



# ALMOST LOST A SECOND TIME

THE RESCUE OF THE STEAMBOAT  
*BERTRAND* COLLECTION FROM THE  
MISSOURI RIVER FLOOD EVENT OF 2011



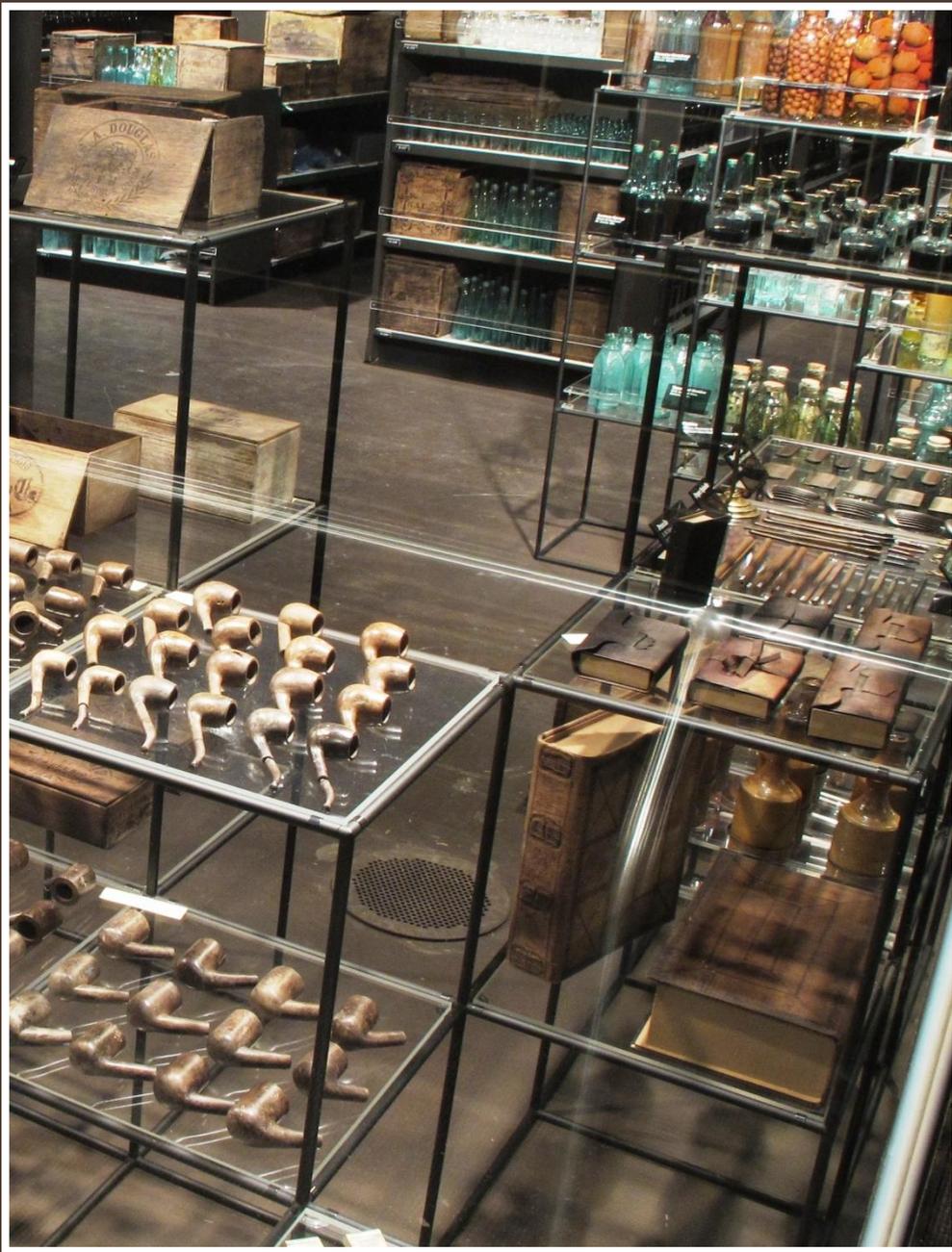
40 YEARS AGO, THE  
CARGO FROM THE  
WRECK OF THE  
STEAMBOAT  
*BERTRAND* WAS  
RECOVERED FROM  
THE MUD OF THE  
MISSOURI RIVER,  
WHICH HAD FIRST  
CLAIMED HER IN  
1865...

