



Minnesota Lakes Maritime Museum

2015 Interpretive Plan

Prepared by Bluestem Heritage Group, St. Paul
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<u>PART I: BACKGROUND AND INTRODUCTION</u>	<u>3</u>
HOW TO USE THIS INTERPRETIVE PLAN	5
WHAT IS INTERPRETATION? WHY DOES IT MATTER?	7
DEFINITIONS.....	8
AUDIENCE ANALYSIS SUMMARY	9
SITE ANALYSIS SUMMARY	11
<u>PART II: IDENTIFYING THE STORY.....</u>	<u>14</u>
CENTRAL INTERPRETIVE THEME AND CENTRAL INTERPRETIVE MESSAGE	15
PRIMARY INTERPRETIVE NARRATIVES.....	16
<u>PART III: STRENGTHENING THE STORYTELLING.....</u>	<u>20</u>
HIGHLIGHT PERSONAL STORIES.....	20
ADD CONTEXTUAL SIGNAGE	20
REVISE SIGNS TO IMPROVE EXPERIENCE	22
RE-ORGANIZE EXHIBITS TO REFLECT INTENTIONAL NARRATIVE.....	23
CURATE DISPLAYS	25
IMPROVE INTERACTIVE ELEMENTS	25
DEVELOP AND EXPAND PROGRAMMING	27
DEVELOP TEMPORARY AND TRAVELING EXHIBITS	28
<u>PART IV: BUILDING ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY</u>	<u>30</u>
DEVELOP STAFF AND VOLUNTEER TRAINING.....	30
BROADEN AUDIENCE	31
DEVELOP COLLECTIONS MANAGEMENT PLAN.....	32
STRENGTHEN AND DIVERSIFY SOURCES OF FUNDING.....	32
DEVELOP PARTNERSHIPS.....	33
<u>PART V: PRIORITIZATION & NEXT STEPS.....</u>	<u>35</u>
<u>REFERENCES.....</u>	<u>37</u>
<u>APPENDIX A: AUDIENCE SURVEY RESULTS & REGIONAL TOURIST PATTERNS.....</u>	<u>38</u>
<u>APPENDIX B: COMPARATIVE SITE ANALYSIS.....</u>	<u>38</u>



This plan was created by Bluestem Heritage Group under the guidance of the Minnesota Lakes Maritime Museum Interpretive Working Group: Fred Bursch, Jim Eidsvold, Dennis Gimmestad, Loraine Jensen, Carl Mammel, Bruce Olson, and Terry Quist. This plan was reviewed and approved by the Minnesota Lakes Maritime Museum Board on April 30, 2015.

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Part I: Background and Introduction

The Minnesota Lakes Maritime Museum (MLMM) was established in 1995 by a group of founders who “recognized the value of these lake traditions and legacies, and the need to preserve for future generations the memories that make Minnesota so special.” MLMM’s mission statement defines the organization as “dedicated to the preservation of antique and classic watercraft, resort memorabilia and sporting equipment used on Minnesota’s lakes.”

When MLMM first opened in 2004, the museum was housed in the Agricultural Building on the campus of the Runestone Museum, adjacent to the current location. For almost two years, through August 2006, MLMM operated from the Runestone site. Meanwhile, MLMM acquired an old maintenance garage from the City of Alexandria and began construction on a permanent location. The museum celebrated a grand opening in August 2006, with 2007 marking the first full season of operations in the new building.

Since 2007, MLMM has completed two significant expansion projects. The first, in 2009, was the addition of the North Gallery, which now houses the Chris-Craft and Gar Wood exhibits. The space is also used to host events and features glass doors that open to the Maritime Gardens. MLMM’s Maritime Gardens have been the museum’s second major expansion project. Conceptualized in 2010 and now mostly completed, the gardens function as a community space, a venue for weddings and special events, and the setting for MLMM’s successful “Music in the Gardens” summer concert series.

MLMM is open every day of the week from early May through the end of October, and the museum houses seven permanent exhibits. Approximately 3,000 annual visitors explore exhibits about the Alexandria Boat Works, the Missouri Club, and the Grand Hotels and Resorts that dotted the shores of Alexandria's lakes. An exhibit featuring classic Chris-Craft boats is among the most striking in the museum, and an adjacent exhibit explores Gar Wood’s innovations during the heyday of wooden boats. Another exhibit showcases the familiar fiberglass of Minnesota’s own Larson boats, and a gallery displaying vintage fishing tackle

is a visitor favorite. Traveling exhibits complement the museum's permanent collection. In 2014, MLMM hosted an exhibit from Nebraska's Joslyn Art Museum, featuring 40 framed prints from the 1832-1834 Maximilian-Bodmer Expedition. In 2015, MLMM plans to host "Chased by the Light", a collection of Jim Brandenburg's Boundary Waters photography.

MLMM begins its second decade of operations in the enviable position of being well-funded, well-managed and well-loved. For ten years, the vision and dedication of MLMM's founders has guided the museum. Now the museum faces the dual challenges of preserving and developing that vision under a new generation of board members, staff, and volunteers. This Interpretive Plan offers a cohesive thematic guide to follow as MLMM continues to grow.

How to Use this Interpretive Plan

This Interpretive Plan is a tool to help MLMM develop engaging and enriching experiences for visitors. The analysis and recommendations included below have been crafted with this in mind. There are many steps that any museum can undertake to improve a visitor's experience, from installing elaborate exhibits to making sure the displays are accessible and clean. An Interpretive Plan defines thematic messages and proposes methods of interpretation that will best connect the audience, the collections, the site, and the story. The goal is to facilitate a meaningful experience for every visitor regardless of background knowledge or prior interest.

The interpretive suggestions in this plan fall into two categories. The first addresses the question, what is MLMM's story? Like most museums, MLMM includes thousands of artifacts with thousands of related stories. The challenge is figuring out how to present these different items and stories so that visitors experience them as pieces of a larger, cohesive narrative. To accomplish this, museums use the interpretive planning process to develop a set of thematic narratives that tie together discrete stories. This interpretive plan includes suggestions for the museum's Central Interpretive Theme as well as four sub-themes. The Central Interpretive Theme is a broad statement about what makes MLMM's content unique and how different stories within the museum are related to one another. Interpretive Narratives (or "Sub-Themes") are more specific areas of focus that can be especially useful as a museum determines how to prioritize the stories it tells.

