

Maureen and Mike

Mansfield Library

UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA

Archives and Special Collections

Mansfield Library, University of Montana

Missoula MT 59812-9936

Email: library.archives@umontana.edu

Telephone: (406) 243-2053

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Interviewee: Matt Lautzenheiser

Interviewer: Sophia Etier

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Sophia Etier: For the first question, can you please briefly describe your background in public history as well as what you do at Fort Missoula?

Matt Lautzenheiser: Sure. I have been an executive director at a museum since 2005. Prior to that, I worked as a site historian at a living history site. My first job was with a house museum in fairly rural Ohio, and I did that for from 2005 to about 2014. Then I moved to Missoula in the summer of 2014. And took over here at the historical museum. And both the last two stops, I have been an executive director. So, I'm responsible for kind of day to day operations as well as interactions with board members and kind of representing the museum in the community. I've also worked on a number of different partnerships in the community, with everybody from you know, most recently, the Missoula Downtown Association and their heritage interpretative plan to a number of other organizations in town. Finally, I serve on the Museums Association of Montana board. I'm the current president on that one. And I'm also on the Glacier Country Tourism Board. So, it kind of, I've always been really interested in the intersection of how museums work as tourist attractions, as we are cultural and academic institutions. But we're also, you know, we cater to a tourist audience. So, I think it's important for those folks to have a voice with the tourism industry.

SE: Perfect. So, when was the first time you heard of COVID-19? And how did you react?

ML: You know, I think probably, I mean, I think we all heard about it a little bit when things started breaking out in China. And you heard about it, you know, there have been other times in the past where there have been similar germs or bugs that have that have broken out somewhere in China or someplace distant. And you know, you're always a little nervous, but I think it really hit me when we started seeing cases in the United States. And it started spreading when Italy and people started being positive here. And it was, I mean, like everyone else, there's a sense of fear, a sense of not knowing what percentage, you know, how does this impact people? What percent were going to get sick? What percent were going to die? You know, is it, was it something just like the regular flu where most people are fine? Is it something that, you know, we've all come to learn that the death toll from COVID is about five times higher than traditional flu. And it's super contagious. So, I think probably, sometime early spring was when I or late winter was when I first heard about it. And then of course, things seemed to

change pretty rapidly once we got into March here in Montana and you started seeing cases happen in our state.

SE: How has Fort Missoula been impacted by the community shutdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic?

ML: So, we have been impacted. More so I would say the just general operations and museum and also our Friends of the Museum group. We are very fortunate that we have a stable funding source because we have County support. So, we, we don't quite have the challenges that other traditional nonprofits do. But that said, we did have to close our operations for almost three months. We've just recently reopened on June 1. We closed in mid-March. Like everyone we did our time from home and work remote and still tried to create interesting and dynamic programming that would engage people in kind of a remote kind of a remote way whether it be online, Kristijana [Eyjolfsson] our education director, has done some wonderful, she calls them Lunch and Learn, where they're basically virtual programs that can be offered to families and children and adults as well. So, museum had to close for three months, we've now had to cancel a significant amount of our special events and fundraisers. The first one to go was our annual meeting. So, by our, per bylaws, we're required to have an annual meeting every year of our membership and of our boards for elections and those things, and that was originally scheduled for the first week in April, and that was cancelled. Forestry Day, which is the final Saturday in April, was canceled as well too, which is our big kind of forest, forest demonstration logging demonstration event. It's also in partnership with the University of Montana and their Woodsman's Day that they do where it's a logging competition. Uh, so we had to cancel that event. I mean, we essentially had a number of other smaller events, lectures, things like that. And then just recently, we made the decision to go ahead and cancel our Fourth of July celebration, which is one of the largest events we do of the year. Several thousand people come out to the museum, but we just didn't feel it would be safe to have those numbers here. And then also we cancelled or we're not going to be able to do our cheese curd booth at the fair, which is one of the biggest fundraisers for our Friends group. So, I mentioned kind of the Friends group starting out and they are our fundraising nonprofit line, and they will see some pretty significant impact. Multiple fundraisers and events have been canceled. And that's a lot of revenue that the museum relies on for special projects and education that simply won't be there in 2020.