... IN 2011 THE  
RIVER TRIED TO  
TAKE IT BACK!



## **INITIALLY, THE PLAN WAS TO STAY PUT...**

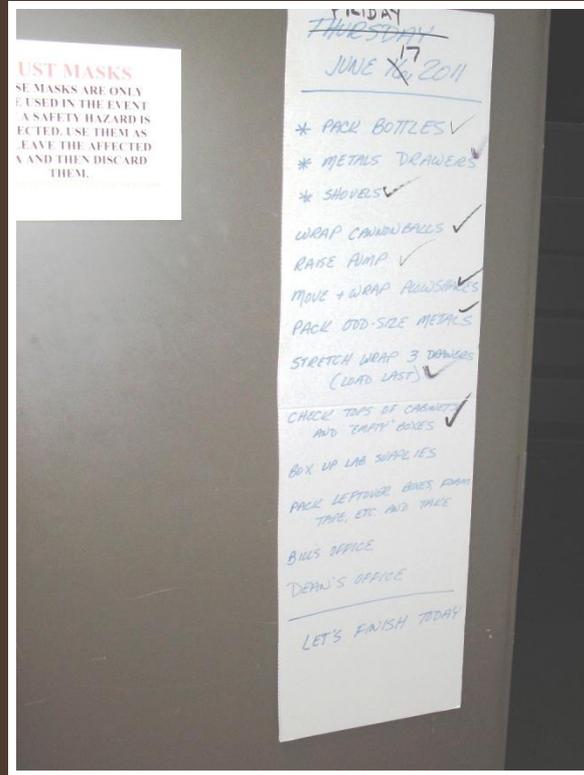
**Huge efforts went into reinforcing and constructing dikes and levees to keep the river at bay... but the predicted height of the flooding was increased and electric power to the visitor center could not be guaranteed, so at noon on Friday, June 10, 2011, the decision was made – move the collection!**



# BUT THEN, WHERE DO YOU BEGIN?

What do you do first  
when your museum  
collection contains  
250,000 objects?

Some of which are as  
delicate as glass...



... and some are as sturdy as, well - steel!

Well, first you prioritize which objects are more rare, and which ought to go right away. Then you gather as many packing materials and rental trucks as you can get your hands on and send out a call for volunteers. You post a list of tasks, show the workers how to pack artifacts, assign them to a work station in the storage area and tell them they only have a few days to get these objects to safety.



The first things to go were boots. They were already in boxes and just needed padding to be ready to go.



As the thousands of boots went out, experts, like MWAC's Karin Roberts packed delicate objects.



Wooden packing crates also went out early as they are rare and fit nicely into modern mover's boxes.



We drew most of our help from local students, firefighters, teachers, State of Iowa law enforcement officers and refuge personnel sent from around the region.

Ceramics, such as these ale bottles from Holland, are inherently strong but still needed individual padding and careful packing.



On a few occasions, heavy lifting equipment could be used to move bulky things like steel cabinets. But mostly we relied on strong backs and willing hands.

