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Interviewee: Carolyn Thompson

Interviewer: Sophia Etier

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Sophia Etier: All right, so, can you please briefly describe your background in public history as well as what you do at Fort Missoula?

Carolyn Thompson: Okay, so, currently I serve as the Assistant Director for the Historical Museum at Fort Missoula. And, um, you want a description of my duties or just basic- a basic description of my title kind of?

SE: Whatever you feel most comfortable with.

CT: Well I wear a lot of hats in my job. When I first started at the museum, I was an education assistant, so I helped out a lot in the education department. Leading tours, designing tours, putting together interactive etc. And then kind of through the years my job has just evolved, and I got more involved working with volunteers and coordinating their participation here at the museum. And then most recently, in the last five years...I think it's five years...Four years...I don't know I can't remember...I've been the assistant director and most of my duties now, in addition to the volunteer supervision, revolve around more administrative tasks for the museum. And also, working with our maintenance person to keep the grounds kept up, and so, I basically pay bills, meet with various contractors. I know I do more than that, but that's kinda what comes to mind and most then recently, I've been in charge of our response to COVID-19 here at the museum in terms of putting together a cleaning regimen and supplies so that we could open safely to the public.

SE: Do you have a background in Public History previous to working at the Fort or...?

CT: On a personal level, yes. My father was a grants person over at the Montana Historical Society growing up, and so like all throughout my life, I have been involved in history. But, in terms of formal training, that has come on the job. My educational background is in social work.

SE: Oh, very nice. When was the first time you heard of COVID-19 and how did you react to it?

CT: You know, I remember hearing about it in January [2020] because they were talking about what was happening on the news, I think it was in the Wuhan province, and they were saying that, I don't know that they referred to it as COVID-19 per say, but, they were talking about the spread of a virus that pretty virulent, so I would say January [2020].

SE: How did you respond to that news of, like, an incoming virus?

CT: Well, you know initially, I really didn't think that much about it I guess I was like, well okay, it's a really densely populated part of the world and not knowing what some of the hygiene practices were or just understanding that, when you have that many people living together in a small space, it's likely that you'll have a greater spread of disease. I also wasn't really surprised. I think that with global warming, and just the way the planet has gone, we're in for a lot of changes across the planet. It makes sense to me that, with our population numbers increasing and our practices around the world, the spread of disease is inevitable.

SE: How have museum operations been impacted with the potential loss of volunteers due to the social distancing measures?

CT: They've been severely impacted. In March was when we started scaling back in terms of operations, and we initially asked volunteers to quit coming in and then the staff reduced their hours at the museum. And we started covering more of the front desk shifts and we stopped book donations and book sortings, which we do all year round, and that's primarily a volunteer function because we have our big book sale in November and it's volunteer driven so we stopped that. Then, of course, we closed the museum mid-March and so we didn't have any volunteers on site essentially for March, April, and May. And, so any projects that were being done by volunteers like in collections or education, so we didn't do any tours so there weren't any docents on site or anything. No tour groups coming. Of course, the front desk was closed so we really, we didn't have a volunteer force because we wanted to make sure that everybody could stay safe and healthy, and not having a lot of information about COVID-19 in terms of how it spreads or what people's risk factors are, we just felt like it was best to keep our volunteers safe and keep them out of the museum until we could figure out a better plan to have them here.

SE: In your opinion, how have visitors to Fort Missoula responded to the sanitation and distancing measures that are currently in place that have reduced operation hours and limited the number of visitors in the museum at one time?

CT: It's been really interesting. So, we opened to the public June 1, and like you acknowledged, we have limited operating hours and, of course, only staff members are at the front desk so there's no volunteers there yet. We are not going to have volunteers return until early July [2020]. So, we had signs made so there's two signs outside that alert visitors to what our expectations or recommendations are, and then when people come into the museum, of course, we greet them and we have signage available. We have this great sign up that says you know 'Patriots wear masks'. Of course, being a county entity, we are not able to demand that people wear masks, but we're recommending it and we present it as an option for, you know, concern and respect for not only the staff, but also other visitors. If people aren't wearing the mask when they come in, I've just ran up and I say, 'So we're asking people to please put on a mask when they come inside the facility and we have free masks available for people'. So, if they don't have something to wear personally, we have an option for them to take it up. For the

most part, people are pretty agreeable and pretty interested in doing that. They're like, "Oh ya, ya definitely. Oh, thank you for having masks." But, we have had a number of people who just flat out refuse. They will still be inside the building. We have had some people who have refused and then turned around and left. But, I would say the majority of people are supportive and very willing to practice social distancing, wear the mask, utilize the hand sanitizing units, and then we also have a sign in sheet for folks. It's like, so, in the event that there was an outbreak here, we would be able to track down visitors and alert them if they had been exposed to, potentially, to the virus. Really, almost to a person, everybody has been very agreeable to do that so, all in all, I think we've had a pretty positive response.

SE: Very nice, that's good, yes. As a whole, how do you foresee the public history field being impacted by COVID-19 in the long term?

