

# 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 The more intensely we feel a particular  
 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 mo-

have to be searched.ments, few are as powerful or unavoi-  
 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 associ-

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 themselves. 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 collec-  
 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.*