

A BRIEF HISTORY OF

MUSEUMS ALASKA

THE STATEWIDE MUSEUM ASSOCIATION



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*Prepared by Gail Hollinger
For the 19th or 25th annual meeting of Museums Alaska
Fairbanks, Alaska, 2002*

MUSEUMS ALASKA

The State Wide Museum Association

GETTING STARTED

Every organization has to start somewhere, and I suppose you could say Museums Alaska began when some people became concerned over the lack of a unified voice to speak for Alaska's museums. There was a feeling that issues specific to Alaska's growing museum community were not being addressed by existing organizations and that the history of Alaska Natives was not being explored to its fullest potential. This concern led to the first semi-official statewide gathering of Alaska's museum people in Kenai in November of 1977, during the annual meeting of the Alaska Historical Society (AHS). Most museums in Alaska were history based at that time, and members of AHS. At this first meeting, some 40 to 50 people from all around the state took part in a planning session to identify and prioritize statewide museum needs.

The *Museum Planning Committee* was organized at this meeting and assigned the task of representing museum issues to the state legislature and developing a statewide plan for the future of museums in Alaska. Pat Wolf, from the Anchorage Museum of History and Art, was elected as the chair. Other members of the committee included Dan Monroe (Alaska State Museum), Terry Dickey (U of AK Museum), Roy Helms (Alaska State Council on the Arts), Betsy Friedman Pitzman (Pratt Museum), Martha Madsen (Pratt Museum), Glen Mast (?), Kay Shepard (?), Mike Kennedy (Alaska State Museum), Marilyn Knapp (Sitka Historical Society) and Rachael Craig, (Nome).

To put this into historical perspective, in 1977 the *big three* museums in Anchorage, Juneau and Fairbanks were much, much smaller, in terms of buildings, staff and collections; the Anchorage Museum

was a decade away from their first expansion, there was only one State Museum as the Sheldon Jackson Museum was still owned by Sheldon Jackson College, and the University of Alaska Museum was a year away from moving into their new building on the Fairbanks campus. An initial survey by the committee concluded that there were 33 museums around the state; the current Museum Directory lists 81 institutions.

For the 1978 meeting of AHS, the still unofficial *Museum Planning Committee* organized the first workshop aimed specifically at the needs of museums, *Exhibition Design and Installation*, led by Charles Daily of the *Institute of American Indian Arts* in Santa Fe. Participants were encouraged to bring photos and drawings of any exhibits they were working on. This workshop was the genesis of our present professional development conference programs. Discussions at this meeting centered around requirements for a statewide plan and the committee's input on the Alaska State Museum budget.

About this time, the committee asked AHS to make the *Museum Planning Committee* a standing committee of the society and to arrange for regular sessions on museum issues at the annual meeting – both of which AHS declined to do; their feeling was that new direction would dilute the AHS mission and focus. This prompted discussions on the feasibility of forming a completely new association for Alaska's museum professionals. The general feeling was that while the museum community and AHS had many points in common, a separate association would be able to address some of the concerns specific to museums; financial and legislative support for museums and museum programs, training for museum staff (paid and volunteer) and public programming.

Once the decision was made to form a new organization just for Alaska museums, action was quickly initiated to incorporate into a non-profit organization. Anyone who has gone through this process knows it is can be complicated affair; but this one was made even

more difficult than usual when the lawyer contracted to shepherd the articles of incorporation through government bureaucracy suddenly disappeared, seemingly dropping off the end of the earth. Another lawyer – from Nome – was engaged to complete the process. Part of the incorporation process was choosing a name for the new organization; some of the choices voted on were *Museums of Alaska*, *Society of Alaska's Museums*, *Alaska Museum Council*, *Alaska Council of Museums*, *Society for Alaska's Museums* and *Museums Alaska*. *Museums Alaska* was chosen on the third ballot. Terry Dicky seems to have contributed the adopted name.

