

## The History Professional

*An Interview with Peter Liebhold*

*Peter Liebhold is a curator in the Division of Work and Industry at the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History (NMAH) in Washington, DC, and has worked there since 1985. He has curated and co-curated numerous exhibitions, including "American Enterprise," "Bittersweet Harvest: The Bracero Program 1942–1964," "Barriers to Bridges: Asian American Immigration after Exclusion," "Between a Rock and a Hard Place: A History of American Sweatshops, 1820–Present," "Treasures of American History," and "America on the Move." He has produced numerous related public programs and written on American business practices and museum exhibitions, including American Enterprise: A History of Business in America (2015), Smithsonian Treasures of American History (2006), and "Experiences from the Front Line: Presenting a Controversial Exhibition during the Culture Wars," in The Public Historian 22 No. 3 (Summer 2000).*



*Peter Liebhold*

*Interview by Benjamin Guterman*

**How did you get your start at the NMAH, and what were your initial assignments?**

I first joined the Smithsonian in 1985 and started working in the division of Photographic History. Having earlier worked at the start-up Baltimore Museum of Industry, the move to the big leagues was pretty exciting. In my second week of work, my supervisor Gene Ostroff and fellow museum specialist Lynn Novick both left on vacation, leaving me alone to run the office. It was a great introduction to the incredible opportunities at the Smithsonian for one who is self-directed.

From the beginning, I got to work with and collect nationally important artifacts, help organize conferences, write papers for small publications, help out on other folks' exhibitions, and participate in internal political drama. It was a classic museum apprenticeship.

**What are your current duties?**

Having just stepped down after 10 years as chair of the Division of Work and Industry it is refreshing to be a full-time curator again. As such, I am focused on keeping two exhibitions vital ("American Enterprise" and "America on the Move"), collecting objects for the museum, and engaging in serious research. I am currently working on a book project titled Food Tech: Commercialized and Revolutionized, and several SI Networks TV programs.

**Could you outline some of the essential planning stages and curatorial discussions that go into the making of a major exhibit at the Smithsonian?**

Developing a major exhibition at the Smithsonian is a pretty crazy undertaking. To paraphrase Ben Hamper in "Rivthead," The only thing worse than working at the Smithsonian is not working at the Smithsonian.

To successfully open a new show, one needs to spend about one-third of the time fund-raising; one-third interacting with designers, administrators, and fabricators; and one-third in research and writing. It is a long process, and one has to approach it like

running a marathon—you can't sprint the whole distance, and there is always at least one killer hill near the finish line.

There is no single successful organizational model for an exhibition team. In some groups, curators work independently and quietly with the information, coming together towards the end. Others work by consensus. Personally, I like the engaged approach wherein the core team members sit around the table and try to convince others by raising their voices and gesturing wildly. It is often a heady atmosphere of really smart people finishing each others' sentences and moving at a lightning pace. It is totally exhausting and ultimately exhilarating. Not for the meek and mild; others prefer a quieter and politer approach.

**The museum's new permanent exhibit "American Enterprise" was not intended to be a straightforward narrative of U.S. business history. What is the concept behind it, and how has it incorporated opportunities for public interaction?**

"American Enterprise" seeks to use the prism of business stories to understand American history at large. The exhibition is accessible to the general public because it looks at market stories—the fascinating backstory behind producers and retailers as well and workers and consumers. The show is rich in personal stories and important historical anecdotes. The exhibition revolves around four themes: opportunity, innovation, completion, and common good. "American Enterprise" argues that the United States has had a vibrant and leading economy for over 200 years for social and cultural reasons. The exhibition does not claim American exceptionalism but does recognize unique national characteristics. Organized chronologically, the "American Enterprise" exhibition illustrates economist Joseph Schumpeter's notion of creative destruction. Not particularly respectful of the past, Americans are often willing to abandon old ways and take up new innovative techniques that promote efficiency and productivity. At the same time, commitment to common good and rule of law keeps the worst excesses at bay. At its heart, "American Enterprise" is the story of the dynamic tension between capitalism and democracy.