SE: Do you think that those the elimination of those fundraising opportunities will have an impact further on for the museum?

ML: It's possible. And I think a lot of it is going to depend on when when we're able to move past the COVID pandemic, when it's either been either eradicated completely or whether we have a vaccine that's going to keep people safe. Because in all honesty, I don't, I don't see our museum being able to return to its full regular operations until those things have happened. You know, whether it be some of our large fundraisers, where we have thousands of people on the grounds or even smaller events, it's, it's going to impact us until we are completely through with COVID. And until that point, we have to make decisions that are in the best interest of public safety, but not necessarily in the best interest of our nonprofit and the museum itself.

SE: Just watching many museums, interpretation sites, and other public history centers struggle to keep their heads above water, due to reduced hours or reduced public visitation per current social distancing protocols, as a director and as, you know, a prominent member, you know of public history in Missoula, and across the country, what do you foresee the lasting impact of Coronavirus being on museums and other interpretation sites?

ML: So, I think there's a lot of different impacts there. First and foremost, my concern is that many of our small nonprofits, or even midsize museums, will cease to exist because of this. Many nonprofits kind of operate on a knife edge of staying solvent and relevant and I worry that you know, many of those organizations will not have the available reserves and funds to come back after COVID has passed. On a more kind of, I guess, employee wise, I've been kind of horrified by following on the national articles and such about the staffing cuts that have been done in museums and nonprofits and many of those staffing cuts. I mean, within weeks of the quarantine, there were organizations that were cutting 40, 50, 60% of their staff or furloughing them indefinitely. And you just have to wonder what is that going to do to the field? And at what point, you know, will these museums recover enough to begin to rehire these positions because some of them are furloughed, where you're just having people that are simply not working and not being paid for a period of weeks or months, but a lot of the other research I've read, there are many organizations that are furloughing people indefinitely and not able to essentially promise or be able to rehire them at the end of that period. So, I worry about the field and I worry about the professionalism in the field. What is the impact going to be as we move forward? Because all these folks are currently unemployed, and the jobs aren't necessarily coming back, what kind of knowledge or leadership are we going to lose when people decide that they want something more stable, that's not going to be subject to furloughs and layoffs and things like that and they decide to leave the industry. So, you're going to lose a decent amount of folks that are gonna find employment elsewhere, maybe do something outside the museum field. So that's, that's very discouraging to museum folks. You know, from a personal level, I really feel for those folks, because, you know, it's, it's amazing to think you can go from having a stable, steady job that you really enjoy, and, you know, within a

six week period, all of a sudden you're unemployed and there's no guarantee your job's ever going to be there. And you're dealing with a job market where organizations are going to be hesitant to rehire or add a new position. So, you're gonna have an ultra-competitive job market for the museum jobs that are there. So that's why my worry is that some of these folks are just going to go elsewhere and pursue other opportunities career wise and not, we'll lose a lot of that that talent in field.

SE: That is kind of unfortunate to you know, think as a grad student going into public history it is a tad daunting now.

ML: Yeah. Well, the job market is going to be hyper competitive. And like I said, I just, you know, until, not only until we're through...[cell phone rings] Sorry, that would be my cell phone. So, not only until where was I at? I had lost my train of thought, but no, I get...here's what I was gonna say. So not only is it a matter of waiting out COVID and when COVID is through, but then what are the long-term repercussions as far as how long it's going to be until museums recovered enough financially to rehire these positions. So, you know, I feel for new grad students, I feel for people that are being laid off, or people that are fairly early into their career that haven't reached the leadership position where they can't be laid off from and maybe some have, but I worry about that. Because like I said, you're you know, now as a new grad student, not only are you competing against all the other grad students, but you're also competing against people that are career professionals that maybe 5, 10, or 15 years into their careers, but, you know, have been laid off or, so, no, it's less jobs and more competition, essentially, which is tough.

