

Maritime museum a leader in collection management

By Patrick Murphy
Times-Colonist staff

WHEN GUY Mathias tells people he is collections manager at a museum, visions of a two-legged packrat run through minds of the white-coated Mathias hoarding away every little knick-knack he can find.

However, Mathias goes to great pains to point out he *manages* the collection, while the

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collecting at the Maritime Museum of B.C. is left up to the curator.

"Once it arrives on the premises, I am in charge of it," he said.

"I register and document it, keep paper records and find information on where it came from and work on the appraisal."

The managing of this collection of 10,000 photographs, 12,000 plans, 2,000 charts and more than 10,000 artifacts from ship models to anchors is a major task.

When the Saskatchewan-born Mathias came to Victoria three years ago after four years as associate registrar at the Royal Ontario Museum, he found a collection which was far from organized.

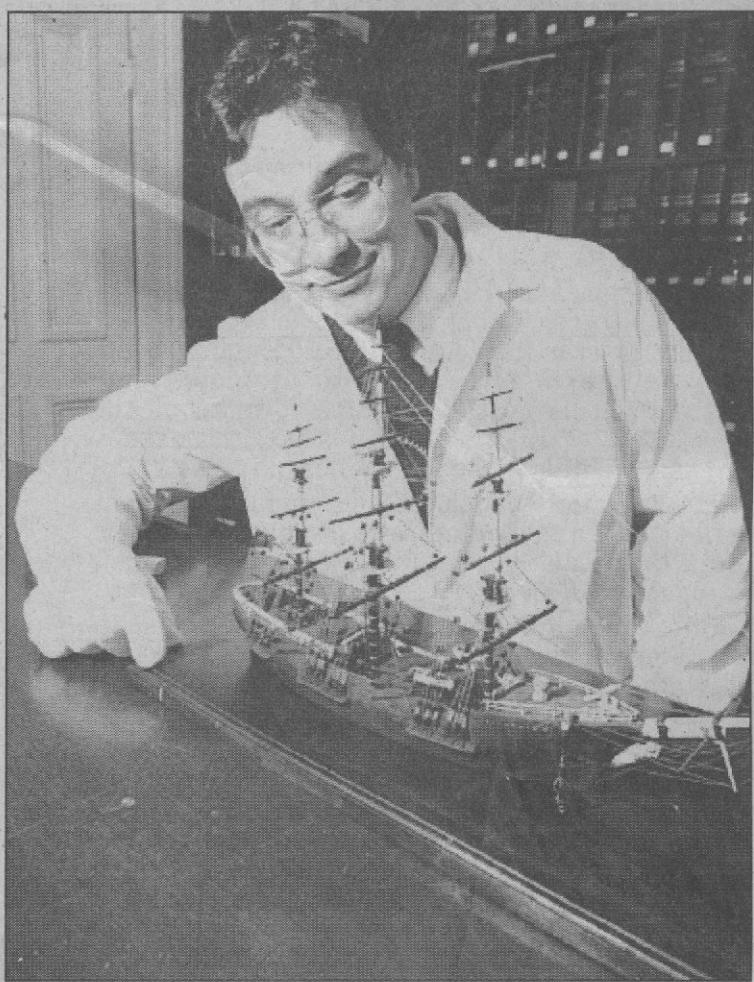
"The whole museum was crammed with material," he said.

"It was literally pushed into rooms and the doors closed. The idea must have been 'out of sight, out of mind' because the staff then just lacked the resources to do cataloguing or organizing."

The museum now has "more resources and we have made tremendous strides.

"In volunteer programs we have our volunteers working on the collection and handling requests from researchers," said Mathias.

One lot of volunteers has taken the 400 models in the museum and cleaned and fixed



John McKay/Times-Colonist

■ MATHIAS wants larger percentage of collection on display.

them. Many have sat for three decades collecting dust and slowly crumbling.

Two conservators from the Canadian War Museum came to the maritime museum and started the repair and maintenance program with five volunteers.

Another group of volunteers works on research requests, which have grown from 73 requests three years ago to more than 400 this year.

That is an area Mathias wants to move into automation to make it more accessible.

"One of the biggest things was committing the museum to the automation of records," he said.

"We now stand at 6,000 records entered on the computer data base where they used to be on index cards with random cross references. Now we have them on computer with a classification system. There is so much original manuscript material here that it was most critical to establish this system so the originals are not handled."

The museum is also on the

leading edge of collection management with digital imaging of the collection, Mathias said.

With this computerized system, staff can scan all objects and papers and put them on a small disk which is then put into the computer and an image of the item presented on the screen.

"We have to preserve and collect, so the limited handling of objects is a crucial factor," Mathias said. "When they are on computer, you don't have to handle them. "We now have the digital camera to photograph the entire collection."

The work is "all pretty experimental," said Mathias, but he pointed out that computerization would provide people with far more access to the museum's collection. Less than two per cent of the collection is on display.

"If we can photograph the entire collection and put it on computer, people can have access to the whole collection through the computer terminals. That is our key objective now."