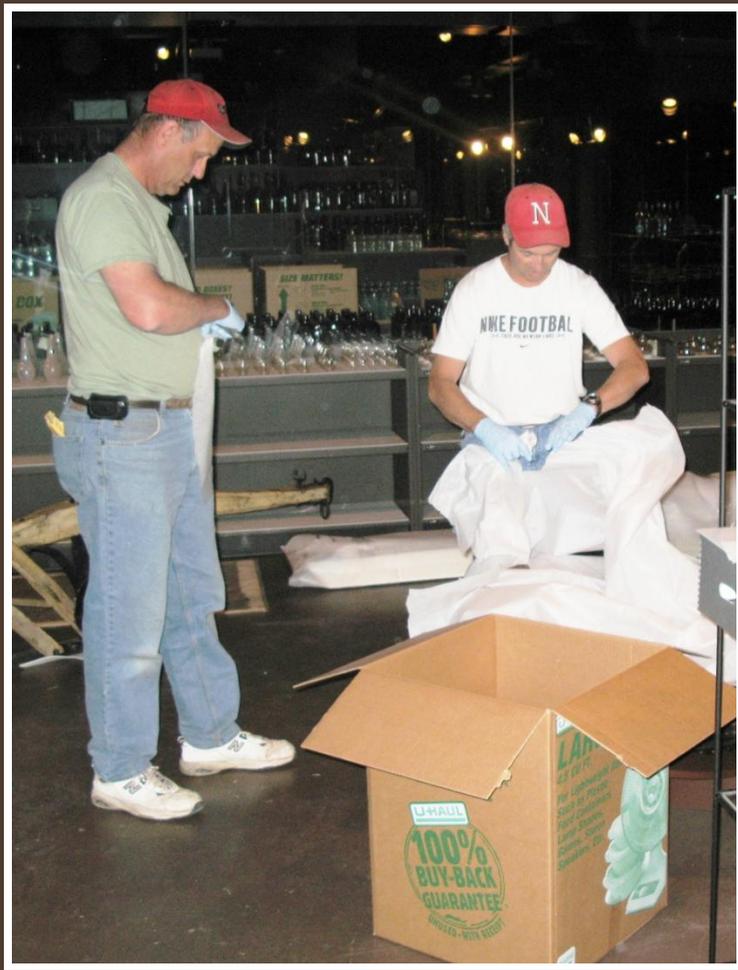
The loading dock was the center of our activity. Rental trucks lined up awaiting their loads even as more packing supplies were being delivered.



Fish & Wildlife's Regional Director, Tom Melius, came by to check on our efforts and was put to work packing cannonballs.



Sometimes packing objects resulted in lighthearted moments.



Most objects were individually wrapped in tissue or foam before being carefully packed in a cardboard box.



Before any boxes left the museum they were marked with the location from which they were taken.

Space for irregularly-shaped objects could pose a challenge to our eager packers. At times, boxes had to be custom-made.



James Myster, the FWS Region 3 Archeologist, and our own Michael Ellis showed a remarkable talent for using every square inch of cargo space in the rented trucks.



Our first temporary storage spot was provided by the good people at the Gerald Ford Conservation Center in Omaha. There was a large meeting room that was not being used, and in a weak moment, Conservator Deb Long said we could use it...



**..and before we knew it the available space at the Ford Center was filling up - but we still had lots of stuff left to move!**



By Tuesday, June 14<sup>th</sup>, 20% of the collection had been packed and removed.

A fresh influx of volunteers helped us to pick up the pace even further. Long hours and hard work were paying off – but would there be enough time?



**Our next challenge involved finding a second site to store our boxes. In desperation we even wound up taking one truckload to Lincoln, where the NPS allowed us the use of their limited space ... but then the manager of a warehouse in the Omaha area learned of our predicament and graciously offered the use of his facility - without charge!**



The offer of a controlled storage space came at just the right time. The packing effort at DeSoto was gaining momentum, and without missing a beat the work continued and trucks began to roll to their new destination.



With thousands of square feet of storage secured, the truckloads of artifacts began to fill the warehouse. No real effort was made to organize the collection at this point, as time was the most important factor.

Necessity really is the mother of invention. Since the cabinets were too heavy to move, the drawers were removed and cocooned with a technique now forever known as “Myster Wrapping.”

One team would hold a padded drawer while a second team maneuvered around them to stretch-wrap plastic over and under the entire drawer. The final product was both protected and transportable. Thanks James!





Moving iron engine parts could sometimes be nerve-wracking.



Metal textile drawers required some careful stacking.



100-year-old raincoats demanded very special packing.

