Museum of Agriculture Lends Helping Hand to Mississippi Museum Damaged by Fire

TIFTON—For any museum housing one-of-kind relics and treasured memories of the past, there can be no more dangerous an enemy than flames engulfing an irreplaceable collection which took years to put together.
That’s why Polly Huff, assistant director and curator of the Georgia Museum of Agriculture and Historic Village at Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College, was quick to respond to a nationwide disaster relief call last November.

“The Association for Living History, Farm, and Agricultural Museums asked museum professionals from across the nation to respond to a tragedy in Jackson because of a devastating fire at the Mississippi Agriculture and Forestry Museum,” Huff said. “The fire gutted several major buildings, damaged many others and just crushed the museum’s operations.”

For three days, Huff and other volunteers assisted with artifact triage, restoration, and relocation. With the help of a photographer and a local volunteer, she processed over 500 artifacts affected by the fire.

The fire started in the facility’s animal barn from a hay bale that was too close to a light fixture which became overheated. Museum staff members discovered the fire, and eight to 10 fire trucks were on site in minutes.

“If it hadn’t been for such quick response, the damage would have been more widespread,” Huff said. “Folks in Florence fifteen miles away saw smoke from the fire. Crews battled the blaze for more than three hours to keep it from spreading to the historic village.”

Huff said the maintenance shop, animal barn, and Veterinary Infirmary burned to the ground. A barn used for storage for tractors and plows incurred severe damage including damage to some of the large artifacts stored underneath it. Another storage barn also had to be repaired due to fire damage.
“The side of the main exhibit hall building was scorched, and the inside required professional disaster clean-up services,” Huff said. “Luckily the collections displayed in that building were safe from damage other than smoke and soot. Several other buildings in the historic village also suffered some damage from the smoke and soot and required immediate clean-up attention.”

Officials estimate that damage to the site could total $2.5 million. There was no loss of life although one employee suffered minor injuries while she was hurrying to release animals from their barn. Those animals included rabbits, goats, ponies, pigs, peacocks, chickens, mules, and a cow.

Huff said the Mississippi Agriculture and Forestry Museum closed temporarily to the public in the days after the fire and focused on clean-up and restoration. Helping hands dug artifacts out of the ashes of the burned buildings.

“The good news is that the Museum re-opened three weeks after the disaster,” Huff said. “They will continue to slowly rebuild and restore their beautiful site, which is almost an identical copy of our Georgia Museum of Agriculture with a church, school house, blacksmith forge, general store, Masonic Lodge and doctor’s office among their historic buildings.

“One thing obvious to anyone who participated in the recovery effort was how the Jackson community came together to assist the Museum staff, and how this heartbreaking loss of history heightened everyone’s appreciation for this unique and special museum.”

Huff said every volunteer lauded the quick reaction of the local fire department, whose personnel saved the entire site from being devoured by the flames. The Mississippi Commissioner of Agriculture’s office has been instrumental in the recovery effort, and many of
the state offices in Jackson and the surrounding areas allowed their employees to assist with the cleanup efforts as a part of their work day.

“I was glad to represent ABAC and Georgia’s Museum of Agriculture in lending a helping hand to a sister museum,” Huff said. “I think because of this fire and seeing this damage, I have an even greater appreciation for what we have here in our living history museum.”

###