

MAINE STATE LEGISLATURE

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SARAH C. TUBBESING
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
OF THE LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL

MAINE STATE LEGISLATURE

OFFICE OF THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL

April 27, 1999

TO: Honorable Mark W. Lawrence, Chair
Honorable G. Steven Rowe, Vice-Chair
and Members of the Legislative Council

FROM: Sally *Sally*

SUBJECT: Display Cases in the South Museum Area

You may have seen today's article in the Kennebec Journal regarding the Council's recent decision to remove the Klir Beck display cases from the "Old Museum Area".

I wanted you to be aware of the work that is underway that the article appears to overlook.

1. Following the Council's vote at the April 5, 1999 meeting, Earle Shettleworth and I met with J.R. Phillips, Director of the Maine State Museum and members of his staff to report your decision. They expressed concern: the Klir Beck dioramas represent a form of art that has largely disappeared, and they have both artistic and historic value.
2. We agreed at that meeting to work in collaboration with Museum staff to explore the feasibility of removing the display cases from their current location and to explore options for relocating them in another public space in conjunction with the renovations that are currently underway. Stan has facilitated the preliminary evaluations of the exhibits. The renovations present some interesting options.

The objectives of this evaluation are twofold:

- a. To assess the feasibility of removing and relocating the exhibits; and
- b. To develop an estimate cost for this work.

3. Stan and I met with Museum staff again yesterday to assess the progress of the evaluation. As a result of this meeting, we have arranged to bring our structural engineer in, as well as paint and plaster specialists to further study the feasibility of removing the exhibits in such a manner that would allow them to be reassembled. It is clear that the backdrops for each diorama would have to be cut in order to get it out of the building.

I will keep you posted as the evaluation proceeds and would be happy to answer questions.

Enclosure

cc: Joy O'Brien, Secretary of the Senate
Joseph Mayo, Clerk of the House
Legislative Staff Directors
Teen Griffin, Legislative Information Office
Stan Fairservice, Owner's Representative
Earle Shettleworth, Jr., Director, Maine Historic Preservation Commission
Joseph R. Phillips, Director, Maine State Museum

Woodland diorama faces ax at Capitol

By GARY J. REMAL
Staff Writer

AUGUSTA — Several of the most beloved artifacts in Maine's Capitol have been ordered cut up and moved by legislative leaders.

State Museum officials are scrambling to come up with a plan to save the fragile plaster dioramas that serve as woodlands backdrops to mounted deer, bear, beaver, muskrat, porcupine and moose in the Old Museum area of the south wing before demolition begins July 1 for a major renovation project.

Members of the Legislative Council told museum officials April 1 to remove the dioramas to make way for lockers for legislators and the construction of two new hearing rooms.

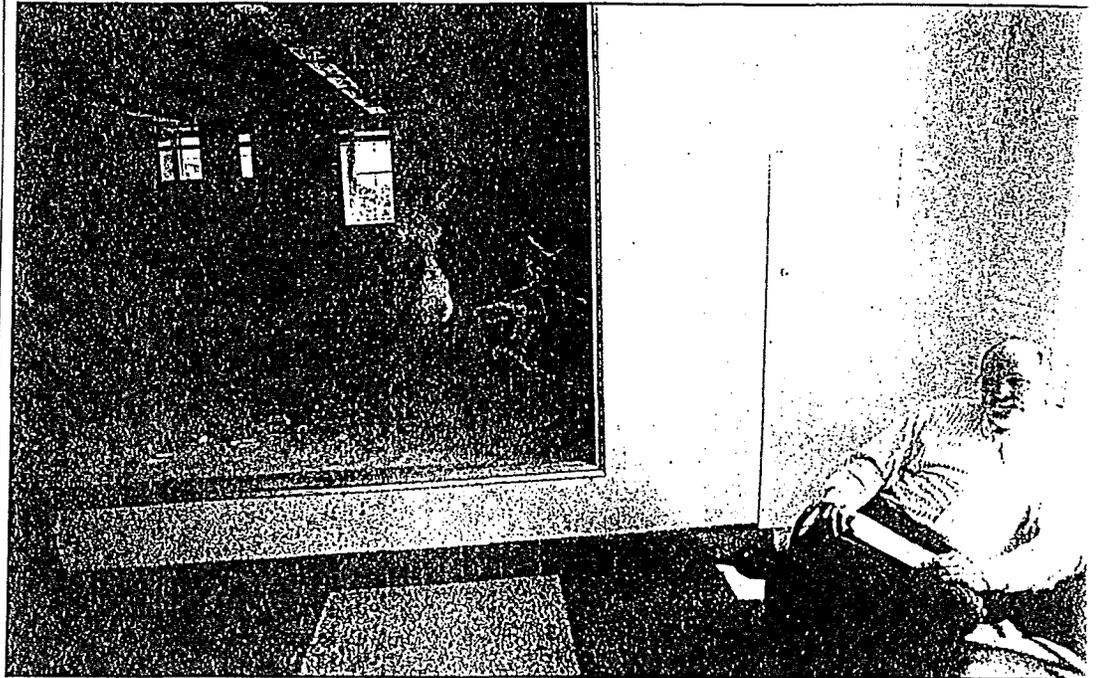
Built by Klir Beck, former Maine State Museum curator, in the late 1950s, the four, 13½-foot wide, 10-foot high and 10-foot deep, plaster-shelled, three-dimensional recreations of outdoor scenes have become more and more rare and recently have been recognized as an art form of increasing importance.