GETTING OFFICIAL

Articles of Incorporation for Museums Alaska, Inc. were filed with the state in 1983. So depending on how you count, in 2002 Museums Alaska is either 25 years old (first *Museum Planning Committee* meeting) or 19 years old (first incorporated). (We decided there's no point in quibbling over details, so we're planning to party for a year, to connect our 20th and 25th anniversaries.) IRS designation as a non-profit 501 C (3) organization soon followed and the *Western Museum Association* accepted *Museums Alaska* as the official representative of Alaska's museums in 1984. We were an officially sanctioned organization. The directors elected to the first official board included Roxana Adams (President), Roy Iutzi-Johnson (Vice President), Betsy Pitzman (Treasurer), Rita Gunderson (Secretary), Terry Dickey, Marilyn Knapp, Marian Johnson and Patricia Oakes. There were three standing committees, Legislative, Public Relations and Professional Development. At this time there were 12 institutional members and 33 individual members.

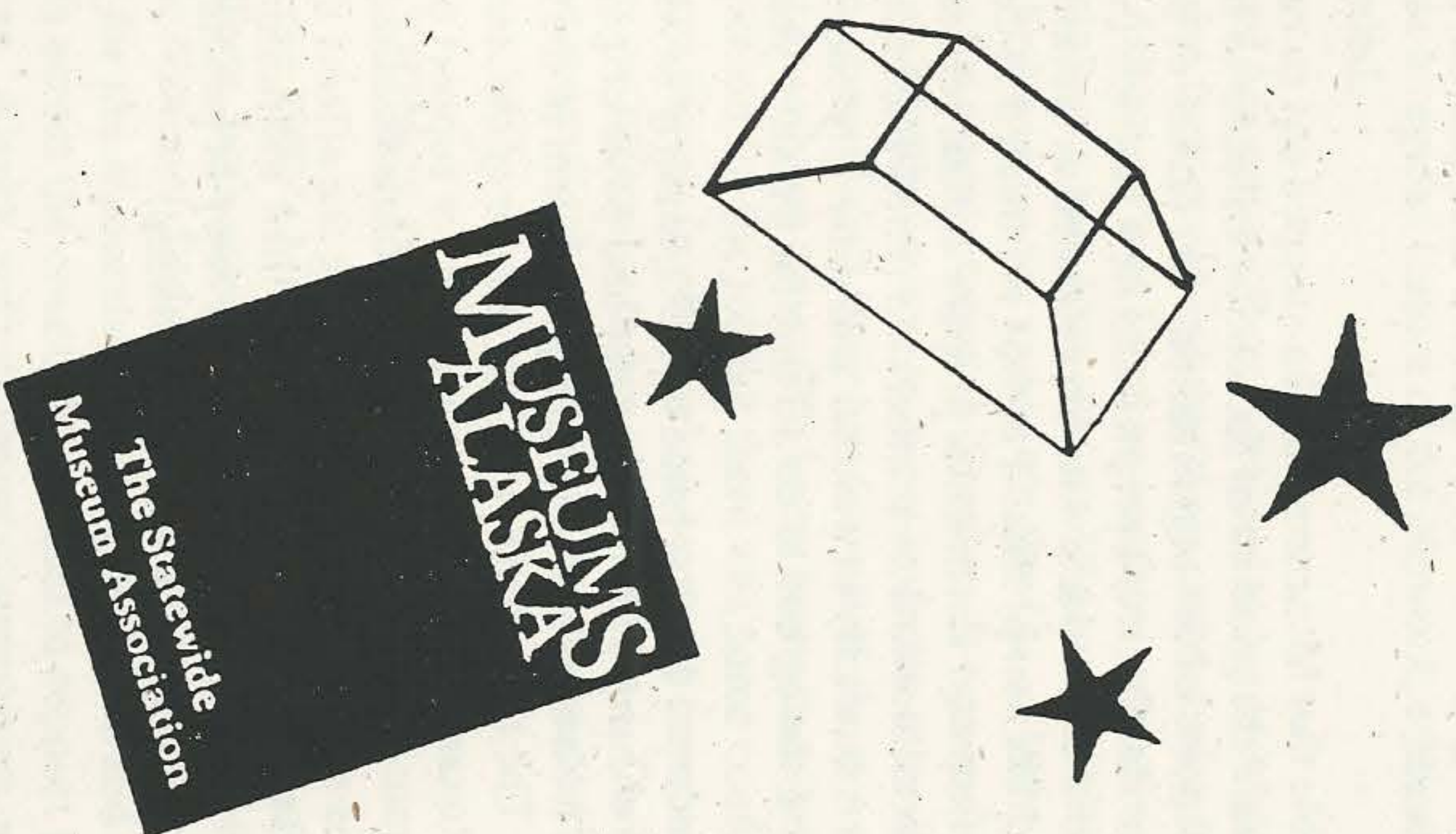
Wanda Chin volunteered her talents to one of the most visible aspects of Museums Alaska, designing its logo. Wanda wanted to create an iconic emblem for our organization, one that expressed our solid foundations, and the open, multiple perspectives we aspire to.

