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**The rivers tell our story: Sac State students’ exhibit debuts at the Oakland Museum of California**

In the fall of 2011, the nine students in Professor Lee Simpson’s graduate-level Public History class took on the assignment to somehow define Sacramento in an installation for the Oakland Museum of California (OMCA).

The result is “What’s Happening Sacramento,” on display through Sunday, March 24, in the Gallery of California History.

“Our class decided on the river theme because Sacramento was founded at the junction of the Sacramento and American rivers,” says student Jane Higgins. “These rivers have played an important role in the city’s growth, economics, politics and culture.”

Higgins and the other students gathered photographs, maps, objects, ephemera and oral histories and created several film documentaries to convey Sacramento’s longstanding love of, and occasional disdain for, its two rivers.

In 1850, floods twice swamped the fledgling city. Hastily built levees proved no match for the devastating 1862 flood, so city builders began the daunting task of raising streets and sidewalks. The flood threat continues to this day as delta levees age and erode. A New York Times story in 2011 referred to Sacramento as “the most flood-prone city in the nation.”

The American and Sacramento rivers are popular destinations for boaters, fishermen and locals seeking cool respite on a broiling summer’s day. They are vital to the area’s rich agricultural heritage and often are at the center of water-rights battles between Northern and Southern California. The bucolic Sacramento River delta is a favorite subject of artists such as Sacramento’s Wayne Thiebaud and Gregory Kondos.

Higgins, who volunteers as a Crocker Art Museum docent, focused on the public art installations along the Sacramento River as her contribution to “What’s Happening Sacramento?” She provided photographs and satellite maps for 16 works of art, including Michael Hayden’s LED sculpture, *Lumetric River*, on the US Bank building and Suzanne Adan’s *Flying Colors*, a glass-mosaic floor installation at Sacramento International Airport’s Terminal B.
Tracy Phillips put the spotlight on the many opportunities for river recreation, particularly the venerable Eppie’s Great Race, as her contribution to the exhibit.

“Although I only focused on the recreation of the rivers, I was able to see the other dimensions contributed by my fellow classmates, and I was very impressed with the outcome,” she says.

“Working on the museum exhibit taught me how history is researched, developed and connected to tangible objects. I was able to observe the final step in this important process: conveying history to the public. I have fallen in love with museum studies. I am very proud to say that I am a part of an exhibit in a major California museum.”

Sacramento State’s two-year Public History Program leads to a Master of Arts degree with a concentration in public history. Graduates are trained for careers in archives, museum interpretation, historic preservation and cultural resources management.

“There is nothing like real-world experience,” says Simpson, a history professor and now the director of Sacramento State’s General Education Honors Program. “The classroom is book-learning, academics, but they actually got out there and tried to find artifacts and learned to be adaptable and learned how to follow through with a project.

“We had a 15-week semester, but instead of just walking away from it then, the students all stayed engaged and were willing to continue the work. That’s what we do in the real world. That is what it means to be a public historian. You often don’t get something done in a short period of time,” she says.

“What’s Happening Sacramento?” is the first in the Oakland Museum’s series of exhibits broadly labeled “What’s Happening California?” that will be created in collaboration with various California State University campuses. OMCA received a $150,000 grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Sciences to fund the Sacramento State installation and one by Cal State Fullerton, scheduled to open in April.

“The purpose of the project is to work with students at California State University to document the contemporary history of their communities, to help them learn what museum work is about and to help our museum better reflect California,” says Suzanne Fischer, the museum’s associate curator of history and contemporary trends.

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