

# Saving Orphan Collections

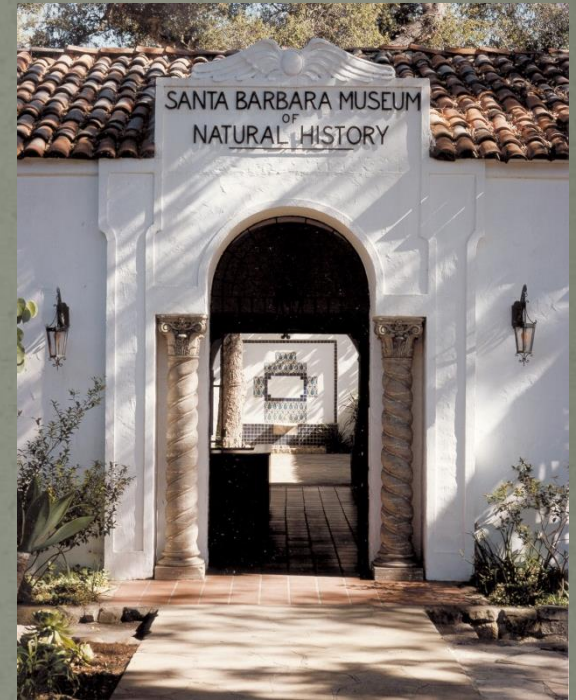
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Paul Valentich-Scott

Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History

# Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History

- Private, non-profit
- Established in 1916
- Four collections departments
  - IZ, VZ, Anthropology, Library/Art
- About 3 million total objects
- Have acquired many dozens of orphan collections
- Paul VS has been a curator at SBMNH since 1982





# Introduction

- What is an orphan collection?
- How do we hear about orphan collections?
- Assessing orphan collections
- Assessing departmental or institutional fit for orphan collections
- Assessing total cost for “adopting” an orphan collection
- Making the final decision
- Other options



# What is an orphan collection?

- **A Collection In Peril!**

- Institution/Department no longer wishes to the house collection
- Researcher wishes to pass along collection for long term care
- Individual researcher retiring / leaving the field
- Death of a researcher





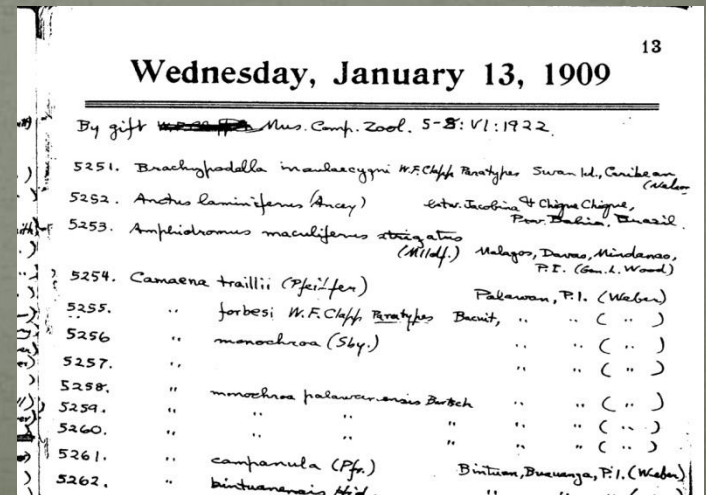
# How do we hear about orphan collections?



- The infamous phone call
  - “We are throwing this collection in the dumpster tomorrow unless you come get it.”
- Collection managers
  - “We are changing direction at our institution and need to dispose of this group of organisms.”
- Private collectors
  - “I have run out of space in my garage and need to get rid of some of my specimens.”
  - “My father died, and I have no idea what to do with his huge collection of bugs/shells/fossils.....”