SE: Yeah, on a personal side note, from my experience, I applied for jobs in February and they've all closed now for like public history jobs. So, I completely understand where your worry is coming from because I hold that sentiment as well because, you know, it was very exciting to think about, you know, having these jobs, and then all of a sudden they're just gone.

ML: Yeah, no I...so I, I get all the, because we're a member of the American Alliance Museums, so I get the job bulletin they hand out once a month. And it's been really sad to see, you know, what where there normally 25 to 30 jobs posted on their website at any given time, now, there's five. So, I mean, you're seeing a reduction of that'd be 80% of the jobs. And I think it's just organizations don't feel stable enough to hire anybody right now. So, they're just kind of all sitting pat. So, you know, that's happening at the same time that you have incredibly high unemployment numbers and people that are furloughed, and so yeah, it's definitely a very doom and gloom time to be looking for a museum job.

SE: Yeah. That kind of leads me into my next question. How has the Coronavirus pandemic either furthered or hinder the ongoing interpretation effort of the museum's alien detention past? Because I noticed that you had received the National Park Service grant. The NPS grant, I believe. Has it given you more time to work on those things and to work on the interpretation or how is that, you know, been for the museum?

ML: So, so we're, we're still moving forward on that project. We did receive the Park Service grant, which was important, and we've been fortunate enough that our Friends of the Museum group has stepped up and offered to provide the match for that grant so that we can go ahead and get the project done. And it was, you know, we're kind of on a pretty crucial time crunch. The Japanese American Confinement Sites grants were originally funded by the Federal Government for \$34 million. We're down to the point where there's enough of those original funds left to fully fund their grant program in 2020, 2021, and then to partially fund it in 2022. And then at the end of that stretch, those funds go away. So, we were on a pretty big time crunch, our first phase of this project was simply to, to do the full kind of architectural assessment and historical assessment of both buildings. So, because of that, if we didn't get the assessment done, which will also give us all of our budget numbers for restoration. If we didn't complete that, by the end of this summer or early fall at the latest, we wouldn't have the numbers we would need in place to apply for a second JACS grant in 2021. And the concern was that if we missed the 2021 deadline, then we're competing for half the funds in 2022. And there's nothing in 2023 currently, unless they would allocate more money, the government would. So, we were on a real time crunch for that. So, the Friends of the Museum is a nonprofit support group of the museum have stepped up to match that so we should get that project done and we should be able to apply for a larger grant. I think my bigger concern is that there are foundations already that are starting to either cancel their grants for 2020, devote them specifically to COVID relief, or defer everything to 2021. I received notification, we had applied for some matching dollars for our barrack assessment, and I received a notification this week that one of the foundations we requested funding from has decided not to give any grants in 2020. And they're going to push everything back to 2021. I think that's something you're going to see more of as we move forward. Like I said, either that allocating funds specifically towards COVID relief, or just deferring because so many of these organizations rely on their investments to make their gifts and with the economy not in good shape, those investments aren't producing to the interest they would have previously, so they're struggling and they don't want to dip into the principle of their endowment. So that's what happens. So, I think, you know, I don't know that it's affected our ability per say to, to interpret it, we're still pushing forward on that. We still have a large exhibit plan this fall that's going to be in our Heath Gallery that will focus on the ADC. And that exhibit is in partnership with the Missoula Art Museum and an art installation about a Japanese internment that will take place there as well, too. So, at this point,

