

Museum on Main Street

Ideas for Public Programs and Local Exhibitions

Between Fences

(Organized by Exhibition Theme)

This Land is My Land

Public Program/Event Ideas

- Panel Discussions
 - What does it mean to be a property owner? How do different cultures define land ownership? What kinds of fences do difference cultures create to communicate the boundaries of their property to others?
 - Who were the Native American groups present in your state at the time of European contact? How did they defend their lands as Europeans began to settle near and around them? What kinds of fences, either real or metaphorical, did both sides use to separate themselves from the other? What conflicts existed over land ownership? What conflicts exist today?
 - Have someone from the State Historic Preservation Office or the local historic district commission talk about local historic districts. How do the actions of a property owner impact his/her neighbors regardless of the fences that have been built? How does the concept of local design review work with traditional definitions of American property ownership?
 - How does community zoning work? Why are certain parcels zoned commercial, industrial, residential? What problems exist when the borders meet, particularly at a fence, i.e. children from a neighborhood who are intrigued by a fence closing off an abandoned factory. The fence is not just about exclusion, it's also about separating function. How is this different from historical organization of property function, i.e. company towns or even small villages? What will the future look like?
- Film or Book Discussion: Read or show John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* then facilitate a conversation about the meaning of property ownership for the Joad family. In one scene their house is being destroyed by bulldozers sending them on a journey in search of security and a space of their own. Does it have the same meaning today? Is the same as Thomas Jefferson's "pursuit of happiness?"
- Activities/Events:
 - "Plats and Plots:" Have an event where people from the community can come and get help researching the history of their houses or farms or the history of their families' ownership of property in a community. Use plat maps, Sanborn maps and other local history resources.
 - Hold a *Monopoly* tournament. The game is about the "pursuit of happiness" via the acquisition of property. Create your own Monopoly game, maybe even life size, using local names and places. Does the acquisition of property actually lead to happiness? What about in real life? What are the different motivations for building fences after acquiring property? List the positive reasons and the negative.

- Hold a city or county planning commission meeting at your site and invite families to attend. Ask that there be a question and answer period at the end of the regular meeting to allow people, particularly children, to ask questions about zoning and planning.
- Show children what a plat map looks like then, using a clean map, have children plat their neighborhoods. Who lives on which plots, how big are the plots? What are the property boundaries? Where's the school? Churches? Shopping?

Companion Exhibition Ideas

- Late 19th and early 20th century plat books are generally attractive as well as informative. Display the more fragile copies in a small exhibit, but if you have "library" copies, have them in the exhibit so that people can look through them to see what kinds of information they contain. The same holds true for the Sanborn Insurance Maps.
- Display maps, photos, and images of local settlers and settlement patterns. This should address Native American settlement, if applicable, how European settlers staked out land when they arrived, etc. How have the fences and boundaries changed over time?
- Have photos of various sizes and styles of homes in your community. If possible, have small mock-ups of various fence types (can be made out of cardboard or other inexpensive material). Allow visitors to move different kinds of fences in front of different structures. Fence types could include picket, barbed wire, wrought iron, chain link, etc. Ask the question, "how do fences illustrate economic status?"

Farm and Fence

Public Program/Event Ideas

- Panel Discussions/Lecture Topics
 - Land Use: invite experts from your state Dept. of Agriculture, local farmers, city or county zoning officials, and facilitate a discussion of land use in the 21st century. What is the future of American agriculture with farmland disappearing at an increasingly rapid rate?
 - Have a roundtable discussion with farmers and farm wives talking about life on the farm. This could be geared toward children or adults. Prepare specific questions such as "what was an average day on a farm like?" Pose that question to a farmer and then a farm wife. How were they similar? How were they different? What was it like to be a child on a farm? Record these exchanges as part of an oral history project
 - Offer a lecture/presentation about the advent of industrial farming, its pros and cons, etc. What kinds of fences are used in this type of farming versus family farming? Are there similarities, differences? Are the functions of the fences the same?

