

# Smithsonian Seeks Ag Artifacts

New exhibit will feature “American Enterprise,” including farming, ranching and rural life stories.

by **Kindra Gordon**, field editor

Plans are under way for a new exhibit at the Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History — and agriculture will be a featured component. Titled “American Enterprise,” the 8,000-square-foot exhibit, which is set to open in the spring of 2015, will trace the development of the United States from a small, dependent nation to one of the world’s most vibrant and trend-setting economies.

The multimedia exhibit will highlight agriculture for its integral part in the growth of American enterprise, explains Smithsonian curator Peter Leibhold. Farmers and ranchers are being asked to share their stories for the exhibit, as well.

Leibhold notes that ag museums traditionally feature historical tractors and other antiquated equipment.

“We don’t want that,” he says. “We want to feature America’s growth and development. Agriculture is present in all of that ... agriculture isn’t just part of the past.”

He adds that, in the past 70 years the ag industry has undergone tremendous change, which has affected not just farmers, but “every American and the American experience in general.”

The Smithsonian recognizes that the story of agriculture is complex, noting that in Jefferson’s time, 96% of Americans were farmers; today, that number is less than 2%. Despite this drop, productivity has skyrocketed and agriculture has evolved into a technology-driven profession with the cab of a tractor akin to a traditional CEO’s office, explains Leibhold.

He states, “We’re producing more food with fewer people and less land than ever before.”

## Chronological display

“American Enterprise” will tell the story of the nation’s business, centering on themes of opportunity, innovation, competition and common good with examples drawn from five areas: agriculture, consumer finance, information technology/communication, manufacturing and retail/service.

The chronological display will be divided into four periods:

- ▶ 1770s to 1860s — rise of the market economy;
- ▶ 1860 to 1960s — the beginning of the

population move from rural to urban areas;

- ▶ 1930s to 1970s — rise of the consumer economy, which includes the green revolution; and
- ▶ 1970s to 2010s — the global period.

As examples, the exhibition will showcase the development of American agriculture through objects such as Eli Whitney’s cotton gin, a 1920s Fordson tractor, Barbara McClintock’s microscope and Stanley Cohen’s recombinant DNA research notebook.

But the Smithsonian’s curators are also looking for more modern-day items and stories, and they’ll be using social media to gather information.

“We’re reaching out through social media, which will allow us to have more conversations with people and make it easier for them to contribute their stories to the project,” Leibhold explains.

Even though the Smithsonian exhibit won’t open until 2015, the museum is turning to the farm and ranch community to seek stories for consideration and inclusion in the exhibit.

Coinciding with National Agriculture Day on March 19, 2013, the museum will unveil a new Web portal where the public can upload stories about technologies and innovation that have changed their work lives. Stories about technology, biotechnology, debt and its use, environment concerns and issues, competition, food

safety, animal agriculture, water issues and farm labor are examples being sought. For details, visit <http://americanenterprise.si.edu>.

Leibhold notes that the American Enterprise exhibit will be on display for at least 20 years, and the exhibit will be updated as needed to make sure the most current information remains relevant.

Of the exhibit, he puts the 8,000-sq.-ft. space into perspective, saying, “I know it’s not much space in agriculture, hardly enough to turn a combine around in, but for us it’s a major undertaking.” The exhibit is expected to be viewed by 4.6 million visitors every year.

Leibhold concludes, “The goal is to raise the visibility of agriculture, and we’d like today’s farmers and ranchers to help tell the story.”

For more information, visit <http://americanhistory.si.edu>.

