Museums & Sustainability

Cultivating a Sustainable Museum Collection

The Saskatchewan Aviation Museum

Intangible Heritage & the Transmission of Tradition

Museums Association of Saskatchewan

Message from MAS

Until now, *Museums and Sustainability* has looked at different facets of sustainability – economic, environmental, social, and cultural – and how they relate to museums. We've developed a better understanding of what sustainability means, both for museums and for the communities they're a part of. However, we haven't had the chance to explore how sustainability impacts specific domains of museum practice, such as collections, education, or research. That's why, for the next few issues, we're taking a different approach, looking at how different aspects of museum operations relate to sustainability.

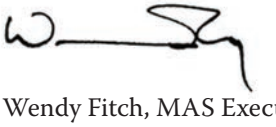
We're starting with collections. Collections have long been at the centre of museums. It's hard to imagine a community history museum without artifacts, a natural history museum without specimens, or a gallery without art works. If our goal is museums that embody and promote sustainability, we need to understand how collections fit into that picture.

Some of the effects of collections on a museum's sustainability are straightforward. It takes resources – money, but also space and labour time – to catalogue and care for a collection, so the better a job museums do in managing these activities, the more sustainable that museum is likely to be in the long term.

How a museum's collection affects a community's sustainability is not quite as obvious, but it's every bit as important. Our collections are one of our key ways of presenting what our communities are all about. This means that the objects we preserve and celebrate can work to include (or, if we're not careful, exclude) particular people and groups from our communities.

Our collections are also the focus of many of the museum's relationships: relationships with the collection's donors or source communities, with volunteers who have helped catalogue and care for them, or with visitors who have had powerful experiences with them. Focusing on those relationships helps us build more sustainable museums and communities. It also lets us see new possibilities for collections themselves, and find new ways to document and preserve some of the less tangible pieces of our heritage, like language, cultural practices, and folklore.

Collections, in all their varied forms, are a vital part of Saskatchewan's museums, and another important piece to consider as we work towards museums that are an integral part of resilient, inclusive communities.



Wendy Fitch, MAS Executive Director

The Museums Association of Saskatchewan (MAS) is a non-profit, collective organization with more than 400 members, including 200 member museums and galleries. MAS is governed by an elected Board of Directors that develops policy and provides direction for programs and services to benefit all Saskatchewan museums.

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Museums & Sustainability

Cultivating a Sustainable Museum Collection

By Dan Holbrow

When I think of museum collections, I think about gardening.

An old friend who'd moved to the prairies from the west coast used to tell me about the differences between the two regions. Gardening on the prairies, she said, took a different philosophy than gardening on the coast. On the prairies, the problem was getting things to grow: you had to carefully protect and nurture your plants, or they'd shrivel up and dry out. Back in BC, she told me, the problem was getting things *not* to grow: you had to constantly thin and prune and weed to keep your garden from being overrun.

When it comes to heritage, Saskatchewan is fertile ground. This is great news for museums, but it also means that keeping a collection under control demands relentless thinning, pruning, and weeding. Again and again, museum workers tell me about boxes of artifacts mysteriously appearing on the museum steps overnight, unexpected pump organ deliveries, or vintage machinery that someone found at auction and then left in the museum yard. Much like in my friend's B.C. garden, one key to a successful collection is managing, and even restraining, growth.

Like gardening, managing a good museum collection takes careful planning, hard work, and regular attention.

So how do museums keep their collections from growing out of control? There are two key tactics, and successful museums use both of them. The first strategy is carefully managing which artifacts are added to the collection – controlling what takes root. The second involves pruning and thinning – that is, removing what's not essential so that the museum can thrive.

To understand this better, I spoke to the collections management team at Saskatchewan's Western Development Museum (WDM), and to Megan Peters, Assistant Curator at the Melfort and District Museum.

Acquisitions: Managing what comes in

People will go to surprising lengths to leave objects with a museum.

"Branch staff are trained not to allow anyone to drop off items without the appropriate paperwork," says Julie Jackson, museum technician at the Saskatoon WDM. "However, a few times objects were just left by the front door when the museum was closed. And over the years, visitors have also added objects to the exhibits. We find these when we conduct building inventories. It's a big, time-consuming challenge to figure out which of them are 'drop-offs' and which are artifacts that have lost their labeling."

What these donors may not realize is that information about the artifact is most often what gives it historical value.

"Normally, when a donation comes in, we make sure that it's directly related to Melfort's history," Megan Peters says. "We make sure that we get any relevant information with the artifact – its story." Not only is this in the museum's mandate; it's what makes the collection useful for presenting the history of the community.

