The New Special Collections Gallery

By Kathleen Wendell, Registrar/Collections Manager

Violins, an engine for a Pierce-Arrow automobile, a bikini designed by Oscar de la Renta, beer kegs and beer cans, skis, Kensingtonware cigarette holders and ice buckets and Wear-Ever pots and pans!

What do they have in common? All are made of aluminum and they characterize various periods, designs, and technological aspects of the metal. These items — and much more — were donated in 1996 by the Aluminum Company of America (Alcoa) to the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania. Although a few of these items were loaned by the Historical Society to the Carnegie Museum of Art for the exhibit, “Aluminum By Design,” the Alcoa Collection has never been shown in its entirety.

With the opening of the Special Collections Gallery in the Smithsonian wing of the History Center, visitors will see this important collection along with other collections containing hundreds of artifacts that otherwise go unseen, kept in secured museum storage. These artifacts will be displayed on the fourth floor in an area specifically designed to preserve artifacts as well as to permit the public to see curators work with them. Temperature and humidity controls, light sensors, and a special dust filtration system will maintain an environment that will best protect these artifacts while on display. And just like an exhibit, little-noticed things like security will be a priority.

The gallery is being designed to be “user friendly.” Work stations with computers, videos, and sound recordings will encourage visitors to learn more about the objects around them. Workbooks with object information will be at various places throughout the gallery. And visitors will be able to use a handheld recorder to hear selected individuals “tell their stories.” Education programs are being developed to use these vast collections for a variety of workshops and programs. There also will be special assistance devices for the visually and hearing impaired.

For many years, individuals and families have donated their prized possessions but only a small percentage were displayed. The gallery will include artifacts which typify the strong ethnic heritage of the Pittsburgh area: a shawl worn by Elizabeth Voytek when she immigrated in 1920 to the United States from Slovakia to join her brother in Hunker, Pa.; a traditional Serbian costume that Anna (Anka) Vidakovich wore when she sang with the Dr. Laza Kostich Serbian Singing Society in Midland; and a puppet theater with marionettes and scenery purchased in the Czech Republic in 1907 by Thomas Getting to familiarize his sons with their Czech culture. Large photographs of people throughout the various neighborhoods will complement these important collections.
Viennese Court Gown, 1898, worn by Mrs. Lawrence Cole.

The puppet Kasparek, a traditional mischievous character in Czech puppetry from a 1907 puppet theater.

The wine press of Feliciano Caste.

A traditional Serbian costume from Anna (Anka) Vidakovich.
Organizing the collections by ethnicity is challenging. Countries and borders change, but ethnicity remains a strong identifying force that overlaps national boundaries, and cultural aspects often remain for many generations. German ethnicity straddled areas now familiar to us as Germany, Switzerland, Austria, the Czech Republic and even France.

The German Hetzel family exemplifies one of the problems encountered when discussing ethnicity: political versus geographic versus cultural identity. George and Marie Louisa Hetzel left their Strasbourg home in 1828 which, although then located in Alsace, France, was culturally German. The Hetzels spoke and considered themselves German. Their son, George Hetzel, Jr., a noted local painter, painted portraits of his parents which show the influence of the northern German Dusseldorf school, where George studied in the late 1840s.

The Italian community has maintained a presence at the Society since 1996 when they began to help support an Italian-American curator. This individual has attended many meetings and programs of various Italian organizations and is well-known within that community. Therefore, this collection is strong both in archival material and artifacts.

A well-worn wine press and accompanying equipment was used by Feliciano Caste and his family to make homemade wine. A native of Frosolone in the Molise region of Italy, Caste immigrated to Western Pennsylvania in 1914 and went on to become a prosperous contractor in Mt. Lebanon. According to Caste, an important aspect of his Italian American family life was "keeping a large garden and making wine, which I had learned from my father." The traditional day for tapping young wine is November 11 – Saint Martin’s Day – although many Italian Americans wait until well after the New Year.

Known as zampogne in Italian, Italian bagpipes were handmade in the Abruzzo region of Italy. They were sent from a family in Italy to the donor’s father living in the Pittsburgh neighborhood of Crafton Heights in the 1950s. The zampogna is made from sheepskin turned inside out, to which is affixed a series of wooden reeds. They are held and played much like the better-known Scottish bagpipes. Known to exist as early as the Roman period, bagpipes are now played in Europe, North Africa, and Asia.

While researching the collections, the curators found a small black box that contained a strange looking apparatus with a coil around a metal tube and a crank at one end. When the crank is turned quickly, static electricity builds up and an individual can grasp two extended rods and get a "charge." This magneto – Davis & Kidder’s Electric Machine/Patented for Nervous Diseases Aug. 1, 1854 – was a popular medical treatment in the late-Victorian period when electric charges were thought to cure anxiety as well as certain aches and pains. This artifact and many others, including a box used to mail order eggs and a portable, circular bathtub will be part of the "What Is It?" section where visitors will be able to guess what these and other strange-looking items are.

Another section of the gallery will house one of the strongest collections held by the Historical Society: the costume collection. ("Costume" in historic terms means clothing and accessories.) Including the collections transferred from the Carnegie Museum of Natural History and the Pittsburgh History and Landmarks Foundation, this collection holds over 4,000 items ranging from working clothes to fabulous gowns, shoes, hats, fans, and other accessories. This enclosed glass "mini-gallery" will feature many of these items on a changing basis as preservation issues prevent
Known as zampogne in Italian, these c. 1950 Italian bagpipes were handmade in the Abruzzo region of Italy.

long-term display. The initial selection will highlight some of the “wow” dresses such as a lovely Viennese, lime green and orchid gown with court train worn by Pittsburgher Mrs. Lawrence Cole at the court of King Albert & Queen Carola of Saxony in 1898. There will be study drawers for visitors to view the smaller accessories such as the collection of intricately beaded handbags. Plans for future gallery displays include workers’ uniforms, bathing suits and children’s clothes.

Another difficulty in exhibiting artifacts that reflect ethnicity is simply getting the word out. Many cultures may not be represented due to the lack of collections. This can cause confusion and questions such as “Why are there only six items from my community?” The answer is often because that’s all that there is in the Historical Society’s collection. Additionally, some recent immigrants, such as those from India, Asia, and certain countries in Africa are sparsely represented as yet. Sometimes people are just not ready to part with items that represent very close personal memories.

While not everything can be displayed, this selection of artifacts will help tell the history of Western Pennsylvania. Although there are some obviously lacking artifacts from Pittsburgh’s history, particularly, as noted, some immigration history, the curators are working constantly to alleviate these deficiencies. What is here, however, truly represents Pittsburgh and the surrounding region. The corporate collections, the various ethnic collections, and the many objects relating to the crafts and occupations all testify to the area’s predominantly working-class background as well as its corporate base. When people see the Special Collections gallery, we hope they will begin to think about a permanent “home” for items that help to tell “their” history. This will enable us to continue to share the rich stories of the people, organizations, and workplaces of Western Pennsylvania. The Special Collections Gallery is truly a fitting testimonial to the 125 year anniversary of the HSWP and the artifacts it has collected and preserved.