

MUSEUM on Main Street

Local Exhibition & Program Ideas

The following information has been assembled to assist and inspire you in developing local exhibitions and public humanities programs to complement the themes of The Way We Worked. The information is organized according to the themes of each section of the exhibition.

INTRODUCTION

Program Ideas

- There is a wide range of films that depict American workers and various aspects of their work lives (see accompanying filmography). Work with your local movie theatre or library to host a film-and-discussion program one night a week in conjunction with the exhibition's run in your community.
- There is also a wide range of children's books exploring America's workers and their work lives (see accompanying reading list of children's books). Work with your local library and/or bookstore to develop children's reading programs in conjunction with the exhibition's run in your community:
 - Set aside a space in the exhibition area as a reading room for children and families;
 - Ask the local librarian to focus story-time selections on books that explore the exhibition's themes;
 - Have a reading contest: children who read X number of books related to the exhibition will receive special rewards such as discounts to local business, posters, etc. (This is a good way to get sponsorships from local businesses.)
- In the same way, work with your local library and/or bookstore to develop reading programs and learning opportunities for adults and young adults (see accompanying reading lists of adult and young adult books):
 - Host book club meetings using books related to the exhibition's themes;
 - Set up a *The Way We Worked* station at the local library, displaying books on the subject and having a computer available to explore related web sites.

WHERE WE WORKED

Local Exhibition Themes/Ideas

- Create an exhibit of historical photos showing local people working at a variety of jobs in both indoor and outdoor environments (see TWWW exhibition text for examples), and include written descriptions of the images.
- Hold a photography contest and ask people of all ages to take photographs of community members in different work environments. Entries should include a description of the image, and the images and descriptions could become part of your local exhibit. Ask local businesses and industries to contribute prizes, and make sure to invite them to your grand opening of the exhibition.
- Expand on the photo exhibit by adding artifacts that further illustrate the variety of jobs people in your community have done over time. Include want ads, clothing/uniforms, tools and equipment, historic and contemporary signs, advertisements and promotional memorabilia, media clippings, and personal accounts.

Programming Ideas

- Ask your local newspaper to run a weekly photo as a promotion prior to your exhibit opening, and/or as a contest during the exhibit run. Use a historical or contemporary image of an aspect of a local business that still exists, and ask people to identify the business. Ask local businesses to contribute coupons for the winners.
- Create a small space to approximate the size of a car in a mineshaft, which could even be done with tape on the floor as long as it gives visitors a sense of confinement. Have docents tell visitors how many miners would need to ride in the car and for how long, and invite them to try and sit in the space for that length of time.
- For young adults: Work with teachers to encourage participation in a video project. Ask students to tape a two-minute video of a parent explaining their job and then actually doing it. String several segments together and run them on a loop in your local exhibit.
- For children: Design a TWWW scavenger hunt and have participants gather photos and items related to a range of local business/industry.

HOW WE WORKED

Local Exhibition Themes/Ideas

- Create a “then and now” photo exhibit, with contemporary photos of local people in their work environments juxtaposed with historical images of local workers doing similar jobs with the tools and machinery of the time (see TWWW exhibition text for examples). The images could include examples of the actual tools or equipment, for example washboards versus washing machines. Include written descriptions of how these images reflect changes in these tasks, industries, or professions over time.
- Create a “then and now” exhibit of historical tools and equipment, including explanations of how they were used and what tools have replaced them (substitute images when necessary). For example, display “historical” communications tools such as typewriters and dial-up telephones, and show an image of what has replaced them.
- Invite workers from local businesses and industries to come to your site and do tool and equipment demonstrations, providing visitors with opportunities to perform a variety of tasks such as assembling a product or mending a fence.
- Create an exhibit using a series of images from local businesses and industries that illustrates the stages of how workers got something done. For example, show crops going from fields to stores, open land becoming a highway or building, or a product being created by hand or on an assembly line. Provide a written description and collect workers’ stories on the process or project.
- For children: Create a hands-on exhibit that explores how the same tools can be used by different kinds of workers for different tasks. For example, display a shovel, a rope, and a bucket and have a docent ask if the kids know how each item can be used for more than one kind of job. Provide a companion handout on which kids can match historic and contemporary tools with more than one task.

Programming Ideas

- Ask your local newspaper to run a weekly photo as a promotion prior to your exhibit opening, and/or as a contest during the exhibit run. Use a local historical image of a job that people no longer do, and ask readers to identify what they’re doing. For example,

“Why are these people standing in a circle and throwing grain in the air?” (Answer: They’re separating the wheat from the chaff so that...etc.) Ask local businesses and industries to contribute coupons for the winners.

