Education Programs:
Past, Present, and Future

by James Powers

Although museums have existed in some form or another for several centuries, educational concerns have not come to the forefront in these institutions until the last few decades. In this short time, educational programming has flourished in museums everywhere in the form of guided tours, living history programs, outreach programs, lectures, film series, and a wide variety of other educational opportunities. The museum’s role in the educational system is to enrich the classroom experience by providing instruction which brings the subject matter to life. Learning is facilitated when three-dimensional objects are available, and it is this supposition which forms the foundation for the majority of educational programming within the museum context.

From its inception in 1875, Society leaders have expressed an interest in providing public access to the museum collection, stating in 1892 that they recognized it to be “of intense interest to the youth and masses of our people.”¹ By the early twentieth century, about the time the Society was moving from the Capitol to the Memorial Building, this sentiment had been taken one step further. The museum was acknowledged to be “almost as important in an educational way as the library.”² A few years later, it was noted in a biennial report that “the educational value of the museum is recognized more and more each year by the schools. Many teachers bring their pupils here to look through the museum, with its historical relics and portraits, and we receive many testimonials to the value of these visits.”³

For some years, however, nothing was done to meet the educational needs of visitors beyond the presentation of static displays of historical relics accompanied by labels without specific educational objectives. The museum’s curator and only staff person would (if called upon) take time out of his busy schedule to answer questions.⁴ But this was the standard of the day. The Kansas State Historical Society Museum was, in fact, reported to be one of the best in the nation.⁵

It was not until the Society was almost seventy years old that organized educational programs were first available at the museum. In 1941 almost four thousand schoolchildren visited the museum in organized tours sponsored by the Santa Fe and Missouri Pacific railroads.⁶ With several hundred children each, the large size of these groups must certainly have limited the educational impact of

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1. Eighth Biennial Report, 1890-1892, 11.
the tours. Nonetheless, this was an admirable undertaking.

The Santa Fe Railway continued to organize tours of the museum intermittently for the next several years. Although continuing to express an interest in increasing the educational value of the exhibits, the museum took few steps to offer its own tours until 1956, when the annual report noted that guided tours were available on request and that some one hundred and fifty groups had taken advantage of this service.7

Thereafter, tours of the museum were available on a reservation basis. The stage was set for the blossoming of educational programming at the Society, and the next twenty years saw substantial progress.

As tour requests increased steadily, other forms of programming developed simultaneously. A Sunday afternoon film series began in 1962. The following year museum staff met with area social studies teachers to discuss how the museum could help schools teach history. This meeting resulted in the establishment of the first formal outreach program, with museum representatives giving talks to junior and senior high school students and clubs and other organizations. In 1965 the outreach program was expanded to include portable displays which traveled to area elementary and junior high schools. A conscious effort was made to tie all programs directly to the needs of the audience and to coordinate them with school curricula when possible.

With limited staff and increased demands for programs, however, it was clear that a major adminis-

trative reorganization was needed. Museums across the nation were coming to the same realization. Unable to hire additional staff to meet increasing requests for public programming, the Society, along with hundreds of other institutions, turned to volunteers. During the 1966-67 school year the museum’s volunteer force was organized under the auspices of the American Association of University Women. With assistance from senior girl scouts, volunteers took over the majority of the museum’s educational programs.8 They organized training


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A volunteer guide explains aspects of sod-house life to schoolchildren in 1978.
sessions, designed uniforms, and circulated volunteer bulletins.

With the formation of the volunteer organization, programming grew rapidly. A steady increase in the numbers served by guided tours was reported each year. Even during the 1973-74 gasoline crisis when the museum's overall attendance decreased, school-tour attendance increased by thirty-nine percent over the preceding year.\(^9\)

With the implementation of traditional craft demonstrations in 1975, volunteers became involved in a new education program. The museum's period rooms became the setting for Sunday afternoon weaving, spinning, butter-churning, and candle-making demonstrations. Volunteers also took these nineteenth-century Kansas crafts into the schools, giving “286 demonstrations to approximately 10,000 elementary school children” in the first year.\(^{10}\)

Thus in roughly twenty years a comprehensive educational program had been developed, although there still was no full-time staff person to oversee these activities. Finally, in 1978 a federal grant from the Institute of Museum Services (IMS) created the position of museum educator. With additional IMS and state support, the Division of Museum Education now consists of three full-time staff members.