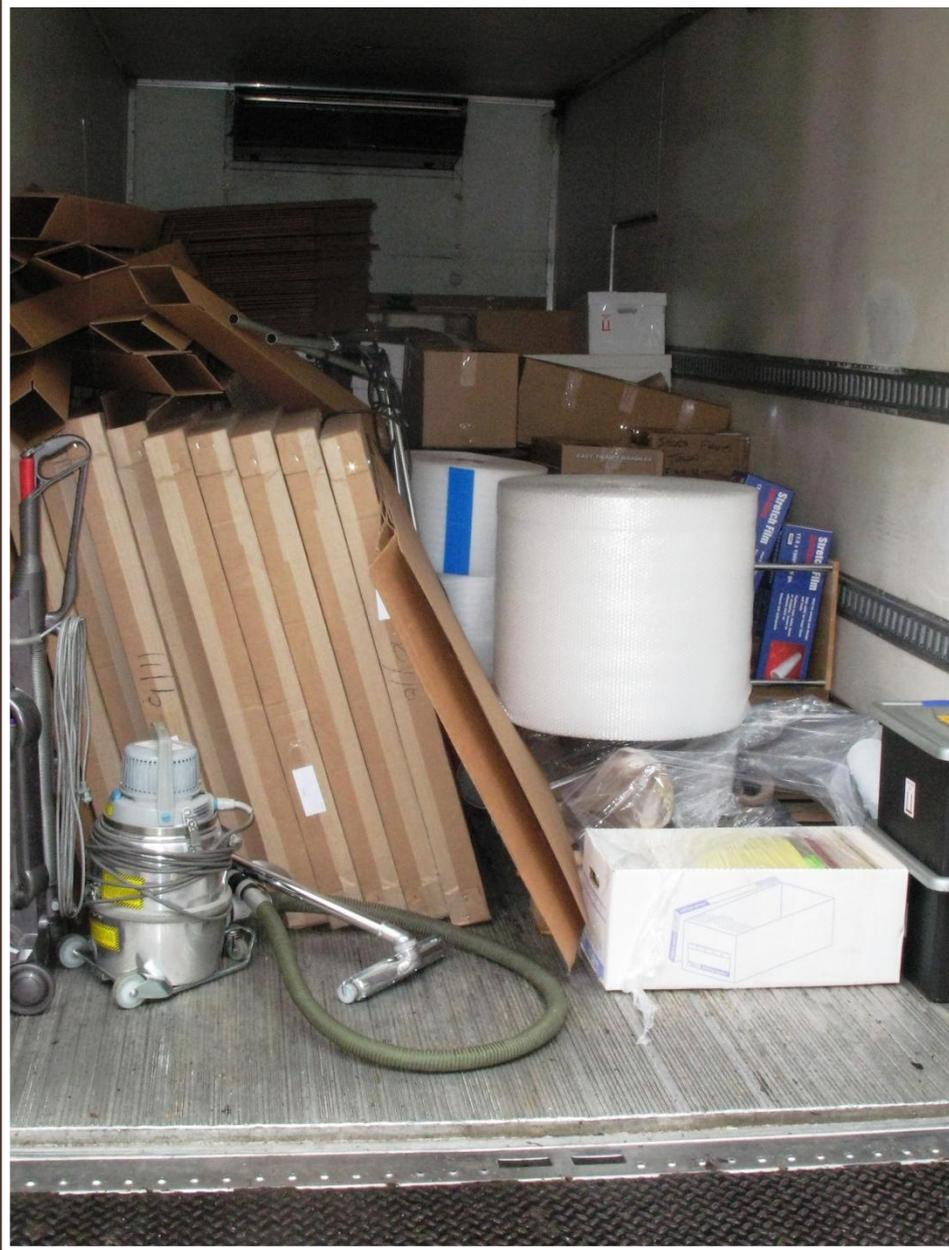
## ***“The Curator’s Rap”***



As Friday, June 17<sup>th</sup> approached the end was in sight. Hundreds of shelves and cabinets, once loaded with precious artifacts from the steamboat *Bertrand*, were standing empty.



The big push was on to get all of the objects out of the storage bays. Odd-shaped tools, such as shovels, had to be packed into handmade boxes before being transported to safety.

