

# MUSE

Vol. IX No. 3

Winter/Hiver 1992

February/Février

## COMMUNITY MUSEUMS: SHARING EXPERIENCES

## LES PETITS MUSÉES : UN PARTAGE D'EXPÉRIENCES

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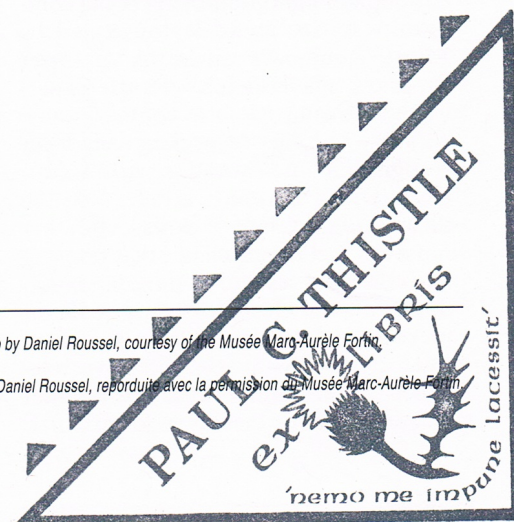
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Cover: "Hiver à Baie St-Paul" (Winter in Baie St-Paul), by Marc-Aurèle Fortin, c. 1943. Panel painting, 45.7 cm x 71.1 cm. Private collection. Photo by Daniel Roussel, courtesy of the Musée Marc-Aurèle Fortin.

Couverture : « Hiver à Baie St-Paul », par Marc-Aurèle Fortin, c. 1943. Peinture sur panneau, 45,7 cm x 71,1 cm. Collection particulière. Photo par Daniel Roussel, reproduite avec la permission du Musée Marc-Aurèle Fortin.





# Small Museums and Municipal Funding<sup>1</sup>

Paul C. Thistle

By 1985, more than 28.4% of Canadian museums were being operated by municipalities, making them the largest single category of governing authority.

In numerous and varied forms, both analysis of the subject and workers in the field have expressed the need for increased financial support for museums from their municipalities.<sup>2</sup> The following will briefly examine the history of, current trends in, and key strategies for strengthening the ties between museums and local governments.

Following the establishment in 1826 of the Guildhall Museum in London, England, as one of the earliest municipally supported institutions, Canada's first municipal museum was Allan Gardens in Toronto, created in 1864. The idea did not catch on quickly, since by 1932, only seven of 125 museums surveyed were supported by local governments.<sup>3</sup> The municipal museum movement began to gain momentum several decades later under the impetus of economic growth and the stimulus of national and provincial centennial celebrations in the 1950s and 1960s, which were accompanied by a related rise in awareness of and support for heritage.

More recently, landmark preservation battles in communities across the country resulted in the coalescing of local heritage groups, and many historic sites have been turned into museums. Gradually, municipalities have been drawn into funding these institutions because it is often the case that local government is the only stable source available to provide operating funding. The presence of existing collections and/or historic sites have been important factors in this development, since few museums have been started from scratch by municipal governments.<sup>4</sup>

By 1985, more than 28.4% of Canadian museums were being operated by municipalities, making them the largest single category of governing authority. Nearly half of all small community museums in Canada are municipal and in Ontario the figure is as high as 59%.<sup>5</sup>

All forms of local governments, large and small, sponsor museums. Of all municipal museums, villages sponsor 6.2%, townships 10.5%, towns 24.4%, cities 43%, and many of those (32.6%) operate more than one facility. Although Lee Jolliffe's study of municipal museums reports that more than half of these institutions are located in communities with populations exceeding 26,700 and postulates that a minimum population of 10,000 is required to support a museum, she also notes that municipal museums have been established successfully by communities with populations as small as 200.<sup>6</sup> For example, the west central Manitoba town of The Pas, with 6,283 inhabitants, is proof that a community with a small population can provide solid financial support for a museum operation (*see sidebar*).

The municipal contribution to museums is substantial and growing. Of municipally supported museums surveyed in 1983, Jolliffe found that 61.6% of their total operating budgets derived from local governments (which were the sole source of revenue for 21% of these institutions). By 1985-86, this figure had risen to 65.3%.<sup>7</sup> The most recent figures available are for 1987 and clearly show that local governments across Canada are continuing to increase levels of financial support. They now report spending more than \$20.6 million on their museums, which is up by 74.7% in four years.<sup>8</sup> The general trend therefore appears to be a positive one.

As illustrated by the case of the Sam Waller Museum, the vast majority of museums now supported by municipalities were originally started by individuals or organizations totally separate from the influence of local governments. The evolution toward closer ties with municipalities is the result of several factors: changes in the expectations of the public in relation to municipal services, the

Paul Thistle is curator of the Sam Waller Museum, which is owned and operated by the Town of The Pas, Manitoba.



Museum founder and volunteer curator Sam Waller outside the first building he built in 1958.