The second category of interpretive recommendations concerns how MLMM should tell its story. This includes suggestions related to non-personal as well as personal methods of interpretation. Non-personal methods (spatial arrangement, signage, displays, and interactive media) are effective for introducing topics to audiences and serving large groups and school groups, and require minimal staffing. Personal methods (guided tours, demonstrations, staffed stations, and participatory programs) are better for serving individuals or smaller groups, families, and buffs. Visitors often prefer one format over another, and successful museums offer both types of interpretation.

Also included in this Interpretive Plan are several suggestions for how MLMM can develop greater organizational capacity. Adding members, recruiting and training volunteers, and expanding partnerships with local as well as national organizations will help MLMM increase its capacity to offer a successful interpretive experience for all museum visitors.

What is Interpretation? Why Does it Matter?

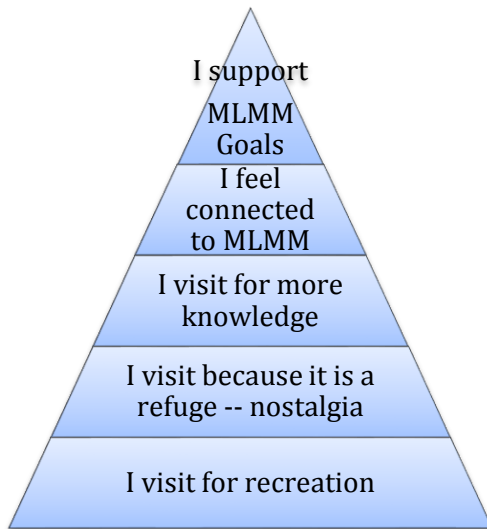
“Interpretation” is any museum communication that enriches the visitor’s experience by making meaningful connections between the museum’s message and the intellectual and emotional world of the visitor. High quality interpretation is ***historically significant, unique, compelling, transformative, and marketable***.

- Interpretation that does not relate to the personality or experience of the visitor is sterile.
- Interpretation is revelation based on information.
- Interpretation is an art.
- Interpretation is revelation, not instruction.
- Interpretation should aim to present the whole, rather than a part.

Interpretation uses a message and a method to meet the needs and desires of an audience in order to nurture their connection to a site. The pyramid graphic illustrates the levels of connection a visitor can have with a site. Effective interpretation can help shift visitors up a level.

Most visitors, especially first-time visitors, are drawn to museums because they expect to be interested in – or at least entertained by – exhibit content. These visits are recreational; visitors expect to enjoy the experience of exploring exhibits and encountering compelling artifacts. Others will be drawn to MLMM because an exhibit or an artifact recalls something in their personal experience; for some, cultivating robust content knowledge is a passion. In each case, visitors form relationships to the content of the museum.

The relationship between museum visitors and museum content is crucial to a museum’s success. Visitors who develop strong relationships with MLMM content are more likely to become visitors who feel an emotional connection to MLMM as an organization, and they are ultimately more likely to support MLMM’s organizational goals. These are the visitors who introduce new people to the museum, choose to become members or volunteers, and support the museum through financial donations. The purpose of this Interpretive Plan is to outline the steps necessary to develop compelling exhibits and unique programs that will attract new visitors and encourage returning visitors to forge deeper connections with the museum.



Definitions

As the members and volunteers of MLMM work to implement this Interpretive Plan, it is helpful to ensure that people share the same understanding of these terms.

Activity: A staff- or volunteer-lead, hands-on experience where visitors gain an understanding of the technical, cultural, or personal aspects of the content presented.

Curation: The process of selecting artifacts and content to include in a collection or display in an exhibit.

Display: A small section of an exhibit, such as a case and related sign, which communicates a message. Displays may occasionally include interactive elements.

Docent: A volunteer trained to further the public's understanding of the museum and its collections.

Exhibit: An organized arrangement of text, graphics, and objects that communicate a message or theme.

Gallery: A particular section of an exhibition space or museum, often named. For example, MLMM's "Fishing Gallery."

Historical Context: The cultural, political, and technological environment in which a particular event occurred.

Interactive Elements: Pieces within an exhibit that allow visitors to physically interact with material objects or projected images. Simple interactive elements include flipbooks or objects. Complex interactive elements include buttons that launch video clips.

Interactive Station: A hands-on area where visitors get to manipulate artifacts, props, or other pieces.

Interpretive Programs: Activities, presentations, publications, exhibits, and special events that convey key messages to audiences, either on- or off-site.

Special Event: An event that celebrates a topic or theme, involves the community, and occurs outside of regularly scheduled programming.

Audience Analysis Summary

If the purpose of interpretive planning is to improve visitor experience, it is important to begin with an understanding of who those visitors are. During this interpretive planning process, Bluestem Heritage Group and MLMM conducted a formal audience analysis and uncovered a number of patterns. The survey was conducted during the summer and fall of 2014. Visitors supplied basic demographic information as well as subjective feedback about their museum experience. Survey participants shared their ZIP codes, ages, reasons for visiting, and also described their connection to the Alexandria region — permanent residence, seasonal residence, or vacation destination. To develop a clearer picture of the audience for the MLMM, the museum should continue gathering this visitor data during the 2015 season.

MLMM should also begin tracking the number of returning visitors, especially those who are non-members. This is an important metric for evaluating the kind of connections that visitors are developing with MLMM. Returning visitors are good candidates to become volunteers or board members.

The 2014 visitor survey also measured visitor satisfaction and interest in potential exhibit topics. Visitors shared their favorite aspects of the museum and offered suggestions for potential improvements. MLMM should continue to track this information in order to develop a sense for how to prioritize interpretive efforts.

The existing visitor patterns measured at MLMM are generally in line with broader tourism patterns throughout central Minnesota, although fewer families visit MLMM than other regional museums. These are some of the most important audience findings for purposes of MLMM's interpretive considerations. (See Appendix A for full report.)

- During the survey period, 68% of MLMM's visitors were over 60 years old.
- During the survey period, 73% of MLMM's visitors came from Minnesota.

- During the survey period, 29% of MLMM visitors described themselves as “Just Passin’ Through” and 25% as “Occasional Visitors”. Only 17.8% described themselves as “Local Full-Time Residents.”
- 55% of visitors to the Northwest/Central Region of Minnesota are traveling in groups of three or more people.
- Visitors to MLMM feel passionately about the museum’s content. Boating or the boating industry was cited by 63% of visitors as the most important feature at MLMM, but many also felt compelled to give more than one response to this question.

