

Mything the Point! – Regional Renewal in the Riverina

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Conferences of this nature tend to cater predominantly for larger institutions from major urban areas. If we look at where delegates have come from for this conference we note that they are overwhelmingly from the major centres with just a sprinkling from the bush. Data received from the conference organisers indicates 85% attendance from urban areas and only 15% from rural areas.

This is a quirky paradox as the majority of museums within this country are in rural Australia and not in the major cities. As smaller museums are grossly under represented at this conference there is a tendency to banish them into oblivion.

We choose to forget them.

And not only do we choose to forget them we also, through their absence and silence, perpetuate negative myths about them. This afternoon I will be batting for the bush and presenting ten myths about rural museums which need to be put to the test.

Are we are mything the point when it comes to rural museums?

I believe we are and therefore wish to challenge some of the fictional or negative perceptions about our rural museums.

Myth 1 - The bush is stagnant, dead or decaying with little happening out there!

I'd like to use the *Museum of the Riverina*, situated at Wagga Wagga, in NSW as an example to challenge this myth. The *Museum of the Riverina* has undergone a period of rapid renewal over the past four years which contradicts any statement that the bush is dying, is dead, or both.

During this period our museum has undergone significant development and at the same time driven a regional revival within our local museums. This has included:

- Securing the financial commitment from the Wagga Wagga City Council to support and develop a regional museum;
- Successful grant funding from the NSW Ministry for the Arts (and must I say that without the support of both the WWCC and the NSW Ministry of the Arts we would never have achieved as much as we have);
- In terms of staff we have had the appointment of three professional staff members – a Manager, Curator and one of only two Regional Museum Officers in the State. This means that in 4 years the total paid staff complement in the Riverina has gone from only 2 paid staff at the Pioneer Museum in Griffith to 3 in Wagga Wagga, a Community Curator in Hay, 2 Museum Advisers in Gundagai and Junee and a Museum/Cultural Officer soon to be appointed at Coolamon;
- In Wagga Wagga we have developed two sites. The first, in the former Council Chambers, which was renovated to act as a venue for hosting travelling exhibitions with 18 shows presented in the past two years.
- To support these travelling exhibitions we have organised a larger number of public programs which have ranged from body painting workshops to film festival evenings to a variety of training sessions;
- The second site is the former Wagga Wagga & District Historical Society Museum, situated adjacent to the Botanic Gardens, which was leased, renovated and reopened by Council in September last year. This site focuses on the people, places and events which give

Wagga Wagga its unique character and includes the Wagga Wagga Sporting Hall of Fame;

- We've even managed to create and travel an exhibition about Olympians from the bush which was funded by Visions of Australia and toured fourteen venues in four states during 2001;
- An equally important element of the *Museum of the Riverina* is its regional museum program developed by the Regional Museum Officer, which incorporates 38 rural museums. Here there have been wonderful successes with new museums opening at Adelong and Barellan and with other capital developments pending in Coolamon, Gundagai, Junee and at our western border in Hay.

In terms of the regional program there has been a marked increase in:

- the writing of strategic plans,
- in the application of contemporary museum practices,
- in grant applications,
- in the appointment of new Museum Advisers or Community Curators,
- in the presentation of training workshops,
- the production of a quarterly newsletter
- and the development and piloting of a National training program for Museum Certificates III and IV which is currently running with 12 participants.

Time does not allow me to go into detail about these developments other than to say they have brought about a period of **regeneration** and **renewal** within our local museums. The energy and enthusiasm this has created belies any statement that the bush is stagnant or meandering in the doldrums. This does not imply we have achieved excellence on all levels. **We do have a long, long way to go** but the journey to improve our museums and their level of service has began and good progress is being made.

Much of the regional success is due to the wonderful work of my colleague Madeleine Scully, our Regional Museum Officer. If you wish to discuss any of these developments in greater depth with Madeleine she is in the audience and will be at the Regional Rave on Friday.

Myth 2 – Historical Societies have no imagination and have failed to provide for succession!

Most museums in the country are run by volunteer led Historical Societies. Many of these museums were started in the 1950s or 60s and their traditional volunteer base is literally dying. To illustrate this point during a strategic planning session at one of our local museums when the participants were asked to think about where would they be in five years time? Their response was emphatically open and honest, “We’ll all probably be dead!”

A dying traditional volunteer base is a challenge facing many local museums and places them at risk, as succession is not assured. Generally the loss of a volunteer is a double blow to the museum, as not only do they lose active members they also lose a bank of knowledge as these long term keepers of the knowledge seldom write information down.

The Wagga Wagga District & Historical Society recognised this threat five years ago and had the wisdom, foresight and the strength of character to enter into a lease agreement with the local City Council whereby Council agreed to lease and manage their site for 25 years. This was one of the key elements in the creation of the *Museum of the Riverina* and from the Society’s perspective ensured the ongoing survival and renewal of their museum. Their efforts over four decades were not wasted. Many other Societies could follow this model and lobby their local councils to manage their museums on their behalf.