Her clean, sharp design, with its solid black pedestal topped with a clear display case shown in perspective, has become the instantly recognizable symbol of Museums Alaska. Its first appearance seems to have been on the registration packet for the 1984 meeting, *Planning that Gets Results*.

There were mixed feelings on the part of the members of the Alaska Historical Society towards the new museum organization. Some feared we would dilute the strength of AHS by pulling active members away. There was even a suggestion that perhaps it would be better for the two organizations to meet at different times and places. However, the new Museums Alaska board felt it was in the best interests of the members of both organizations that we continue holding joint meetings. Over the years we have tried melding these meetings in different ways, sometimes holding them back-to-back, sometimes concurrently, sometimes overlapping in the middle.

Roxana Adams provided leadership for the new organization, serving as president for five years. She stuck with us during these formative years, even through her move from the Alaska State Museum to the Ketchikan Museums. The board, committees and membership continued organizing annual meetings, lobbying the state legislature on museum issues, building membership and connections with other organizations. An early challenge was the threatened elimination of the Grant-In-Aid program – some things never change. Aggressive lobbying resulted in the program being replaced. Museums Alaska was active in supporting the Alaska Heritage Endowment Fund and supported funding the purchase of the Sheldon Jackson Museum. Support for the State Museum's budget and programs were important issues until much of this role was taken on by the museum's new Friends organization.

An early Museums Alaska project was to survey the membership to get a picture of what kinds of museums were out there, what kinds of facilities they had, what staff they had and the training they had and needed. This information was used to plan sessions and conference



Wanda Chin's variation of the Museums Alaska logo, Used for the Spirit of Inventiveness conference Fairbanks, 1987

topics. Another project was the production of the first statewide Museum Directory in 1984. The publication of the directory was funded through a grant from the State Department of Tourism, a very useful grant program that has long since disappeared, along with the department itself.

It's remarkable that Museums Alaska stepped out so early in its history to create the position of Executive Director to handle many of the clerical aspects of the organization. Pat Oakes of the Circle District Historical Society accepted the new position in 1987. She had served on the board and was experienced in working in the same capacity for other non-profits. Pat was contracted to distribute minutes and financial statements, prepare annual reports, handle correspondence, coordinate membership renewals, maintain mailing lists, produce a quarterly newsletter and generally coordinate board activities. And she agreed to do all this for \$1500 a year!

Pat Oakes produced the first issue of our quarterly newsletter, *Network*, in February 1987 and her cut-and-paste original (the old fashion kind, with scissors, tape and glue) is still in the Museums Alaska files. The lead article was *The Future of the Alaskan Museum* by Roxana Adams, a rousing call for support of the threatened Grant-In-Aid program. Another article asked for input from museums around the state concerning the affects the economic downturn in the economy was having on their institutions. News from around the state was featured and a copy of pending legislation on protecting cultural resources was included.