**The 2009 exhibit “Bittersweet Harvest: The Bracero Program 1942–1964” grew out of a larger documentary project about agricultural guest workers. How did the exhibit contribute to our understanding of such labor programs?**

Bittersweet Harvest came out of a national effort led by the Smithsonian to document and preserve the history of an almost forgotten chapter of American labor history. Under the bracero program (the nation’s largest guest worker program), Mexican nationals came to work in the United States on short-term labor contracts. Collaborating with universities around the country, teams interviewed the workers, their relatives, and growers, and collected objects and images. We launched the online Bracero History Archive (<http://braceroarchive.org/>) and created a traveling exhibit.

When “Bittersweet Harvest” opened at the National Museum of American History in 2009, we expected it to add to the debate about guest workers and immigrant labor that was raging across the nation. We expected it to provide an important historic framework for heated discussions about illegal immigration and citizenship. To our surprise, connections to current-day political concerns were largely ignored. Instead the exhibition’s impact was on the public perception of the Smithsonian, museums more broadly, and Mexican Americans. That the national museum would tell the story of working-class agricultural workers and promote it as a key chapter in American history was important. This story of hardworking people humanized a topic. Instead of being about trade, immigration law, or government programs, it was about real people who sacrificed so much. “Bittersweet Harvest” was immensely popular, bringing new audiences to our museum and the traveling venues.

As the exhibition toured the country (two copies of the show are still on the road seven years later), the reaction was different than in Washington, DC. In many smaller communities, the exhibition did serve to spark conversations about guest workers, citizenship, and immigration. In all the venues, it changed conversations from broad theoretical discussions to explorations of human experience wherein participants have personal agency.

The exhibition provided uncomfortable nuance to the bracero program. It presented the program as exploiting workers but also providing opportunities—bittersweet. It cast a light on the experiences of everyday people rather than lauding a few well-known heroes. Unquestionably, this is history from the bottom up. Troubling for some visitors, it was not clear whether the bracero program should be heralded or vilified. For others, seeing their ancestors in a museum was a real recognition of status and importance. For many, this was the first time that they saw themselves in a museum exhibition.

**In developing the controversial American sweatshops exhibit, “Between a Rock and a Hard Place,” that opened in April 1998, you and your fellow curators attempted to achieve balance by using several voices beyond the standard**

**curatorial voice. Was that a relatively new approach, and how well do you think it worked overall?**

When Harry Rubenstein and I had the hubris to think we could do a controversial show during the height of the Culture Wars it was because we thought we understood a new model for success. The failure of the ivory tower approach that got Martin Harwit, director of the National Air and Space Museum, fired in 1995 over the “Enola Gay” exhibition had taught us a lot. It was no longer enough to be academically correct. Good footnotes and research do not carry the day in media battles. We learned from the (Bill) Clinton campaign battles that any attack should be have a response within 24 hours. We also learned that you need to curry friends before things go bad so that you can call in favors during times of need. We realized that the ability to talk to confrontational media and the art of spinning was just as important as delivering papers to colleagues at conferences.

Of course the most important lesson coming out of the Cultural Wars was that success in public history was not steering clear of tough topics but instead committing to achieving balance and a general perception that we had done so. This approach meant a lot of time spent talking to all members of the community, not just friends. In general, Harry and I did better talking to people who disliked us (and our project) than to our supporters. In the case of “Between a Rock and a Hard Place,” we turned over a considerable amount of space to let stakeholders speak their piece.

One trademark of the show is a very careful use of voice. Some of the labels were written in the dry curatorial voice of God, while some that were edgier relied heavily on quotes. In public history, great weight is given to participants even when you can argue that their facts might be wrong. In the very last label of the exhibition, Harry and I wrote in the first person. Today that personal approach is typical for a blog, but in 1998 it was quite a break from the curatorial norm.

**One criticism of the sweatshops exhibit, was that it lacked drama, and even outrage, at the abuses of laborers, especially with the discovery of forced labor at the sweatshop in El Monte, California, in August 1995. How did you respond to those reviews?**

Outrage works in a book but rarely in the public history world. Everyone has a perspective and needs to feel that they are being fairly represented. The notion of being balanced and fair is critical to success. For us, just getting the show open was huge. The public doesn’t need to be hit over the head with anger and abuse. Sometimes framing part of the story with empathy towards all the participants, even the exploiters, makes the impact even more powerful. Reducing the story to good and evil is not terribly effective, insightful, or accurate. Presenting a nuanced and complicated story that sparks conversation between viewers is what we sought.