However, when donations are dumped at or snuck into the museum, they tend to have little or none of this important information. "Most often in situations like these," WDM Collections Manager Ruth Bitner says, "there are few, if any, artifacts that the WDM is interested in adding to the collection. If there is donor information, we can contact them and ask that they pick up the items, or ask them to sign a donation form for any item we would like to add to the collection. If the drop-off is anonymous, we have sometimes waited until there are a number of these, then taken them to an auction house to be sold with the proceeds going toward the acquisition and care of the collection."

Volunteers with Regina's North Central community garden. Photo: Deron Staffen.

Deaccessions: Pruning and thinning the collection

Controlling what comes into the collection is important, but museums also need to ensure that they don't devote valuable space and time to artifacts that don't belong there. A museum can deaccession artifacts for all kinds of reasons: irreparable damage, hazards to staff or the rest of the collection, repatriation, or the simple realization that the artifact doesn't fit the museum's mandate.

But deciding whether an artifact should be removed from the collection is only the first step. Museum staff also have to decide where deaccessioned artifacts should go. Of course, if an artifact is hazardous or all but destroyed, it needs to be properly disposed of, and its disposal documented. But if an object is in good condition, the museum still has an obligation to try to ensure that it's preserved.

"In the 1980s," Bitner says, "the WDM deaccessioned a substantial number of artifacts. We offered these artifacts at no cost to MAS member museums. After their selections were made, the remaining artifacts and parts were sold at public auctions."

When this happens, it's important that everyone understands that the museum isn't simply throwing away or selling off important heritage objects.

"There was considerable concern about public perceptions," Bitner continues, "so auction posters, interviews with the media, and other publicity all clearly stated the reasons for the deaccessioning. It was also important to let the public know that the Saskatchewan museum community had been given the opportunity to acquire items before they went to auction."

Cultivating better collections

Like gardening, managing a good museum collection takes careful planning, hard work, and regular attention. It demands that museums carefully manage their acquisitions, accepting only those artifacts that best fit their mission, and that they have the resources to properly care for. It also requires hard choices about which artifacts to dispose of, and what to do with them. But there's a payoff for all this work: collections that preserve valuable pieces of our heritage and make them accessible to our communities. That's something worth cultivating.


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CABIN AIR

Flying High

The Saskatchewan Aviation Museum and Learning Centre prepares for takeoff

Tim Munro started flying about the same time he learned to walk.

"I grew up around aircraft," explains Munro, executive director of the Saskatchewan Aviation Historical Society (SAHS). "My dad was a bush pilot for about 50 years. I remember him saying, 'It's not a job, it's not a career – it's an addiction.' I have to agree with him. Once it's in your blood, it's hard to get rid of."

Munro is now a driving force behind the new Saskatchewan Aviation Museum and Learning Centre, scheduled to open next summer in Saskatoon at the site of the province's first aircraft flight in May 1911.

"We're looking forward to working with other museums in Saskatchewan," says Munro. "It's a learning experience for us. Aircraft is one thing, but putting them on display in a proper environment is totally new. We're learning, and the museum classes we're taking have been a big help. The support is there … it's fantastic."

The Saskatchewan Aviation Museum will showcase the province's rich aviation history, which includes being home to the first registered commercial airport, the first commercial pilot, and the first aircraft mechanic in Canada.

SAHS's soon-to-be-displayed aircraft collection began with two de Havilland Tiger Moths, used as training planes by the Royal Canadian Air Force in the Second World War, and has expanded to include 14 aircraft – many of which have been fully restored to flying condition.

Above: Aircraft from the Saskatchewan Aviation Museum's collection wait in temporary storage at the John G. Diefenbaker International Airport. Previous page: Tim Munro, executive director of the Saskatchewan Aviation Historical Society.

"There aren't that many of the aircraft that we have left in the world, never mind flying," says Munro. "We try to keep them going. We've gotta pass that information on to the next generation."

Aircraft as Artifact

Caring for a collection of aircraft comes with a unique set of challenges. Because SAHS endeavours to restore its planes to airworthy standards, they are required to meet Transport Canada's regulations for aircraft maintenance.

Safety is also an ongoing consideration. "Properly training volunteers to work around functioning aircraft is important," says Munro. "It's a different environment than most museums, with different occupational health and safety standards."

Given the nature of the collection, space constraints are also top of mind. "It's the same as any other museum, but on a larger scale," says Munro. "A space that might house two or three galleries in a typical museum quite often gives us room for a single aircraft."

