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The Museum of the New South. Emily Zimmern, Director.

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The Museum of the New South

Builders and boosters of the New South sought the new, the modern, the business-like, and the innovative. Located in the heart of Charlotte, the Museum of the New South (MNS) both exhibits ande xemplifies the New South. The Museum's beautiful new home was an architecture firm in the 1980s, a warehouse in the 1950s, and the birthplace (1878) of Clarence "Booster" Kuester, whose life was devoted to encouraging visitors and investors to "watch Charlotte grow." Indeed, the city continues to grow around the Museum, but in that rapid growth lies some of the faults of the New South as well as its virtues. With the blessings of a new generation of New South boosters, historical homes and buildings continue to fall to developers' wrecking balls in downtown Charlotte. In a city where the past is rapidly disappearing, the MNS is a strategically-located, desperately-needed, and well-executed addition to the southern historical landscape. <p> Chartered in 1991 with no space and no collection, the MNS began as a "museum without walls," a floating exhibition of photographs and artifacts in downtown office buildings. In 1996, the mostly privately-funded museum moved to permanent quarters, and staffers began planning to expand the collection and the building. Although Robert Weis was the original driving force of the museum, and remains Director of Administration, Emily Zimmern is now Director. Hailing from Louisiana and educated (BA, MA in History) at Vanderbilt University, Zimmern was a schoolteacher and newspaper reporter before taking the helm at the MNS. Jean Johnson is the Exhibit Curator, but all exhibits are team efforts with other staff members. The Oral History collection, coordinated by Bren Martin, constitute an important part of the growing MNS collection, and include the voices of black and white women and men involved in radio, sports, religion, war, sharecropping, textile manufacture, and banking. The museum seeks to draw an audience from professional historians to the general public, but mainly hosts school groups, visiting conventioneers and business people, and Charlotteans. <p> Exhibits are often tactile, visually and acoustically stimulating, and geared toward almost all ages. In one exhibit, the museum furnishes Post-It notes, and visitors respond with lively comments. As the historical collections grow, improved facilities for archival work are planned. <p> The exhibits and collections of this young museum do not represent the entire New South, but are focused on Charlotte and the Carolina Piedmont. However, the MNS need not be renamed the "Museum of New Charlotte" because the Queen City is, in many ways, representative of the New South. MNS exhibits address themes and subjects shared by Charlotte and other New South cities including agriculture, boosterism, corporate culture, economic growth, historical forgetfulness, industrialization, modernization, music, national image, politics, race relations, religion, and social differences. Plans are underway to expand the museum's focus to represent more of South, but Charlotte and the Piedmont will remain at the center of the MNS. <p> While remaining focused on the Charlotte area, future MNS exhibits should offer comparisons to other southern cities in order to further define and delineate the chronological era and state of mind we label the New South. Contrasting "New" Atlanta with "Old" Charleston would prove helpful. Even comparing two New South cities could yield important evidence for diversity. For example, Charlotte's leaders shunned the new country music recording industry for fear that the "hillbilly" music of the mountain musicians (working in nearby textile mills) would ruin the city's image. Partially due to city leaders' efforts to project a more modern and business-like image, RCA abandoned Charlotte as a recording center. By contrast, Nashville boosters embraced the hillbilly image and made it a big business. <p> MNS exhibits are wide-ranging and attempt to cover the 1865-2000 period. Devoted to a subject whose parameters historians still debate,the MNS sensibly first offers "What is the New South?," an orientation room on the region's evolution since the Civil War. Here, the Piedmont's history of processing and marketing cot-