CHANGES

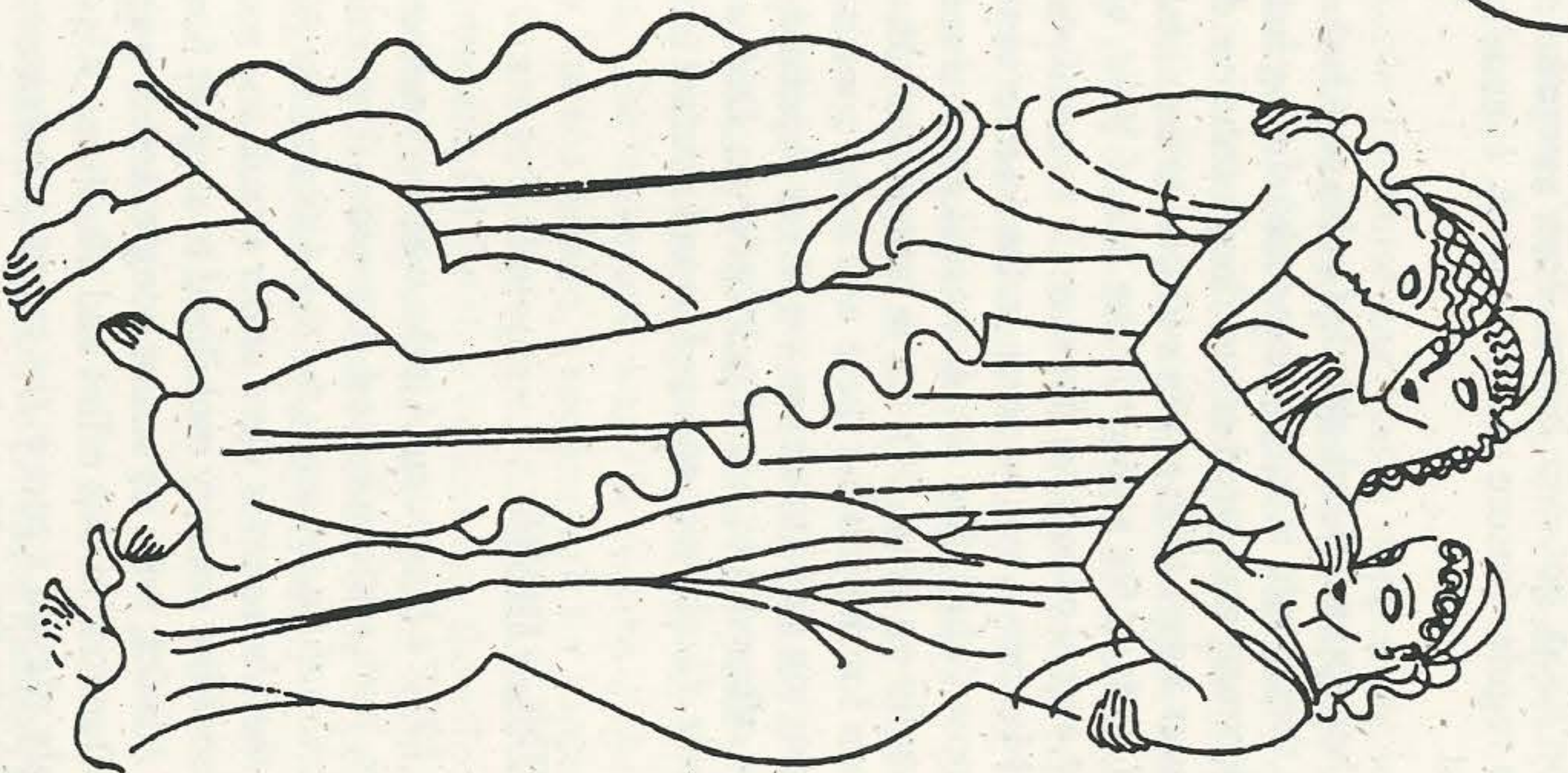
Pat Oakes continued as Executive Director through the 1989 Anchorage meeting and then Patti Carey of the Pratt Museum stepped into Executive Director position. The ever-memorable Jean Swearingen was president and the two made a great team, Jean providing vision and Patti keeping things moving forward with her

