

## Collecting Queensland Festivals

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### Abstract

*Collecting Queensland Festivals* was a 2 year state-wide project designed to encourage Queensland community museums to engage in contemporary collecting. Throughout 2008 the Queensland Museum's Museum Development Officers (MDOs) assisted eleven community museums across regional Queensland to collect stories, images and memorabilia from their local community festivals and develop displays to showcase the important place festivals have in their communities. Elements of each of the eleven displays were then combined into an online exhibition which was launched by Queensland Premier Anna Bligh in November 2009. This was the first time MDOs and Queensland community museums collaborated on a state-wide project.

### Collecting Queensland Festivals

*Collecting Queensland Festivals* was a 2 year state-wide project designed to encourage Queensland collecting organisations to engage in contemporary collecting. A survey conducted from 2005 - 2007 of 280 organisations throughout Queensland highlighted the fact that very few of these organisations were collecting contemporary history. In fact, most collections stop around the 1950s, which means the last 60 years of our history are generally not well represented in museums. The *Collecting Queensland Festivals* project was developed in an attempt to address this situation.

The project involved eleven community museums across regional Queensland, collecting stories, images and memorabilia from their local community festivals and developing displays within their own organisations about those festivals. These displays were then combined into an online exhibition.

The project was developed and lead by the Queensland Museum's, *Museum Resource Centre Network* (MRCN), of which I am a member. For

those of you who haven't heard of the MRCN, I'll explain a little about us.

The *Museum Resource Centre Network* is part of the Queensland Museum's Regional Services Program which delivers museum services state-wide. It's a partnership between the Queensland Museum and Arts Qld. The MRCN employs a team of six regionally based Museum Development Officers or MDOs as we're commonly known.

Each MDO has a designated region in which we live and work. Our regions and our base towns are as follows:

- Far North Qld – Cairns
- North Qld – Townsville
- Central Qld – Rockhampton
- Sunshine Coast – Cooroy
- Gold Coast and Western Corridor – Ipswich
- Southern Inland Qld – Toowoomba

We provide support to cultural heritage collecting organisations across the State. We don't just work with museums, but also work with historical societies, archives, local history libraries, keeping places and art galleries – in fact any not-for-profit organisation that collects cultural heritage.

We identify significant collections and assist regional communities to document, preserve, interpret and make these collections accessible. We do this by providing a professional advisory and 'hands on' training service that aims to raise the professional standards of regional organisations holding significant collections of cultural heritage. We generally work with clients on a fee for service basis; however we do provide some services and projects for free.

The *Collecting Queensland Festivals* project was offered to our clients free of charge as a means to encourage them to embrace the idea of collecting contemporary history.

At the time this project began the MRCN consisted of five MDOs.

Guidelines for the project were developed by the MDOs in 2008 with the aims being

- to encourage organisations to engage in contemporary collecting and exhibition development;
- to connect collecting organisations with their communities through partnership with festival organisations;
- to promote museums, community cultural heritage and tourism opportunities;
- to contribute to the Q150 celebrations

For those who don't know what Q150 is - in 2009, Queensland celebrated its 150<sup>th</sup> birthday with a year long party. Activities and events were planned throughout the state and we were keen to include this project as a part of those celebrations.

The project was also designed to provide training and professional development for the participating organisations' volunteers. But the MDOs weren't to miss out either – the project was seen as a great opportunity to enhance our capacity in working with digital media.

The festival theme was chosen as a significant Queensland contemporary history story common to many Queensland communities and popular with a wide age group. It was also thought that festivals would compliment the Q150 theme of community celebration in 2009 – which would hopefully attract some funding. Which fortunately it did!

The overall project was developed in two stages.

Stage 1 was undertaken throughout 2008 and early 2009. Each MDO invited selected collecting organisations within their region to participate in the project. The following eleven organisations across regional Queensland became our project partners:

1. Abbey Museum - Abbey Medieval Festival
2. Capricorn Coast Historical Society – Pineapple Festival
3. Chinchilla Museum – Chinchilla Melon Festival
4. Cooktown & District Historical Society – Discovery Festival

5. Kilkivan & District Historical Society – Gympie Muster
6. Mackay Historical Society – River to Reef Festival
7. Maleny Historical Society – Woodford Folk Festival
8. Millmerran Museum – Australian Camp Oven Festival
9. Mt Morgan Museum – Golden Mount Festival
10. Sarina District Historical Centre - Discover Sarina Festival
11. Stanthorpe Museum – Apple and Grape Harvest Festival

MDOs worked with the partner organisations providing volunteers with training in contemporary collecting, copyright and exhibition development. Volunteers from each partner organisation worked with festival organising committees and their local community in order to collect stories, images and memorabilia from their festivals.