The Sam Waller Museum

Le fondateur et conservateur bénévole Sam Waller à l'extérieur du premier bâtiment qu'il fit construire en 1958.

Second building created by the local Rotary Club as a Manitoba Centennial project in 1970 to house Mr. Waller and his growing collections.



The Sam Waller Museum

Deuxième bâtiment destiné à abriter M. Waller et ses collections toujours plus importantes. Créé en 1970 par le Rotary Club de la ville, le projet s'insérait dans le cadre du centenaire du Manitoba.

The Museum's new home after renovation: a provincially designated historic site built in 1916-17 and known as The Pas Courthouse-Community Building.



The Sam Waller Museum

Le nouveau bâtiment du musée avant sa rénovation : classé lieu historique national par la province, il fut construit en 1916-1917 et connu comme tribunal et bâtiment municipal de The Pas.



need for greater stability in the funding of operations, the potential for obtaining matching funding from provincial sources, and the availability of paid staff and effective leadership within municipal structures.<sup>9</sup> At its most remote, municipal support might consist of services such as grounds maintenance, purchasing, accounting, staff training or the provision of a building to house the operation. Closer co-operation is marked by property tax relief, an annual operating grant, or line department status within the municipal structure.

Apart from the obvious benefits found in financial stability, the major disadvantage inherent in closer ties with local government is the loss of autonomy in decision-making. As well, small museums can get "lost" within the hierarchy of local government when they have to compete for funds and attention within a comparatively large, complex municipal structure. Municipal museums may also be faced with undue pressure to focus solely on providing public services at the expense of other important museum functions such as conservation and research.

The benefits to the municipality itself are not so obvious. Despite the fact that municipalities are service-oriented, heritage preservation and education may not be the most valued utility provided by local government. However, museums can deliver important and desirable services which can be justified in the same manner as any other civic service. Indeed, as a result of quality-of-life, educational, and economic spin-offs, municipalities become the second principal beneficiaries of museum activities after individual citizens.<sup>10</sup>

Although many museum workers, senior government officials and analysts in the field argue that municipalities should contribute more to their local museums, it is very surprising to note the findings of one study conducted in Manitoba in 1986: it showed that nearly half (48.2%) of the museums responding had never asked their local governments for support.<sup>11</sup> This speaks of what appears to be a serious lack of planning, organization, initiative, or perhaps even confidence among museums in seeking financial support. Museum workers should not be intimidated by this task. The data available from Brian Dixon's study of Canadian opinion showed that 84% of those responding agreed that governments should provide financial support for museums. This was the highest ranking among seven leisure-time activities tested. On the Prairies, this figure reached 90%. Even among

non-visitors, 72% agreed with government spending on museums. The more often people visited, the more often they approved (91% among frequent visitors). The Bovey study found that 46% of Canadians desired increased levels of government support.<sup>12</sup>

### **Making a case**

Nevertheless, before approaching your local government for support, your museum requires a good case to justify the expenditure of public tax dollars. The outlines of exactly how to go about creating a good "case" for your museum can be found in any of the widely available literature on fundraising.<sup>13</sup>

Museums should prepare written arguments detailing the value of the institution to the general public and the municipality itself. This document should be geared to the nature of the local community and the character of the decision-makers in local government and it should touch on any number of the



**The major disadvantage inherent in closer ties with local government is the loss of autonomy in decision-making.**

persuasive preservation, social, educational, recreational, academic, political, aesthetic, economic, and other practical values inherent in the museum movement.<sup>14</sup> This case should be founded on some solid preparatory planning exercises and prior museological training in order to prepare a solid, professional, and well-thought-out proposal to present to local government. Here again, there are resources available to assist the small museum, including correspondence courses, provincial museum associations, larger institutions, as well as the general and museological planning literature.<sup>15</sup>

In this process, a knowledge of the local community is important in order to identify how your museum can serve its needs. For example, find out how exhibits and programs can enhance the curriculum in local schools. Research tourist traffic patterns and develop a plan to attract outside visitors.

### **The need for P.R.**

Another step which needs to be taken prior to approaching a local government for support is a public relations campaign. In all cases, the support and participation of a wide cross-section of the public is a key fac-

tor in successfully encouraging municipalities to fund museums.<sup>16</sup> Local media should be exploited to the maximum in order to inform your community about what services are provided now and what you plan to do in the future. One element of a public relations strategy may be to focus on past "heritage disasters" which, as society becomes more concerned about the loss of historic resources, both the general public and local politicians may now be regretting.

### **Gaining political support**

Another crucial preparatory step falls within the political realm. It is not sufficient merely to have a good case to present to a local government council at a "one-shot" meeting. If you wish to be successful, a good deal of prior legwork and arm-twisting is required. Opinion-makers, influential groups and individual leaders in the community who are not members of the municipal council should be enlisted. Once you can begin to demonstrate support from the community at large, it would then be advisable to spend the time necessary to introduce each councillor to your museum in a personal way — perhaps through a special behind-the-scenes tour. Most importantly, ensure that the purpose and programs of your museum are well understood by each councillor, especially in their public service aspects. If only in the planning stages for creating a new museum, it would be wise to start by recruiting a municipal councillor to sit on your committee. This political legwork is crucial. Potential supporters on municipal council must be provided with information, arguments, and evidence of strong community support in order to help them win your case against opponents.