The progress during the early years became the foundation for the expansion; after 1978 existing programs were improved and new programs were implemented. Based on the frequency of teacher requests, new theme tours were designed with specific instructional objectives. The craft program developed into a monthly activity involving scores of demonstrators, musicians, and performers. The film series became a full-fledged educational program complete with weekly interpretive handouts.

New programs opened the museum learning experience to new audiences. Special activities for handicapped visitors were made possible largely by the creation of an educational collection with reproduction artifacts for use in hands-on programs. The division also branched out to work with various Society departments to develop programs and co-sponsor events with broad appeal, such as the Children’s Area at the Kansas Folklife Festival. The Division of Museum Education also planned exhibit opening activities for the wide variety of temporary exhibits at the Society.

The most ambitious program was the traveling trunk program, implemented in 1980. Using a combination of reproduction artifacts, photographs, and teaching materials organized around specific themes, the trunks have become a valuable resource for those unable to visit the museum. Thirty-one units, each packed in its own footlocker, currently travel to every corner of the state, serving thousands of Kansans annually. The current trunk topics include “Farm Family in Kansas,” “Volga Germans in Kansas,” “La Raza: The Mexican-American Experience in Kansas,” “Archeology in Kansas,” and “Carpentry in Kansas,” with additional topics planned.

With the closing of the galleries on March 31, 1983, in preparation for the move to the new Kansas Museum of History, the Division of Museum Educa-

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tion faced a unique situation. While other museum divisions curtailed routine activities in favor of packing collections and planning for the new museum, the education division was given the responsibility of continuing to serve the public. Without galleries in which to operate, programming took the form of limited in-house and greatly increased outreach programming.

The film series continued to operate with a sister series at Fort Hays Frontier Historical Park. Several classes and workshop series were offered; “Crafts-Up-Close,” the first of these series, provided one-day workshops on rag rug braiding, spinning, Czech egg decorating, Cherokee basket making, and tatting.

During this period the outreach programming reached the greatest number of people. The traveling trunks continued to serve large numbers of Kansans, and three new outreach programs were implemented. “Voices of the South Wind,” a slide/tape show introducing the history of Kansas through modern times; “Slides, Guides, and Buffalo Hides,” a slide/tape program presented with reproduction artifacts by a museum representative; and “Crafts-in-the-Schools,” a program featuring nineteenth-century craft demonstrations, were given to school groups and other organizations upon request.

With the move to the new Kansas Museum of

James Powers explains soapmaking to students as part of the Crafts-in-the-Schools program.

History, the potential for innovative programming has increased dramatically, with flexible spaces for many types of programs—pre- and post-tour activities, workshops, classes, lecture series, and scholarly seminars. A nineteenth-century foodways program, currently being developed as a joint project between the Kansas Museum of History and the State Department of Education, will utilize the cooking area.

Another important feature in the education area is a small exhibit gallery for educationally oriented exhibits. Initially this space will be used for temporary exhibits around which tours and other programs will be developed. In time, plans call for this gallery to house the museum’s discovery room, stocked with hands-on exhibits and resource materials.

Facilities within the main gallery also will enhance programming. Teaching areas in key locations will provide space out of the main traffic flow to gather groups for programs dealing with surrounding exhibits. Built-in storage cabinets nearby will house reproduction artifacts and other props. For example, one teaching area adjacent to a reproduction emigrant wagon will serve participants in a program entitled “Life in a Wagon.” Visitors will have the opportunity to load the wagon, making decisions about what to bring on their “journey” west and what to leave behind.

Even the land on which the museum is built will become an eighty-acre classroom with a tremendous potential for programming. An interpretive trail is planned, taking hikers past natural features which have molded the history of the state. A nineteenth-century schoolhouse will provide a setting for living history programs for twentieth-century schoolchildren.