

# An Interview with Sterling Jenson of the March Field Air Museum

by Jason Baird Jackson on July 6, 2016

*Sterling Jenson is the Collections Manager at the [March Field Air Museum](#) in Riverside, California. He earned a B.A. degree in [folklore](#) and an M.A. degree in [arts administration](#) at Indiana University. While at IU, he was graduate assistant in the registration department at the [Mathers Museum of World Cultures](#) (MMWC) and a volunteer in its education department. He was also an intern at [Traditional Arts Indiana](#), which is now a department of the MMWC.*



**Jason Baird Jackson (JJ):** Thank you Sterling for your willingness to talk to me about your work as a museum professional and Indiana University alumnus. We'll go back in time shortly, but could you tell me a bit about the March Field Air Museum and your work as its Collections Manager?

Sterling Jenson (SJ): The March Field Air Museum celebrates the history of aviation with a focus on one of the historical military airfields of the United States, the March Air Reserve Base. March Field was founded in 1918 and since that time has been an important part of the history of the [U.S.] Air Force and the Air Force Reserves, which means that the museum has an important legacy to present to the public. The museum has on display over seventy aircraft, including one of the two A-9s in existence, a SR-71 Blackbird, and, a PT-6 biplane trainer from 1930. The collections range in size from a B-52 on our flight line to ribbons awarded to airmen for their service. In order to house these objects, the museum has two hangars, an exhibit hall, and a library.

As Collections Manager, I am in charge of the processing of the objects, loan paperwork, and ensuring that the collections are organized. Currently, I am building upon my predecessor's work in order to make the collections more accessible. Prior to my arrival, the museum was using an [Microsoft] Access database to keep track of the objects and the books in our library. In order to better serve the museum, I am migrating the database from Access to [CollectiveAccess](#) in the case of objects and to [Koha](#) for the library books. Both programs are open source software that we will be able to upload to the museum's website in order to make the collections more accessible. I am also in the process of overseeing an inventory and standardizing the disposition system, both of which I learned from my time working as a Graduate Assistant at the MMWC.

**JJ: A B-52! I know that you did not get experience in caring for a 132-ton bomber during your time at the MMWC! How *did* your experience as a student at IU prepare you for the challenging museum work that you are doing now?**

SJ: At Indiana University, I studied folklore as an undergraduate and then went back to get my Masters of Arts in arts administration. Due to my studies in folklore, I love collecting information that describes the context of the object, especially personal narratives or biographies. While I never know if these stories will ever be utilized in the exhibits, trying to collect them when the objects arrive is the best time to get this kind of documentation. For one donation, the son emailed me a document he created for his father's funeral, which helps explain the history of the man who wore the uniform.

My studies in arts administration have helped me immensely because the program focused on both the practical components as well as the theoretical ones. I have been working on preparing grant proposals in order to better manage the objects within the collections. The course [MMWC Assistant Director] Judy Kirk taught on Museum Management will be helpful in the near future as I go through and update the collections policies, plans, and procedures. During my graduate studies, I worked at MMWC in the Registrar's office as the Graduate Assistant. I loved my time there because [Registrar] Terry Harley-Wilson gave me hands-on projects, including working with loan agreements and working with an inventory.

At my current position, I am try to emulate Terry by giving my interns and volunteers important tasks and seeking their opinions to better improve the department. As many of our aircraft are on loan from the [National Museum of the United States Air Force](#), including the B-52, I am using what I learned at MMWC regarding loans frequently. I am grateful we have a Restoration Department to deal with repairs to the aircraft, so my focus can be on the smaller objects within

the collection. In short, my experience dealing with loans and other institutions at MMWC has been valuable in this position.

**JJ: I am a big advocate for the combination of disciplinary training in folklore studies and professional training in arts administration, thus it is great for me to hear how you bring them together everyday in your current role. I am, of course, also thrilled that your work with MMWC Registrar Terry Harley-Wilson has proved to be so valuable in your current efforts. Courses like Judy Kirk's combined with hands-on experiences at the museum are a big part of our mission. Is there something about your current role that has surprised you or that you initially felt less prepared to address? We are all, of course, constantly learning new things on the job.**

SJ: One of the areas that I feel less prepared for is needing to explain why all of my projects in my department need to be so thorough and why they take so long. As you know, the standards in the museum world have been set high because of past mistakes in the field. In order to achieve these standards takes work, care, and persistence. I hope that I am slowly making progress in explaining the importance of collections care.

**JJ: I have been there with you, for sure. Unfortunately we live in an impatient moment in which time is money, talent is money, attention is money, and money is money. We are expected to be good stewards of all of them but it is often hard to explain to those not working alongside us why being careful the first time is so crucial. We cannot un-break an ancient Greek vase or recover an un-digitized analog oral history recording destroyed in a fire or flood or misplaced and discarded through careless handling. As you note so well, past mistakes haunt us and we want and need to get it right the first time.**

**In closing, can you tell me about your favorite item or collection at the March Field Air Museum?**

SJ: My favorite items are part of the Collection relating to Orla Bridges and as you can see in the photograph (Figure 1), the curator decided that these items were important enough to put right into the cases. Wagoner Orla Bridges' uniform and Victory in Europe Medal from the Great War for Civilization were donated to our museum within the last year. Mr. Bridges was stationed at March Field about the time when it opened in 1918 and his family owned the farm across the street from the front gates of the base. He is a great example of someone who has ties to both local history as well as international history.

**JJ: Well said. That is a great example of what we do—connecting the little and the big, the local and the global. Thank you so much for taking the time to talk with me about your work and your career. Good luck with all that you and your March Field Air Museum colleagues are pursuing.**



Figure 1. A uniform coat and military medal from the collection of Wagoner Orla Bridges, now in the collections of the March Field Air Museum.