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**What did you learn from the sweatshop exhibit experience, especially regarding the issue of museum responsibility to explore societal crises as well as successes?**

I learned a lot from the sweatshop show. Taking on timely issues that are relevant to visitors is important. Lecturing to visitors about what is right or wrong is a mistake. Instead we should engage the public; an exhibition should be a point of departure not an answer. I am happy when people leave my exhibitions slightly frustrated—wanting to know more, asking what they should do. The public should be motivated to learn, to be active, to be engaged citizens. I don’t believe that public history should be prescriptive with a specific social agenda. Instead, public history is about engagement. Success is when people read a book, consult the Web, or take an action, even if what they do is not what I would do.

“American Enterprise” employs the techniques we established in “Between a Rock and a Hard Place.” It presents a complex story: the benefits, failures, and unanticipated consequences of American economic development. Visitors learn how business and work affected the nation’s history as well as their own lives—that business is important but not always just. Some people succeed, some get by, and some get hurt. Understanding the business development of the nation, and the corresponding social effects, is fundamental to the lives of the American people, the history of the United States, and the nation’s role in global affairs. “American Enterprise” conveys the drama, breadth, and diversity of America’s business heritage

**Can you discuss your current book project on food production and technology and how NMAH artifacts will fit into the discussion?**

My current project, *Food Tech*, is based on museum objects and my recent curatorial work. Over the past 200 years, food choices in the United States have increased dramatically while the real price of food has decreased. Access to and choice of food greatly expanded as new technology and forms of production commercialized and revolutionized agriculture and food processing. Efficiency of production lowered costs but at the same time raised environmental and life-style concerns. *Food Tech* explores that complicated and nuanced experience through a series of food case studies. Anecdotal in approach and rich in material culture, *Food Tech* peels back the amazing stories that lie beneath what we grow and eat.

**As you collect and research for an upcoming project on post–World War II agriculture, what themes or transformative technologies stand out at this point?**

Post–World War II agriculture is absolutely fascinating although scary to some people. The largest transformation in the period is the basic switch from extensive to intensive farming practices. Instead of plowing up more land, farmers make the

land more productive. The mid-1930s was the peak in the United States for the number of farms, acreage under till, and people in farming. Following WWII, productivity really takes off. New hybrids in plants and animals are part of the story, but so too is the switch from animal power to gasoline- and electrically powered equipment, the use of fertilizer, and chemicals like herbicides, pesticides, and fungicides.

Recently, the rise of GMOs, commercial organic production, and biosecurity are all intriguing transformative changes. Animal stories are also important. Before WWII, chicken was expensive (that is why Hoover promised a chicken in every pot). Today chicken is inexpensive (Martin Short offers Steve Martin the “cheaper chicken” in the movie *Father of the Bride*.) Chicken nuggets, largely unknown 50 years ago, have become the gold standard to every parent across America. One of the huge stories today is the rise of precision farming—how the use of GPS and big data is changing agricultural practices.

**Has the Museum made any significant changes in how it manages its growing collections, and has it changed its guidelines for procuring new artifacts?**

The museum field continues to professionalize and raise its standards of collections care. While saving artifacts for perpetuity is what a museum should do, it also raises the cost of operations. Between the crisis of storage space and the escalation of preservation and security standards the ability to expand collections is being challenged. Curators today have to think much more carefully about what to collect on how well to care for it. A major question for the next generation of curators is should everything in their collections be kept? What is out of scope, what needs to be reinterpreted?

**What is your favorite aspect of your curatorial duties at the NMAH?**

Working at the National Museum of American History is a real privilege. I get to explore world-class collections, interact with brilliant colleagues, and put together fantastic exhibitions. The respect for the museum by the general public is powerful. I am always amazed that when I call important people they are willing to talk to me and give the museum prized artifacts. ❖

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