Packing Up, Moving Out

The skillful transfer of five million priceless items to the new Sam Noble Oklahoma Museum of Natural History is a multi-year project requiring steady nerves, strong backs and a mountain of bubble wrap.

BY MICHAEL WATERS

A decades-old Apache basket, silent a long time, is picked up and carried and erupts in sound—the musical tones of metal cones dangling from its 41 rawhide fringes. The deerskin basket's tightly woven patterns are bathed in fresh light for the first time in many years.

Nearby, two pairs of hands examine and wrap a 2,300-year-old Roman oil lamp about the size of a toddler's fist. The lamp, made of clay, is layered in a protective cushion of acid-free paper and bubble wrap, then packed in a specially crafted storage box.

Welcome to the biggest "moving day" in OU history. These objects—along with roughly 4,999,998 others—are being carefully checked, wrapped and stored for the 1998-99 relocation to the new $37.5 million Sam Noble Oklahoma Museum of Natural History, next door to the OU Law Center.

Truth to tell, it is not exactly a moving day, according to Vicki Byre, move coordinator for the museum. "And it's not like packing up your house," she adds.

Byre's activities actually are an ongoing effort that began in July 1996 with six months of planning on her part. Then, she says, "We started packing in January of this year, with a couple of the smaller collections.

"It'll take all of this year and till September of 1998 just to get things prepared for the move," Byre explains. "That's with my four people, plus me, working full time."

Unpacking this immense historical armada is another story. Approximately 10,000-12,000 of the objects will be on display when the new museum opens in late 1999. Unpacking the remainder of the collections will require more than an additional year.

Michael Mares, museum director, defines Byre's job as essentially help-

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ing to “choreograph an extremely com-
plicated ballet.” He points out that not only does the packing and moving have to be done in a timely fashion, but that Byre also has to coordinate her work with museum curators and be flexible with her moving plans—because “research goes on.”

The job might not be the type Byre expected when she first came to OU, but she is comfortable with the demands of this challenging role.

Byre moved to Norman in 1990 from her position at the Chicago Academy of Sciences. Holding a master’s degree in ornithology, her museum experience chiefly lay in the realm of bird studies.

“I came to this museum and worked for a little while as a volunteer and then as a curatorial assistant in the collections department,” she says.

Byre explains that since the museum does not have curators in many of its collection areas, the collections office takes care of these non-curated collections. That chore includes pest management, handling of requests for loans and locating specimens for visiting researchers.

“I became pretty well acquainted with our collection areas—everything from archeology to zoology,” Byre says. “I’d do six months here and six months there, and in between I’d fill in with other collection areas.”

Museum officials naturally tapped Byre for the newly created position of move coordinator. “I guess I have a reputation for being organized,” she says with a chuckle.

Starting in July 1996, Byre spent the first six months of her appointment “visiting each collection area, taking notes about the size of each collection and studying what would be the best way to prepare each for the move, how many people would it take and how long would it take.”

She developed a manual that set forth a master plan for moving each of the collection areas. Then she asked for suggestions from curators and the professors emeritus who volunteer in that capacity for some of the non-curated collections.

In addition to budgeting for an enormous volume and variety of packing materials, Byre also put four full-time assistants to work doing the actual packing.

“We had close to 50 applicants, and from those we got four very good people who have both museum experience and common sense. Plus, they believed in one of the main rules I stressed—'If there’s any question, please ask. Don’t figure it out yourself.'”

In packing the various collections, “you have to be careful and methodical, and at the same time be able to withstand heat and cold and dirt and climbing up ladders carrying 30-pound boxes,” she says.

Byre says the new packers “are working out very well.” Each has a minimum of a bachelor’s degree in different areas pertaining to the museum’s collections.

“What’s good is that with each collection we go to, there’s at least one person there who has a pretty good background in that collection and can see how things should be handled.”

Fortunately as well, Byre’s helpers all appear to be enthusiastic about the multiple challenges presented by the packing. They see the job as an opportunity to get a “sneak preview” of some of the fascinating specimens that the new 190,000-square-foot museum will have on display.

Harold Babb, an OU geology graduate, describes the methodical, day-to-day tasks of inventorying and packing...
Empty shelves in the classics area testify to the packers' progress. Still awaiting processing are Greek and Roman statuary, both marble and bronze, and the Greek vases at right.

Above right, Vicki Byre inspects a newly arrived shipment of bubble wrap in the main building's first floor exhibit area, formerly occupied by the museum's resident mammoth. When each of these 750-foot rolls is exhausted, the packers will have used 11 miles of the material. The mammoth has been sent to Canada for restoration.