Such a strategy is part of regional renewal where volunteer museums can morph themselves into becoming a local government community service, which is a desirable outcome with long-term benefits.

Myth 3 – More Volunteers are the only solution!

It has often been said to me over the past four years, when I've mentioned how stretched Madeleine and I are driving a hectic and varied work program, that we should find ourselves volunteers and our staffing problems would be solved. Having tested this path we don't believe it.

Yes, rural museums need volunteers and yes volunteers will continue to be valuable assets for smaller museums but they are not the ultimate long-term solution. What we need more of is paid, permanent, professional staff in the field.

Society and volunteering has changed. Gone are the days when you're going to get a team of volunteers who will stick with you for twenty or thirty years as has been the case in many small museums. Today potential volunteers have far more other attractions, opportunities or responsibilities to choose from to fill their free time. And in terms of youth, who suffer much higher unemployment rates in the bush than the national average would suggest, there is a need for remuneration.

We believe volunteering needs to shift from the generalist long-term approach to one which is event or project based and managed by a paid professional. Take for example the Sydney Olympic and Paralympic Games where ten of thousands of volunteers put up their hands to participate. There was no shortage – but the focus was on two sixteen-day events. Not a long-term commitment. The recent volunteer response to the bush fires in NSW is another case in point.

In an era where new, younger, volunteers may be hard to find local museums need to develop projects which are theme or activity based and implemented by individuals who have the skills and interest to complete such activities. Ideally some form of casual remuneration should be offered. In that way meaningful results can be achieved and celebrated.

It is important to keep in mind when thinking about the traditional volunteer run museum that we have at best a ten-year cycle before the foundation members disappear forever. In other words planning for succession needs to be a top priority.

Myth 4 – Small communities do not have the capacity to take on long term cultural development!

I'd like to use two examples to challenge this myth.

The first is Coolamon, 41km north of Wagga with a population of 1300 (and a Shire population of under 4000). They have recently commissioned a Cultural & Economic Development Plan which is aimed at securing the Shire's cultural heritage as a basis for ongoing quality of life and for economic revitalisation.

They want cultural tourism to be a crucial part of the Shire's economy with the main attraction being the refurbished Up to Date Store in the main street. The Up to Date Store was an important retail outlet since 1932. This building will now act as multipurpose venue including an information centre, a venue for functions and a museum aimed at interpreting the building, and housing the Garth Jones collection which is an important agricultural collection. The project is an initiative of the Coolamon Shire Council, NSW Heritage Office and the NSW Ministry for the Arts in partnership with the community. Australia Street Company did the report.

The second example is Barellan, about 180km northwest of Wagga Wagga. It forms part of the Narrandera Shire. It has a population of 390 of which 200 are Friends of the Museum Committee! In 2001 the Museum Committee and the Progress Association worked together with Centenary of Federation Funding to start and open a museum in town.

The event which included a Centenary of Federation Ball, opening of the Barellan Museum, morning tea, BBQ lunch at the showgrounds, a Gymkhana, a Rock and Roll Dance, a Grand Parade, and the crowning of the winner of the Charity Princess Competition was awarded the Best Event for 2001 by the Narrandera Shire Council.

The Museum Committee has also shown great entrepreneurial ingenuity by raising funds for the museum by developing an informal business centre which offers a fax, photocopying, and laminating service to their community. They also have a computer, and MOSAIC software and will soon become connected to the Internet which is an impressive statement for a community of fewer than 400 people.

Myth 5 – All rural museums are entrenched in the pioneering myth of opening up the land and portray only an Anglo-Celtic history!

Our experience with our travelling exhibition program is that there is a hunger and an interest in our community for diversity and new themes. Our most popular shows with the highest attendance figures in the past year were those which reflected on the Jewish Holocaust, Aboriginal issues and the Chinese in NSW.

Furthermore, our Museum in its recent renovations has included a contemporary Aboriginal display and a Sporting Hall of Fame to reflect a broader and younger demographic. We are also looking at an environmental theme to underpin all our future programs and activities. This is not to say that the pioneer story no longer has a voice or a role within our museums. It certainly does. What we are saying is that we should widen the lense to include other groups in our viewfinder as there are people within our communities who wish to see a broader and richer picture.

Myth 6 – When it comes to collecting we take anything and everything which comes to the door!

Museums can no longer afford indiscriminate and all encompassing collecting. Decades of open house, no-questions-asked collecting has left our museums bursting at the seams. Saying No! has become a sensible and desirable alternative. One of the most satisfying initiatives in this regard is the *How to Say No* workshops developed by the Museums and Galleries Foundation of NSW.

Our institution has **moved from a culture of collecting to a culture of care** and as a result we have a freeze on accepting material other than items which have a strong local relevance, are in good condition and come with a good story. Our primary task at present is to work through the enormous backlog of material which means cataloguing the entire collection using MOSAIC software and increasing and improving our storage capacity. It's a long tough task but critical for our future development and respectability.

Myth 7 - The tourist dollar will save you!