outstanding organizational skills. The newsletter took a big leap forward with a much more professional look and the content, which had always been good, got even better. Jean's popular column, *Musings*, was a regular feature of the *Network*, even after her term as president ended.

Patti Cary and her spouse Butch decided to leave Alaska for warmer climates where they could indulge their scuba diving habits and in 1993 Doug Askerman was hired as our third executive director. However, this was a part-time job in addition to a military career and he only worked with us for a year. In the fall of 1994, we began interviewing for a new executive director. It was snowing very hard the day Donna Matthews was to come in for an interview but like a real Alaskan, snow didn't slow her down and she arrived for her appointment exactly on time. We knew immediately that she was the perfect person for the job but there was some confusion on how much we were paying (a pittance) so we never expected her to take the job when we offered it to her. Luckily for us, Donna believed in the work *Museums Alaska* was engaged in and wanted to be part of it.

GETTING THINGS DONE

Throughout the 1990's Museums Alaska was very active in advocacy efforts, both nationally and statewide. The federal cultural agencies, the *National Endowment for the Arts* and the *National Endowment for the Humanities* were under attack and museum professionals across the country mobilized to support funding for these agencies. Alaska, with its senior congressmen, was in a position to be influential in this effort and Museums Alaska's members certainly played a part in the eventual outcome. Statewide, support for the Alaska State Museums was ongoing, from supporting the curator position when it was threatened by budget cuts, to agitating to fill the vacant state conservator and museum services coordinator position. Grant-In-Aid was always on the advocacy agenda as were other issues such as the unclaimed loan legislation



