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Warrnambool & District Historical Society

Left to right: Rosemary Isaac, Secretary; Marita Murphy, Vice-President; Barbara McLeod, Treasurer; Janet Macdonald, President; Glenys Phillpott OAM, past president.

Photo credit: Nola Golding

Case study 4: Warrnambool and District Historical Society Inc, Victoria

www.warrnamboolhistory.org.au

Summary

Warrnambool and District Historical Society Inc (WDHS) is a volunteer-run institution using the Victorian Collections IMS, and progressively making its collection digitally accessible through its own website, Victorian Collections and Trove.

Background

WDHS is an archive and museum. It has no paid staff but an established and dedicated team of 18 volunteers. It has an internet connection, access to smartphones and NBN is soon to arrive. Many computer terminals are evident.

WDHS operates with three main focuses — conservation of collection items, research and education. It has pursued its conservation role by collecting and preserving items of local and broader historical interest. In addition to preserving material culture, it has also sought to preserve local historical knowledge. This goal has seen the WDHS having a research and publication role. It has made substantial progress in making the collection digitally accessible through Victorian Collections, Trove, and on its own website.

Community

Warrnambool City Council is a municipality covering 120sqkm in south-west Victoria. It contains the city of Warrnambool, which has a population of 33,300. Prior to the arrival of Europeans, Warrnambool was home to a significant Indigenous population.

Tourism is a major driver of the city's economy. Each year more than 700,000 people visit Warrnambool and it is home to the award-winning Flagstaff Hill Maritime Village and the council-owned and managed Warrnambool Art Gallery.

Community engagement and partnerships

WDHS provides research services for Society members and also members of the public. It supplies information on request to Warrnambool City Council's planning department in relation to heritage issues, street naming and specific projects. It works cooperatively with fellow historical societies in the region, for instance support was given to Port Fairy Historical Society for its *Casino* online exhibition.

WDHS also supports and receives advice from the Cheeseworld Museum, Flagstaff Hill Maritime Village and Warrnambool Art Gallery. It receives professional guidance and technical support from local information technology businesses.

WDHS works closely with the Warrnambool Family History group in shared accommodation. The two incorporated organisations aim to eventually integrate all their records and databases. The WFHG has recently digitised its card file system (30,000 cards). The groups have also integrated their library and are now using a common catalogue. All digital records are on a single server with access to members of both groups.

WDHS is affiliated with the Royal Historical Society of Victoria and Museums Australia (Victoria). Both organisations have run regional workshops at WDHS related to digital technology in recent years. The Society is working toward Museums Australia Accreditation and sees value in its experience participating in major online partnership projects like *The ANZAC Story*.

Collection

The WDHS has over 13,000 items in a variety of formats comprising art works (30+); badges, coins and medals (300); docketts (1,320); ledgers, minute books (795); miscellaneous small items (60); original documents (1,250); textiles (350); cards, tickets, letterheads (400); artefacts (1,000+); books (1,400); labels (250); maps (250); photographs (7,000); programs (450) and tourist guides (100). In addition, there is a huge research resources collection, which includes the combined files and library of WDHS and the Warrnambool Family History Group.

Three-quarters of the collection is catalogued and this work is ongoing. The catalogue comprises paper records, card files and computer databases (Access and Excel).

The Society cares for its collections and they are suitably boxed and stored. A climate controlled and secure archive is being established in a separate building to the research centre.

“The Society finds the Victorian Collections IMS has most of the features they need and more and they aim to use it for the majority of their collections.”

Hardware

The Society has an SLR camera with specialist lenses and two A3 scanners.

Software

The Victorian Collections Information Management System (IMS) is used primarily for artefacts and documents.

The reasons the WDHS decided on the Victorian Collections IMS were:

- Access to valuable and fragile items is limited and it helps preservation;
- It is free with no license or potential costs to the Society;
- It is well supported and backed up regularly;
- The Society is offered training through regional workshops that come to them;
- It was offered to the Society at the right time when they were considering how to combine and upgrade databases and further digitise their collections and offer digital access to them;
- Museums Australia (Victoria) workshops and support are offered;
- The platform gives remote or home access for the team and can also be used to answer enquiries;
- It suits the ability and previous experience of volunteers who are mainly seniors; and
- A comprehensive information manual (small Museums Cataloging Manual) was offered.

The Society finds the Victorian Collections IMS has most of the features they need and more and they aim to use it for the majority of their collections. However, it is likely that the photographs database (in Excel) will remain separate, though some images have been catalogued using both systems, and the Society has doubts about the IMS's suitability for its genealogy records. It hopes a future upgrade would allow the tagging of related records and the handling of family history records.

Images are held in JPEG format but increasingly the Society is moving to TIFF. Images are backed up to the Cloud.

Process

WDHS enters information into the Victorian Collections IMS manually to ensure high quality, consistent data entry and the Society does not make entries live until they are fully completed. Each entry takes an estimated 3 hours (45 minutes actual data entry and over two hours of research and compilation). The team described the process as being labour intensive even though the IMS only holds limited information.

Entering items into the Victorian Collections IMS is enabling the Society to review and update all its collection documentation, some of which is held in old databases. The group is aware that the old databases could possibly be converted to Excel spreadsheets and imported straight into the IMS but they have chosen not to do so. They are working towards having the IMS as their primary collections management database.

WDHS currently has over 1,300 items on Victorian Collections, linked to Trove.

Challenges

- WDHS is making great strides with digitisation but there is never enough time available. There is a significant backlog of documentation and cataloguing for acquisitions.
- Initially, the cataloguing team found that there were many steps to get from the Victorian Collections IMS to providing digital collections access via the web. They have worked at streamlining and simplifying the process.
- Not all their collections documentation information and fields can be added to the IMS, which is a simple database mainly developed for objects. The Society retains detailed object files and expressed concern about what happens to the information in the object files in the long term or the information in the old databases which cannot be easily added to the Database. The Society also considers this as reductionist but is pragmatic about the advantages that the Database provides to them.
- The WHDS has concerns about the potential for loss and theft of images on their website and on shared digital platforms.
- The Society finds it difficult to decide the priorities for its website with so much material available. It endeavours to prioritise the most significant items and finds the method in *Significance 2* useful in this process.

Opportunities

- WDHS finds that a strong web presence increases the Society's public profile and interest. When images are posted on Facebook the group notes many comments and a significant amount of community interest.
- Among other things, the WDHS website is used for story-telling (seven stories have been added). The Society also publishes books and booklets which are a lasting saleable item for revenue.
- The Society's website generates many online inquiries. Some are time consuming and out of scope — for example, requests for valuations — others are image purchase requests which produce revenue. There are 111 images on the website out of a total of 5,000+ images. The images on the website are representative of their entire collection and are generally ones which have been popular with the public, have been purchased in the past and therefore have undergone digital enhancement.
- The Society derives income from hourly research fees and image sales, and hopes that greater digital collections access through Victorian Collections and Trove will encourage grants and donations and generate more sales and research revenue.

Conclusion

The WDHS is successfully digitising its collection and making it accessible to researchers. It has embraced the Victorian Collections IMS as a free, well-supported collections management system, and this has prompted the review of documentation and upgrading of legacy databases. A high degree of pride is evident in ensuring that the work the Society enters and publishes online is of a high quality and the process is viewed as an opportunity for a collection documentation 'stock take'.

The Society uses the Victorian Collections platform and Trove to make the collection digitally accessible. The WDHS website remains a separate means to make the knowledge in its collection accessible for digital storytelling.

Digital access is expanding the Society's potential for public engagement and revenue generation.