The archeology collection—inventoried, packed and ready for the move—fills storage shelves in the museum's Building 2. The acid-free boxes—part of 6,500 purchased at $3.59 each—contain lithics (points and spears, etc.), pottery, bones and tools, mostly prehistoric from the pre-Columbian era, some from the historic post-European settlement era.
These study skins of (top to bottom) warblers, cardinals and buntings are part of 25,000 specimens awaiting packing in the museum's bird range in Building 3. The drawers will be moved in their cases after each paper liner is changed, the drawers and cases vacuumed and the specimens secured in the drawers with bubble wrap. Elsewhere in the room, 600 mounted birds have been individually hermetically sealed in plastic and frozen to destroy insects.

...to be "one of the most fun jobs I've had in a long time."

"I've just been packing and moving and enjoying the heck out of it," Babb says. "You have the opportunity to pull out, handle and wrap up things that quite literally haven't been seen since they were donated."

Sometimes the packaging, as well as the object itself, gives the movers a sense of history. "When we were packing minerals last winter," Babb recalls, "we unwrapped rocks that looked like they'd come straight from the field—except the newspapers they were wrapped in were dated 1893.

"As we unwrapped them, we read an ad for Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show. And we realized that these had been wrapped by the original donor and hadn't been opened since."

Babb's "partner" in checking and packing items, Tim Poteete, says the variety of specimens to check—and the demands of properly examining each item—keep a repetitive job from becoming mind-numbing.

Poteete, who has a master's degree in history, explains, "You have to pay attention to matching up the catalogue numbers on the object to the number in the museum's records. You have to check the specimen for insects. Some of the artifacts are really pliable and flexible, while some are very delicate, and you have to be dainty about handling them."

Stacy Brooks, who holds degrees in interior design and history, relishes the opportunity to work with items in all of the museum's 14 collections, which include archeology, classics, education, ethnology, herpetology, history and textiles, ichthyology, invertebrates, invertebrate paleontology, mammalogy, minerals, ornithology, paleobotany and vertebrate paleontology.

"You get a chance to learn a little bit about each of these areas," Brooks says.

Her packing cohort, Jana Cornelius, who has an OU degree in anthropology, agrees. "It was quite a change going from archeology, where it was all rocks and soils, to packing oil lamps from ancient Rome and Greece," she says.

"We wrapped some Egyptian artifacts a couple of days ago and some Babylonian tablets with writing on them," Brooks adds.

Working in ethnology, Brooks and Cornelius wrap the oil lamps in acid-free paper and protect the shielded artifact with bubble wrap, writing the catalogue number on the outside, then...
packing the finished product in a box. They also agree on the enjoyment of working with antiquity.

"Actually we had just noticed a pot with a fingerprint on it, the print of whoever had made it... those things give these items a lot of character," Brooks says.

"One of my favorite things in archeology was when we found Neanderthal tools, 100,000 years old," Cornelius says. "And I held one, trying to imagine the person who held it originally."

This rich variety of materials does create complications in the packing process. When dealing with thousands upon thousands of objects that run the gamut from stuffed birds to Navajo weavings, soil samples, drawers full of prehistoric fossils and shelves of fragile pottery, each type of specimen requires its own special process for wrapping and storing.

The work requires a bit of traveling as well, since the museum's collections are spread among 10 campus buildings.

"You go collection by collection, and usually there will be a special type of box the packers will have to use—probably acid-free or built to special dimensions," Byre says.

"After they've selected the box, they label all four sides and the top. Then, the box is prepared by putting archival foam or bubble wrap in the bottom—these are inert materials that don't give off any kind of dangerous fumes that may damage the object."

"Then the object is usually wrapped in bubble wrap. For some objects, you want the bubbles to face inward. For other objects, it's important for the bubbles to be facing outward if the bubbles might cause a little bit of roughness that could damage the surface."

She adds that the workers wear white cotton gloves in examining many types of specimens "because the oils on your hands could be damaging to the object."

"Then, the object is carefully examined to see if there's any pest infestation," Byre continues. In fact, pest examination can be a critical part of the work. The dermestid, a flesh-eating beetle, can destroy a specimen from within and "make it collapse right in your hands." Some types of objects have to be frozen for up to two weeks to make sure they are packed away pest-free.

Following the pest inspection, Byre says, "the object's catalogue number must be verified and recorded on the inventory sheets listing the box numbers, so later you can see which box contains catalogue number NAM-9-6-54, if you need it."

The type of wrapping used on each item depends on the item, Byre notes. An artifact made of a plant material, such as a basket, requires buffered acid-free paper. However, an animal product, such as leather or a birdskin, requires acid-free paper which is not buffered.