Consequently, SAHS has to be ever-diligent about what it accepts into its collection. "It has to meet the mandate of the museum, which is predominantly Saskatchewan aircraft," says Munro. "So far we've only had to say no to a couple of items, but we do our best to redirect people so that the items are not lost."

More than a museum

For Munro, preserving knowledge about aviation is every bit as important as preserving the aircraft themselves.

"It's not just a museum," explains Munro. "We want it to be an educational centre for kids to come and learn about the physics of flight. We want to have public seminars for adults to learn about general aviation, but also how to care for aircraft for those who are interested – things like engine maintenance, and how to re-cover fabric."

"There aren't that many of the aircraft that we have left in the world, never mind flying."

In the first three months of 2016, SAHS saw over 200 Grade 6 students come through the doors of its temporary space at the south end of the John G. Diefenbaker International Airport.

"It's such a delight to see them walk in," says Munro. "They see the airplanes and their eyes get big. You see that excitement, and it's hard not to get excited yourself, even if you've been in it for 25 or 50 years. Kids pick it up when they're young, and if it gets in their blood, they have it till the day they pass."

Wes Long, curatorial assistant in palaeontology at the Royal Saskatchewan Museum.

Sustainable Storage and Conservation

A conversation with the curatorial staff of the Royal Saskatchewan Museum

Museums have many purposes. For visitors, museum exhibits and programming offer opportunities to learn about the natural and human history of a place, and to make meaning of the world around them. Scientists rely on specimens housed in museum collections to pursue research and create knowledge for the public good. As societies, we depend on museums to collect and preserve objects and information that are important to our collective heritage, and to interpret their significance. Increasingly, museums are also involved in bringing people in a community together to better understand and influence the contemporary world, and to make informed decisions about the future.

Balancing these roles can present challenges for museums seeking to meet divergent responsibilities. How do museums preserve the integrity of delicate artifacts and at the same time make collections accessible to the public? And how can museums serve as archives of the past and at the same time reflect the evolving interests and demographics of communities in the present?

"There are tensions wherever we look," says Glenn Sutter, curator of human ecology at the Royal Saskatchewan Museum (RSM). "There's a long-standing back and forth between the desire to preserve artifacts exactly as they are, forever, versus wanting to make sure there is easy access to

everything – which could quickly deteriorate those same collections."

Traditionally, museums have tended toward the former, orienting storage and conservation practices around the needs of objects. "Once things come into the museum, we want to keep them in their state, or perhaps even improve their state," says Alyssa Becker-Burns, the RSM's conservator. "That means monitoring light levels, relative humidity, and temperature. Because the majority of our collections are made up of things like hide, feathers, fur, and wool, pest management is also a big part of what we do."

Caring for artifacts properly is a social responsibility. "These collections don't belong to the RSM, they belong to the people of Saskatchewan," explains Sutter. "That means a lot of things, including making sure they're available for scientific research. And they have to be kept under a certain level of care to be valuable scientifically."

Many museums are also turning to 'open storage' as a way of balancing preservation with public engagement and displaying parts of their collections normally hidden from view.

At the same time, optimal conditions for preservation often mean that the bulk of a museum's collection is stored beyond the purview of the public. Rotating displays are one way of making collections more visible and reflecting the interests of changing audiences and community demographics. Many museums are also turning to "open storage" as a way of balancing preservation with public engagement and displaying parts of their collections normally hidden from view.

"Personally, I'd like to see more open storage in settings where the casual visitor could realize that museums are housing important collections, and that those collections are being used all the time by visiting scientists," says Sutter.

Evelyn Siegfried, the RSM's curator of Aboriginal studies, agrees, and points to the Museum of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia – credited with conceiving the concept of open storage – as an inspiring example.

"They have all their materials in glass cases with low lighting … people can see *everything*," says Siegfried. "They even have a conservation room with windows so people on the outside can observe what goes on on the inside. In a museum like ours, people don't realize that conservation takes place. That opportunity isn't presented. It's not a large building, and it would need to be greatly expanded for us to do anything like that. But we have been thinking about the future."

The scarcity of space is a persistent concern for the RSM, which, like most museums, must contend with housing an ever-expanding collection in a finite physical space. "It's important to make careful decisions about what goes in," says Sutter. "You want to have clear criteria about why you've added something to the collection in the first place.… If a museum doesn't have clear policy on why it's collecting and what it wants to add to the collection, it's really tempting to look after everything. That's not a properly curated collection, in my mind."