With the assistance of the MDOs, each organisation prepared and presented small displays within their own organisations that showcased the important place festivals have in their communities.

The MDOs also encouraged partner organisations to seek support to assist with the development of displays. Mt Morgan Museum and the Millmerran Historical Society received funding for new display cases and interpretation panels and Mt Morgan also received funding for radio and printed publicity. In the Southern Inland Queensland region, a partnership was formed with the Southern Queensland Institute of TAFE Photoimaging Department. Students produced a photographic record of the three festivals in that region and used those images to create posters about the festivals.

All images and posters were donated to the relevant organisations' collections and were used in their displays.

In Stage 2 of the project, the MRCN was fortunate to receive Q150 funding to support the development of an online exhibition utilising elements of each of the eleven individual displays.

In order to embark on this stage of the project the MDOs needed to undertake some professional development of their own. Firstly, one of the Queensland Museum's award winning photographers, Jeff Wright provided us with hands-on training in photographing artefacts, especially artefacts behind glass and Perspex, while in the field with limited equipment. These skills were used to photograph the individual festival display items for the online exhibition.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> hurdle to cross was learning to prepare material for the web. We had to prepare images and a script for a digital story; images and text for the content of the site; design the website architecture; and deal with all the web related intellectual property and copyright issues - which was a nightmare.

We were ably guided through this process by Queensland Museum's Information Technology department. This was a steep learning curve for everyone involved. The MDOs in turn then trained our partner volunteers to help prepare the content for the website. With Q150 grant funding we were able to engage consultants to produce a digital story on the project and to create the final web design.

The end result is the *Collecting Queensland Festivals* website, <http://www.qm.qld.gov.au/microsites/collecting-queensland-festivals/index.html>, which was launched by the Queensland Premier and Minister for the Arts, Anna Bligh, on 13 November 2009. We were fortunate to be able to launch the website as part of the Museum and Gallery Services Queensland's, Gallery and Museum Achievement Awards ceremony held at the Queensland Museum.

This was a very long and time consuming project for the MDOs and very difficult to manage over great distances. But after hundreds of emails and many conference calls, what were the outcomes?

The project was the first of its kind in Queensland and possibly Australia in a number of ways:

- 1<sup>st</sup> time all the MDOs and Queensland regional collecting organisations collaborated on a state-wide project

- 1<sup>st</sup> time the idea of contemporary collecting was formally introduced to the QLD regional collecting sector
- 1<sup>st</sup> state-wide online project involving regional collecting organisations and presenting museum displays to a wider, international audience via the internet
- And for many of our project partners it was the first time their collections have had an online presence.

At the project's completion, partner organisations and the MDOs were surveyed to evaluate its success. In general, our partners believed the project increased their knowledge and understanding of contemporary collecting, stirring organisations to actively request specific contemporary material from their community. Many of the organisations report they are now confidently planning to focus on collecting and displaying more contemporary material including:

- developing a display on the contemporary history of the local light horse brigade;
- collecting photographs and stories of senior members of the community;
- publication of one of the festival histories;
- recording urban change in local buildings and locations

The profile of partner organisations was raised resulting in increased support and interest from the local community, businesses, media and council. One organisation reported that as a direct result of the project they've been receiving ongoing contributions to the collection from the community; increased financial and in-kind support from local businesses and requests for regular contributions from the local media.

Outcomes of the website are harder to measure as it's expected to have a longer term impact on visitor planning. Considerable print and radio media coverage was received when the website was launched, focusing Queensland's attention on our project partners and their collections. It's hoped that this interest will result in increased access to the collections over time.

In the ten months since the website was launched there have been over 12,000 visits to the site and

the State Library of QLD considered the website significant enough to archive.

And what of the MDOs?

All felt that working on a web based project was a particularly valuable exercise. The website component of the project provided the MDOs with professional development in the areas of photographing objects, digital storytelling, writing for the web, website design, and intellectual property and copyright for the web.

The MDOs plan to utilise these new skills again in the near future by developing another website, focusing on significant collections across Queensland. The compilation of significance assessments for regional museum collections is another state-wide project the MDOs have been working on for the past 3 years.

### **About the Author**

For the past eight years Vicki Warden has worked as the Museum Development Officer for Southern Inland Queensland, based at the Cobb & Co Museum in Toowoomba, as part of the Queensland Museum's Museum Resource Centre Network. Since 2008, Vicki has also fulfilled the role of Museum Development Coordinator for the Network. In a previous life Vicki worked in the field of paper conservation and preservation for 16 years within archives, libraries, galleries and museums around Australia. Vicki loves helping regional museum workers achieve their goals.