Site Analysis Summary

Although MLMM is a relatively young museum, its accomplishments are impressive. The main exhibits are thoughtfully presented and well-maintained, programs are engaging and well attended, and visitors report very positive experiences. Most of MLMM's progress is directly attributable to the drive and intuition of the museum's founding members. The challenges that lie ahead belong to a growing organization seeking to articulate a set of objectives that have been informally understood but never fully defined.

Strengths to Nurture

Collection of Classic Boats – MLMM's collection of classic boats is dramatic and compelling. These are large and finely detailed artifacts, with more to reveal on every closer inspection. Chris-Craft or Alexandria Boat Works or Larson artifacts deserve deliberate space and attention so that visitors have space to appreciate them.



MLMM's collection of classic wood boats is among the museum's greatest strengths.

Proximity to Regional Tourist Destinations – MLMM is in downtown Alexandria, a regionally significant city in central Minnesota's lakes region. The museum itself sits on the bank of the remnants of Lake Winona, which presents a unique opportunity to interpret the history of transportation and natural history in lakes country. MLMM is also next door to Alexandria's famous Runestone Museum, which draws over 13,000 adult and family visitors, plus approximately 500 school students each year. MLMM should continue to leverage its location to draw tourists who already flock to the region.

Programming – MLMM currently offers an excellent series of programs, ranging from lectures and garden tours to

photography classes and lake tours aboard a pontoon boat. Wherever possible, this programming should be expanded. Existing programs should be offered more than once, and boat tour programming should be developed as one of MLMM's feature attractions.

Music in the Gardens – MLMM should consider using appropriate branding to link its popular concert series to the museum's interpretive themes. Concerts or other special events could be called "Dock Parties," for example, to identify the connection between an evening's celebration and "Lakes Culture."

Exhibit Quality – MLMM's existing exhibits are professionally designed, attractive, and generally very high quality. To make them easier for visitors to navigate, MLMM should develop a consistent (or at least complementary) style and system of signage and implement it throughout the museum. Where appropriate, exhibits should be expanded to reflect important thematic context and revised to comport with museum best practices.

MLMM Building and Site – The building that houses MLMM is extremely well-suited for the museum. It offers an attractive space with high ceilings, dedicated space for traveling exhibits, a healthy gift shop, nice bathrooms, and good parking. The adjacent gardens are appealing, and the landscaping is attractive. MLMM can continue to develop this site by adding exterior signage and walking paths to attract visitors approaching from all sides, especially the adjacent Runestone Museum.

Board Investment – MLMM is fortunate to have a talented and engaged Board of Directors. Their continued input and support will be crucial as MLMM implements this Interpretive Plan.

Challenges to Address

Interpretive Identity – The central challenge facing the Minnesota Lakes Maritime Museum is determining how to display, manage, and expand interpretation in order to convey a clear and compelling message for all visitors. The other challenges identified in this section are, in large part, consequences of this one.

Name and Brand Identity – The museum’s name is not consistent with its collection, exhibits, or mission. In addition, there is another regionally significant museum that shares a similar name (Minnesota Marine Art Museum). The MLMM should consider re-naming itself.

Exhibit Organization – The existing exhibits at MLMM are high quality, but they do not effectively connect to one another or to a broader interpretive story. By organizing existing exhibits under a Central Interpretive Theme and according to particular interpretive narratives, visitors will experience each one as part of cohesive story. Establishing a process for revising or changing exhibits will help prevent well-intentioned but unclear results.

Collections Management – Currently, MLMM displays are overflowing with artifacts. The museum displays almost every boat in its collection. The museum has allotted almost no storage space. In addition, a large proportion of the items on display are on loan. When it becomes possible, MLMM should curate the displays by reducing the number of artifacts, which will result in visitors giving each one more attention. MLMM should also implement a collections policy that avoids redundancy and prioritizes purposeful acquisitions. Storage for collections and archives will likely be needed in the next phase for the museum.

Space Management – MLMM currently functions as two fairly distinct spaces, the museum and the gardens. The new glass doors in the museum’s North Gallery now visually join these spaces. As the organization continues to grow, the museum and the gardens should complement one another, and each should reinforce MLMM’s interpretive message. In 2015, the museum should also define the role its new “Green Building” will play within this interpretive framework.



The new gardens, established in 2014, offer an appealing opportunity for expanded programming and interpretive signs.

Part II: Identifying the Story

At successful museums, interpretive themes and narratives filter content and focus the presentation so that viewers can appreciate detail they would otherwise miss. Themes and narratives give structure to museum content, and suggest relationships between different exhibits. They help to create a cohesive narrative, where every story and every artifact is included to serve a broader purpose. At innovative museums, thematic relationships leave room for a variety of stories; they can expand or adapt to accept new information.

An effective Interpretive Message also helps to form the connection between a museum's mission and its visitors. MLMM's founders established the museum to serve as a home for beautiful antique boats, and because they "recognized the value of lake traditions and legacies." Most MLMM visitors also appreciate these traditions and legacies. They respond not only to the fine detail of the museum's gleaming Chris-Crafts, but also to the stories of the region's grand hotels and resorts. The interpretive strategies included in this plan are intended to strengthen both aspects of the founders' vision. Developing the interpretation of "lake traditions and legacies" will give MLMM's visitors a better chance to appreciate the cultural meaning of its antique boats. Including personal narratives to supplement existing interpretation at boat displays will give visitors an opportunity to experience the emotional connection many Minnesotans feel towards their own boats. These visitor experiences will be framed and reinforced throughout the museum by an Interpretive Message that joins the stories together.

The exhibits and artifacts currently on display at MLMM offer myriad opportunities for visitors to explore those aspects of "Lakes Culture" that are most meaningful to them. For some visitors, discovering the same Larson boat their parents owned is as exhilarating as learning about Gar Wood's innovations. MLMM's Interpretive Message should guide a visitor's exploration of "Lakes Culture," and capture something of the nebulous magic many Minnesotans ascribe to our lakes. The ambitious interpretive objective at MLMM is to create a visitor experience that approximates Robert Bly's poetic reflection:

*Beneath the waters, since I was a boy,
I have dreamt of strange and dark treasures,
Not of gold, or of strange stones, but the true
Gift, beneath the pale lakes of Minnesota. (1962)*

His words conjure the slippery, elusive nature of Minnesota's "strange and dark treasures," but the poem's title casts those amorphous qualities as a simple, relatable personal story: "After Drinking All Night With A Friend, We Go Out On A Boat At Dawn To See Who Can Write The Best Poem" (from *Silence in the Snowy Fields*, 1962). Readers understand many of the things Bly appreciates most about Minnesota lakes – drinks, friendship, dawn, boats – and they also understand that the emotional sum is greater than those parts. To help visitors leave MLMM with the same understanding, the museum should adopt the following interpretive themes and narratives.