Equally important is ensuring that objects enter the collection with proper documentation. As Becker-Burns explains, dissociation – the loss of information about an artifact – is listed by the Canadian Conservation Institute as one of the top 10 agents of deterioration. "If you can't link up the information with a particular object, it loses a lot of value," she says.

Part of the work of conserving artifacts, in addition to protecting the physical items, involves consulting with communities about the history of objects and how to appropriately display them. "If you're going to have a space that speaks to the culture of First Nations people, you really should be including their voice in that space," says Siegfried. "It's kind of a must. Care is one thing, but to be knowledgeable about what's in collections, and that it's someone's cultural patrimony … it's been a bit of a hard road. Museums have come a long way, but there's still work to do."

Thinking beyond collections

Although caring for collections is fundamental to the mandate of museums, Sutter stresses that museums are about much more than their inventories. "Museums are about providing memorable experiences," he says. "Collections can inform those experiences, but there are

A recently restored grain elevator in the Val Marie ecomuseum.

plenty of things people are looking for that museums can offer that don't have anything to do with the collection at all. They're more issue driven."

Sutter points to the example of climate change as a pressing concern that museums could play a role in addressing. "There aren't many artifacts associated with it. There's nothing you could collect. Yet, museums are uniquely positioned to offer opportunities for people to reflect on what climate change means for their personal life and for their community," he says. "A community might have plenty of assets, both tangible and intangible, that are impacted by climate change. The traditional museum approach would be to try to pull all those assets into a building and protect them forever, but that's kind of irrelevant. Maybe that community wants to leave those assets where they are, and learn from them as they try to grapple with that problem."

The ecomuseum model is premised on keeping such assets in place, where they are most meaningful. As Sutter explains, "collections are only important when people have that context. Ecomuseums are about putting the context first, and drawing on assets as needed.... In a way, ecomuseums make everybody in the community a curator. They have a higher appreciation for their local assets, and they can become the storytellers. Curators at their core are storytellers, whether they do it with objects or issue-based experiences. They're interested in and excited by stories."

"If a museum doesn't have clear policy on why it's collecting and what it wants to add to the collection, it's really tempting to look after everything."


ART INK

A Passion for Print

Artifacts are put to work at Articulate Ink

Despite what you may have heard about the "death of print," in the second-storey studio of Regina's Articulate Ink, it's making a comeback.

Here, drawers of wooden blocks with metal type line the walls, tubs of ink cover tabletops, and desks are furnished not with computer monitors, but with a collection of cast-iron successors of the letterpress invented by Johannes Gutenberg nearly six centuries ago.

"We take anything that's offered to us," says Karli Jessup, who founded the artist-run printmaking centre in 2010 with three other graduates of the University of Regina's Visual Arts department. "So much old printing equipment and presses go to scrap because people don't know what they are or what to do with them. We take everything, or at least put it in storage until we have a place to put it."

The centre's growing collection includes two tabletop letterpresses, a proof press, a custom-made etching press, and, most recently, a four-foot-high, 1500-pound 1919 Chandler & Price letterpress that had long been languishing in the basement of a cafe in Regina's Chinatown.

As co-founder Michelle Brownridge explains, these presses are built to last. "They're pretty solid and, to some degree, simple machines. If they turn over, they do their jobs." Apart from oiling the presses before use and leaving them covered to keep out dust while idle, maintenance is minimal.

The business of art

The presses in Articulate Ink's collection are by no means kept strictly for archival purposes. The studio is a hub of printmaking activity, where members use the presses for both commercial projects and their own art practices.

While letterpress printing has been practised as an art form since its inception in the 15th century, it's enjoying something of a renaissance in a screen-saturated era of digital fatigue. According to Jessup, it's not just the process that's appealing, but the product that results.

"It's quality printing," she says. "So many things today aren't made to last. They're just quick. It has a quality that you can't achieve through digital printing."

The presses in Articulate Ink's collection are by no means relics kept simply for archival purposes. The studio is a hub of printmaking activity.

"We have an informal motto here," adds Brownridge. "Friends don't let friends Xerox."

Commercial projects like business cards, wedding invitations, or bar menus help sustain the non-profit centre financially, and also serve to demonstrate the range of uses for letterpress technology.

"We're able to make these unique things within the spaces that we operate and show people what is possible," says

Articulate Ink co-founders Karli Jessup and Michelle Brownridge.

Brownridge. "I find that kind of exciting."