CT: Well I mean, already, it has certainly impacted the way programming occurs. Because of social distancing and the inability to gather in large groups, some of those normal means of learning have been forced to go digitally or virtually, so, I think that will be very impactful. Depending on like visitation, which, ya I mean we'll have to kinda see how many people feel comfortable being tourists or visitors here and that will impact people's ability to learn more about history, kind of on that hands-on basis. I do think that we'll just kind of have to, as a field, we're just going to have to figure out new ways to provide information and like we're all learning at the same time. There is a huge learning curve, but, thankfully we've got lots of young people who are very tech-savvy and who are super interested in adapting to some needs. Ya, I mean, it's just that it's a new normal and that's okay. We can adapt and make it work.

SE: Just kind of like following up with that question, do you feel like public history sites will further the use of social media like they have had to during COVID? And, you know with that possibility, do you think that internships for students will specifically include digital outreach? Adapting to that?

CT: Oh, I can definitely see that. Like we've had, Kristijana [Eyjolfsson] has had her intern this spring. For the first month of his internship, because we were closed, they were meeting online and he was doing a lot of independent study, and so, I do think that it will change internships and how they're...it's just going to be different. I'm not being very specific, because I guess, I'm kind of waiting to see how it all unfolds.

SE: Ya we can't be too specific now because we don't really now. So, with many of the Fort's annual events being cancelled such as the 4th at the Fort celebration or the participation of the cheese curd booth at the Western Montana Fair, what potential repercussions do these cancellations bring for the Fort moving into the fall and into 2021?

CT: Well of course the first obvious one would be a loss of revenue. Both of those events are considered fundraisers for the museum so we will lose revenue this year. Fortunately, we have a pretty solid, stable Friends [Friends of the Historical Museum at Fort Missoula] budget. We do have some money in reserves. This initial year it will be impactful, but it's not like a deal breaker necessarily for us. I think that definitely there's a lot people out there who have expressed their disappointment that we are not going to have the 4th and things are kinda up in the air about the fair, and so, I think it will...how is that going to change things? Obviously, the financial aspect, but you know, there may be people who aren't as comfortable with the digital aspect so they may be less inclined to view our exhibits that way or because of the social distancing, physical distancing restrictions, they may feel a little bit inhibited about coming on site. Also, a large portion of our visitors are older, older demographics, sometimes with those demographics who see people who have some underlying health risks so I do think that it may shift the composite of our visitors in a way if older people are not venturing out as much and people who are at risk maybe not be participating as much. Again, I mean, it still feels really new like we've only been open for these first two weeks and it'll depend if we're able to have any of our other events like we have the Harvest festival usually in the fall and then we have the book sale. So, at this point, we are planning to go forward with the book sale but with some pretty different structures in place to make that happen. So ya, I mean it's just day by day.

SE: Kind of following up with that one, one of the other questions I had was with the museum slowly lifting - or reopening in compliance with Governor Bullock's phased plan for lifting social restrictions across the state, do you believe that volunteers, who are typically older and could be deemed at-risk during this pandemic, will be resuming their positions at the Fort?

CT: Well, we're leaving that up to our volunteers. I've been in contact with all of the volunteers throughout this whole pandemic. Most recently, a few weeks ago, I sent out a letter to everybody just kind of outlining the general process, what's happening, what our plans are. I told each volunteer, and have spoken to both-almost all of them personally and said you know 'This is a personal decision on your part if you feel comfortable returning to a public setting'. Obviously we have some measures in place to keep people safe like we have a plexi-shield that we put at the front desk so that there's not a transmission of air. We've quit charging admission for the summer because that reduces our point of contact. Probably for this first month, well, we don't have the bookstore open right now and again to reduce the point of contact, people touching books and rocks and all of that. For volunteers, I don't know. I imagine that we might have a couple that might return, but I'm fully anticipating that the bulk of at least my front desk core of people won't be returning for a while because they are in some of those high-risk categories.

SE: I kind of asked you this already, but how do you see internal museum operations changing on a large scale across the state, the nation, or internationally following the COVID-19 pandemic?

CT: Well again, I think people will have to revisit how they provide learning experiences for their visitors. I think there will be less in person visiting, there will be a lot more virtual learning. Well I mean, like I remember when this first started out, I can't remember who it was now but someone circulated a list from like a museum service and it was all of the museums that were closing or laying off staff during the pandemic and I don't know, there was like fifteen major museums throughout the country that had virtually eliminated departments and had no plans to recreate these programs or departments post-COVID. That was it. They just felt like they did not have the resources. Again, I think it's gonna really in the next few months is when we're gonna start to see some big shifts. I feel really lucky that we were able to keep the museum afloat and that's in large part because we have such a wonderful, strong support base with Missoula County tax dollars that we've been able to keep things going. None of us lost our positions. Even in some of the major museums in the East, I know that departments were just obliterated and I don't see those coming back and especially for museums who have a much more volatile financial support and if their operations depend on visitation numbers and if people have reduced their visits or they're not doing anything in person that's a lot of lost revenue. I think it's going to be pretty impactful for the museum field as a whole.

