BigStuff 07 – Country Update for the United States

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The preservation and conservation of large industrial artifacts in the United States remains mostly a collection of independent activities. While the National Park Service, state agencies and several large museums have successfully protected certain industrial sites and objects, dozens of smaller organizations struggle to adequately protect and interpret their resources. This presentation contains a few representative examples of conservation activities throughout the United States. These examples highlight various conservation and funding methods used to preserve important elements of the industrial landscape

Three different industrial complexes help illustrate some of the approaches used to protect former industrial sites. In Birmingham, Alabama, the local community rallied to create the Sloss Furnace National Historic Landmark. Faced with the impending demolition of the site in the late 1970s, the citizens of Birmingham voted for a bond measure to protect and interpret this excellent example of a twentieth-century blast furnace. The initial bond funds helped to stabilize the industrial remains, while today, the site supports itself through interpretive tours, donations, public event hosting, and by offering metalworking workshops. In contrast, the Bethlehem Steel Mill in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania struggled to find a new use after closing in 1995. Home to what was once the second-largest steel mill in the United States, the site remained essentially dormant until 2006. A group called Sands BethWorks Gaming is now constructing a casino and hotel complex in the former ore pits at the site. The larger development plan includes a shopping mall, event space, and the creation of the Smithsonian-supported National Museum of Industrial History. The developers also plan to preserve and interpret the blast furnace complex in order to retain some of the historic fabric of the site. The third example of an industrial site is the Soudan Underground Mine State Park. Located in Soudan, Minnesota, the park provides an interesting example of a federal – state partnership. When the former iron mine closed in 1962, the mining company donated the site and equipment to the state of Minnesota. The state then added the mine complex to their state park system and began giving historic underground tours. In the 1980s, university researchers collaborated with the park to conduct physics experiments in abandoned portions of the mine. The underground spaces were so well suited to their experiments that the federal government became involved in the late 1990s. After an initial $50 million investment in equipment and modifications in the mine, a consortium of federal and educational institutions now provides annual lease payments and other funds to operate and maintain the mine.

Unlike the sites mentioned above, a more common method of interpreting U.S. industrial history occurs through the selection of an individual structure or object for preservation and conservation. The Anaconda Smoke Stack State Park in Anaconda, Montana celebrates the copper-smelting heritage of the area by preserving a 585-foot tall smelter chimney. The smoke stack is all that remains from the once huge Washoe smelter complex. Local residents helped save the smoke stack by lobbying for its preservation during the smelter demolition. The state of Montana now maintains the smoke stack as well as a small interpretive park near the smelter site. Another

example is located in Hancock, Michigan. At 150 feet tall, the Quincy Mining Company's No. 2 shaft-rockhouse is the tallest structure in the local area. Although the structure has not operated since 1931, it serves as an important identity symbol for the local community. The local non-profit organization that owns the structure completely replaced its rusting corrugated steel exterior in the 1980s to help slow its deterioration. Although the group received some complaints about adding new materials to the structure, the newly covered shaft-rockhouse and its companion steam hoist played a major role in the subsequent creation of the Keweenaw National Historic Park. Unfortunately, within sight of the shaft-rockhouse is an outdoor collection of historic mining equipment that currently receives little or no care.

With regard to movable objects, one of the most impressive restoration activities in recent years has been the work on the schooner *CA Thayer* in San Francisco, California. The *Thayer* was the last commercial sailing vessel to operate on the west coast of the United States. It has been a floating museum since the 1950s and was in poor shape as crossed its hundredth anniversary in 1995. In 2003, the San Francisco Maritime National Historical Park removed the *Thayer* from its berth and relocated it to a nearby seaplane hanger. Over the next four years, workers completely disassembled and reconstructed the ship using a mix of old and new parts. The *Thayer* returned to the water in April of 2007 where the restoration work continues. Another high-profile restoration activity involves the *USS Monitor*. The *Monitor* is a United States Civil War-era ironclad ship that is best known for its 1862 battle with the Confederate ironclad CSS Virginia. The *Monitor* saw limited action after that first battle and later sank in a storm off North Carolina in 1863. In March of 2007, the USS Monitor Center opened in Newport News, Virginia to help conserve and interpret the wreckage of the *Monitor*. The new 63,000 square foot museum contains conservation facilities, interactive exhibits, and a full-scale replica of the Monitor.

Although not a ship, an historic shipbuilding crane illustrates how even when objects are in their original locations, they may be extremely difficult to properly interpret. The Rosie the Riveter National Historical Park in Richmond, California recently acquired a World War II-era whirley crane from a nearby scrap yard. Whirleys were a key element that enabled the four Richmond shipyards to produce almost 750 ships in four years during the war. The park employees placed the historic crane at one of the remaining shipways within the park. Unfortunately, the special nature of these cranes was in how groups of them worked together to arrange pre-assembled pieces of the ships. A visitor to the park today can get a sense of the scale of the operation by seeing the existing crane, but the majesty of the how it worked in conjunction with one to three other cranes is extremely difficult to convey.

Finally, in a display of what a small group of dedicated volunteers can accomplish, a group in Youngstown, Ohio formed a non-profit organization to save and interpret a Tod steam engine. Built in 1914, the 4000-horsepower steam engine drove a number of rolling mill operations before being retired in 1979. The engine then sat idle for fifteen years. In 1995, the non-profit group stepped in to save it from the scrap yard. The group disassembled the engine, stored it, and purchased a piece of property to display it. In 2006, the group reassembled in the 600,000-pound engine in the new Tod Engine Heritage Park in Youngstown. The group is now working to obtain funding to construct a display building over the engine. In the meantime, they have painted the engine to help protect it from the elements.