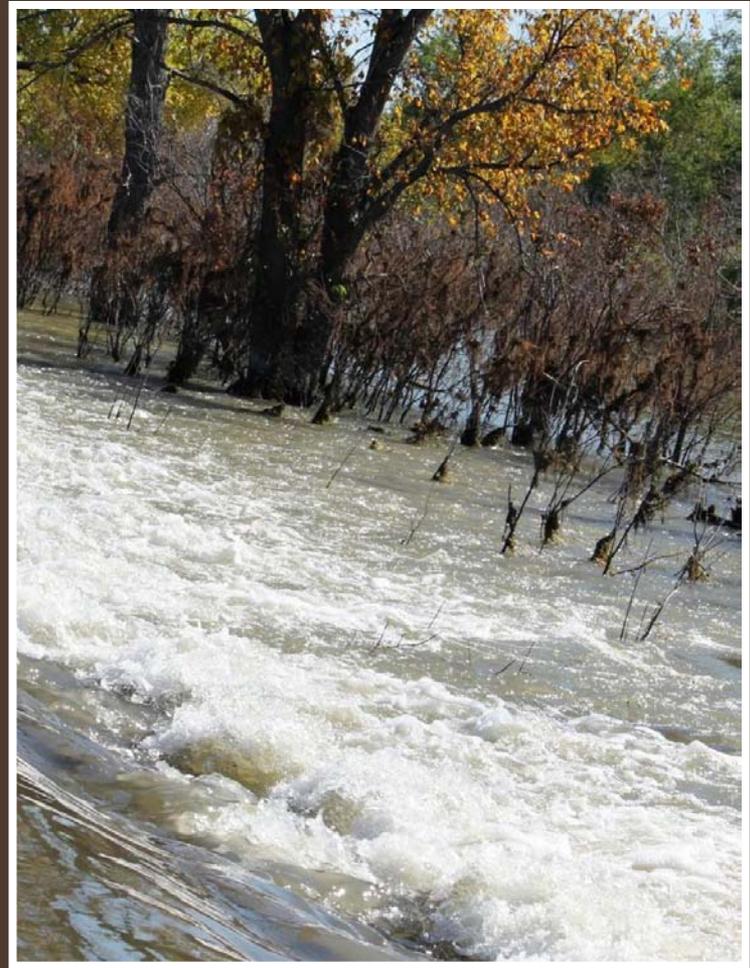


Finally, at noon of Saturday, June 18, 2011, the LAST load of objects and museum supplies was packed into the LAST truck.

Seven days of hard work had achieved the impossible. The *Bertrand* Collection was safely out of harm's way and the workers had good reason to smile.



**When the LAST truck pulled out and the LAST volunteer went home, an eerie silence settled over the storage bays. The shelves and cabinets were empty. The flurry of activity that had descended so quickly on the museum had ebbed after just one week.**



**However, the Missouri River could not be held back forever, and in the end it forced its way through the levees. On June 24, 2011, water poured into DeSoto and Boyer Chute Refuges, causing millions of dollars in damage.**



**The flooding of the refuge reached record heights. For several weeks the visitor center became an island, accessible only by boat. Water did not enter the upper floors, but the boiler room was submerged and electrical power was lost for several months. Since then, the lake has returned to its pre-flood level, but it is uncertain when the collection will be returned to DeSoto.**



Aerial view of Visitor Center Complex before the flood event...



...same view, Summer 2011.

A great deal of damage was suffered at Boyer Chute, where tons of sand and silt were deposited. At DeSoto, roads were washed out and hiking trails destroyed. Both refuges suffered damage to fishing piers and buildings.





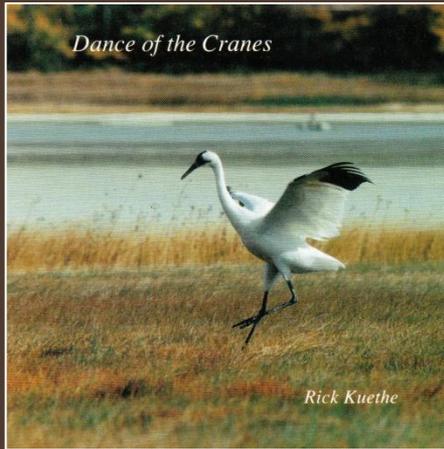
After looking into various options, the decision was made to lease space in the “temporary” warehouse, set up security and environmental controls, and house the collection there until the time came to return it to the visitor center at DeSoto NWR. Objects that had been stored at the Ford Center and the NPS were all brought to the warehouse so they could be housed together.

To our relief, an inspection by an independent contractor revealed that the artifacts were not damaged during the evacuation.

In the meantime, the collection is being sorted, inventoried, cataloged, photographed and repacked in anticipation of the day it will be brought back and put on display.



## CREDITS



Photos by: Joe Burns, Michael Ellis, Barbara Nielsen and other members of the DeSoto NWR staff

PowerPoint layout and design by Brittany Deeds and Dean Knudsen. Thanks Brit!