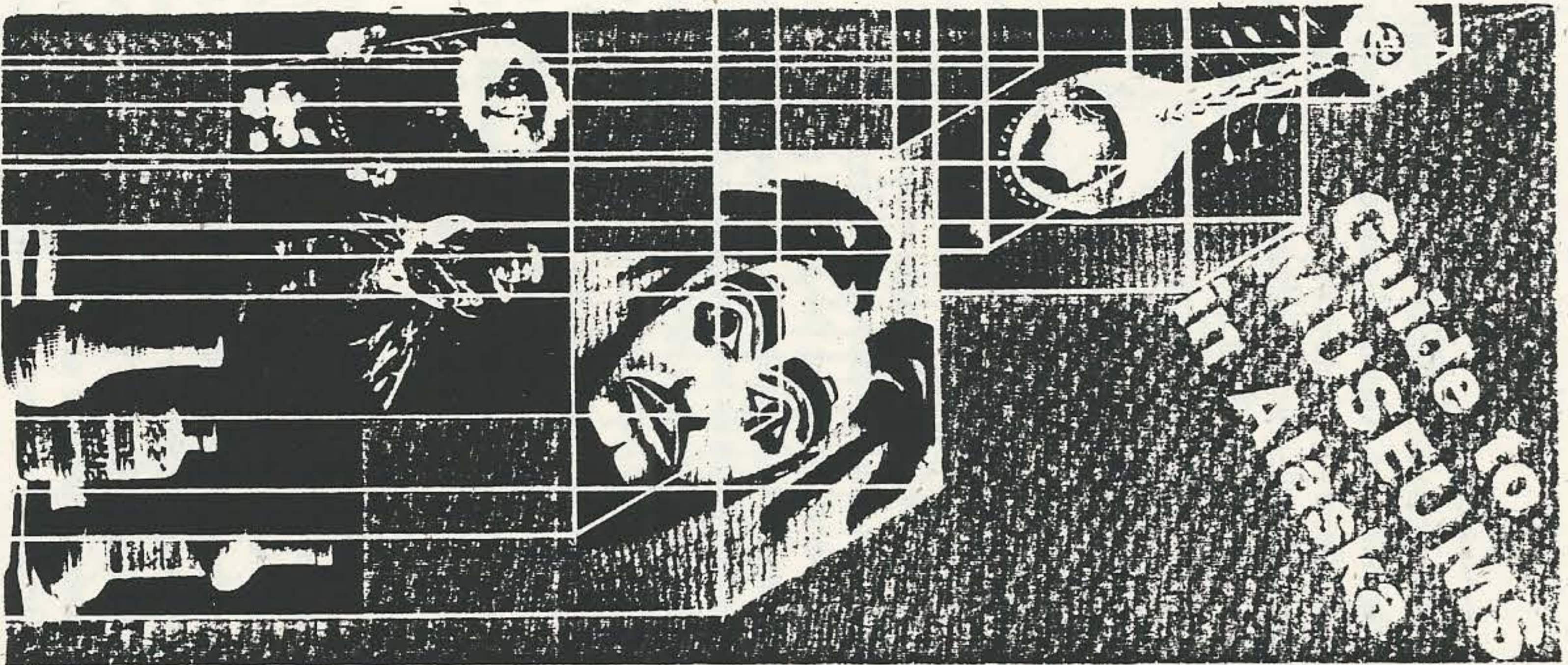
Jean

Drawing of the muses, from one Jean Swearingen's columns on
Museums and the Muses
Network, April, 1990

and the Heritage Endowment Fund. In the late 1990's we began working actively with the Alaska Historical Society to meet regularly with our state legislators in their districts to familiarize them with the concerns we had identified as important to Alaska's museums and cultural agencies. Bea Shepherd is our ever-vigilant Advocacy Committee Chair in Juneau, keeping us focused on the importance of this work.

Projects over the years have included printing two editions of the *Guide to Museums in Alaska* (this has now, happily, been taken on by the Alaska State Museum), printing a brochure guide to museums in Alaska in four languages, creating a web-site for Museums Alaska, serving as a clearing house for information of all kinds for Alaska's museums and planning the annual professional development conferences. Museums Alaska has been an active collaborator over the years as well, holding two meetings with the Western Museum Association (1993 & 1998), and a meeting with the national Oral History Association (1999). One of the most recent and exciting collaborations is with the Cultural Center Museum Consortium, the association of Alaska Native cultural centers and museums. They have been meeting in conjunction with Museums Alaska since the 2000 conference in Ketchikan.

Our annual professional development conferences provide valuable continuing education for the state's museum staffs. One of the important elements keeping our conferences strong and dynamic has been the scholarship program supported by the *Grant-in-Aid to Museums*, and more recently, by proceeds of the annual meeting's silent auction. This scholarship program has made it possible to gather a diverse representation at our meetings, both geographically and culturally. Below is an overview of the conferences held since Museums Alaska began as an informal committee at the 1977 Alaska Historical Society meeting.