we're still moving forward with those projects. I guess one other way it has impacted us as the staff was preparing to travel to Heart Mountain for the pilgrimage again this year. And we've worked really hard to raise our standing among those better-established internment camps, or the incarceration sites like Minidoka, Heart Mountain, places like that. And the hope was actually to attend the pilgrimage in 2020, and then potentially host our own in 2021. So, I'm not sure how this will impact our ability to do that, because we were really hoping to use the 2020 conference to get a better handle on what's involved in a pilgrimage, and also to start to raise awareness of our intent to hold one in 2021. But obviously, that's not going to happen this year because the pilgrimage has been canceled. So that that's one way it will affect us. So, I would think primarily from a funding standpoint, and, and also, you know, the majority of folks that are still living that were part of that era of American history are very elderly at this point. So, I don't know how it's going to affect those folks. And obviously, the ability to gather those folks or to have them travel is completely out of the question at this point.

SE: So, kinda, also leading into the next question, how effective has social media been in the process of closing the gap between the museum and the community as social distancing practices are still in place?

ML: So, social media has been crucial. I think all of us in the museum field have had to become much more comfortable with technology and social media in the past 8 to 10 weeks or 12 weeks. We've had to find new and creative ways to virtually engage your audiences. I know here at the museum, we've done quite a few virtual we do a virtual puzzle every day. We do all sorts of history quiz questions and things like that. We've also started to utilize Facebook Live. And we have two weekly Facebook Live presentations, which is not something we've done in the past, geared towards keeping our audience engaged and keeping them interested in what's happening at the museum, and also providing educational content to those folks which meets our mission as a museum. So, I think you know that, it's one of the few ways that we can still kind of have daily contact with our potential visitors, especially with the doors not being open. So, you know, I don't, I think this could have been much worse if we hadn't reached a point in our society where we, we have things like Zoom and Microsoft Teams, and Facebook and Twitter and all those things. It does allow you some version of keeping in touch with folks even if it's not in person.

SE: Have you enjoyed filming the weekly Facebook Live videos where the community can ask you direct questions that they might not have been able to ask before?

ML: Do I have to answer that honestly?

SE: I mean, you don't have to.

ML: No, I'll be on hon-- it was one of those I was a little nervous doing it first. You know, everybody, when they tell you to look into the camera and talk for 15 minutes, it makes you nervous. But I think once you realize what's involved in it, and you realize that you're there, you know, engaging folks and raising awareness for your museum and trying to keep that personal connection we have with a lot of our visitors and members and such. I found it wasn't nearly as difficult as I thought it was going to be. And I've actually come to enjoy certain aspects of it. One of the fun things is I try to give general updates on the museum and talk about what's happening and what's going on and opening. But I've also tried to work in some historic content, whether it be filming from the top of the lookout and talking about giving a kind of a pseudo tour of the lookout. I filmed one from the interior of the Vietnam Exhibit. I did another one where we took a walk around the grounds and we talked about the Grant Creek Schoolhouse. So it's been kind of fun for me, as an executive director who doesn't get to do tours very often to kind of back and talk about history a little bit and be able to kind of feed that inner tour guide inside of me that enjoys that side of the business that I don't you know, as a director, you don't get to do that too much. So, from that standpoint, yes, I have enjoyed it. But I was very unsure when we first started doing them. But it's turned out really well.

SE: Kind of like a sub-question to that one, do you think that museums and interpretation sites, historic sites, after COVID, will keep a social media presence? Do you think that they'll integrate it more?

ML: I think, you know, the thinking on these things has changed drastically. We've all like added new tools to what we're able to do as institutions. And I think, to a certain degree, that will still happen. That said, I don't think anything is ever going to substitute visiting a historic site. There's a sense of this place and history and kind of feeling the weight of that when you visit a place that you simply are never going to get off of watching a video online. So, I think it's kind of a hybrid. I feel like it's important for folks to come back out and visit the museum so that they can really kind of conceptualize that history. But at the same time, I feel like there are definitely tools that we've all had to learn in the past three months that we will, that we will be able to use moving forward as well too.

SE: Perfect. With the museum solely reopening in compliance with Governor Bullock's phase plan for lifting social restrictions across the state, have visitors responded well to the precautions that the museum has taken?

