

A brush with death at the museum

By Hannah Combsbridge to another person" or to a feeling.

Reader Contributor To many people, special objects can

trigger chains of memory that remind us who we are. A dress may not simply be a

"D13, shelf 4; D13, shelf 4," I piece of cloth on a hanger, but an object muttered to myself as I hurried through that evokes a swirl of twinkling lights, the archives. I needed to pull one more the adoring gaze of a dance partner, even artifact for tomorrow's presentation the essence of youth.

before closing up. Though alone in the large building, I was at ease in the bright moment, the more likely we are to make lights and familiar surroundings. The these connections between the event and tiny coin I sought was probably at the the objects we associate with it. While our bottom of a box; the entire shelf would lives are marked by many deeply felt moments, few are as powerful or unavoidable.

I carefully lowered a pot to the floor, able as experiencing the death of a loved and behind it was what looked like a one. For this reason, objects connected to piece of thick rope, neatly coiled. I death are likely to be held onto and even-lifted it off the shelf, brought it into the tually to find their way to the museum. light, and my stomach dropped. I made Some objects in the collection are associated with myself take a deep breath and laid the ated with ceremonies that honor a death, noose out on the floor. Its stout knot some are sentimental keepsakes and some looked bright and fresh, but the ends of are artifacts connected to the event of the the rope were frayed into tufts of soft death itself. These associations may be fiber, and gray discoloration lined the explicit or mysterious.

noose's loop. I suddenly wanted very Two of the Native American pestles much to be anywhere but alone in the in the museum's collection show the archives. How in the world did the mu-marks of deep cracks on the surface. seum acquire a noose? They were unearthed in the Hope area

There are more than a million objects and may have ties to the Kalispel tribe. and archival materials in the muse-It is believed that these cracks are the um's collection, and they all arrived in result of intentional breakage inflicted the same way: because an individual during a burial ceremony, symbolizing believed that the object has value. Dr. that in death the owner of the tool would Maryam Afshar wrote her dissertation at no longer have need of it.

Washington State University on object Many of us keep objects that belonged to the event of a death. Lt. Jack Thomas attachment and identified six distinct to a loved one as a way to honor their Crawford, while on a "scramble" mission reasons people assign value to things memory, but during the 19th century out of Geiger Air Force Base in 1953, was and hold onto them. But why would they sentimental keepsakes were created from killed when his F-86D Sabre jet fighter donate them to a museum? remnants of the loved one themself. crashed into the pole yard of the L.D.

Tax benefits aside, most donations According to C. Jeanenne Bell, jewelry McFarland Pole Co. in Sandpoint. The are made for sentimental reasons or what historian, Victorian women fashioned cre-foreman of the plant recovered a scrap Afshar calls "self-concept" reasons. ative ways to wear the hair of their dearly of Crawford's helmet, and it eventually When a museum accepts a gift from a departed by weaving it like bobbin lace made its way to the museum. donor, it promises to care for that object into bracelets, rings, and brooches. At its The noose as a symbol always evokes while it is in the collection. The high level culmination, hairwork jewelry designs be-violent death, but this particular artifact of preservation is appealing to someone came so elaborate that people would buy sent shudders through me because of what with sentimental attachments who can't additional swatches of hair to supplement it didn't say. According to the museum's bear to see family heirlooms neglected or the hair from the beloved; during this database, on New Year's Day in 2015, the thrown away. Museums can also help tell period, hair fetched a higher price than noose was found in the museum's collect-the story of the object and the people to silver in some parts of the country. One tion with no note, with no documentation whom it belonged, preserving the sense exceptional example of hairwork, an elab-whatsoever. Its story and its arrival at the of identity that the object extended to its orate "mourning wreath" in the shape of museum remain a mystery. former owner.a lyre, was made in the 1880s by Jennie Every object in the collection holds

Dr. Milhaly Csikszntmihalyi, profes-Whitaker and passed down through the within it a story of those who lived and sor of psychology at Claremont Graduate Gorsline family before being donated to died with the objects, as well as those University, defines the reason people the museum.who held onto them, seeking connec-most often save objects as *instrumental* Perhaps the most unsettling are objects tion through them. Whether the story is *materialism*, in which the object is "a left behind that have a direct connection well-documented or not, it demands our



The mysterious noose found by the author at the Bonner County History Museum with no known attribution listed for who donated it or why. Courtesy photo.

respect and care. So with gravity, I coiled the noose back into its place, briskly left the building and took a deep breath of cold, clear air.

Research provided by the Bonner County History Museum, The Atlantic's article "For the Love of Stuff," and the book Collecting Victorian Jewelry. At the museum, we are fortunate to be able to preserve and share your objects for a lifetime; consider us if you would like to donate an object that tells the story of Bonner County — even its darkest history.

This article is brought to you by the Bonner County Historical Society and Museum.