



Cataloging the Crail Ranch Collections

By Anne Marie Mistretta

Originally published in the *Lone Peak Lookout*, "Crail Ranch Corner," March 6, 2014

From "wrecking ball" to the National Register of Historic Places, the 112 year-old Crail Ranch sits proudly amid modern condos and golf course greens in Big Sky. Now a homestead museum, the Crail Ranch displays architecture and artifacts from the sixty years that the Crails and then the Humes called the ranch home.

In 2004, the Historic Crail Ranch Conservators located Frank Crail, grandson and ranch founder namesake. He donated nearly 400 items original to the homestead. His notes led Conservators to other descendants, who also have contributed family heirlooms.

A few years later, another connection proved equally valuable, when Conservators hired part-time Big Sky resident, Scott Carpenter, who specializes in archaeology, research, and architectural history. Carpenter advises the Conservators on artifact documentation and building preservation.

Carpenter comes to these tasks with impeccable credentials. With degrees from the University of Colorado and George Washington University, Carpenter worked at the Smithsonian Institution and then with the National Park Service in the positions of Research Archaeologist, Cultural Resources Planner, and Branch Chief of Cultural Research. Some of his most interesting investigations include the home of abolitionist Frederick Jackson Douglass, Harper's Ferry, and Appomattox Court House - locations with history that spans the beginning to the end of the Civil War.

His Bozeman-based company, InteResources Planning, Inc., has done work throughout Montana and the U.S. since 1991. Some recent projects center on Indian cultures. East of Livingston his group is unearthing prehistoric materials. Another location along the Madison River features 300 tipi rings.

Although Carpenter studies many rewarding sites, he includes the Crail Ranch historic property among his favorites. "I've researched the area's prehistoric use of higher elevations. It's interesting to contrast prehistoric land use with ranching. I'm really fascinated with the Homestead Era."

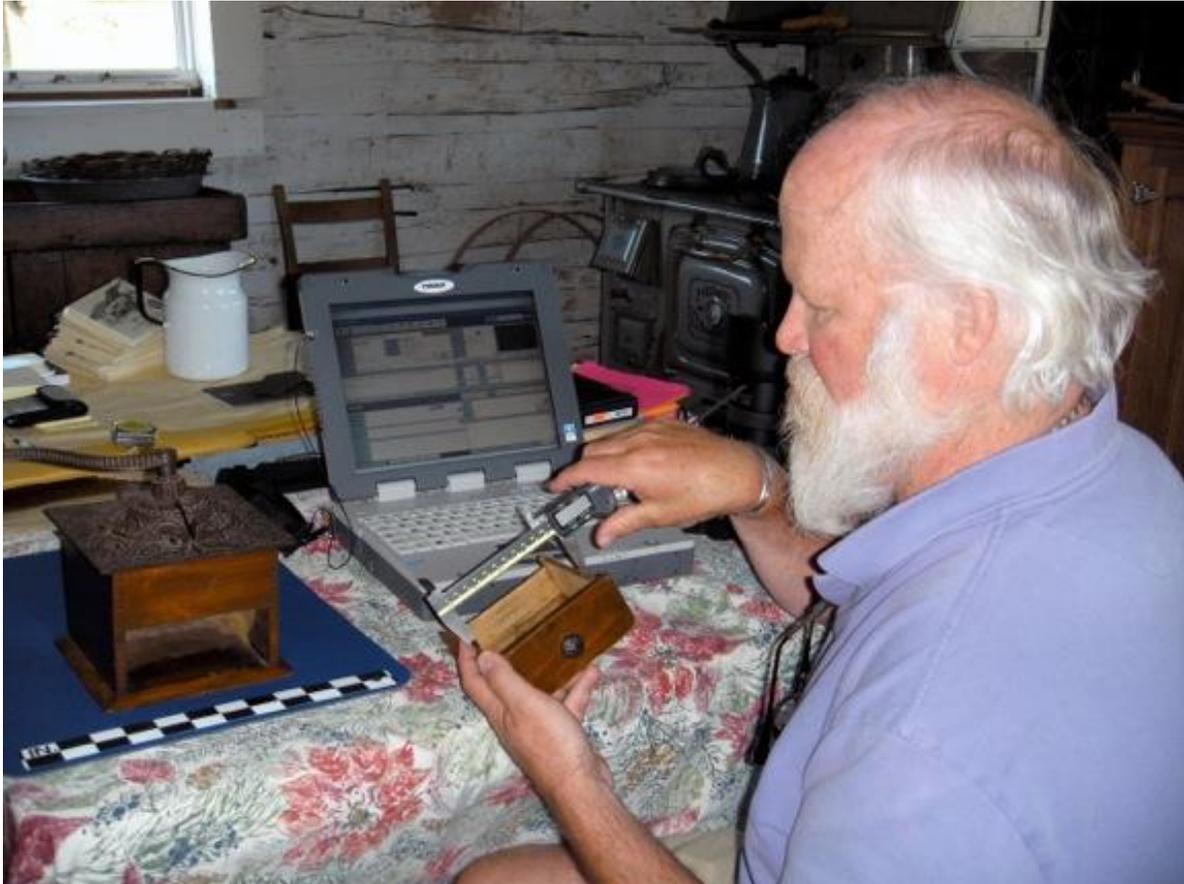
Carpenter and the Conservators are inventorying over 600 artifacts in the museum collection. "The Conservators have an agreement with the Crail Family to inventory and track the items they donated. But in addition, careful management of a collection is fundamental to the proper operation of any museum," explains longtime Conservator Al Lockwood. "Using PastPerfect, a software program for museum cataloging, Scott is creating a digital database of photographs and accession information about each artifact, photograph, and document in the Historic Crail Ranch collections."