Central Interpretive Theme and Central Interpretive Message

A museum's Central Interpretive Theme is the first idea that visitors encounter. It is a succinct statement of the museum's Central Interpretive Message and it serves as a mnemonic tool to help visitors find relationships between other thematic messages.

A museum's Central Interpretive Message is a museum's interpretive mission statement. It articulates a museum's identity and values while appealing to a visitor's emotions. The Central Interpretive Message is a museum's most direct response to every visitor's question, "Why should I care?" High quality interpretation is historically significant, unique, compelling, and transformative. To that end, we have proposed the following Central Interpretive Message for MLMM:

Ten Thousand Treasures: Minnesota's Lakes Culture

To become a Minnesotan is to fall in love with a lake.
With endless variety to their shape and size, temperament and depth, Minnesota's lakes have nurtured life for every generation. Still, geologists struggle to distinguish a "lake" from other bodies of water. In Minnesota, the distinction carries cultural as well as ecological significance; "The Lakes" are what make our state unique. They are the setting for childhood adventures, family retreats and moments of

*personal repose. Those who sail their shimmering waters or walk their wooded shores have discovered fertile soil, business opportunities, creative inspiration, and sacred sanctuaries. **For many Minnesotans, the treasure of a lake is the promise of memory.***

Stated another way, the MLMM explores the geography, the economies, the people, and the poetry of Minnesota's Lakes.

Primary Interpretive Narratives

Interpretive narratives are specific areas of thematic focus, roughly equivalent to distinct exhibits within a museum. Interpretive narratives organize important stories thematically and help visitors understand how different stories relate to one another.

Interpretive Narrative 1: Local Landscape

Treasure Map: How to Find Lake Country

KEY QUESTION: What Are the Lakes?

In order to visit Minnesota's lakes we need to know where we're going, but Minnesota's lakes are "scattered irregularly over the state." What's more, geologists have trouble identifying true "lakes." How can we know if we are swimming in a genuine lake, or something else? And how did this water get here in the first place? Explore the address and origins of Minnesota's Lake Country, from the geologic features of particular lake systems to the roots of their economic prosperity; from their ecological complexity to the Native American heritage they sustain. Learn how different lakes have acquired distinct characteristics, why some lakes have been especially valued for recreation and why others have been split or buried to accommodate new development.

Current Exhibits Addressing this Interpretive Narrative:

Very limited interpretation stretched across several exhibits, including: Grand Hotels and Resorts, Alexandria Boat Works, History of Larson Boats, The Minnesota Porch, History of Chris-Craft, History of Gar Wood.

Interpretive Narrative 2: Industry and Innovation

Transforming the Shore: From the Lakes to "The Lakes"

KEY QUESTIONS: Who Built "The Lakes"? How Did They Do It?

As the lakes became more popular, entire industries grew on their shorelines. Hotels and resorts, outing clubs, and private cabins clustered on lakes from Minnetonka to Superior to Lake Miltona. Boat works and related industries opened throughout the state. The lakes became home to boats of all kinds, including the Lady of the Lakes made by the Alexandria Boat Works. Some lakes were dredged to make them more navigable, while others were drained to provide more farmland. Railroads actively promoted resorts and service industries boomed. Minnesotans began to believe that a trip to the lake was the sort of modest luxury to which they might reasonably aspire.

Current Exhibits Addressing this Interpretive Narrative:

Detailed interpretation in many exhibits, including: Grand Hotels and Resorts, Alexandria Boat Works, History of Larson Boats, The Minnesota Porch, History of Chris-Craft, History of Gar Wood.



The Larson display is one of several areas where the Industry and Innovation narrative is currently addressed.

Interpretive Narrative 3: Status and Equality

Members and Guests: Status and Equality in Lake Country

KEY QUESTION: Who Lives in Lake Country?

The experience of "Lakes Culture" has never been homogenous. For some, the lakes have been a critical source of food, for others a source of accessible leisure. Many came to Lake Country seeking steady employment or fertile farmland. Large immigrant populations have settled in Lake Country and large tourist communities make seasonal pilgrimages to the lakes. What has "Lakes Culture" meant for these different groups? To whom do the lakes "belong"? How have demographic relationships shaped the character of Minnesota's Lake Country? Who is a member and who is a guest in Lake Country?

Current Exhibits Addressing this Interpretive Narrative:

Almost no existing interpretation, though the subject of social class referenced in the Grand Hotels and Resorts exhibit.

Interpretive Narrative 4: Recreation and Adventure

Dockside Adventures: Recreation on the Lake

KEY QUESTION: How Do We Celebrate the Lakes?