ML: I would say yes. So, as a as a County entity, we can't legally require people to do things that some private businesses can. For example, we cannot require people to wear masks, we can ask and strongly encourage them to do that and even offer them free masks if they want one. But we can't tell them you're not allowed to come into the building unless you have a mask on. We have found that probably, since we've been open about a week and a half now about, I would say 80 to 90% of the people that have come through have agreed to follow the guidelines, including wearing masks, that we've asked them to do. We try to make it as easy as possible. We've tried to make things available for our visitors like, you know, we, we really, I'm really proud of my staff and our participation in Missoula County, that we put a lot of precautions into place and we've done a lot of planning to make sure that we could open safely for our visitors but also keeping our staff and volunteers safe. So, you know, so far it's been good. I guess that's the best way to put it. People have been pretty respectful. We haven't had anyone that's gotten angry with us or called us names or anything like that. We have had a couple people that you know, when they walked in, we asked them if they were willing to wear a mask and offer them one and they left. So, but that's, I mean, that's kind of the world we're in right now.

SE: What changes, if any, do you think you and your staff will carry on into the future that you've, you know, experienced during COVID, you've made changes during the pandemic, you know, has, there been kind of being a reshifting of operations. If you could expand on that.

ML: You know, a little. One of the things that it told us by going through COVID, we all had to learn to work different ways, mainly work remote. Um, you know, we were able to essentially operate, obviously the museum wasn't open, we're able to operate from a museum standpoint, virtually and meet virtually from remote locations. So, I feel like that's a potential where some of my staff have already reached out to me about wanting to do maybe one or two remote days a week from home. You know, in a way that I may not have been as open minded to that, prior to COVID. Now that I, we kind of were forced to all work that way, and we understand how the process can be effective. And, you know, I'm, I'm more, I have more willingness to, to work with them to do those things now. And we've already started to see that where we have staff that are maybe working one or two days a week from home, especially those that have a longer drive to get into the office here. So, I think that's one way as far as remote work. The other one is you mentioned earlier was the idea about social dist...not social distancing, about virtual. Learning to do our meetings virtually, learning to be more engaging and provide more programming and content virtually to our guests. I think that's something you know, we may not do quite as much as we have during the quarantine. But I do think that's, that's a new tool that we've developed, and we've been able to add to our toolbox that will, will be part of the way we interpret Fort Missoula history moving forward in a way that it wasn't prior to COVID.

SE: As you're part of the coalition in Missoula to collect experiences of the pandemic, what are your thoughts on Missoula's historical community joining forces in hopes of extensively documenting Western Montana's varying Coronavirus experiences, especially organizations that may not normally work together like the University and Downtown Missoula and, you know, Fort Missoula, you know, everybody kind of joining together, I guess, you know, that may not have before, like, what are your thoughts on that?

ML: So, I'm partial or kind of, I would say, so, I was actually one of the people that that started to form the group. That group came about because I was approached by Commissioner Strohmaier. And he had the idea of what if we attempted to document this once in a generation or once in a century event, historic event, you know, as it's happening, for the sake of both a historical resource, but also a resource for first responders and health departments and folks like that, so that if we're ever faced with a similar situation, again, there is a wealth of information available about how our community dealt with it, which can help guide them moving forward to deal with a similar situation in the future. So, it kind of started with that. And initially, we reached out to the, you know, Missoula County was a primary partner. The City was a partner and then the University and then from there, we've expanded to include Missoula Downtown Association. We've engaged the hospitals, we've engaged a number of other nonprofit folks in the community. We're now working on a project with the Missoula County Fairgrounds that there'll be a COVID collection and a COVID theme related to the fair this year. So, you know, for instance, they may have one of their contests may be making masks so people can make creative masks. And so essentially it's that, you know, the things we all are accustomed to reflecting this difficult situation we're going through. So, you know, it's been it's been really interesting and fulfilling to work with the partners that maybe I don't traditionally work with. And I feel like what we're, the collaboration is going to produce kind of longer-term relationships between those organizations and a willingness to partner and do things together. So yeah, I mean, it's, I think it's been really good. And I'm excited to kind of build relations with those folks. And who knows, I mean, hopefully the next project we work on is a little more positive than dealing with a pandemic but, it's been it's been really rewarding, and I think you know, the work that's being done and captured now can potentially benefit our community for decades. You know, as far as I look back on, I mean, as a historian, when we first started experiencing COVID-19, one of the first things I did was to go back and read articles about the Flu of 1918. Because I understand what the impact was and how the community responded to it. But other than kind of secondhand articles, there's not a central place where you can go back and look at primary documents. I mean, whereas I feel like what we're creating will be an incredible value to historians, and health officials and people like that the future.