Title Page from the first Guide to Museums in Alaska, 1984

Designed by Barry McWayne

CONFERENCES

- 1977 Kenai: First meeting of the *Museum Planning Committee*
- 1978 Anchorage: *Exhibition Design and Installation*, led by Charles Daily of the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe
- 1979 Haines:
- 1980 Juneau:
- 1981 Fairbanks: *Museum Operations*. This seems to have been a mix of topics relating to basic museum operations; registration methods, museum stores, conservation, exhibit labels, etc.
- 1982 Valdez: *Museum Learning*. Dr. Virginia Johnson, Professor of Education Alaska Pacific University explored how people learn in museums. Other sessions focused on building docent programs.
- 1983 Sitka: *Approaches to Interpretation*. David Estabrook of the Smithsonian Office of Education led sessions examining the theoretical and practical aspects of museum interpretation and learning.
- 1984 Anchorage: *Strategies for the Future: Planning that Gets Results*. Author of the book *Planning for Success*, Richard Lynch presented a day long session on long-range planning to provide a basis of practical action.
- 1985 Wrangell: *Collecting Alaska: Ethics, Policy & Methods*. Sessions examined collecting with a purpose, writing collection policies, and photographing collections. Sessions were led by Alaskan professionals; Peter Corey, Gary Candelaria, Jean Swearingen, Mark Daughtee, Elva Scott, Roxana Adams and Joe Leahy.
- 1986 Homer: *Museums and Entrepreneurship*.
- 1987 Fairbanks: *The Spirit of Inventiveness, Exhibit Planning and Development*. Robert Kosturak, designer & planner for the California Academy of Sciences led a workshop to address planning, designing and building museum exhibits, using community resources.

- 1988 Cordova: *Museums in Service to the Community*. Roxana Adams led a session on defining institutional mission. Museums were encouraged to bring copies of their mission statements to review. Other sessions focused on museums and tourism. It wasn't called *cultural* tourism yet.
- 1989 Anchorage: *Caring for the Collection*. There were two professional development meetings in 1989; the Anchorage meeting was in March. The emphasis was on using computers for collection management. The Fish and Game department's computers were used for hands-on experience. Carl Patterson from the Rocky Mountain Conservation Center led sessions on collection care.
- 1989 Sitka: *Introduction to Fundraising and Community Support Programs for Museums*. Hedy Hartman, Director of the National Bicycle Museum led sessions on funding and community support for museums. Rebecca Danvers of IMLS introduced participants to the Institutes grant programs.
- 1990 Anchorage: *Collecting for the 21st Century*. Jerry George (author, *Visiting History, Arguments over Museums and Historic Sites* and former director of AASLH) convinced us that we could not expect to collect for the 21st century in the same way we collected for the 20th. Ed Able, director of the American Association of Museums, was a guest at the meeting.
- 1991 Haines: *Museums and Community*. The featured speaker was Kathy McLean of the consulting firm, *Independent Exhibitions* (McLean and her firm worked with the Pratt on *Darkened Waters*). Her two-day workshop demonstrated how to improve the visitor experience by managing all aspects of exhibit design and development.
- 1992 Anchorage: *Evaluation of Exhibits and Programs & Repatriation*. Beverly Serrell, author of *Exhibit Labels*, provided attendees with the groundwork for evaluating exhibits and programs. This year also marked the first in a

MUSEUMS ALASKA
AND THE
ALASKA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

ANNUAL MEETINGS
22 - 26 October, 1991

HAINES, ALASKA



Logo from the 1991 Annual Meeting in Haines
Museums and Community

- series of notable sessions on Repatriation organized by Steve Hendriks, curator at the Alaska State Museum
- 1993 Fairbanks: *Partnering With Diverse Communities*. The Western Museum Association put their conference on the road that year, bringing their program to each of the states in the WMA district.
- 1994 Kodiak: *From Art to Zoo, Museum Publications*. Betsy Armstrong, publications coordinator of the Denver Museum of Natural History was the featured speaker at this conference. A daylong session on museum registration methods was offered for Continuing Education college credit.
- 1995 Juneau: *Long Distance Research and Hands-on Development*. In addition to sessions on the conference topics, Bea Shepherd organized an energizing political advocacy session with state lobbyist Clark Gruening.
- 1996 Anchorage: *Preserving and Interpreting Cultural Heritage*. Discussions around the Anchorage Museum of History and Art's seminal exhibit on Yup'ik masks, *Agayuliyararput, Our Way of Making Prayer*, was the focal point of this meeting. Steven Weil was the conference keynote speaker
- 1997 Sika: *Cultural Tourism*. Bridget McCarthy, a consultant and project developer, presented her views on regionalism, marketing, facilities management, the arts, tourism and grass-roots community development. The Hindsight Museum also made a memorable appearance, emphasizing the need for disaster planning.
- 1998 Anchorage: *Changes in Latitudes, Changes in Attitude*. This was the year the Western Museum Association met in Anchorage, combining their annual meeting with our own. The Alaska Historical Society met in the Matanuska Valley that year, joining us for the combined board meeting and joint banquet.
- 1999 Anchorage: *Giving Voice: Oral Historians and the Shaping of Narrative*. For two years in a row Museums Alaska worked with national organizations to put on conferences;