Brownridge and Jessup found their passion for print as students at the University of Regina, where they studied screen printing and etching. But when it comes to letterpress, they're entirely self-taught.

"We learned off the internet," explains Brownridge. "We just started Googling and researching and asking questions. It's amazing what you can teach yourself."

Making printmakers

Central to the mandate of Articulate Ink is fostering educational opportunities and building the community of people in Saskatchewan who are interested and invested in print.

"We love making new printmakers," says Jessup. "We rely on membership to keep people interested in our space. It can't just be about us working on our own thing. We have to create some interest."

Once people have attended workshops hosted by Articulate Ink and learned the basic techniques, they are free to come and use the space themselves as a member of the collective.

"We have a few full-time members now who got their start in our workshops," says Jessup. "That's always a really exciting thing for me to see – someone gets introduced to print as a medium, really falls in love with it, and then decides it's something they want to do on an ongoing basis."

WHILE LETTERPRESS PRINTING HAS BEEN PRACTISED AS AN ART FORM SINCE ITS INCEPTION IN THE 15TH CENTURY, IT'S ENJOYING SOMETHING OF A RENAISSANCE IN A SCREEN-SATURATED ERA OF DIGITAL FATIGUE.

Since Articulate Ink's opening in 2010, the demand for the centre's printmaking workshops has only increased.

"So much of what we do has moved to the digital realm," says Brownridge. "I think one of the main reasons people are in love with letterpress these days is the indent and the physicality that happens on the paper. What you're creating is an actual object. People are longing for that authenticity in something. That's what's brought this resurgence about, and we're happy for that."

Reconciliation and Resurgence

The First Nations Language Keepers Conference

"Language is necessary to define and maintain a world view. For this reason, some First Nation elders to this day will say that knowing or learning the native language is basic to any deep understanding of a First Nation way of life, to being a First Nation person. For them, a First Nation world is quite simply not possible without its own language. For them, the impact of residential school silencing their language is equivalent to a residential school silencing their world." – Assembly of First Nations, *Breaking the Silence*, 1994

Mary John was 11 years old when she was enrolled in the Lejac Residential School on the shore of Fraser Lake, B.C. "I was scared of breaking a rule and being punished for it," she remembers. "I never used my native language except very privately and in a whisper." At the File Hills school in Saskatchewan, Melvina McNabb recalls "not being able to speak a word of English" when she arrived at the school at age seven. "I talked Cree and I was abused for that, hit, and made to try to talk English."

These are among the thousands of testimonies documented by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), launched in 2008 with a mandate to uncover the truth of what happened in the residential school system and to provide recommendations for repairing the harm that it caused.

In its final report, released in December 2015, the TRC described residential schools as a "systematic, government-sponsored attempt to destroy Aboriginal cultures and languages and to assimilate Aboriginal peoples so that they no longer existed as distinct peoples." Further, it concluded that "more than a century of cultural genocide has left most Aboriginal languages on the verge of extinction."

Protecting and revitalizing Indigenous languages is at the heart of the First Nations Language Keepers Conference, an annual gathering of community leaders, Elders, educators, and youth from across Canada and the United States. The tenth annual conference, held last November in Saskatoon, was themed "Stories from the Community: Celebrating Language Success" and showcased creative initiatives that

Iris O'Watch, a "language warrior" and coordinator of Carry The Kettle First Nation's Nakoda Language Revitalization Model.

"It's our language that we love and cherish above anything else. To hear your language is a gift. To speak your language is an even greater gift. We are saving lives with our language." That's what we're doing."

language keepers are undertaking in communities across Saskatchewan and beyond.

"It's our language that feeds our spirit," says Iris O'Watch, who presented a workshop on Carry the Kettle First Nation's partnership with the First Nations University of Canada to train and certify Nakoda language instructors in the community. "Our worldview is inherent within our language … it gives purpose to our lives. It's our language that we love and cherish above anything else. To hear your language is a gift. To speak your language is an even greater gift. We are saving lives with our language. That's what we're doing."

Workshops and plenary sessions at the conference examined a variety of teaching methodologies and highlighted community-based projects ranging from mentorship programs and immersion camps to efforts to promote languages through film and theatre.

Among the projects showcased at the conference was the Saskatchewan Indian Cultural Centre's (SICC) annual book-writing contest, which was launched in 2011 to encourage First Nations children to write in their own languages. This year's prize went to a student from Piyesiw Awasis School in Thunderchild First Nation, who read excerpts from his Plains Cree story titled *My Teachers: My Grandfather and Grandmother* to attendees. Each year, the winning entry is illustrated and published as a book by the SICC.