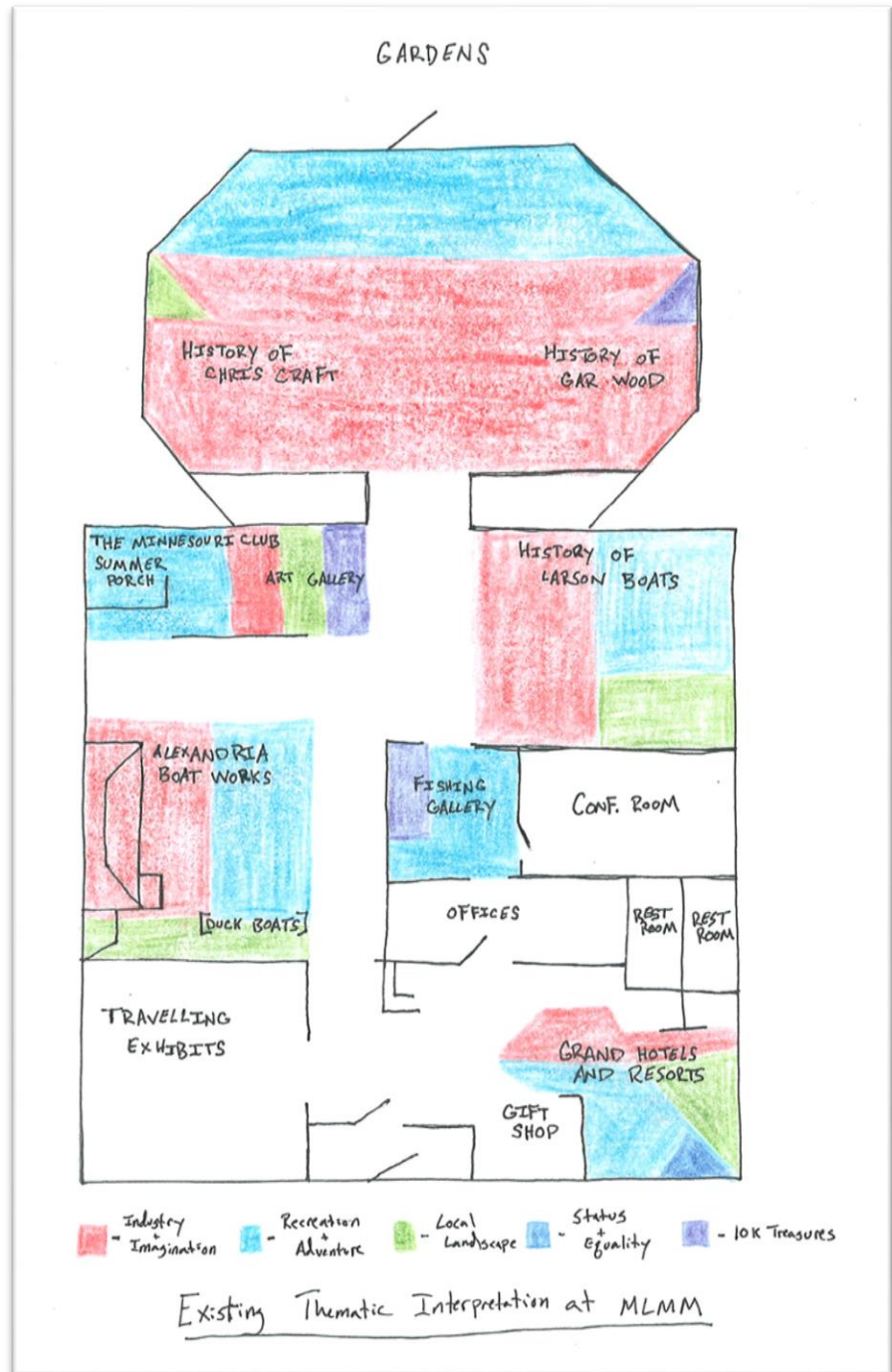
Minnesotans have always found cause to celebrate The Lakes. Beaches, boats, docks and clubs have served as venues for recreation of all kinds. At the Minnesota Club, "the general purpose" was "the instruction and mutual improvement in the art of angling and the social culture and entertainment of its members." Entire entertainment industries grew from local tourism industries, such as lakeshore roller rinks that felt like the center of the universe for teenagers in summer. For others, the thrill came from an afternoon on the water, fishing or racing or drifting. Almost all travelers in Lake Country had a passion for boating; on Lake Pepin some were even inventing waterskiing. Adventure and discovery have always been central to the experience of Minnesota's lakes.

Current Exhibits Addressing this Interpretive Narrative:

Detailed interpretation, including: Grand Hotels and Resorts, Alexandria Boat Works, History of Larson Boats, The Minnesota Porch, History of Chris-Craft, History of Gar Wood.

Existing Thematic Interpretation

Many of these thematic narratives are already being interpreted in MLMM's existing exhibits. The map below approximates how much space is given to each one.



Part III: Strengthening the Storytelling

An interpretive strategy is a museum's approach to interpreting a particular theme. Common examples include exhibits, displays, guided tours, and programs. Effective interpretive strategies should highlight the key questions presented in the museum's thematic ideas, and encourage visitors to explore those questions. It is likely that MLMM will continue to rely on traditional exhibits for the bulk of its interpretive methodology.

By embracing the broader interpretive framework established in this plan, then connecting the exhibits, displays, and artifacts to the broader story, MLMM will create exhibits that are more meaningful to a larger group. In addition, there are many pragmatic efforts that will increase the effectiveness of storytelling, no matter what the interpretive message.

Highlight Personal Stories

Presently, some of the exhibits at MLMM are so tightly focused on the technical aspects of particular artifacts that the broader context of the items, their historical significance, and their importance to individuals or lakes culture are muffled. We encourage future exhibits to include more stories about individual people. This will help avoid the omniscient tone that can creep into museum exhibits, while capturing the authentic voices and perspectives of denizens of Lakes Culture.

Add Contextual Signage

Interpretive signage should connect new information to information already familiar to visitors. This will normally mean working to ensure that every exhibit sign is connected to an interpretive theme. An exhibit's first sign will introduce its thematic messages so that every visitor can use them to help contextualize information as they move throughout the exhibits. For example, an introductory sign might identify several ways in which Minnesota's lakes have evolved over time. A secondary exhibit sign at the Alexandria Boat Works (ABW) display would

describe the role the company played in the development of lake country tourism. A smaller sign or artifact label would then explain particular details related to ABW boats. Signs related to a particular theme can also be graphically related, either by color-coding or by use of other design features. Visitors should understand immediately whether they are reading a “Local Landscape” sign or an “Industry and Imagination” sign. Implementing this kind of hierarchy of signage will help visitors find the information they find most interesting and relevant.



Use signage and exhibit organization to help visitors understand explicit thematic relationships between the Minnesota Club display and the Grand Hotels and Resorts exhibit.

Revise Signs to Improve Experience

At MLMM, signs are the most common medium through which visitors are exposed to the museum's interpretive content.