State Museum Curator of Natural History B. Gary Hoyle has hired private conservator Ronald S. Harvey of Lincolnville to see if the four dioramas can be cut into sections, supported and crated. Hoyle wants to know the cost to move them out of what had been museum quarters from 1911 (when the State House was last expanded) until 1970 (when the new museum was built next door).

"We were told they were going to be removed and we said, if they have to be removed, then they've got to be saved somehow ...," said Hoyle, who as a 14-year-old boy watched Beck building the dioramas. "It's like taking the shell of an egg, cutting it into all these sections and putting it back together again. I don't know if it can be done."

Hoyle said the possibility still exists that the dioramas would be destroyed if they are moved. "It's like being between a rock and a hard place," he said.

To replace them would cost about \$170,000 apiece, Hoyle said, with a total cost of \$680,000 and without the historical value of Beck's work. Harvey is working on an estimate for their removal, restoration and reinstallation. But he guesses it would likely cost somewhat less than \$200,000, although that was before he consulted with a structural engi-



Staff ph

Richard Thompson, director of the Division of Purchases, sits in front of the moose display in the Old Museum area of the Capitol in Augusta on Monday.

• Dioramas

Continued from A1

neer, and plaster and paint experts.

Harvey said he knows of frescos — large painted flat plaster walls — being moved, but "to my knowledge, no one has ever moved a diorama ... Anything can be done with enough time and money. We don't have enough time but we have the funding. So we want to move them with as little damage as possible."

When the new museum was built, the dioramas were left behind because it was believed impossible to move them to the new building.

For generations of State House visitors, explained Maine State Museum Director Joseph R. Phillips, the Old Museum dioramas have become one of their highlights in an area that is known affectionately as the "Moose Room."

Even if moving them is found to be possible, Phillips said the museum has no place for them now and, as a part of the State House for so long, they should be returned there. But he said he still holds out hope that legislative leaders can be convinced to leave the dioramas undisturbed where they are and design the new rooms around them.

"We might like to renew that discus-

sion. But we took it that that decision has been made," the museum director said. At the same time, he said, "Beck's dioramas have gained in value as they have aged and the dioramas in other museums have been lost, so they have become more rare."

Legislative Council Executive Director Sarah Tubbesing said council members want to hear the details of the conservator's study on the feasibility of moving the dioramas and the cost. And while the council could change its decision based on what Harvey comes up with, she said the decision to move the dioramas has been made and is expected to be carried out.

"The motion that described the scope of the renovation of the south wing included removal of the Klir Beck cases because we need use of that space," Tubbesing said. "I think if this study determines they would be destroyed by this process, the council certainly would like to see that information."

Rep. Michael Brennan, chairman of the Legislature's Education and Cultural Affairs Committee which oversees the museum, said he had not been told of the controversy either by the council or museum officials. He agreed with Phillips that the moose and other animal displays are important to State House visitors, and he

said most legislators are unlikely know about the decision to move the:

"As the committee with jurisdiction over the museum and cultural issue it is a concern and I'd like to know more about it," the Portland Democrat said. "This does seem to be clear within cultural affairs and maybe you should take a look at it."

Tubbesing on Monday said legislative officials have been looking for places within the newly renovated State House to reinstall the Beck dioramas. But Harvey said he doubts that all four will ever find their way back into the Capitol.

Phillips said one of the places for the dioramas that has been discussed inside the planned new tunnel between the State House and the State Office Building. He and Hoyle said the dioramas were originally designed to be viewed from a room with low lighting, with the interior illuminated to make the animals and their surroundings come alive.

The museum director said putting them in the tunnel connector would provide that same condition, with light from the dioramas illuminating the walkway. But no final decision on locations will likely be made until late this summer, Tubbesing said.

"When you see them in the proper light you feel the intimacy of a close encounter in the wild," Hoyle said.