

OUR COMMUNITY HERITAGE

a Common Thread

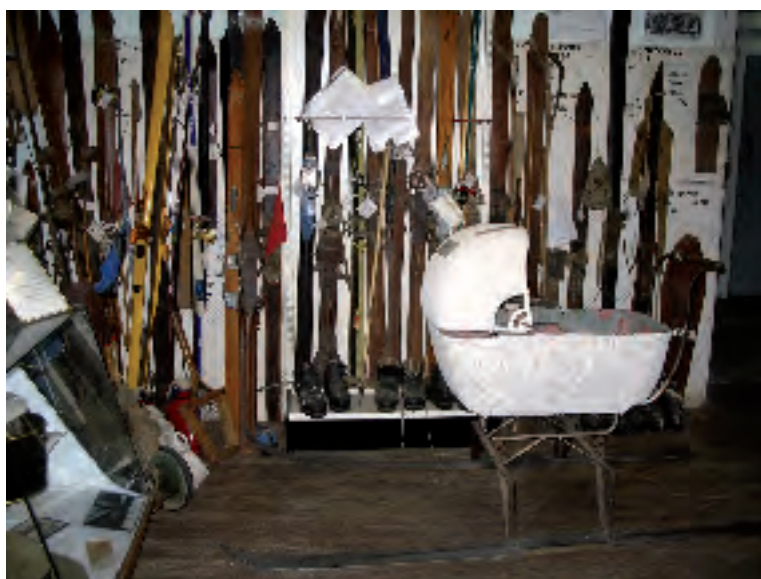
Juliana Madden discusses the enormous social, cultural and historical benefits arising from the Community Heritage Grants program

School records, circus costumes, a throwing axe, sheet music, a pram on skis, a hand-knitted rug in the shape of Australia—what could be the common thread?

When the school records include those of former prime minister, Gough Whitlam, the circus costume is by Flying Fruit Fly Circus designer Laurel Frank, the throwing axe is a Smoky Dawson stage prop, the sheet music is part of Australia's oldest choir repertoire, the pram on skis is an insight into high country passion, and the rug is an Australian soldier's stand against the enemy while a captive in a German prisoner-of-war camp, the common thread is national significance—the core criterion required to receive a Community Heritage Grant.

The Community Heritage Grants (CHG) program is managed by the National Library of Australia. Funded by the Australian Government through the Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts, the National Archives of Australia, the Australian Film Commission through the National Film and Sound Archive, the National Museum of Australia and the National Library of Australia, it provides an opportunity for communities large and small to have the artefacts of their history kept alive for generations to come, in the places where that history happened.

In recent years the CHG program has grown rapidly in terms of funding, reach and national awareness. From Burnie to Broome, the program is now an important component in the preservation of Australian local history of national significance. The scheme makes available up to \$15 000 for not-for-profit organisations to preserve



artefacts and documents significant to the heritage of people, places and institutions. The grants extend beyond books and archival documents, anything from toys and domestic appliances to diaries and digital materials may be put forward for preservation. Community Heritage Grants are not, however, intended just as funding for the preservation of historical materials. Special emphasis is put on ensuring that historical items remain accessible to the Australian community, particularly to the communities from which they come. The engagement of communities with their own history is part of the ethos that drives the program.

Community organisations benefiting from the program include museums, libraries, archives, historical societies, art galleries and migrant, Indigenous and religious organisations. In 2006, 80 organisations received more than \$391 000, demonstrating the federal government's increasing commitment to the program; five years ago the total amount granted was only \$160 990. The grant money is used for collection assessments, preservation surveys, conservation treatments, preservation training, digitisation and purchasing of quality storage material or environmental monitoring equipment.

Marita Albert
Ski Collection, including a ski pram
used by Tom and Elyne Mitchell
while skiing in the mountains with
their children.
Snowy River Museum, Corryong, VIC



above left to right:
Ellen Morosini
Community Heritage Grant
Workshop Participants
Observing Photograph
Preservation Techniques,
National Archives of Australia,
Mitchell 2006

Karen Donnelly
The Flying Fruit Fly Circus

Loui Seselja (b.1948)
Community Heritage Grant
Awards, 8 November 2006—
Group in the Foyer with Jan
Fullerton and Hon. Rod Kemp,
Minister for the Arts and Sport

below:
Loui Seselja (b.1948)
Eric Scott, Australian Country
Music Foundation, Receiving
a Community Heritage Grant
Award from the Hon. Rod
Kemp, Minister for the Arts and
Sport, 8 November 2006

Preservation and collection management training has always been a priority and grant recipients are offered three days intensive preservation training with the National Archives of Australia, the National Film and Sound Archive, the National Museum of Australia and the Library. The training coincides with the presentation of the grants at the award ceremony which is held in Canberra each year.