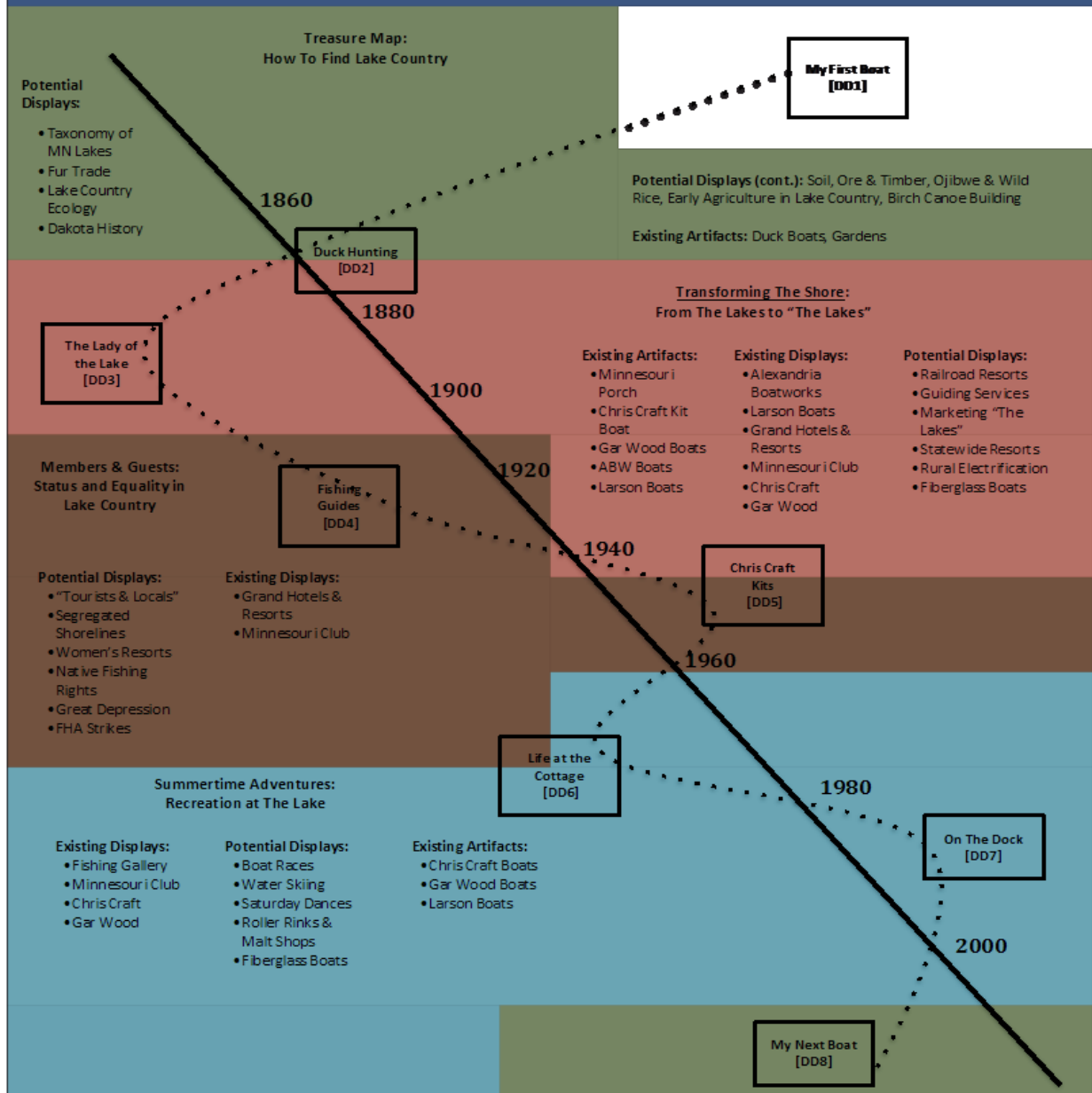
MLMM should partner with a professional designer and revise interpretive and directional signage according to the principles below.

- Sign content should be accurate and meaningful.
- Signs should be graphically consistent, legible, friendly, and informative.
- Use language and graphic design to reinforce thematic messages.
- Use a hierarchy of sizes and lengths to emphasize content significance.
- Signs should not block view of artifacts or displays. Ideally, they should not be attached to artifacts.
- Place signs directed at adults at adult-height and signs directed at children at child-height.
- Sign content should be written clearly and at an appropriate reading level for the intended audience.
- Use signs to direct visitor flow and behavior and manage expectations. Signs should clearly indicate the path visitors should follow. Politely and clearly signal when visitors are invited to touch or not touch displays: "Thank you for not touching" or "Please touch."
- The "Smithsonian Guidelines for Accessible Exhibit Design" is available online, and offers many practical suggestions for designing effective and accessible signs.

Re-Organize Exhibits to Reflect Intentional Narrative

Presently, there is limited intentional structure to the organization of the museum. Individual displays are well-researched and presented, but very few connections between displays are suggested. These would link related content and help visitors understand how to prioritize the exhibit content. The lack of cohesive narrative flow creates a disjointed experience for visitors. Organizing the museum's exhibit using a Central Interpretive Theme and distinct interpretive narratives will help visitors understand which information is most important and which stories are related to one another. This makes new information easier to retain, especially new information about why MLMM's story is an important one. We recommend that MLMM contract for professional exhibit design using this Interpretive Plan and the following schematic as a guide.

Ten Thousand Treasures: Minnesota's Lakes Culture



Curate Displays

In addition to curating its collection, MLMM has a responsibility to curate its displays. This means being selective as well as strategic about displaying only the artifacts necessary to tell a particular story. Most visitors become distracted or overwhelmed when they encounter displays featuring three or more similar objects. When more artifacts are displayed it becomes more difficult to understand what is distinctive about each one, and which artifacts are most important to the relevant interpretive narrative.

Instead, the goal is to display fewer items with more contextual interpretation. This leaves more opportunity for crisp storytelling. By displaying only the artifacts that are most important to communicating a specific interpretive message, visitors will leave with a clearer understanding of that message as well as a more meaningful sense of investment in the museum.



In 2014, MLMM's Duck Boat display obscured the visitor's path to the Alexandria Boat Works exhibit. At the Larson Boat Works display a set of motors blocks the introductory sign.

Improve Interactive Elements

Many of MLMM's displays could be improved by adding interactive elements. These encourage visitors to actively engage with museum content, and this can often shift a visitor's superficial experience toward a richer, more meaningful and more complex one. MLMM should consult with a professional exhibit designer to adopt interactive displays according to the principles below.

Best Practices for Interactivity at Museums

- While interactivity does not *require* a hands-on activity, **most visitors will welcome a tactile experience** to support the text-based learning that often dominates at museum displays.
- Interactive opportunities available at MLMM should be **physically proximate to displays delivering related interpretive content**. This will have two important consequences.
 - First, it will mean that adults can enjoy interpretive displays while easily monitoring children. (Children are often the first to approach these elements.)
 - Second, it will mean that interactive experiences support the museum's interpretive message.
- **Adults and children will enjoy more meaningful experiences if they can participate together** in interactive activities that support the particular elements of the MLMM interpretive message included at a particular display.
- **Encourage a variety of behavioral actions at interactive locations**. Interactive activities do not need to be complicated in order to be effective. Simple actions like flipping a card to answer a question or lifting a phone to listen to a pre-recorded message will introduce variety to the visitor's experience and respond to different learning styles.
- **Align the interactive elements with the interpretive message and cognitive and affective goals**. Define the behavioral, cognitive, and affective goals for each interactive element (i.e., behavioral goal: cooperate; cognitive goal: identify challenges; affective goal: joy of cooperation, discovery of content, develop desire to explore this idea more at next station).
- **Identify items that are for teaching and touching**. Museums must find the balance between interpreting preserved artifacts and interpreting "teaching" artifacts. Some artifacts are fragile, and should not be touched (or even displayed for long periods). But other artifacts, especially duplicates, might be best used as teaching artifacts. Visitors should be allowed and encouraged to handle them. Developing this approach takes some additional work. Museums must help visitors learn what items are off-limits and which can be handled, but the

extra effort and occasionally damaged or destroyed artifacts can be worth the impact for the public.