- Activities and Events:
 - Have a photography contest where amateur photographers submit photos of fences or the remains of fences located on what is now or once was farmland. Photos become part of the companion exhibition.
 - Writing contest with stories, poetry, and reminiscences about farm life and fences in farm life
 - Hold a family event that includes fence construction demonstrations and/or interactives. Have people build a community fence (temporary or permanent depending on its location). The event could also include activities that celebrate farm life, i.e. tractors, livestock, etc. Collaborate with the local co-op, Future Farmers of America chapter at the high school and so on.
 - Use the *Between Fences* bibliography and filmography and develop a reading group or film series that focuses on farm life and the role and function of the fence.
 - Do an oral history project about farm life in your area. As fewer and fewer Americans farm, the stories of what it was like to grow up on a farm or to be a farm wife, are disappearing. Take this opportunity to capture those stories. Ask specifically about the kinds of fences found on the farm. What was the function of the fence? Did they play on the fences when they were kids? How hard was it to build the fences?
 - Offer a hands-on workshop on fence construction

Companion Exhibition Ideas

- Exhibit tools and materials for fences used on local farms
- Have a table in the companion exhibit set up with a house, a barn, and other components of a farmstead. Have various toy farm animals and different kinds of fences, i.e. barbed wire, split rail, etc. Have children determine which animals need which kinds of fences. Why is a particular fence more appropriate to one animal over another?
- Display historic photographs of farms in your community. If possible, display photos of historic farmsteads right next to current photos of the same farmsteads to facilitate conversation about the evolution of the farm and agriculture in your community and in the US.
- If available, prescriptive farm magazines would make an interesting exhibit. Seek out articles or ads that describe or recommend particular fences.

Don't Fence Me In

Public Program/Event Ideas

- Public policy debates / panel discussions:
 - What happens when nature and wildlife don't respect our man-made divisions of property? Do we have a responsibility to see that migrating animals can find passage? Who is responsible for the costs in maintaining natural wildlife resources on private property?
 - Discuss federal land ownership: a burden or a blessing? What is the role of the military and national defense on the open range?

- Fences & Ranching: Do ranchers pay their fair share? Is ranching compatible with a healthy ecosystem? Can ranching on public land be both economically viable and environmentally sound?
- How do we interface urban sprawl with farm land, green space, and undeveloped land? How do we preserve open lands in rapidly growing cities? How are fences at the center of property rights?
- Does owning real estate give you absolute control over your piece of land all the way to the earth's core and high into the space? Methane and mineral rights case studies, how much do we own? How far down?
- Closing of the Range: How did it happen locally? Is the fight over or still going on? Who were/are the players? What are/were the sides in the debates? What were/are their interests? Who won or is winning? Why?
- Access to public land: Who controls access to public land, yesterday and today? Why? How? Can private fences block access to public land?
- What does owning land really mean? Does it mean the same for farmers as it does for private home property? Are there distinct rights and responsibilities for the type of land or amount of land you own? Do you have the same rights on the beach or in a National Forest as you do in your high rise condominium?
- Values and land use: Are the needs for fences the same today as they used to be? What needs to be tamed or subdued in our modern world? Though the needs may have changed have our values changed as well?
- Youth reading/discussion series: e.g. *The Yearling* (set in Florida, this classic book highlights dilemmas between natural and settled, freedom and restraint); *Little House on the Prairie* (the Ingalls family moves to Oklahoma Territory as homesteaders, spend a rough year building a homestead and must move when they find they've settled mistakenly in Indian Territory)
- Film/discussion series (e.g. *Jurassic Park*, *Shane*, or *The Big Country*, see additional suggestions in the filmography)
- Lecture topics:
 - Western Expansion—Cattle Barons, the coming of the railroad
 - Public land responsibilities
 - Indian Reservations, forced evacuations, the Trail of Tears
 - Private land hunting, mining, logging, etc.
 - Cattle drive stories, songs, and journals
 - Wild horses: Are they a feral infestation or national heritage?
- Activities:
 - Have a Free Range history lesson, then conduct a blind taste test of readily available products: Free Range vs. Non-Free Range (chicken, eggs, turkey, beef, etc.)
 - Music night: Show snippets from American musicals focusing on "territory" from American musicals: "The Farmer and the Cowman Should Be Friends" from *Oklahoma*, "How Can I Ignore the Boy Next Door?" from *Meet Me in St. Louis*, "When You're a Jet" from *West Side Story*, etc. Have musicians play cowboy cattle drive songs such as "Don't Fence Me In," "Git Along Little Doogie," etc.
 - Hold a Barbed Wire Day—folk arts and crafts bazaar all made from barbed wire

- “Fence Me In!” Tour a local graveyard, have an expert relate grieving practices of different generations, including the fences surrounding graves

Companion Exhibition Ideas

- Barbed wire samples, history of barbed wire, include “why I collect barbed wire” statements from local collectors
- Display of brands with stories of family ranchers and farmers, origins of brand and stories of cattle property “outside the fences”
- Display sample fencing tools and equipment, describe their use, feature the memories of those who used them
- Display samples of popular literature and Hollywood films that depict stereotypical or realistic land ownership tensions between ranchers and farmers, settlers, etc.
- Curate a local exhibition on “the closing of the range” – display photographs and artifacts that tell the local impact on economy, immigration, wild spaces.
- Visit BLM General Land Office Records (The Official Federal Land Patent Records Site) www.gloreCORDS.blm.gov; except for the original thirteen colonies, copies of grants of public land to private individuals can easily be accessed.
- Solicit visitor reactions: mount butcher paper to a fence in the gallery – post quotes at the top and have visitors write their reactions to the quote below. For instance: Horace Capron: “How are the vast plains to be peopled? How are they to be tamed, subdued, and brought into proper use and cultivation? How are they to be fenced?”

