INDIANA HISTORICAL SOCIETY
COLLECTIONS ADVISOR
A RESOURCE FROM IHS LOCAL HISTORY SERVICES

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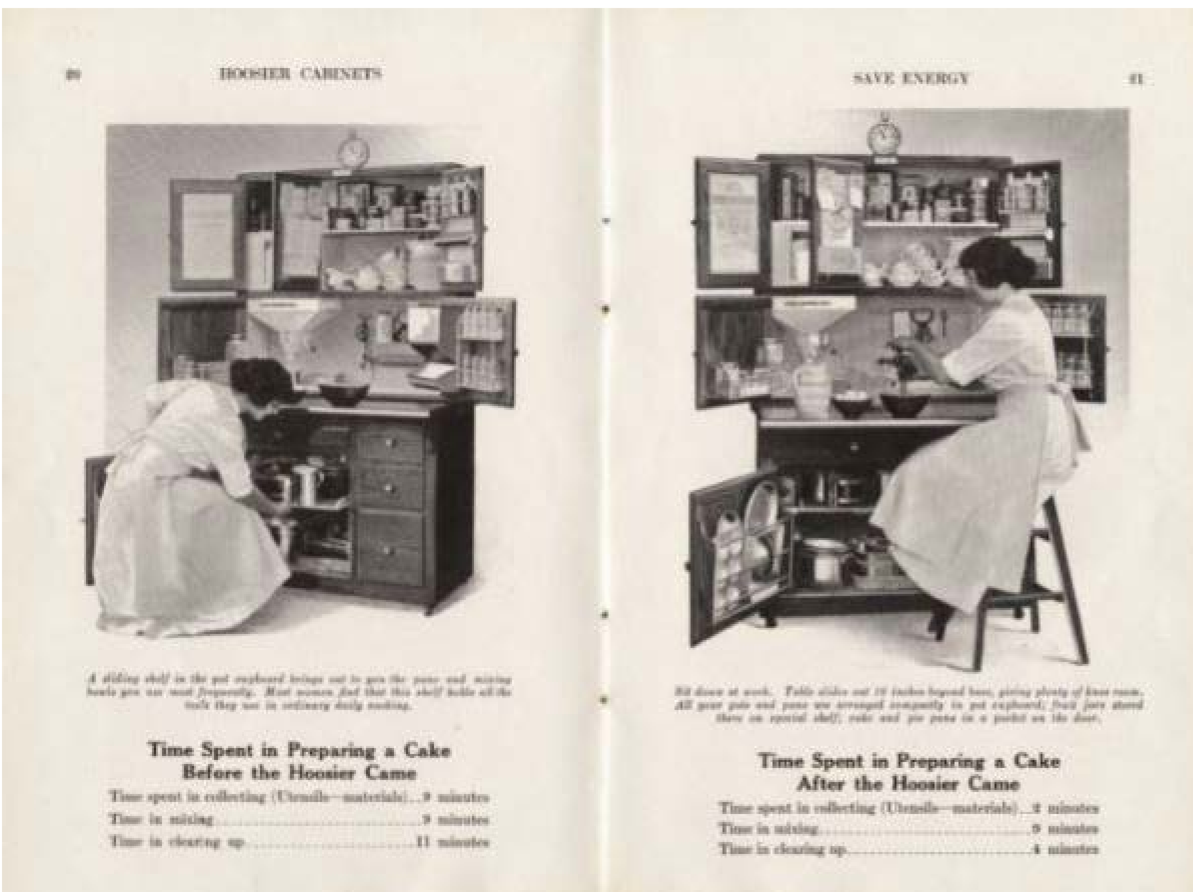
Organization is Key

By Karen DePauw, Manager, Local History Services

We all understand the importance of being able to find things quickly and easily in our collection storage areas, but what about in our collection work areas? It is just as important, or potentially more so, to know what is happening with collection items that are still in the process of being considered for, or added to, the collection. This is the time when items are in limbo concerning legal custody and usually do not have permanent numbers physically attached to them, making it very easy to separate the items from their records. Here are a few tips on how to make sure collection work areas are well organized.



Hoosier Cabinets Saving Time and Energy (Indiana Historical Society)

1) Have a process.

One of the most important things you can do to help keep areas containing collections organized is to have clear processes. Know what happens from the moment an item comes in as a potential accession all the way to it finding a permanent home in storage. Have processes for things that are accepted and things that are declined. These processes should be clearly outlined and known by all those who deal with the collection. Have copies of the process available and easily accessible to all.

2) Designate areas for items in different parts of the process.

This might be certain shelves or even Sterilite tubs (since it is temporary storage, these work just fine). Either way, clearly mark each area for the categories of items it contains: recent items for accession consideration; items accepted for accession but need numbers attached; items awaiting permanent homes; or any other category that makes sense for the institution and its process.

3) Create a checklist.

Having a checklist of each important step in the process can be very helpful when working with a team to move items along in the process from potential accessions to fully tagged and housed collections items. This list can help everyone know what the item needs next: approval to accession, a signed deed of gift, a physical number, a photograph, and so on. By having a simple checklist that lives with each set of items, the team can easily and effectively communicate where each item is in the process at all times. A checklist can be particularly helpful if you have a small area for items coming into the collection that does not allow space for separating out things as suggested in bullet number one.

Fall Creek Sweet Peas Label (Indiana Historical Society)

4) Label, label, label!

Label everything clearly at all times and make careful notes. This goes for everything in the collection work area, not just the items in process of being added to the collection. If items were declined for the collection and need to be returned to the donor, label those items clearly. If items have been found in the collection and are now in the work area so their histories can be researched and sorted out, label them. Labeling items with all the information known about them is very important to keeping intellectual control over items in the organization’s care. Never assume you will remember specifics about an item from one day to the next.

5) Make two copies of important paperwork.

It can be very helpful to have one copy of the temporary custody receipt and/or deed of gift that stays with the potential collection items until they are completely processed and housed, and one copy of each document that can be filed and used for creating catalogue records. This way when the registrar (whether paid or volunteer) needs to utilize the information from the paperwork there is no risk that the paperwork will get separated from the items. This avoids the risk that the next person will not know what paperwork goes with what items. This can make for frustrating, and completely preventable, issues. By having a second copy that remains with the items until they are fully processed, this frustration can be eliminated.

Interior of Montgomery Ward's Department Store (Martin Collection, Indiana Historical Society)

By taking the above steps, you can help get a currently unorganized collection work area under control and keep it organized. Communicating what has been done and needs to be done with each set of items is vital especially in a team dynamic. This can be particularly true if the care and processing of the collection is primarily done by volunteers who may not always work on the same days or at the same times. Knowing what has been done and what still needs to be done with each item in the collection work area improves collection stewardship and helps the museum run smoother.

Further Resources

- Collections Advisors (Indiana Historical Society)

Collection Trainings

Museum Security Fundamentals
July 20 – (Connecting to Collections Care)

Tackling Nostalgia: The Creation of “Sit Down to Take a Stand”
August 2 – (Texas Historical Commission)

Webinars
Recorded – (Indiana Historical Society)

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