplinary approaches add depth to rural and farm history. Rural history draws on humanists and social/behavioral sciences while agricultural history requires additional talents in the sciences. Lessons in agriculture range from basic information on plant propagation and animal gestation to more complicated and controversial subjects such as genetic modification. Current research in biofuels offers opportunities to discuss non-renewable energy sources and its implications for rural life over centuries. Studies of water quality, environmental conservation, and soil science have increased understanding of fertilizer needs and have reduced runoff and helped mediate the real threats of red tides in oceans far from the fields on which farmers first apply the chemicals. Debates about the humane treatment of animals should engage knowledge and skills based in ethical reasoning, scientific research and social and behavioral sciences. The potential for public programming seems limitless with partners to help provide the content.

#### Step 4: The Collections and Research Potential:

With this overview of the potential for partnerships between museums and rural history experts, and the range of institutions available, let's shift direction to discuss one of the unique assets of museums – collections (tangible and intangible). Historians can learn a new technique of historical research (reading material culture).<sup>1</sup> Websites can help historians devise their research plans, but physical inspection must occur.

Once read, artifacts offer new insights. For instance, John Schlebecker, former curator of the Smithsonian Institution explained that “personal examination of a museum object often saves the historian from blunders. . . [Edward Kendall's] interest in seeing John Deere's earliest

plows led him to discover that they were made mostly of iron and had only a small strip of steel along the edge of the share. The whole story of plows and related implements will have to be rewritten in the light of Kendall's discovery. What is strange about this is that it took historians more than a century to make this fundamental discovery. Had they examined objects as carefully as they studied documents, they would have written more accurate history in the recent past."<sup>2</sup>

Darwin Kelsey, now director of a National Park Service agricultural heritage zone in the Cuyahoga Valley near Akron Ohio, knew, in 1970, that some disciplines such as art history, archaeology and anthropology "have long relied on material objects as the core of their documentary evidence. . . . [but] professional historians . . . have done little to augment written documents with artifacts."<sup>3</sup> Kelsey urged historians in museums to become conscious of the benefits of relying on artifacts as documents, and to become literate in material culture analysis. Then the collections at institutions such as Old Sturbridge Village could become the evidence needed to challenge traditional historical interpretations based on textual sources only. For example, the Pliny Freeman farmhouse and historic inventories of contents contradicted oft repeated statements about the self-sufficiency of New England farm families during the 1790s to 1840s.<sup>4</sup>

Adding this new dimension – the artifact -- to your research (quite literally, adding a third dimension!) requires proactive steps to find the artifact in the museum storage facility. To accomplish this task, historians need to know what museum curators call things. Nomenclature identifies standard names for artifacts that perform the same function (because calling a manure fork a manure fork separates it from other things that might look similar but that performed very different chores: the frog or fish gig and the potato digger for instance).

A cautionary tale: Access does not always come easy. It requires a time commitment on the part of researchers and of the institution to provide access. How many of you have visited a museum collection as part of your formal research plan? Start now – take a moment to think about an object that could inform your research. What museum would you visit to analyze that object? Next time you write a grant proposal, include a statement in your research plan that indicates what the museum visit will fulfill, and include a line item to fund the museum research trip. Identify an approach to reading those objects and forge ahead! For information on approaches, consult the articles by me and by Cameron Saffell and published in *Agricultural History*. They provide an overview of the value of material evidence as historic evidence, and provide some case studies to consider as you construct your methodology.

Incorporating agricultural artifacts into rural history research is really a life’s work. Success depends on developing the mindset needed to commit yourself to seeking agricultural artifacts as legitimate historical sources. Then you have to use them to document historical mindsets and change over time.

#### Step 5: Putting the Hand to the Plow: Learning by Doing

Reading objects is the first step of analysis. Sometimes understanding requires “putting the hand to the plow” literally. Living history farms and the replicated domestic environments and working landscapes provide laboratories that researchers can use to learn more.

Historians can interact with experts who practice traditional animal husbandry and crop cultivation methods in a landscape and with the crops and the stock species appropriate to the time period. ALHFAM and EXARC and AIMA exist to facilitate this sort of exchange, to help connect partners. Each of these organizations advocates for the value of using replicas in

complete environments to learn about the physically demanding tasks of stoop labor and other routines of rural life (yoke oxen, drive multi-horse hitches, repair wagon wheels, bake bread – this just touches the surface of experimental archaeological opportunities).

Ecomuseums in France feature traditional ox drover culture (as these images from Cozette Griffin-Kremer indicate. These indicate the ways that archaeological evidence, pre-historic rock art, documents technologies that traditionalists still use. Researchers must interact with these traditionalists to grasp the long heritage of a technology, and to understand the nuances of use and change (or continuity) over time.

Sometimes replicas can help researchers understand historic use of originals too fragile or rare to test. The curator of the McCormick collection worked with International Harvester mechanics and the *Romance of the Reaper* film crew to learn from a replica. IH mechanics in Chicago produced 100 replicas in recognition of the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of McCormick’s experiments in Virginia. These reapers made their way into agricultural collections all over the world (as this example at the museum in Chartres, France indicates). I could go on, but . . . Museum collections will realize their potential only when they become essential tools to studying the past. Let’s help make that goal a reality together.

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<sup>1</sup> Debra A. Reid, “Tangible Agricultural History: An Artifact’s-Eye View of the Field,” *Agricultural History* 86, no. 3 (Summer 2012), 57-76. Cameron Saffell, “An Alternative Means of Field Research: Extending Material Culture Analysis to Farm Implements,” *Agricultural History* 88, no. 4 (Fall 2014): 517-537.

<sup>2</sup> John T. Schlebecker, “Research in Agricultural History at the Smithsonian Institution,” *Agricultural History* 40, no. 3 (July 1966), 207-210, quote 208. John T. Schlebecker, *The Past in Action: Living Historical Farms* (Washington, D.C.: Living Historical Farms Project, Smithsonian Institution, 1967); John T. Schlebecker, *Living Historical Farms: A Walk Through the Past* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1968)

<sup>3</sup> Darwin P. Kelsey, “Outdoor Museums and Historical Agriculture,” *Agricultural History* 46, no. 1 (January 1972), 105-127, esp. pgs. 107-108, in Debra A. Reid, “Agricultural Artifacts: Early Curators, Their Philosophies and Their Collections,” *Proceedings of the 2010 ALHFAM Conference and Annual Meeting* (North Bloomfield, Ohio: Association for Living History, Farm and Agricultural Museums, 2011), 30-52.

<sup>4</sup> Kelsey, “Outdoor Museums,” 110-111 and note no. 15. Kelsey used Percy Wells Bidwell as an example of a historian that argued that rural New Englanders were self-sufficient in the 1790-1840 era, but interdisciplinary research yielded contradictory information and historic house interiors, including that at the Freeman Farm, illustrated in three dimensions the dependency on outside markets that kept New Englanders outfitted.