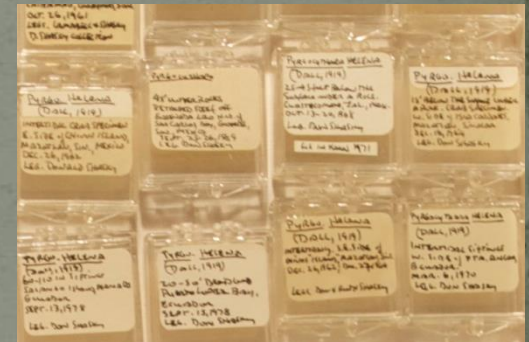
# Assessing orphan collections

- The mantra
  - Data, data, data
  - Locality, collector, date, identification, etc.
- Data sources
  - Spreadsheet with georeferenced localities, dates, etc
  - Hard copy collection catalogue
  - Hard copy field notes
  - Labels in individual vials
- Don't be fooled
  - “The data is in the mail.”



# Assessing orphan collections

- If data is adequate, begin the initial assessment
- Preliminary costs
  - How large is the collection?
  - Is the collection nearby?
  - How is the collection currently housed?
  - Is the collection currently stable?
  - What resources will it take to pack and move it?
    - Personnel, boxes, bags, tape, trucks, dollies....
- Review the information gathered so far....
  - Is it worth it?





# Assessing “fit” for orphan collections

- If the budget is manageable, how should we assess?
  - Does it fit your museum mission?
  - Does it fit into your long range plan?
  - Does it add to your existing collection strengths?
  - Does it add new material to a currently weak portion of your collection?



Table of data from a field notebook, showing specimen counts, locations, and coordinates.

# on Specimen	Location	Latitude	Longitude
31	(West) Lakeview	37° 59' 22.70" N	122° 26' 57.12" W
162	Marina mudflat	37° 59' 56.19" N	122° 07' 40.92" W
87	Hayward "Triangle Marsh" mudflat	37° 35' 40.71" N	122° 08' 45.90" W
19/20	Boyle's Boat Dock mudflat	37° 27' 28.07" N	122° 06' 05.35" W



# Assessing “fit” for orphan collections

- If the budget is manageable, how should we assess?
  - Is there adequate space currently in your collection room?
  - Does it require new cabinetry?
  - Does it require special temperature and humidity conditions?
  - How long will it take to make it accessible?
  - How long will it take to fully curate the collection?
- Review again – Is it worth it?



# Assessing cost for adopting orphan collections

- Small collections (100's of specimens) of small specimens frequently have very limited upfront costs
  - Transportation, packing supplies, personnel
  - Sometimes the donor will pay these costs (encourage this!)





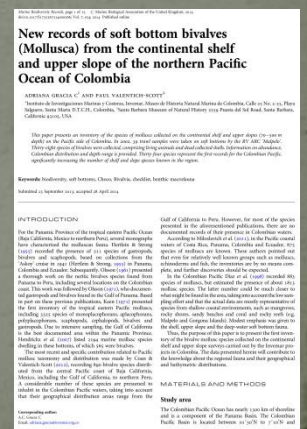
# Assessing cost for adopting orphan collections

- Large collections (>1,000 specimens) can have a very high cost
  - Need to hire additional temporary staff for move?
  - Extended use of trucks or vans
  - Large number of boxes, tape, bubble wrap, etc.
  - Safe place to “fumigate” the collection
  - Long term storage while processing collection
  - New collection boxes, vials and other supplies
  - Need to hire new staff to curate and catalogue?
  - New collection drawers, cabinets or shelves



# Why adopt orphan collections?

- Saving important specimens that might otherwise be lost to science
- Increasing your departmental/institutional strength and importance
- Increase number of research visitors to your department
- Increase number of publications that cite your collection
- Increase chances of collection funding





# Making the final decisions

- Will the orphan collection positively add to your holdings?
- Is the move budget acceptable?
- How will the new material effect your current space and workflow?
- Do you have long-term storage, in case there are not resources to process the collection on the short term?
- Is the long term budget acceptable?
- Remember every orphan collection has unique strengths and weaknesses

# Other options and referrals

- Collections without data, or limited data
  - Nice collection of local shells, bugs, etc.
- Your Museum Education Department
- Public exhibition
  - Hands-on displays
- Other public outreach
- Refer to another institution





# Summary

- Each orphan collection has unique characteristics that must be assessed
  - Value to your institution
  - Short-term and long term costs to acquire
  - Long-term benefit to your institution
  - Possibility of funding



Questions??