This may be true for small museums along the coast and those linked to popular tourist destinations but it certainly isn't true of Wagga Wagga and the Riverina. We are not typically a tourist destination due to our location, distance from the major centres and a lack of highly desirable tourist product.

Our focus therefore is to service our local community first. We place a premium on keeping the locals happy as the largest slice of our business comes from repeat local visitors or those visiting family members. The passing tourist for us is a bonus. This is not to say that we are not interested in the tourist market or we don't do anything to attract tourists. What it means is, unlike other areas this market is small in number and unlikely to dramatically increase in future.

Myth 8 - We can't do anything because we don't have any money!

This is a familiar small museum lament. Our response is dream rather than become immobilised or defeated.

Budgets and funds can be tight but if you have a dream, which you translate into a good concept, and a plan for action, then there are numerous avenues for applying for money. You may not get the funds first time round but try and try again. If your proposal is sound and well thought out, through perseverance and determination you will succeed over the long term.

In our area Coolamon, Gundagai and Adelong - all small communities with small museums - have received funding for capital works during 2001 or 2002. They have all received this funding for the first time and all are ecstatic about their success.

Like them convert your dreams into action.

Myth 9 - A grant will fix everything!

Another familiar sentiment from the bush. Don't be fooled by the notion if I get the money all my problems will be solved. Madeleine's reputation as a grants guru has grown considerably over the last two years. As a result she gets numerous calls from people who assume she has this bucket of money with which she showers the region. When pressed for what they want the funds for and how they will approach the project silence usually reigns. **Projects need to be thought out and thought through.** You need to visualise, verbalise and develop a plan with outcomes BEFORE you consider asking for funds.

This is such an obvious point but so often overlooked – think your projects through, write them down, work out the budget, who will do what and within what time frames. Only then can you start thinking about applying for funding.

Myth 10 - The only time larger institutions think of smaller museums is when they want to borrow something from them!

Does this sound familiar to those of you who work in smaller museums? Do we only come into larger institutions thought processes when they want something from us?

This may be true some of the time but there are wonderful opportunities for smaller museums to form partnerships with larger institutions when they come knocking on our door. This relationship can mean far more than them walking away with some of our treasures for some special national exhibition.

Let me give you an example of a good partnership. In the course of 2001 the Powerhouse Museum in Sydney travelled its *Births of a Nation* exhibition which focused on childbirth at the time of Federation. Yes they wanted items from our individual collections to make a great display but they offered a lot lot more in return.

This included:

- Staff from the PHM doing research at Riverina museums about selected items in their collections;
- PHM staff working with local staff to develop and install three satellite exhibitions at smaller museums while the larger *Births of a Nations* exhibition was hosted by the *Museum of the Riverina*.
- Administrative support – writing of labels, brochures and publicity.
- The research and development of “women’s history” town walks.
- On site workshops about how to care for the collection all of which made a meaningful and lasting contribution to each local museum.

In other words the PHM just didn’t breeze in take what they wanted for their own show. They worked with the local museum to enhance confidence and improve skill levels and by so doing left a lasting and meaningful memory in the form of interpreted collections, display panels, small exhibitions, brochures, a network of contacts and ongoing telephone advice and support to these museums.

This is the way we would like larger institutions to work with smaller museums. Show them some respect and move to form a partnership where some meaningful legacy is left behind for the benefit of the

smaller museum. For those of you who represent the 85% from urban museums what we are asking for is an ongoing relationship similar to the Historic Houses Trust's companionship district initiative. For those who represent the 15% of smaller museums our advice is don't wait to be asked. Be proactive. Take the initiative.

For those of you in NSW who wish to pursue this concept of developing meaningful partnerships between larger and smaller institutions a forum will be held in Hay on 5th and 6th of April 2002 to explore this topic. And in keeping with the spirit of the occasion the forum is a joint initiative of the PHM, MGF, Hay Museums and the *Museum of the Riverina*.

To conclude. What do I want you to forget and what do I want you to remember?

Firstly, let's put aside the negative perceptions of small museums and for those who work in small museums let's not wallow in our own inertia or sink under the weight of our collections.

Let's put the myths aside and remember the following points – some of which are aimed at urban institutions, some at the smaller museum, and some are applicable to everyone:

- 1. Enterprise, innovation and action is to be found in the bush.**
- 2. Volunteer museums need to invest in succession planning.**
- 3. View casual remuneration as an alternative to traditional volunteering.**
- 4. With help and guidance small communities can take on bigger projects.**
- 5. When it comes to exhibitions and interpretation there is richness in diversity.**
- 6. Replace the culture of collecting with a culture of care.**
- 7. Service your local community first.**
- 8. Dream, plan, act – don't be defeated.**
- 9. Dreams plus action plans open doors to funding opportunities.**
- 10. Partnerships bring rewards.**

I would be happy to speak to anyone afterwards who wishes to discuss any of the issues raised in this paper. And when next in the Riverina please feel free to visit us at the *Museum of the Riverina*. Thank you.