Develop and Expand Programming

Developing engaging interpretive programs is an important way for MLMM to reinforce its interpretive narratives. Effective programs can offer more detailed content and more in-depth interpretation. New and engaging programs also draw visitors back to the museum even if they have already seen every display. To ensure that all programming is high-quality and relevant to audience interests, MLMM should continue to survey audiences to measure audience interest and evaluate program success.

Existing or Previously Hosted Interpretive Programs

History and Use of Boats in Minnesota: A lecture-based presentation delivered at MLMM.

A View from the Lake: An informal pontoon boat tour of Lake Carlos led by Douglas County Historical Society staff.

Hardy Perennials for Minnesota: An informal tour of the Maritime Gardens led by an MLMM volunteer.

Garden Photography: A class for beginning photographers led by an MLMM volunteer.

Music in the Gardens: A summer concert series in the Maritime Gardens. Consider making these thematically relevant, if only minimally. These events are opportunities to introduce a new audience to museum content.

Proposed Interpretive Programs

A View from the Shore (Driving Tours): Hire a bus and driver and train tour guides to lead one-hour or half-day excursions, especially on the weekends.

Lake Ecology: Collaborate with local universities or the MN-DNR to develop a lecture series. Hands on programming could take place in the gardens!

Boat Racing Series: Create or promote a series of boat races on Minnesota lakes.

Model Boat Racing Series: Host a series of model boat races on weekends at the museum.

S'Mores and Fish Tales: Host a s'more bonfire in the garden and engage storytellers to tell contemporary or historic tall tales.

Movie Nights: Take full advantage of the gardens as a public space by screening classic movies once a week during the summer months ("Beach Blanket Bingo").

Kit Boat Assembly: Recruit a volunteer willing to lead small groups through the process of assembling their own kit boats.

Develop Temporary and Traveling Exhibits

Visitors expect museum exhibits to renew. In order to attract repeat visitors, MLMM must continue to offer attractive and changing displays or exhibits. The museum should focus first on hosting traveling exhibits, or offering high-quality and attractive temporary displays or exhibits that are easiest to research, easiest to develop, most-likely to attract large audiences, and easy to re-purpose for future uses. If main exhibits are meant to attract the museum's broadest audience, smaller rotating displays may provide opportunities to reach other markets and attract new visitors to MLMM.

Whenever possible, MLMM should develop interpretive material that illustrates a temporary or traveling exhibit's relationship to existing interpretive themes or narratives. Related programs, lectures, family events or other special programs will strengthen the experience for visitors. This will help visitors understand why an exhibit from Missouri or Nebraska is relevant to their experience of Lakes Culture in Minnesota.

Potential Temporary or Traveling Exhibits

- *Chased by the Light* (2015)
- Artists and Authors from Lake Country

- *Too Hot, Went to Lake*: Historic Photos of Lake Country
- The Cabin or the Cottage: A Minnesota Tradition
- *In Search of Lake Wobegon*: Essays and Photos
- Water: A Local History
- Ojibwe Birch Bark Canoes: A Living Tradition
- Bikinis in Bemidji: Swim Suit Fashions from the 1900s
- Fish Houses: Icons of Ice
- Smithsonian Traveling Exhibits
- Minnesota Historical Society Traveling Exhibits*

*Full details related to Minnesota Historical Society Traveling Exhibits is available at www.legacy-mnhs.org/traveling-exhibits

Part IV: Building Organizational Capacity

An Interpretive Plan's purpose is to guide the planning and development of interpretive efforts. However, in the development of this plan, we discussed related efforts that would complement interpretive efforts. This section addresses many of those ideas.

Develop Staff and Volunteer Training

MLMM is fortunate to have a talented and knowledgeable membership. Those members should be encouraged to become more actively engaged in interpretation at the museum. Training volunteers to lead effective interpretation will meet professional standards for best practice, strengthen their commitment to MLMM, and offer a consistent and richer experience for visitors.

Meet Professional Standards for Best Practice

Most museums recognize that their volunteers are the museum's first and usually best opportunity to connect with the public. These volunteers, often called docents when they work within an exhibit, can inspire curiosity, deliver knowledge, and encourage connection to a museum. Museums typically offer docent training at least once a year, and the training covers the institutional goals and interpretive message, best practices for visitor engagement, and common tricks of the trade. A Volunteer Manager could coordinate this training, as well as schedule all volunteers, track volunteer hours, and manage volunteer appreciation efforts.

Strengthen the Volunteer Commitment

Offering training for volunteers interested in working with the public would expand the number of members who support the museum by actively engaging in its operation. Establishing policies for volunteer commitment, behavior, and recognition will help formalize the efforts of this group. Training members would also empower them to share what they find personally meaningful about museum content.

Engaging Experience for Visitors

For visitors, a well-trained volunteer offers a far more engaging experience than a novice. A volunteer's knowledge and

enthusiasm increase the chance that visitors will enjoy their experience. Volunteers offer an immediate and personal connection to a museum experience, and they can curate information in a way that lets visitors feel as if they are getting a “behind-the-scenes” experience.

Train Paid Tour Guides

MLMM has a friendly and excellent staff. Training some of them to serve as professional tour guides would allow the museum to offer visitors an especially high-quality interpretive experience, and to charge an additional fee.

Volunteer Appreciation Day

Continue to develop this event so that it becomes a true benefit for volunteers.

Broaden Audience

Currently, MLMM welcomes just over 3,000 visitors each season. The Runestone Museum next door is open year-round, and they welcome approximately 13,000 annual visitors. This suggests that there is a large potential audience that MLMM has yet to capture.