Good Fences Make Good Neighbors

Public Program/Event Ideas

- Panel discussions / lecture topics
 - Do different types of fences reinforce socio-economic divisions? Do they reinforce or establish new means of segregation? What is the role of fences in an urban setting?
 - What are some metaphorical fences that determine if a person is from “the right side of the tracks”? How is “turf” established without fences?
 - Various social groups might discuss and compare the formal or informal ways that they erect their own “fences.” What purposes do they serve? Are there sound reasons for including and excluding?
 - Neighborliness: city officials or judges might highlight local laws and ordinances that are written to preserve the peace among neighbors. Members of academia/ the clergy and/or social service organizations might contrast these with their own non-legal suggestions for improving tolerance and civility.
 - Is privacy the new status symbol? How has American home architecture changed neighborhood relations? Where things different before air conditioning and with big porches? In what ways? Have gated communities and electric garage doors hurt neighborliness?

- With the famous poem, “Mending Wall,” as your centerpiece, conduct a Robert Frost Poetry contest that replicates Frost’s style and sentiment for public reading/newspaper publication.
- Generate “Inside and Outside” observations about gated communities. Area students might gather everyday opinions, stories, and photos of gated communities. Result of research might be a public program in which students present their findings and/or a local exhibition.
- “Tear down a fence!” Invite outside associations and community groups to visit the museum in an effort to “tear down a fence,” and get to know the museum better. Or conversely, hold a museum board or docent meeting away from the museum (at a senior center, church, school, or local business) and invite them over to “your side of the fence.”
- Stories of the spite fence and other grisly tales between neighbors! Hold an open mic night and invite young and old to tell true and untrue of incivility among neighbors – or use the same theme and invite professional storytellers to do the same.
- Conduct city walking tours of notable fences. Give architectural history and family history of specific fences and properties.
- Conduct walking tours to highlight issues of privacy and civility. Have “neighbors in costume” (as w/ Chautauqua) play out fictitious arguments and disputes along fence lines (e.g. biting dog, noisy teens, overgrown trees, peeping, watering, gossiping, unkempt yard, crying babies, etc.). This same activity might be conducted for family days or other special programs on-site if the gallery space allows.
- Hold Hollywood survey night of films that portray issues of neighborliness (such as *Good Neighbors*, *Mr. Rogers Neighborhood*, *American Beauty*, *Our Gang*, *The Osbournes*, *Giants of the Earth*, *The Fantastiks*, *The Sandlot*, *No Down Payment*).

Companion Exhibition Ideas

- Using specific stories and situations from your town or county, curate a small exhibition asking: How do fences preserve the peace among neighbors? How do fences amplify tensions between neighbors? As possible, use real life examples.
- Curate a small exhibition on best and worst memories of neighborhood dogs and cats. Display photos, dog houses, food dishes, leashes, collars, fire hydrants, and Stories! Ask visitors if household pets help overcome property lines or accentuate them.
- In order to convey an earlier time among neighbors, hang clothing lines with period clothing between picket fences. Write an interactive interpretive label asking visitors what they can conclude about the neighbors from looking at their laundry. Are they old? Young? Do they have kids? What are their occupations? Then have them lift up the label to reveal the answer: Mind Your Own Business!

Building Borders

Public Program/Event Ideas

- Panel discussions/lecture topics

- For those states with Canadian or Mexican borders, bring in government officials, business people, service industry reps, etc. to discuss the realities of working across borders. How does it work for people who live on one side of the border and work on the other? How has it changed since the tightening of the borders in 2001?
- What do your state borders look like? Are there natural borders or artificial? Are there any markers of the man-made borders? Are there things that citizens can do on one side that they can't do on the other?
- Bring in an expert to discuss the differences between the Mexican and Canadian borders and the differences in the treatment of those crossing each.
- Activities:
 - Have a film series that includes films about the Mexican and Canadian borders, but also imaginary borders. For example, in the movie *The Sandlot*, there is a fence over which the young baseball players refuse to go to retrieve their baseballs. They have imagined that the dog on the other side is an overgrown monster, but later find that the reality is very different. Are imaginary borders as powerful or more powerful than real borders?
 - Have a place in the exhibition that asks people to visually express the borders in their community. Toward the end of the exhibit, this documentary record could be used to foster a community conversation about borders, real and artificial, that need to be overcome. Perhaps they are borders between socio-economic classes, ethnicity, race. Think of your museum as a center for community dialogue about these issues.