The digital cataloging process starts with the creation of high-resolution digital photographs of each item with photo-scale to show size. Research is conducted to determine the nature, date of manufacture, history and source of each object. This information is entered into a database designed to allow researchers to quickly locate the objects and monitor their conditions.

Part of the work of the Historic Collections Project during 2013 was to scan architectural drawings Eugene Crail had completed for correspondence courses taken between 1908 and 1913 and then between 1926 and 1929. InteResources Planning, Inc. staff also prepared an academic report. Some of these items will be displayed in the newly re-purposed Crail historic small cabin, which dates back to the late 1800s.

Conservators Sue Lindley and Trish Loomis, who are working on re-presentation of the collection in the museum, appreciate the inventory. "We've been able to provide our visitors with more information about artifacts and photos. This will increase visitors' knowledge and improve their Crail Ranch Museum experience."

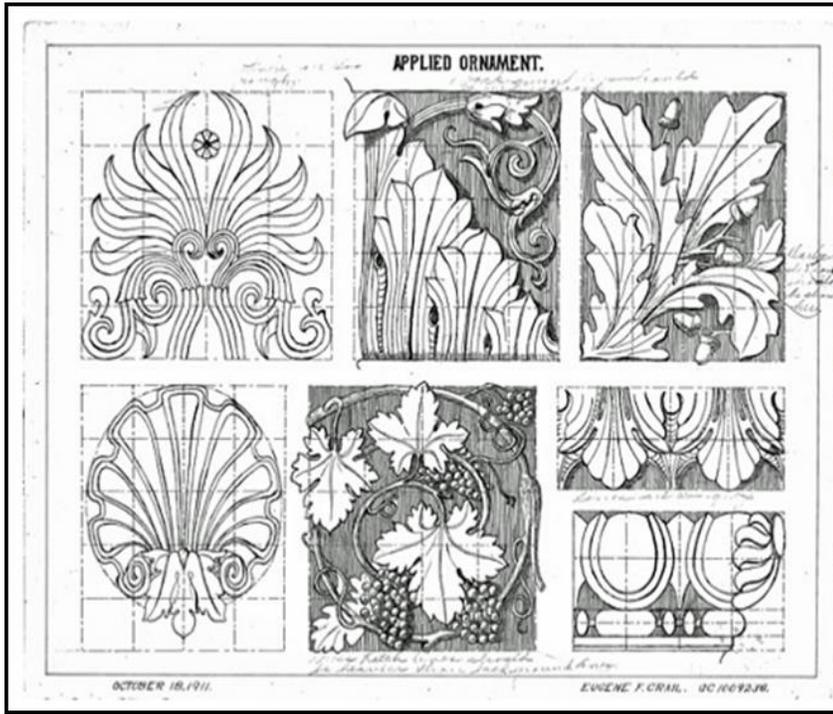
According to Carpenter, "The Crail Ranch Conservators are fortunate to have so many artifacts original to the ranch. But with those artifacts comes the responsibility to care for them and to tell the Crail story. The Conservators are doing just that."



Scott Carpenter examines a wood and cast iron coffee mill manufactured by Landers, Frary, and Clark circa 1900.



Winchester model 1890 .22 caliber pump action rifle, owned by Eugene Crail, is part of the Crail Ranch gun collection.



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