Strategies

- Open museum select weekends throughout November-April. The strongest competition for visitors to a lakes culture museum in the summer are the lakes themselves. Opening the museum over long weekends in the off-season would give Alexandria residents (and visitors with insulated cottages) another opportunity to visit, and to celebrate the lakes indoors during a season when outdoor adventures require opportunities to warm-up. Weekends such as Education Minnesota/MEA Weekend, Thanksgiving, Martin Luther King Day, and President’s Day would likely draw a good audience, especially if MLMM offered family-friendly programming.
- Develop signage and walking path to welcome visitors approaching from the Runestone Museum.
- Review and expand marketing efforts.
 - Member newsletter
 - Events brochure (distributed at MLMM events and non-MLMM events)
 - Stand-alone mailings
 - Newspaper advertisements

- Website
- Social networking efforts
- Press releases
- Revise marketing language to include the interpretive message.
- Design branded signage so MLMM “look” and messaging is consistent.
- Develop programs to specifically appeal to certain audiences, especially vacationing adults.
- Develop high-quality outreach programs and displays for use off-site.
- Develop collaborations with other organizations. See “Develop Partnerships,” page 33.

Develop Collections Management Plan

A Collections Management Plan establishes a process for curating a museum’s collection. Such plans rationalize and prioritize new acquisitions by evaluating a museum’s existing collection in light of an interpretive framework. Without a plan like this, many museums feel compelled to accept any artifact a donor offers. This can result in collections that are not aligned to the museum’s interpretive message and collections that are too large to be effectively managed. Establishing a Collections Management Plan allows a museum to be more selective about the artifacts it purchases or solicits. At MLMM, developing a Collections Management Plan would involve considering which interpretive narratives are best supported by existing artifacts and which interpretive narratives would benefit most from new acquisitions.

Strengthen and Diversify Sources of Funding

MLMM has been very successful in developing strong relationships with a diverse donor base. Efforts to reach out to local businesses have been especially successful. MLMM should continue to pursue these strategies and develop these relationships. It may also be instructive to hire a professional fundraising consultant to develop more sophisticated approaches.

Basic Fundraising Strategies

- Review the appropriateness of individual events and types of events, by evaluating their success, their advancement

of the mission, and the amount of volunteer hours and other associated costs.

- Recognize the value of the rental facilities for groups, and charge appropriate rental fees.
- Review membership dues policies and increase membership dues or establish additional levels of membership at a higher level.
- Write grants to develop future exhibits.
- Systematically approach members and others about legacy gifts, memorial gifts, and other donations.
- Approach businesses and organizations to sponsor events and exhibits.
- Continue to charge special admission prices when the museum hosts special events.
- Return to grantors who have supported MLMM in the past.
- Develop a high-quality gift shop with seasonally appropriate items for purchase.

Develop Partnerships

Many organizations could become collaborators with MLMM. By building and strengthening collaborative efforts with these groups, MLMM will increase its presence in the community and develop connections with a broader audience. **MLMM should place special priority on seeking partners across different lakes regions in Minnesota.** Grand Marais, Brainerd, Ely, Excelsior, Lake City, Bemidji, Detroit Lakes, Spicer and other towns all have an interest in interpreting and promoting Minnesota's lakes. MLMM should create or develop a network of relevant organizations and serve as the capitol of Minnesota's Lake Country.

Potential partner organizations include – but are not limited to – the organizations listed below. See Appendix B for more information about the local museum market.

Regional Partnership Opportunities

Douglas County Historical Society: Consider co-developing a "Local Landscape" exhibit.

Runestone Museum: Continue to find cross-promotional opportunities; embrace strategies that will draw Runestone visitors to MLMM.

Other Central Minnesota Historical Societies and Cultural Institutions:

- Pope County Historical Society
- University of Minnesota Morris
- St. John's University and College of St. Benedict
- Douglas County Library
- Theatre L'Homme Dieu
- Chambers of Commerce

Other Minnesota Lake Country Partnerships

Museums

- North Shore Commercial Fishing Museum (Tofte)
- Minnesota Fishing Museum (Little Falls)
- Lake Superior Marine Museum (Duluth)
- Minnesota Marine Art Museum (Winona)

Lakes Country Tourist Towns

- Grand Marais
- Brainerd /Pequot Lakes
- Bemidji
- Detroit Lakes
- Lake City

Statewide Lakes Organizations (full list available at www.mnwaters.org)

Minnesota Department of Natural Resources

- Lake Carlos State Park
- Glacial Lakes State Park
- Itasca State Park

Other Antique Boat Museums (especially where relationships already exist)

- The Antique Boat Museum (Clayton, NY)
- The Mariners' Museum and Park (Newport News, VA)
- The Center for Wooden Boats (Seattle, WA)

Part V: Prioritization and Next Steps

This plan offers a framework that should guide MLMM's future interpretive projects whether those are exhibits, programs, or special events. The following guidelines should help focus the planning and prioritization efforts.

- **Remember your organization's mission:** Currently, you prioritize "the preservation of antique and classic watercraft, resort memorabilia and sporting equipment used on Minnesota's lakes." This goal is described on the website as "celebrating our lakes traditions and legacies, and preserving them for future generations."
- **Remember Your Interpretive Message and Narratives:** "Ten Thousand Treasures: Minnesota's Lakes Culture" and the geography, the economies, the people, and the poetry of Minnesota's Lakes. This message is fully described on pages 14-18. Interpretive projects will be meaningful and "make sense" to visitors if they are connected to MLMM's interpretive message and narratives.
- **Remember Your Visitors:** Before undertaking any major new interpretive project, measure audience interest. As you plan new efforts, clearly identify the desired audience outcomes such as growth in behavioral, cognitive, and affective knowledge or skills.
- **Strengthen Your Interpretive Narratives:** When setting priorities for interpretive projects, consider which narratives identified in the Interpretive Plan are and are not already supported by interpretation.
- **Offer a variety of interpretive experiences:** Diversify the museum's types of interpretive offerings.

Although each of the recommendations included in this Interpretive Plan will be important to MLMM's long-term success, it is important to prioritize them in order to invest the museum's resources in a deliberate and focused manner. We recommend the following prioritization:

Short-Term	Mid-Range	Long-Term
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create work schedule for next steps, define exhibit planning process • Curate one existing exhibit • Re-skin existing exhibit(s) to reflect Interpretive Narratives • Develop plan for Garden interpretation • Strengthen existing programming • Schedule temporary exhibits • Continue to survey audience interests and evaluate program success. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop comprehensive exhibit plan • Develop and install new Garden interpretation • Expand programming • Research and plan new exhibit(s) • Establish partnerships with other museums or regional organizations • Refine collections policy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop and install new permanent exhibit(s) • Develop traveling exhibit to share with partner organizations.

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See also:

Appendix A: Audience Survey Results and Regional Tourist Patterns

Appendix B: Comparative Site Analysis