SE: Yes, when I interviewed Matt [Lautzenheiser] earlier this week, he had mentioned the same fear that that knowledge base or those departments wouldn't be coming back because they wouldn't have room for them to return. It is definitely frightening to think about that.

CT: And so, I thought of another thing. So, we also have temporarily stopped donations to the collections because we don't have adequate staff to process collections right now. So, you know, who knows. I can see that happening many other places. What will people do with their stuff? Will they hang out to it or will they...you know I don't know, so.

SE: Like you said, it is kind of a day to day, how are we going to deal with this. Is there a plan for the museum's "return to normal" how everyone's been asking organizations lately? Is there a plan set in place for you guys; preliminary thoughts about returning to normal operations?

CT: I think that you know of course right now, limited hours etc. We will probably continue with the additional sanitation methods from here on out. I think as restrictions lift, county and statewide and how the COVID-19 numbers play out, that will really kind of guide our response. I know, like, for the last four weeks, Montana has not seen any new cases of COVID-19. And yet, we are also entering our busiest tourist season, and with the travel restrictions that Governor Bullock lifted, that definitely will impact our visitor rates. I mean, I think more people will be traveling, and so if our numbers start to go up and if they were significant, we would scale back operations. But, if things continue to be pretty stable and we don't have an [increase] [*internet communication disruption*] our restrictions will lift. But it is definitely a very gradual process and I don't know that those things will go back to exactly what they were before, but we will just kind of keep seeing how the numbers are, seeing the kind of guidance we get from the county because we've been following their directives. Each county in the state has-- each county health department in the state has the ability to kind of manage their response so, our

response here in Missoula County will be different than what it is in Ravalli County. Like I know, over at the Historical Society, they have a plan to reopen, but their book shop is open, and I think it's probably a bigger source for revenue for them than ours is, so they may have more interest in keeping it going.

SE: So, my second to last question for you is, and you kind of answered this with the sanitation measures, but what changes if any, do you think you and the Fort Missoula staff will carry into the future?

CT: What changes? Well, I wonder like if we'll ever go back to having staff meetings where we're all sitting at the same table. Right now, we're all super spread out. We've been able to do them outside. We had been doing them virtually, and then once we figured out we were all going to be back in the office, most of the time our doors are shut. We are all wearing masks in the general public space. I know that in the education department, Kristijana and Emily have been doing these Lunch and Learns so they've been doing a lot more virtual education. It's going to be super impactful for Jessie's [Rogers] position because she did a lot of, she's doing a lot of fundraising, and that looks really different during COVID-19 times. So, her job is shifting quite a bit and I don't know what my volunteer force is going to look like. Right now, we're all covering the front desk, but that's not a long-term solution for us. I think things are going to look, definitely, going to look different. I don't know if that is specific enough for you.

SE: No, that's a great insight. Is there anything that you would like future generations or future listeners to know about this pandemic either from a personal standpoint or from a public history standpoint, or both?

CT: Well, you know it's interesting because when I first started here at the museum thirteen years ago, the very first exhibit that I was involved in was the Flu Pandemic of 1918, and, I didn't know anything about that. So, I learned a lot about it when we were putting together that exhibit, and, it's just crazy to me that in my lifetime, worldwide events such as this happened again. Here I am, I'm still at the museum, and now I'm right in the middle of it. Looking at some of the responses the Missoula community had to the Flu Pandemic of 1918 and what was happening worldwide, and now, ugh I'm living this. This is real. It's not just history. It's not just something to read about and be interested in. No, this happening right now. Personally, I have kind of appreciated the slow down and the reevaluation of what's important. I have been really heartened by people's coming together and responding to things, and I think with the enormity of the pandemic, it kind of took away some pretenses that we've all been hanging onto. Especially in light of what's happening right now, with the Black Lives Matter movement and the worldwide protests, I really think that the COVID-19 pandemic had a lot to do with the opening up for this discussion on a planetary basis. Because it forced us to look at our inner connectiveness. We're not just these little isolated communities living here and there, and especially in Montana. It can feel really isolating and sort of disengaged from the rest of the world. Everybody's happy its quiet here, but I do think that the pandemic really set the stage for some pretty needed discussions of life as we know it. Because life as we know it

has not worked for everybody, and, I hear a lot of people say things like 'Oh I just wish it could go back to how it was before' and I'm like but how it was didn't work for everybody. It just worked for this really narrow margin of the world's population. It was very easy for everybody to put that aside, like you don't have to look at it. Now, people have to look at things. Frightening. Scary. Crazy. But, change is never easy. This is just part of it. Growth, it's like cells exploding. Here we are. Exploding!

SE: Well that was the last question I had for you. I think I'm going to end the recording now but, thank you for your participation in this interview.

CT: You're welcome.

[End of Interview]