Jan Fullerton AO, Director-General of the National Library of Australia, summed up the value of this training: 'Over the years, hundreds of people involved in managing nationally significant collections throughout Australia have been given the opportunity to come to Canberra, enhance their skills, and to then take their new knowledge back to their community to ensure the collections are preserved and managed while remaining in a meaningful context'.

Increasingly, grants to support community training are also provided as part of the program and in 2006, one quarter of the allocated grants was for training projects. Training grant recipients included the Chinese Australian Historical Society

which will use the funds to provide workshops for Sydney's Chinese community organisations on the importance of collecting, maintaining and preserving their records. As many of the pre-1960 records held by these organisations are in Chinese, the workshops

will be presented by Chinese-speaking archivists.

Another training grant recipient was the Australian Country Music Foundation in Tamworth where country music identity Smoky Dawson's recordings, throwing axe and other memorabilia are preserved. Foundation vice-president, Eric Scott, told ABC Radio's *Bush Telegraph* program how knowledge will be passed down the line to the grass-roots:

We will be organising for Linda Raymond, a collections expert from Sydney, to present a two-day workshop which will be attended by representatives of museums, art galleries and archives in our immediate district. Each representative will be asked to bring one or two items from their collections and Linda will instruct us on identifying significance.

Grants for undertaking significance assessments provide for engaging an historian, academic, archivist or museum consultant to enable communities to produce a written report which will assist organisations to better understand the significance of a collection, and make informed decisions about its management. A 2006 grant will enable the Society of the Friends of St Mary's Cathedral Choir in Sydney, Australia's oldest musical institution, to assess the significance of its collection. The Man from Snowy River Museum which houses a handmade ski collection dating back to the high country's early 1800s, and the hand-knitted map of Australia rug, will be assessed for significance through a grant to the Upper Murray Historical Society.





The Society's Marita Albert believes the Community Heritage Grants program has major benefits: 'We've had a big emphasis on hoarding and not a lot on conservation. A lot of that is because we just didn't know how to conserve these things. It's wonderful we've had this opportunity to access some of the expertise of the national institutions'.

A preservation survey is enormously helpful in determining the condition of a collection and what needs to be achieved in the future in order to optimise the preservation of the items it contains. The Bundaberg City Art Collection grant will result in a plan aimed at improving the condition of a collection which includes work by artists with national, state and local significance, and is an integral part of the cultural life of the city and the wider region.

Building on its 2005 Significance Assessment, the Flying Fruit Fly Circus's 2006 preservation survey grant will enable it to engage a conservator who will develop a preservation plan for the circus's collection of circus costumes and equipment, photographs, posters and other memorabilia.

The circus's marketing manager, Jane Longhurst, says that the 2006 grant will allow prioritising of the collection's preservation activities, which is significant in the broader Australian context. 'When you look at the presence of a company like the Flying Fruit Fly Circus in a regional context, as we are here in Albury Wodonga, we have contributed so much not only to the cultural landscape of Australia but also in the growth of regional centres.'

Many of Australia's most important heritage materials are fragile and rehousing

is an essential conservation activity.

The Adelaide Gaol Preservation Society's collection of artefacts, which includes officer and inmate uniforms, newspaper cuttings, guns, locks, ball and chains, prisoner-made implements, prison records, and hanging and escape ropes, will gain from a 2006 grant for archival storage materials. Funds are also available for those wishing to purchase environmental control and monitoring equipment, so important in a country like Australia, with its harsh climatic conditions.

At the core of the Community Heritage Grants program is an emphasis on initiating new heritage preservation projects throughout Australia, and then continuing to provide support while they develop. The grants are intended to enable communities to take a proactive approach to preserving their own heritage. Through its management of the Community Heritage Grants program, the National Library of Australia has demonstrated its commitment to the preservation of Australian stories wherever they come from. The message that the Library sends through its promotion of the grants is that Australian stories, whether they are momentous and heroic, or humble and prosaic, are fundamental to the way we live now.

Applications for the 2007 Community Heritage Grants open on 9 March and close on 8 June. For more details on how to apply, visit the Community Heritage Grants website, www.nla.gov.au/chg

JULIANA MADDEN is a Canberra-based freelance writer and media coordinator