

Striving to solve

It all started with a fire. In 1899, a section of Moses Kimball's Boston Museum was damaged by flames. His heirs decided to close the museum, by then a collection of half a million objects, and instead stage theatricals.

But first they contacted Charles Willoughby at the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology (ethnology is the study of human cultures) at Harvard University in Cambridge, Mass. Did Mr. Willoughby want any items from the Boston Museum?

In the 19th century, museums were relatively new. Kimball's collection, like that of circus impresario P.T. Barnum, was as likely to include a two-headed calf or the "Feejee Mermaid" (a creature constructed from fish and monkey parts) as it was artifacts from Indian peoples of the American West.

Willoughby was interested. One day in May he hitched a team to his wagon and drove it across the Charles River to Boston. He selected more than 1,400 objects and hauled them back to the Peabody.

Among the objects he chose were the only surviving native American objects that Lewis and Clark had collected on their famous expedition of 1804 to 1806. But more than a century would pass before the world would know which objects they were. It took anthropologist and curator Castle

McLaughlin and her 20-plus colleagues seven years to identify the Lewis and Clark objects. How did they do it?

To be a museum curator, you have to be a bit of a detective. Ms. McLaughlin, an associate curator of North American ethnography at the Peabody, already knew something about the Lewis and Clark objects hidden among the six million items owned by the museum. The artifacts had traveled a long and twisting road.

Lewis and Clark had given the items to President Thomas Jefferson. Jefferson in turn gave some to Charles Willson Peale's Philadelphia Museum, which in turn gave some to the Boston Museum. From there they went to the Peabody via Willoughby's cart in 1899.

McLaughlin had labels, lists, journals, and correspondence from the 19th century. She also had objects, hundreds of them. But how to put the pieces together to prove which items came from the expedition and which did not?

"This is the culmination of a lifetime of preparation," McLaughlin says.

Sitting in her office, she is surrounded by sculptures and artwork from the American West. She has spent her whole life around Indian peoples and has enormous respect for them and the objects they create. She grew up in Tulsa, Okla., and her father collects Western native American art. She was "surrounded with mementos of the West and books about it," she says. "I was born sharing those interests."

McLaughlin decided to begin at the beginning: "We threw out everything that had been known before and started over," she says.

Step 1: Which objects are likely?

First she examined all the objects Willoughby brought from the Boston Museum. She separated out all the native American items, about 300 of them. Next she put the objects into categories – tobacco pouches, hats, pipes, arrows, robes – and began asking questions. Is this object old enough to have been collected by Lewis and Clark? Did it match a tribal style of the period? Did the explorers mention it or draw it in their journal? Is it in letters between Jefferson and the expedition?

McLaughlin and her team compared the objects to similar pieces in other museums. They researched parts of an object – such as mallard duck necks, feathers, shell beads, silk ribbons, furs, and wood – to place them geographically or culturally. Rose Holdcraft, head of conservation at the Peabody, could look through a microscope at a sample of cloth and pin down its date and country of origin

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Continued on next page



Among the six million artifacts were items from Lewis and Clark. But records were poor: How could she find out which ones they were?

Do your own research

Is there a 'mystery object' in your family? Something you'd like to know more about? Castle McLaughlin, a curator of Harvard's Peabody Museum, offers these tips:

- Find out what the object is made of. Break it down into its component parts and research the materials: the paint or glaze; the type of wood, metal, or ceramic, etc.
- Look for objects similar to yours in local museums or on the Internet (many museums have collections online). Let's say you see a pitcher that looks like yours. The museum's pitcher is from Kentucky. Research Kentucky pottery at the library or online. Some museums offer to identify objects on certain days. Or your museum may be able to tell you whom to talk to.
- Go to flea markets and yard sales. Look for objects similar to yours and talk to their owners about what they know about them.
- Watch PBS! Particularly 'Antiques Roadshow' and 'History Detectives.'

history's mysteries

Continued from previous page

based on the material and its weave. Carla Dove, the nation's only forensic ornithologist, identified bird feathers and beaks used in many objects. "She could identify the bird from a tiny piece of fluff," McLaughlin says with awe.

Of the 300 Indian artifacts, McLaughlin and her team firmly established that seven were from Lewis and Clark's trip: a bag made from an otter hide; two decorated bell-shaped hats woven from roots, bark, grass, fur, and hide; three men's belts ornamented with raven's bodies; and a bear-claw necklace. "I'm positive some of these are Lewis and Clark!" she exclaims, indicating other objects in the collection. "But we can't prove it."