Encouraging language acquisition among children is also the focus of the Lakota Language Nest early-childhood

Alayna Eagle Shield and her daughter Kyya Lyn, a student of the Lakota Language Nest, with books translated into Lakota.

immersion program at the Standing Rock reservation in North Dakota. Tipiziwin Tolman, one of the founders of the program, described the sobering statistics that were revealed in the first stage of the project, a door-to-door survey of residents of the Standing Rock reservation.

"I saw that our language doesn't live in our homes anymore. There is no home with two or more speakers, where the language is alive. There are no conversations for children to overhear," says Tolman. Of the 13,000 residents surveyed, only 275 identified as fluent speakers. "We can either accept that, or we can create an environment where language is nourished again," she adds.

The Lakota Language Nest opened its doors in 2012 with 11 children under age two, and has gradually increased its enrolment each year. Parents are required to sign contracts committing to learning the language themselves and fostering it in their homes. "It's a path worth taking," says Tolman. "It's a proven path to a better life and better health for our people."

The Saskatchewan Indian Cultural Centre Displays winning entries from their annual book writing contest for First Nations children from grades K-12.

According to Tolman, the average age of a Lakota speaker is currently 70, which points to a critical juncture in rescuing the language and the urgent need for programs like the Language Nest.

Circumstances are similar across Canada, with only 14 per cent of Indigenous peoples reporting that their first language is an Indigenous language, according to the last census.

As the final report of the TRC warns, "If the preservation of Aboriginal languages does not become a priority for both governments and for Aboriginal communities, then what the residential schools failed to accomplish will come about through a process of systematic neglect."

For Peter Nippi, a Saulteaux speaker on the Elders Panel of the Language Keepers Conference, the innovative initiatives that language practitioners are taking up in communities across North America are cause for hope.

"Our languages aren't dead," he explains. "They're dormant. It's up to us to dust them off."

HERITAGE LANGUAGES IN SASKATCHWAN

The Saskatchewan Organization for Heritage Languages (SOHL) was founded in 1985 with a mandate to preserve and promote languages in Saskatchewan through educational and cultural programs. As an umbrella organization with over 70 heritage language schools and multilingual organizations among its members, SOHL works to advance the teaching and learning of heritage languages by supporting its members to develop language programs and resource materials and promoting the training of heritage language teachers.

Since 1996, SOHL's annual Mini Language Program has created opportunities for students in Saskatchewan's school system to experience languages including Cree, Ukranian, Urdu, German, Arabic, Japanese, and many more by matching heritage language teachers with classrooms across the province for the months of January through March each year.

To find out more about SOHL's projects and upcoming events, see heritagelanguages.sk.ca.

"I saw that our language doesn't live in our homes anymore ... We can either accept that, or we can create an environment where language is nourished again."

Intangible Heritage and the Transmission of Tradition

A Conversation with Dale Jarvis

Dale Jarvis is a St. John's-based storyteller, folklorist, and tireless promoter of local culture in Newfoundland. By day, he works as Intangible Cultural Heritage Development Officer for the Heritage Foundation of Newfoundland and Labrador. By night, Dale is the proprietor of the St. John's Haunted Hike ghost tour and a raconteur of traditional tales from Newfoundland and Labrador. He is the author of several books on Newfoundland and Labrador ghost stories and folklore.

How do you define intangible heritage?

Intangible cultural heritage is all of the aspects of culture that define who we are, and that don't necessarily take a physical form – our traditions, our songs, the way we perceive the world, our belief systems, our linguistic patterns, and how we interact with nature. None of these things can be put in a museum, but they are really important to who we are as people.

What are some of the challenges that are unique to collecting and preserving intangible heritage?

"Preserving" is an interesting word that gets used a lot in the heritage community. That's in a sense what museums and archives do – they deal with tangible objects, and they're very good at taking an old photograph, for example, and conserving it so that it doesn't degrade. That's great for maintaining artifacts and documents, but traditions aren't like that. Traditions are living, breathing things. They present challenges for organizations that are only really used to dealing with tangible things.

One of the hallmarks of intangible cultural heritage is that it's in a constant state of evolution and change – we're not preserving a fixed thing that happened in the past; we're encouraging the transmission of knowledge in the present day.

Traditions are obviously important parts of culture, but they can also be under threat. Fisheries' knowledge, for example, isn't perceived to be of the same importance today as it once was. The industry has changed, and we start to lose things like knot tying and boat building as a result. How do we find new ways to keep these traditions alive? How do we keep heritage a living thing, as opposed to something that's stuck in one moment in time in an institution? That's the big challenge.