Companion Exhibition Ideas

- Have a photo or art contest asking people of all ages to present images of the borders in their community. The results are part of the exhibition.
- Recreate borders in your companion exhibition. If you have a distinct border within your community or your community exists at one of the two national borders, create a physical representation of that border in your exhibition. Make an attempt to help people feel the difference from one side of the border to the other.

General Suggestions for *Between Fences*

Public Program/Activity Ideas

- Essay or poetry contests on the following themes:
 - Do fences make good neighbors?
 - I once saw a _____ over my fence!
 - I don't want my neighbors to see it when I _____
 - Are fences un-American?
 - How do you build your fences?
- Community picket fence: local museum sells plain "pickets" as fundraiser. Families, local groups (scouts, etc.) purchase pickets and decorate them according to specific museum fence themes. The decorated pickets are collected and assembled onto a picket fence frame on the museum grounds. Museum

- members vote for winning pickets. Possible themes: family history, settlers, state history, ranching, homemaking, mining, children's games, etc.
- Mystery Fence: post photos of local fences in paper. Have readers identify fence for prize (maybe a museum membership). The following week, post identification and history of fence in local paper.
 - Fence scavenger hunt—identify different types of fences in county/town. Might consider holding a “geocache” fence contest may to attract new audiences (www.geocaching.com). Have contestants gather fence photos, histories, materials to win.
 - Compile kids illustrated dictionary of terms related to the exhibition (stretchers, crimpers, splicers, pales, posts, rails, barbs, etc.) or sniglets (made-up words for various phenomena, such unusual ones found in neighborly relations).
 - Conduct fence-building workshops/demonstrations (chain link, vinyl, electronic, barbed wire, mortar-less rock).
 - Lecture/demonstration: “Hedges: Care and Planting,” etc.
 - Hold a community beautification service project : fence painting/repair or hedge trim/hedge planting.
 - Feature students' dramatic reenactments of famous fence scenes from local, American. World history and/or literature (*Tom Sawyer*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, “Mending Wall,” Hatfields & McCoys, The Great Wall, etc.)
 - Fence Inventory: catalog the fences in your region, county, or town. Create display at museum citing best examples of type, period, etc.
 - Hold Fence Film Festival: *Lone Star*, *A Touch of Evil*, *Fatal Flood*, *West Side Story*, *No Down Payment* (Joanne Woodward), *The Warriors* (turf wars), *The Untouchables* (scene at the Canadian border), *Fatal Flood*
 - Sponsor a community theatrical performance of August Wilson's *Fences*

Companion Exhibition Ideas

- Fences of the future: what will we fence out in the future? What will we fence in? What fence materials will we use? (e.g. invisible fences, liquid fences)
- Juxtapose historical fencing tools with modern tools. Profile individual fencers then and now.
- If the white picket fence is one powerful symbol of the American Dream, what are other illustrations of the American Dream? (youth, beauty, money, stuff, power, cars, leisure, celebrity). Why is the picket fence so omnipresent? What does it convey for you?
- If wire fences marked the industrialization of the farm, what other artifacts fit with this key advent? Display and interpret select tools, machines, and houseware that matches the period.
- Worm Fence Gallery. Install an full-scale or miniature example of a traditional worm fence in the gallery or on the museum grounds. Have local artists and/or student artists build worm fences from found or unusual materials.
- What would it cost to fence . . . ? Have local fence providers give fencing estimates for fencing the state, the county, the town, the museum. Show materials and installation.
- Present photo essays of local fences within town/county/neighborhoods. Add stories or oral histories. Research history of area fences and the people who owned the land.

- Borders: display newspaper, magazine and media clippings of harrowing stories of Mexican border crossings. Examine the stereotype of Mexicans taking American jobs and illustrate actual jobs Mexicans hope to secure in the U.S. In order to underscore the disparity and hope of immigrants display items widely available in U.S., but not in Mexico.
- Metaphorical fences: explore how property and exclusion lines are determined at home, in businesses, hospitals, and schools. How are fence lines established with interstates, roads, railroad tracks, trails, etc.
- Display examples of a surveyor's basic tools (examples can be seen at http://www.surveyhistory.org/the_surveyor's_basic_tools.htm)