ton comes alive in pictures, machinery, and a basket of raw cotton. The area's march to industrial diversification, becoming a banking center, and other topics are chronologically arranged for the visitor. Judging from the volume of Post-It notes, two of the most "popular" exhibits in the orientation room are a Ku Klux Klan hood and Jeff Gordon's NASCAR racing suit. The Klan hood solicits many angry notes, some aimed at the Museum for showing it, and others for the area's legacy of racism, but it remains on display as an important symbol and reminder. Recent exhibits have included "Before MASH" and "Morris Field." On display until December 1997, the "Before MASH" exhibit is based on the 38th Evac Unit, a medical unit staffed by Piedmont residents and stationed in North Africa and Italy during World War II. Far from a display on battles and guns, "Before MASH" chronicles the experiences of men and women with oral histories, photographs, and artifacts. Visitors walk through a variety of well-arranged settings that help bring alive the 38th Evac's environment. No longer on display,the "Morris Field" exhibit started as a mural in the officers club and eventually encompassed the history of the army air base in Charlotte. <p> The museum's more defining exhibits are in the planning stages. Future exhibits will include "Don't Touch That Dial" devoted to radio and its social impact on the Carolina Piedmont, "Seeds of the New South" dedicated to changes in lifeways and economics for southern farmers, and "New City New South," the museum's permanent exhibit due to open in the year 2000. Opening on 23 September 1998 and scheduled for a nine month run, the "Don't Touch That Dial" exhibit will feature several immersion settings for different chronological and demographic environments. Thus, the museum will display an upper class household listening to political speeches or opera broadcasts, while a farm family listens to Hillbilly music or a Fireside Chat, and residents of the (now destroyed) Brooklyn neighborhood listen to gospel music or the broadcast of a Joe Louis fight. The range of settings and programs are meant to be suggestive of diversity, not pigeonholing certain groups with certain programs. The exhibit will confront the social impact of war, television, rock, and "narrowcasting" for different audiences. Visitors can also record a song with studio sound effects. Due to open in late January 1998 and last nine months, "Seeds of the New South" will feature sharecroppers, merchants, Populists, white supremacists, equipment manufactures, and the boll weevil. Still in the planning stages, the "New City New South" exhibit will seek to integrate the history of the Carolina Piedmont with larger themes of the New South and American history. This will be the core exhibit for the MNS, and will replace and expand the "What is the New South" exhibit. Whether with "New City New South" or some of the smaller exhibits, one of the MNS's biggest challenges will be to maintain a balanced perspective in interpreting the history of the New South. Voices of blacks and whites, women and men, managers and workers, and the rich and the poor demand equal treatment. Race relations in the New South have traveled a wide spectrum, and interpretations of African American history remain a contested ground. Already the MNS has been criticized for the awkward inclusion of a smaller exhibit on the African American church with a larger Billy Graham exhibit. Organizers did not mean to contrast the two church groups nor to chose relative importance based on display size, but nonetheless, simultaneously exhibiting the two did send the wrong message to members of local African American churches. The KKK hood in the orientation room has drawn a variety of negative (as well as positive) responses, and including "Amos & Andy" in the radio exhibit may draw similar criticism. Despite criticism and sometimes emotional debate, the MNS needs to continue confronting the ugly and often-subtle sides of racism in the New South, because, just as boosters have been eager to build modern-looking facades to cover older buildings, they have also projected images of racial harmony to conceal major social divisions. After all, nothing attracts business in the New South like modern buildings and racial harmony. Angry Post-It notes are a start in keeping the dialogue on race alive. <p> The MNS also faces challenges in balancing corporate dollars and historical integrity. Most of the operating budget for the MNS comes from the donations of major corporations and individual donors. However, shying away from important issues involving the major banks, textile firms and electric companies would weaken the MNS's power of interpretation and water-down the historical message. Large corporations are helping to fuel the dynamic economic growth and define the identity of cities like Charlotte. Eventually, the MNS must confront new and old topics such as lending practices at NationsBank, hiring procedures at Duke Power, racial segregation in the textile industry, and union busting during the 1929 strike at the Loray Mill in Gastonia. Early indications are that exhibit coordinators are seeking to provide a fair hearing from all sides in corporate issues. <p> The Museum of the New South is a must-see for visitors to Charlotte and Charlotteans. Housed in an attractive building yet confronting many forbidding topics, the new museum produces stimulating exhibits on perhaps one of the least-understood eras in American history. The museum fills a gap for the postbellum period, and provokes debate

on the strengths and weaknesses of the dynamic region. Most importantly, the exhibits begin to help all of us understand, with all of its elusive nuances, the New South.

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