

Artist offers 'amnesty' on Steinheim artifacts

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The Steinheim, a castle-like structure on the Alfred University campus, is now the Robert R. McComsey Career Development Center, but for decades, it housed what was Western New York's first museum and the second-oldest museum on a college campus. Within its walls was an eclectic collection that included birds, shells, corals, fossils, plants, pottery, glass, American Indian articles, oil paintings, statuary, shoes, stuffed animals, basketry, crockery, costumes, ancient and historical implements, rocks and minerals and other curiosities including the skeleton of the first woman prosecuted in Allegany County for murder. The museum began in the 1870s, when Jonathan Allen, who was president of Alfred University from 1865 to 1892, began building the Steinheim - German for stone house - using castles he had seen on his travels to Germany and England for inspiration. He used more than 8,000 stones, all collected from within a three-mile radius of Alfred University, to build the exterior walls. As the collection within grew to fill the space, Allen simply added onto to the structure, priding himself on its uniqueness. He allegedly said, "If there is anything in the world like any portion of the building, [I will] immediately tear it down." The interior, too, was unique. The woodwork, shelves and cabinets were made from more than 700 varieties of wood. One of the railings was "made from the spars of vessels sunken by the Merrimac in Hampton Roads, on a piece of the stairway Colonel Ellsworth was shot, a limb of the apple tree under which (Union Army General Ulysses S.) Grant received the surrender of (Confederate Army General Robert E.) General Lee and many other historic relics." President Allen died in 1892, and over the next 100 years, until the structure was renovated in 1995 for use as a career development center, the building began to crumble and the legends began to grow. Students dared each other to make midnight forays into the museum, and to prove their derring-do with a piece of the collection. It became a rendezvous place for young lovers, decades ago when men and women had separate residence halls, and illicit visits by students of the opposite sex resulted in immediate disciplinary action. There were efforts, not always well-coordinated and organized, to safeguard the collection. Some of the pieces went to other departments, other locations on campus. Some were given away or stored for safe-keeping. And others walked away, souvenirs of the dares fulfilled. Now, Lenka Clayton, a documentary artist and Theodore Randall International Chair in the School of Art & Design, has launched what she calls the "Amnesty for the Lost Artifacts of the Steinheim Museum" project. Clayton's work often involves large-scale projects that collect together, create and record communities. More of her work can be seen at:

www.lenkaclayton.co.uk. For more information on the project please visit www.lenkaclayton.co.uk/ga... stresses that her goal is not to reclaim the items, but to document them with photographs of them in their current locations.

"Amnesty is a chance to celebrate the individual journeys that each artifact has managed to travel and will continue to travel in the future," Clayton said. "The story of the Steinheim collection is an emblematic tale of how we remember, collect and lose our own history and how the collection once whole, now lives on in the private homes, attics and garages of individuals." She's already begun to solicit leads on the lost artifacts from alumni, local historians and area residents. She's conducting interviews, trying to track down where pieces of the collection might have gone. "There are rumors as to the whereabouts of many of the artifacts," said Clayton. "A stone lion sits in a garden in Hornell. Some coins are safely stored in the attic of a former faculty member, a portion of the mollusk collection is in a museum in Philadelphia, and two of the oil paintings are hanging in the Fasano House, Alfred University's new welcome center. "She hopes to complete the project by December when she is scheduled to return to England. Any one with information, leads, thoughts, rumors, stories, ideas or artifacts, is asked to contact Lenka Clayton: by e-mail at

lenkaclayton@web.de; by telephone at 607.871.3546, or by mail at P.O. 520, Alfred, NY, 14802 Anonymity is absolutely guaranteed to all participants. You need not give your name. More information about Clayton and her work may be obtained by visiting her web site: <http://www.lenkaclayton.c...>