" 'Buffered' means there's calcium in it, and for some objects that's good, and for others, that's not good," Byre notes. "The appropriate acid-free paper is usually put about the object before it is encased in bubble wrap."

Another challenge, Byre says, is Just when museum workers thought the archeology collection was completely packed and ready for transfer, a new collection arrived from a private donor. Jana Cornelius went back to work.
Tim Poteete's white-gloved hands remove an item from the African collection in the world cultures' subdivision of ethnology to compare its catalog number with inventory sheets. Gloves protect the artifact from the oils and salts on his hands.

The 35,000 specimens of the herpetology collection, which includes amphibians and reptiles, are stored in jars of ethanol on the fourth floor of Cross Center, formerly a dormitory. Since the jars are grouped by family and must be kept in numerical sequence, they will be placed on wooden trays, padded with bubble wrap, moved out a window by scissor lift, taken to a moving van and transported in single layers to the new facility. The shelving will be disassembled and relocated to the new building, ready to receive the specimen jars.

Above, impressions of ancient leaves and other forms of plant life, part of the paleobotany collection, are stored in jewelry boxes, each with a loose data card. The boxes must be individually stretch wrapped, the drawers stabilized and the entire cabinet moved with the drawers intact.

The different storage requirements of various materials. “Some things can’t be exposed to plastics, some things can’t be exposed to buffered paper—and some things should be exposed to buffered paper.”

On top of all that are the items that, by their nature, would not do well being boxed for a significant period of time.

“We have thousands and thousands of dollars worth of Navajo weavings,” Byre says. “Those will be unrolled, vacuumed, put back on a roll, covered with brand-new polyethylene plastic, and then hand-carried into the moving van without being put in boxes.”

Gallon jars of alcohol are being used to store fish, snakes, salamanders, frogs and lizards, Byre says, and most of those types of objects will
be moved in padded wooden crates. After each collection is packed, Byre says, a formidable challenge remains in what to do with the boxes themselves, since obviously the museum has no extra storage space.

“In many cases, we’ve taken things out of old wooden cabinets, either taken the cabinets apart or to Property Control and erected some kind of shelving in its place, which we’ll use later in the new museum. And then we shelve all the packed boxes.”

The goal is not only to get the collections to the new facility but also to be able to locate a given specimen at any time. “Order and inventory are everything, aside from just making sure nothing breaks,” Byre says. “A collection is useless if it’s separated from its data.”

Last fall, during Byre’s preparation phase for the move, she estimated collection sizes, predicted time requirements and calculated the supplies needed to move the collections—for example, 300,000 plastic bags, 27,500 feet of archival foam and 75,000 feet of bubble wrap. But her detailed preparation did not seem to make the challenge any less daunting.

“One thing that always amazes me is when I go to, say, invertebrate paleontology, and just start opening these hundreds of drawers and see all these small fossils, I think, ‘My gosh, how are we going to do this?’”

She adds, “When you see the reality of the task before us, it hits home that you’re in charge of making sure five million objects get safely to the new building.

“It’s amazing what good shape the collections are in considering the leaks and the rickety buildings with no heat or humidity controls. We’re taking out and inspecting each item as we pack it, and so far we’ve found that most things are still in excellent shape—which really says something for the past curators and collection managers, who worked in difficult conditions.”

Byre is satisfied with the progress of the work so far. By mid-1997, the largest of the museum’s collections—archeology, with an estimated three million specimens—had been packed away according to schedule.

Once the job is over and the artifacts unpacked, Byre says with enthusiasm, the public will get to see much, much more of its natural and cultural history heritage than ever before. “That’s something we’re very proud of,” she says.

The packing process is merely one piece of a multi-faceted plan to get specimens prepared in time for the new museum’s opening.

“Before probably only 100 to 200 objects from the collections were on display at any one time,” Byre estimates. “In the new building there will be about 10,000 to 12,000 objects. That’s quite an increase!”

Still Director Mares insists that the increased numbers only tell part of the story.

“In the old building,” he says, “you could see a dinosaur leg. In the new building, you’ll be able to walk under the entire dinosaur.”

What the museum’s future visitors will not see is the hard work under way to transfer these objects to their new home safe and sound. But when these “buried treasures” are viewed by the public in fresh light, it will be in no small part due to the care and painstaking efforts of Byre and her packing crew.

These mid-1890s cabins, to be relocated on the new museum site, are used for educational activities. The cabin on the left, donated by Henry Neal of Wanette, was originally a post office and museum. It now is outfitted for a frontier family of four, complete with tools of the period. The Wallace cabin on the right came from the Noble area, the gift of Colata Frey.