At least they have seven. Many objects didn't survive. "There's a ship full of Lewis and Clark expedition treasures that sank in the Chesapeake Bay," McLaughlin says. They were lost being shipped home by the explorers.

New insights on Lewis & Clark

To McLaughlin, the objects are important as symbols of the first encounters between Indian nations and the fledgling United States. Looking at the objects, she and her colleagues concluded something new about them. Thomas Jefferson sent Meriwether Lewis and William Clark to find a Northwest Passage to the Pacific. He also gave them a scientific mission: Collect animals, minerals, and plants; make maps and careful observations.

But when McLaughlin looked at the list of objects Lewis and Clark had collected, she understood something else about the expedition: Many of the tribal gifts were diplomatic in nature. Among the items described were robes made of animal hides and painted with scenes from actual battles, and calumets (sacred pipes) decorated with woodpecker bills tied beak-backwards (to signify nonaggression). Lewis and Clark weren't just collecting objects, McLaughlin says, they were forging ties with fully equal Indian partners. The objects told of alliances made by the ambassadors of a young nation in need of Indian allies.

"Jefferson's primary goal," the curator concludes, "was to secure political control over the interior by establishing trade relations with Indian peoples."

Lewis and Clark presented peace medals to their Indian hosts. In return, Indian leaders often gave them pipes and robes. "It wasn't to be nice," says McLaughlin. The leaders wanted their gifts to go to the president of US, so he



PHOTOS BY JOHN NORDELL - STAFF

SEARCH FOR MEANING: Associate curator Castle McLaughlin looks at a Pomo basket in a Peabody Museum storeroom.



SACRED PIPE: The calumet on display is decorated with woodpecker bills tied in a way to indicate nonaggression.

would treat the tribes generously. "Generosity," McLaughlin adds, "is one of the most important values among Indian people. It was true then, and it's true now: The more you give, the more you get. I believe the reason these things were brought back is that Lewis recognized their meaning and value."

Lewis and Clark spent more on gifts than on anything else on the expedition. They brought back more pipes – icons of peacemaking even today – than any other object. One is on display in the current exhibition, "Nation to Nation: Examining Lewis and Clark's Indian Collection," at the Peabody Museum through December 2005.

"Objects – what they meant socially, symbolically – represent choices of Indian people," McLaughlin says. "They are the voices of those people. That's why these objects and their stories are so important."

Lesley Bannatyne

Interns find a lost treasure

All Peabody curator Castle McLaughlin had was the label: "Indian Necklace made of the claws of the Grizzly [sic] Bear – Presented by Capt. Lewis and Clark." It was handwritten on faded paper from the 19th century. The necklace itself – extraordinarily rare and valuable – was gone. Ms. McLaughlin had looked for it for years. But another note indicated that it had been returned to the family that had donated it. McLaughlin feared it was lost forever.

She never guessed it was in a dusty box in her own museum.

The necklace, probably given to Lewis and Clark by a tribal chief, was donated to the Philadelphia Museum (the Smithsonian Institution of its day) in 1828. When the museum went bankrupt in 1843, many of its objects, including the Lewis and Clark collection, were acquired by businessman Moses Kimball for his Boston Museum.

When Kimball's heirs decided to give up the museum business, they gave their Lewis and Clark objects to the Harvard University's Peabody Museum – but kept the necklace.

A generation later, in 1941, a Kimball heir gave the necklace to the Peabody, where it was mislabeled as whalebone and sent to sit among Polynesian artifacts. There it sat, on a shelf above eye level, for 62 years.

Fast forward to December 2003: Curatorial assistants Tilly Laskey and Kara Gniewek, working on an Oceania cataloging job, came across

the necklace: 38 bear claws, each a good three inches long, attached with rawhide and fur, probably from a weasel. The interns, knowing these were claws, not bone, contacted their supervisor, who told McLaughlin.

"I felt a sense of recognition," McLaughlin says about seeing the necklace for the first time. "I knew the instant I saw it, I knew that was it. It has a lot of power... It represents the natural world; the grizzly bear that loomed so large in the psyche of people of that day." Few non-Indians had ever seen a grizzly then.

After nearly two centuries, the necklace has now been reunited with its original label.

L.B.



HILLEL BURGER/PEABODY MUSEUM

BEAR-CLAW NECKLACE: It survived a wilderness journey, bankruptcy, obscurity, and mislabeling before being rediscovered on a museum shelf.