

Is There an “Electric Salad Bowl” in Your Schoolhouse Museum Collection?

By Sarah Uthoff

"What's an electric salad bowl, you ask?" In the old Gil Gerard version of “Buck Rogers,” there was a scene when he was first shown his new apartment decorated by a historian of the 20th century. Did Buck point out to his friends everything this historian got right? No, he cocked an eyebrow and informed his friends that he didn't have the heart to tell the historian that the lamp on the table wasn't an "electric salad bowl." The reasons behind the misidentification were well thought out and made sense, but nothing could get around the fact (to those who really knew) that it just wasn't an electric salad bowl.



It's easy to laugh, but there just might be some electric salad bowls (things wrongly identified, from a different time period, poor conservation practices) in your collection, too.

Ask yourself the following questions in evaluating the artifacts in your museum:

1. Is anything just “olde thyme” in your collection?
2. Are the people you talk about real people at a particular place and time or just residents of “the past”? Could Benjamin Franklin and Franklin Roosevelt talk to each other, just because they both lived in the past?
3. What are people getting out of your exhibit? People tend to see the familiar items, but to notice the unfamiliar takes a bit more effort. Sometimes it takes someone or something deliberately drawing attention. Just think for yourself about how if you learn a new word, how you suddenly start seeing it everywhere.

4. Do you really understand everything your stuff is trying to tell you? Don't assume you know what something was for. Ask how do you know? Do we see it the same way they did? Many people mistakenly put today's meaning on yesterday's various uses by many different, cultural groups. Don't assume you know what people meant.



5. Is anything in your museum identified just because it looks like it is something? It is all too common for people to have said this looks like something, then that must be what it is.

6. How do you know what your artifacts really are? Is the story too good to be true? Don't always believe something on the basis of one person's story.

7. Why are you showing an artifact or doing an activity? What is your purpose? What is the visitor getting out of it? These questions and comparison with other one-room school museums

can help you take a fresh look at your museum. Don't be complacent. Ask questions. Make your museum's motto, like that of 4-H, "To make the best better."



Specific Electric Salad Bowls I've Seen:

The following are from actual "electric salad bowls" I've seen in various museums or "information" displayed or shared about one-room schools. Don't let your museum get caught in these traps.

A. Lamination doesn't save paper. DON'T laminate anything original!

B. Check and back up your scrapbooks. "If you don't write it down, it never happened."

C. Stoves wouldn't burn well on sticks picked up along the way to school. Coal was very common.

D. An 1895 Eighth Grade Exam from Salinas, Kansas isn't a good fit for most schools, is repetitious for visitors, and provided without specific and necessary background information and no answers only proves frustrating to visitors. If you want to show a generic eighth grade exam, I suggest one that is available on-line from the South Dakota Agricultural Museum. These questions are not only answerable, but the answers are provided.



E. A set of rules or contract for teachers from 1872 in New York would have little application for most one-room school museums. Teacher conditions varied greatly by area and time and can't be summarized in any one document. Remember you don't make a rule unless something is actually happening.

Conclusion: One-room school museums have often sprung up from a community movement to preserve the local schoolhouse. As with anything that has grown haphazardly over time, it is important to take a step back to get a clear idea of where you have been and where you are going. Every museum should be on the lookout for things that don't belong, aren't clear, or have been wrongly interpreted. You shouldn't ask, "Is this possibly all right?" but, "Is this the best it could be?" If the answer you come to is no, you should change.

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***This article was also previously posted in the Country School Association Newsletter. We are reprinting articles of lasting interest to our members!**