What does a day in the life of a full-time folklorist look like?

My job is to safeguard local culture. What that actually translates into really varies depending on the type of tradition, the body of skills and knowledge, or the particular community that I'm working with. I never know exactly what the next project is going to be.

I just came back from the campus radio station at Memorial University here in St. John's. We're doing a program in partnership with them called Living Heritage, where I interview people in the community who are engaged in similar work to what I do – a traditional boat builder, an archivist … Today I interviewed an artist who is working with local people to collect, document, and present examples of traditional knowledge and skills.

I'm also working on a youth heritage forum that's now in its second year. Last year we had 63 youth who were interested in different aspects of heritage, archeology, folklore, history, or museum studies. It was great fun, and a great opportunity for people to realize that they weren't working in isolation or alone in their passion.

We have an ongoing project called the Grey Sock Project, which is tied into the First World War commemorations that are happening. It has three pieces. The first piece revolves around the work of the Women's Patriotic Association, a group of ladies in St. John's who knit thousands of socks, undershirts, and whatever else was needed by the soldiers who were on the front lines. So, the first piece is a historical work on the craft tradition here in the province. But of course I'm tasked with safeguarding traditional culture, so I want people to knit. For the second piece, we're partnering with the City of St. John's to run beginners' knitting workshops, and we're doing an advanced workshop called "Darn Those Socks!" to teach people how to darn, which is a dying skill. We also have knitting sessions in partnership with the local library system. We'll provide the tea and biscuits, and people will knit together much like the Women's Patriotic Association did in the First World War. At that time, women were knitting socks for soldiers,

"ONE OF THE HALLMARKS OF INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE IS THAT IT'S IN A CONSTANT STATE OF EVOLUTION AND CHANGE – WE'RE NOT PRESERVING A FIXED THING THAT HAPPENED IN THE PAST; WE'RE ENCOURAGING THE TRANSMISSION OF KNOWLEDGE IN THE PRESENT DAY. "

and we want to continue on in that spirit, but knit socks for peace. So, for the third piece, we're taking that history, maintaining it, and subverting it a little bit. We're partnering with a group called Some Warm Welcome, who are making knitted goods for Syrian refugees. So, we're turning that idea of knitting for war on its head. That's an example of the kind of work that we do – drawing on the past, but making it contemporary.

Tell us a bit about the St. John's Storytelling Circle.

The St. John's Storytelling Circle is a project that I started based on other storytelling circles around the world. It's an opportunity to bring people together to share stories, and it runs every month here in St. Johns. I ran it for seven or eight years before turning it over to the St. John's Storytelling Festival. It's kind of like an open mic night for storytelling – it might be

The human brain is wired to think in terms of stories.

a folk tale, it might be a ghost story or local legend, it might be what happened on your way to work that morning, it might be a poem or a recitation. Someone might sing a ballad. It's been running every month for 10 years now.

What's the importance of stories? What function do they serve?

Stories are how we pass on information in ways that are memorable. If you present facts and dates to people, they'll listen for a few minutes. If you phrase that information as a story, they'll listen much longer. The human brain is wired to think in terms of stories. We all tell stories. That's how we communicate. We don't all think of ourselves as storytellers, but storytelling is an incredibly important part of who we are as a species. When we understand people's stories, we develop empathy for those people. If we learn stories about places, we develop reverence for those places. It's how we form emotional connections to places, people, and things. Stories are things that bind us together.

Grasslands Project director Scott Parker and Rockglen-based artist Neil Jones. Photo: Kristin Catherwood.

The Grasslands Project

Storytelling from the ground up

When the National Film Board (NFB) was founded in 1939, it was tasked by Parliament with making films to "help Canadians in all parts of Canada understand the ways of living and the problems of Canadians in other parts."

In the years before televisions secured a place as a fixture of Canadian living rooms, a team of mobile projectionists with the NFB operated a "travelling theatre" along a circuit of rural communities where commercial theatres were scarce.

Among those who travelled the rural circuit was Evelyn Spice Cherry, a pioneering documentary filmmaker and head of the NFB's Agricultural Unit. For Cherry, the travelling theatre was not only an opportunity to bring films from the NFB catalogue to rural audiences; it was a chance to speak directly with rural people about the issues that mattered to them, the stories they wanted told, and the films they hope to see produced.

In the spirit of Cherry's community-guided approach to documentary filmmaking, the NFB's Northwest Studio launched the Grasslands Project last spring, described as "a community-inspired initiative to document contemporary life on the southern Prairies through a series of short films."