- On the topic of changing and/or disappearing jobs and professions in your community:
 - Offer a presentation by a scholar on the history of mechanization and industrialization of businesses and industries in your area, and discuss the pros and cons of modernization during the Q&A period.
 - Have a roundtable discussion with retired workers about changing and/or disappearing jobs in local businesses and industries. Prepare specific questions such as “What were the tasks involved in getting the job done, and how have those changed over time?” Record these exchanges to use as the seed for an oral history project.
 - Follow up on contacts and leads from your roundtable, and take oral histories from people who’ve experienced changes in local businesses and industries over time. For example, the experience of growing up on a family farm is becoming rare, so take this opportunity to ask some local farmers about the nature of the work and the division of labor. Besides incorporating the histories into your collections, use quotes or short stories from the interviews to enrich your exhibits.
- If your community has a history of labor unions and/or labor strife:
 - Offer a presentation by a scholar on the history of labor union activity in your area.
 - Take oral histories from labor leaders and others who were involved in local unions and/or strikes. Besides incorporating the histories into your collections, use quotes or short stories from the interviews to enrich your exhibits.
 - Find out if there have been any protest songs that were associated with local labor union history. If so, include the lyrics and/or recordings in your exhibit, and ask oral history interviewees about the experience of singing those songs. Hold a community-wide contest and ask participants to write a new verse based on local labor union history.

AMERICA WORKS

Local Exhibition Themes/Ideas

- Create a photo exhibit illustrating the diversity of the local workforce over time, one that reflects gender, age groups, and the various nationalities and ethnicities in your community.
- Using maps of the U.S. and the world, illustrate the one-way trips people have made to your community. Include a companion display that explains what kind of work they did before, and what kind of work they do now that they’ve arrived. Is it similar? If not, how is it different? How did their status as migrants affect their ability to find work or the type of work they obtained?
- It’s likely that your community contains some public works projects that were constructed during the Depression as part of the New Deal’s Works Progress Administration or Civilian Conservation Corps. Create an exhibit that tells that story, and include photos that document the progress and completion of the projects as well as personal stories from the workers.
- If your community is near a military base or factory that was active and increased your town’s population during World War II, create an exhibit that tells that story. Include what

ads, clothing/uniforms, tools and equipment, historic and contemporary signs, advertisements and promotional memorabilia, media clippings, and personal accounts.

Programming Ideas

- Offer a presentation by a scholar on the history of gender relations in the workplace, or on the historical impact of migration and immigration on jobs.
- Collect oral histories from diverse members of the community who have worked in a range of local industries and professions. Include people of different ethnicities, genders, and ages, and ask them how their identities and personalities have affected their employment choices and experiences. Besides incorporating the histories into your collections, use quotes or stories from the interviews to enrich your exhibits.
 - If these participants include wartime “Rosies,” display historical photos, factory equipment, and clothing in that part of your exhibit.
 - If these participants include migrant workers, display historical and contemporary photos, farm equipment, and samples of the cultivated crops in that part of your exhibit.

COMMUNITY AND IDENTITY

Local Exhibition Themes/Ideas

- Create an exhibit on the history of your most prominent local businesses and industries. Include want ads, clothing/uniforms, tools and equipment, historic and contemporary signs, advertisements and promotional memorabilia, media clippings, and personal accounts. How did your town/region come to be associated with this business/industry? Does it accurately represent your region? What impact has the industry had on your town in terms of population, housing, and economic development? How does your community recognize its connections to this industry?
- Create an exhibit of historical work clothing/uniforms from local businesses and industries, or simply display the workers’ hats, shoes, and boots. Include written descriptions about the practical and/or supervisory functions of the different uniforms.
- Create an exhibit of historical photos that shows groups of local workers in both professional and social settings, and include written descriptions of the images.
- If your community has its origins in a particular industry (for example: a railroad hub, a company town for a mill or mine, or a fishing village), create an exhibit on the interrelationship between the development of your town and the industry. Does the industry still have a great influence on the community and its residents?

Programming Ideas

- Capture visitors’ work-related stories and memories by putting out a special TWWW guestbook or posting butcher paper on the wall. Pose questions such as “What is your best memory of working at the local factory/farm/store? What was the challenging aspect or incident? What has your work meant to you both professionally and personally?”
- Have an essay or poetry contest asking people of all ages to reflect on how their chosen jobs or careers have affected their personal lives and identities. Display the results as part of your local exhibit.
- Invite retired workers from the most prominent local businesses and industries to either a special preview night/reception or to the grand opening of the exhibition.

- For children: Create a “photo op” using a representational “scene” from the most prominent local businesses and industries, and let kids pose while holding plastic versions of tools and wearing job-appropriate clothing elements.
- Create a walking or driving tour of local businesses and industries and other buildings or locations that are related to local work. Enhance each stop on the tour by providing images and quotations collected from your oral histories with local workers.