



The Flood: A Blessing in Disguise –

Disaster Management of the Leila Old Historic Costume Collection

Joyce Sun, Erika Iiams, Sandra Evenson

University of Idaho, USA

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Abstract

Founded in 1967, the Leila Old Historic Costume Collection holds over 10,000 articles dating from the Civil War to present day and serves as a teaching/learning resource for faculty and students of the University of Idaho. During Thanksgiving break in 2014, a flood in one of the storage rooms caused severe water and mildew damage to 1/6 of the collection. As the race to salvage the collection began, forgotten treasures were uncovered such as a Schiaparelle feather hat, vintage wool Jantzen swimwear, and mourning dress encrusted with jet beads. The misfortune provided an opportunity to cull and re-examine the collection; it brought faculty and students together as a community, offering a unique learning environment that also attracted public interest. It forced us to question existing accession policies when making tough decisions throughout the culling process. We constantly had to revisit our mission as a “teaching collection” when the collection is overcrowded and virtually inaccessible. The goal now is to restructure the collection so that it is both accessible to faculty and students while preserving the integrity of the collection. Several expansion proposals have been drafted and revision of the collections’ policy and management is underway. This paper is a documentation of the efforts made upon encountering a crisis and the chain of reactions it set into motion. It will discuss the gap between ideal and tangible practices in understaffed historic dress collections along with a new definition and concept for “teaching collections”.

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