SE: Has there been good feedback and responses from like community submissions, like artwork and stuff that they could upload themselves?

ML: So, we're, they're trickling in so we've gotten some so far. I think one of the big challenges you face when you do a project like this is that people don't tend to feel as though their memories and their experiences are significant enough to be documented. It's one of the big challenges with doing oral histories is that people, it's usually older folks that have lived longer that see the value in their experiences, and they want to share their stories. But younger people, for the most part seem to assume that, oh, I'm not important. Nobody wants to collect my story. So that's something we've run into. And it's been a challenge. And it's a challenge throughout oral history, not just in this specific project. The other thing is just trying to find the most effective way to get the word out and get submissions. And we continue to work on that. And we continue to encourage our local folks to do that. And a lot of it has fall on the members of the group that are working on this project to kind of reach out and ask for things and we've done that, but I feel like we're gonna have a really great really great collection of the more formal documents and I think where we still need to improve on is engaging the public and getting their feelings and their recollections and their stories about the COVID pandemic.

SE: You had mentioned previously about how things are shifting at the museum. Is there a plan for the museum's return to normal as it's popularly said, now, you know, is there going to be a normal? Are things going to change, you know, what kind of is the situation for the Fort?

ML: So, I think a lot of that is yet to be seen. I don't see the museum returning to a full normal schedule until we've either eradicated COVID or we have a suitable vaccine that will keep people safe. Until that point, we're looking at doing things a little differently as far as asking folks to wear masks, and you know limiting the size of some of our special events, we're looking at our book sale event in the fall, and that's concerning because it is inside. And there are many, many people that come to it. So, we've talked about the possibility of, you know, limiting the number of people in the space at one time and doing time slots that people could come in and browse for books. So, you know, I don't see, I'm excited about getting back to normal. I'm excited about being able to have the community out here to celebrate with us in our local history in our community. But I don't see that happening on a large scale until we're completely done with this situation. So, you know, it's kind of hard to say, getting back to the original question, you know, do I see us when do I see us, or do I see us going back to normal? I think that's still yet to be determined. You know, we'll make that decision I think once we know what the fate of COVID-19 is.

SE: Just kind of to round things off, do you have anything that you wish future generations or future listeners to know about either, you know, your personal experience during the pandemic or your experience as a museum director?

ML: You know, it's very difficult because how, you know, how do you prepare for something that none of us ever envisioned? How do you, you know, I guess the only thing I would say is that when you're dealing with a situation like this, first and foremost, main concern should always be about the safety and wellbeing of your staff, your visitors and your volunteers. And don't be afraid to make decisions that aren't necessarily popular if you're doing them for the reasons of taking care and keeping everybody safe. I mean, that's been a big debate we've, you know, seen on a national level is, which is more important; the economy or health. And, you know, I think at least from my perspective, the most important thing we can do is be kind to each other and care for each other and not, you know, the other stuff we'll figure out but that's kind of, that would be my advice to future me, director of the Historical Museum in 2100.

SE: All right, well, that's all of the questions I have. So, I'm going to stop the recording.

[End of Interview]