"The NFB will often approach geographic areas that don't have a lot of media representation," explains Scott Parker,

director and chief researcher on the project. "About a year ago, the executive producer asked me if I knew anything about the southern Prairies. He wanted to know what kinds of stories might be told from here. Because I have a community engagement background, I said, 'Well, you just need to go down and ask people.'"

Media clinic with Astonished! in Regina. Photo: Scott Parker.

The Grasslands Project began with an eight-day road trip across the southern Prairie of Alberta and Saskatchewan, stopping in eight different communities. Much like the travelling projectionists of the 1940s, the NFB team organized pop-up screenings of films relevant to local communities at each stop along the way. The 2600-kilometre trek also included a series of community outreach meetings with local residents to generate suggestions for short films that would reflect the contemporary concerns and interests of community members.

"BY THE END OF THIS I THINK WE'LL HAVE TRAINED 50 OR 60 NEW FILMMAKERS."

"Out of those ideas, and others I've gathered since I've been down here, we've shot seven short films, and we're planning on doing three more," says Parker, who spent much of 2015 travelling the grasslands in a camper van that doubles as a mobile production studio.

As part of the Grasslands Project, Parker also hosted a series of 12 media clinics across the southern Prairies to train locals in the fundamentals of filmmaking, and to empower them to tell their own stories about contemporary life and community heritage. Eight of the clinics were public workshops in the towns of Eastend, Shaunavon, Mankota, Gravelbourg, Radville, Magrath, Milk River, and the Nekaneet First Nation; four were focused workshops for residents of the Okimaw Ohci Healing Lodge, new immigrants in the town of Ponteix, youth at the high school in Foremost, and members of Astonished!, a group of young adults with complex physical disabilities.

"By the end of this, I think we'll have trained 50 or 60 new filmmakers," says Parker. "For people who are interested in creating shorts for social media, for community presentations, for oral histories, or whatever it is they're interested in doing – the goal is to give them the fundamentals they need to know."

Each media clinic culminated in a finished documentary short, produced collaboratively by attendees and released online. Topics range from a profile of the Frenchman River and its significance for local residents to a look at contemporary life on-reserve for youth from the Nekaneet First Nation.

As for the NFB productions based on ideas generated by community members, Parker is presently finalizing edits, mixing audio, and adding music and credits to the short films. This spring, the NFB will be touring a series of premieres in the communities where the ideas came from, and then the films will be released online.

"All of the films I've shot, I've screened with the subjects," says Parker. "I wanted to make sure that, 'Yes, that's the story,' that's what they're interested in saying."

Follow the Grasslands Project online!

To stay tuned for the release of the NFB shorts online, watch the films made at community clinics, and learn more about the Grasslands Project, see:

thegrasslandsproject.tumblr.com
facebook.com/GrasslandsProject
blog.nfb.ca/blog/tag/the-grasslands-project

ABOUT US

Museums Association of Saskatchewan

The Museums Association of Saskatchewan is a non-profit member organization for Saskatchewan's public museums and museum professionals. Our purpose is to serve our members in Saskatchewan and work for their advancement.

Membership in MAS is open to everyone. MAS provides learning opportunities for museums, personnel and their governing bodies. MAS is responsible for establishing the first Standards for Museums that now guides museum development throughout Saskatchewan.

The Association raises public awareness of museums and fosters communication among members of the museum sector. MAS represents the interests and concerns of the museum sector to all levels of government and with other relevant agencies.

Heritage is our social and natural inheritance: the objects, ideas, places, and traditions of intrinsic value which have shaped our present and will guide our future. We believe our collective inheritance is an asset that must be preserved, understood, and built upon by each generation. Museums, in service to society, provide stewardship for the material evidence of our human and natural inheritance and contribute to the understanding of the world and our place in it - our past, our present, and our future.

Museums and Sustainability is an annual look at sustainability issues in and for Saskatchewan's museums.

Sustainable Collections, the sixth publication in the series, looks at the ways that collections affect the sustainability of museums, and in turn, the ways that collections can be mobilized to affect the sustainability of the communities museums are part of.

Inside, you'll find thought-provoking essays and interviews, as well as stories and photos showcasing sustainability work in Saskatchewan museums.

The Sustainability Committee of the Museums Association of Saskatchewan produces this publication as part of its sustainability initiative. The Museums Association of Saskatchewan is a non-profit member group for Saskatchewan's museums and museum workers.

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