- this year it was in cooperation with the national Oral History Association.
- 2000 Ketchikan: *From Traditional to Digital: Alaska's Cultural Institutions in 2000* This meeting was notable for holding the first pre-conference session specifically for the *Cultural Center Museum Consortium*, the association for Alaska's Native cultural centers and museums, funded by the Alaska Council for the Humanities.
- 2001 Valdez: *Dramatic Change*. No one could ever have imagined how appropriate our theme would be. In spite of the anxiety over travel just weeks after 9/11, the conference was very well attended and the content outstanding.
- 2002 Fairbanks: *Measuring Our Success*. Keynote speaker Dr. Jay Rounds, Professor of Museum Studies at the University of Missouri, expounds on the importance of evaluation in developing museum exhibits and programs, making them more responsive to visitors and the community.
- 2003 Haines – don't miss it!

AWARD FOR EXCELLENCE IN THE MUSEUM PROFESSION

- 1990 Barbara Sweetland Smith, for the exhibit, *Russian America, the Forgotten Frontier*
- 1991 The Pratt Museum, for *Darkened Waters*
- 1992 Roxana Adams, Ketchikan Museums, for her services to Alaska's museums
- 1993 Helen Allen, Conservator, Alaska State Museum, for her services to Alaska's museums
- 1994 Janelle Matz, for the exhibit *Material Issues: Impact of Regulation on Native Art*.
- 1995 Jerry Howard, Alaska State Museum Coordinator of Museum Services, for his services to Alaska's museums
- 1996 Ann Fienup-Riordan for the exhibit, *Agayuliyararput: Our Way of Making Prayer*
- The Pratt Museum for the *Sperm Whale Project*

- 1997 Donna Matthews, Executive Director, Museums Alaska, for her services to Alaska's museums
- 1998 Cynthia (CJ) Jones, Director, Sheldon Museum and Cultural Center, for her services to Alaska's museums
- 1999 Mary Louise and Elmer Rasmuson, for their outstanding contributions to Alaska's museums
- 2000 Pratt Museum, for the *Kachemak Bay Discovery Program*
- 2001 Diane Brenner, Director of Archives, Anchorage Museum of History and Art, for her services to Alaska's museums

BOARD LEADERSHIP

Museum Planning Committee

- 1977 Pat Wolf, Anchorage Museum of History and Art
- 1980 Terry Dickey, University of Alaska Museum
- 1982 Roy Iutzi Johnson, Carrie McLain Memorial Museum

Museums Alaska

- 1983 Roxana Adams, Alaska State Museum, Ketchikan Museums
- 1988 Jean Rodeck Swearingen, National Park Service, Curatorial Services
- 1993 Gail Hollinger, Heritage Library Museum
- 1996 Mary Pat Wyatt, Juneau Douglas Museum
- 1997 Dianne Brenner, Anchorage Museum of History and Art
- 1999 CJ Jones, Sheldon Museum & Cultural Center
- 2001 Michael Hawfield, Pratt Museum

MANY THANKS TO:

- Terry Dickey who wrote the original history of Museums Alaska
- Donna Matthews
- Joe Leahy
- Artemis BonaDea
- Wanda Chin
- Roxana Adams
- Pat Wolf