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Preserving the Past (Pottery)

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Pottery collection becomes library centerpiece

Preserving the Past

By Nancy Steele Brokaw

Anke Voss-Hubbard arrived at Illinois Wesleyan holding a wealth of archival experience. But nothing in her training prepared her for the unexpected task of maintaining a valuable collection of 19th-century Pueblo pottery.

The University's collection of over 100 specimens of Native American pottery came as a legacy from the famed scientific explorer John Wesley Powell, an IWU faculty member from 1865 to 1867. During and his tenure at the University, Powell led IWU students on some of his celebrated expeditions to the West.

The pottery collection — containing objects of Zuni, Hopi and Acoma "provenance" (the library word for "where things come from") - has been moved around the University since the late 1800s and has been on permanent display at the University's main library since the mid-1960s.

Deservedly, Powell's pots were accorded prominence in the design of The Ames Library. After much discussion, they became the showpiece of the main floor's rotunda, encased in four solid mahogany curved cases. There were many design considerations. How best (and most safely) to light them? What about temperature and humidity control? And, how best to clean and move them from their previous home at Sheean Library to the new Ames Library?

This is not the sort of thing taught in library school. Obviously, the pots weren't exactly dishwasher safe. They were dirty — but archivists are protective about dirt, which can have its own story to tell.

In the end, Voss-Hubbard and her crew armed themselves with protective gloves, conservation dust cloths, soft fibrous bristle brushes, and a low-volt vacuum. They "minimally and carefully" cleaned the pieces, wrapped them in acid-free, unbuffered interleaving paper and bubble wrap, placed them in archival boxes and safely tip-toed them over to their splendid new home, where they are displayed together with a seated sculpture of Powell by Bloomington artist Rick Harney.

Above, some of the 128 pieces of clay pottery and hand-woven baskets that comprise the John Wesley Powell Collection. (Photo by Jamie Stukenberg)

The pottery is part of the University's John Wesley Powell/Western Frontier collection, which continues to grow under Voss-Hubbard's direction. She just purchased first editions of work by Grace Hebard, a suffragist from Wyoming (the first state to grant women's suffrage) to add to the collection.

Voss-Hubbard also hopes to develop an on-line presentation of the Powell Pueblo pottery to make it more accessible to scholars who may not have time to visit the actual pieces in their new home. "I am trying to identify institutions with similar collections to see if we might make it a collaborative project and thus unite online, similar artifacts, many of which are now scattered at archives and museums throughout the United States."