The strongest arguments against your request for support, particularly in times of economic recession, will be scarcity of tax dollars for the "soft options." It is therefore important to have a clear picture of your financial requirements, including realistic projections. It would be helpful to have information on matching funds and other grants for which the museum is eligible. This will help to demonstrate that the institution is a net stimulus to economic activity in the community. It would also help to have comparative data outlining the support given to museums by other comparable municipalities. A small touch of local competitive chauvinism in your community may help your cause.

The personalities and interests of the people elected to municipal council are also factors to consider. You may be faced



with the need to try to elect councillors who may be more sympathetic to your cause or, in extreme cases, to help defeat those who are unredeemably opposed. In small communities, a relatively small group with some determination and effort can have a significant impact in the local political arena. While this may seem to be a rather extreme approach (which engenders its own potential dangers should the campaign not be successful), there may be no other alternative. As is the case for other special

Few museums have been started from scratch by municipal governments.

interest groups in society, museum supporters have the right, and indeed the responsibility, to take part in local politics.

In summary, if you are able to do effective prior planning, public relations and political work, and if you have developed a solid case and are able to demonstrate strong public support, your task in convincing municipal councils to support your museum will be much easier. However, you must be prepared to persevere. Do not give up after a first or second rebuff. Remember that Sam Waller tried for nearly a quarter of a century before he was successful in obtaining municipal support. If at first you do not succeed, consult the outside resources available, prepare your case, infrastructure, and base of support for a more auspicious time in your community's development. Other museums have succeeded. The trends, the arguments, and the pressures from other levels of government are all in your favour. Good luck! ■

#### Acknowledgements

The author wishes to acknowledge the pioneering work in the field of municipal museums by Dr. Lee Jolliffe which serves as the basis for this article. The author's own original research and reporting on this subject were funded by the Regional Museums Programme of Manitoba Culture, Heritage and Recreation and the Town of The Pas. The opinions expressed are those of the author and not necessarily endorsed by the sponsors.

#### Footnotes

1. This is an edited version of an unpublished report prepared by the author: "Museums and Municipal Funding: Toward A Strategy For Increasing Local Government Support For Heritage Institutions," The Sam Waller Little Northern Museum, The Pas, Man., 1990.

2. Edmund C. Bovey, *Funding of the Arts in Canada to the Year 2000*. Department of Supply and Services, Ottawa, 1986, p. 10.

3. Lee Jolliffe, "Municipal Museums in Canada: Contemporary Directions," thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, University of Leicester, England, 1987, pp. 37-39, 145.

4. *Ibid.*, pp. 24, 30, 61, 131.

5. *Ibid.*, pp. 1-2; Edmund C. Bovey, op. cit., p. 33; Steve Neufeld, "The Role of the Municipality in the Support of its Museums," *Currently*, August 1989, p. 5.

6. Lee Jolliffe, op. cit., pp. 98-99, 145.

7. *Ibid.*, pp. 104, 73; "Culture Statistics: Heritage Institutions, Preliminary Statistics, 1985-1986," Department of Supply and Services, Ottawa, 1989, p. 54; Edmund C. Bovey, op. cit., p. 83.

8. "Culture Statistics: Government Expenditures on Culture in Canada, Preliminary Statistics, 1987," Department of Supply and Services, Ottawa, 1990, p. 33.

9. Lee Jolliffe, op. cit., p. 45.

10. Evelyn Silber, "A Future for Museums: Debating the Role of Municipal Museums and Art Galleries," *Museums Journal*, Vol. 88, No. 4, 1989, pp. 183, 185; Lee Jolliffe, op. cit., pp. 29, 74; Edmund C. Bovey, op. cit., p. 83.

11. Grant Tyler, "Association of Manitoba Museums Municipal Taxation and Support Survey Report," Association of Manitoba Museums, Winnipeg, 1987.

12. Brian Dixon et al., *The Museum and the Canadian Public*, CultureCan Publications, Ottawa, 1974, pp. 62, 88, 121-122; Edmund C. Bovey, op. cit., p. 28.

13. Two works which have proved helpful to the author are *Designs for Fund-Raising: Principles, Patterns, Techniques*, by Harold J. Seymour, McGraw Hill, New York, 1966; and *The Woman's Day Book of Fund Raising*, by Perri and Harvey Ardman, St. Martin's Press, New York, 1980.

14. A summary of the museological literature on these matters can be found in Thistle, op. cit., pp. 10-17.

15. Dorothy Strachan and Judy Dent, *Long and Short Term Planning: A Participant Workbook Developed by Skills Program for Policy Volunteers in Recreation, Fitness and Sport*, Tyrell, Gloucester, Ont., 1985; Barry Lord and Gail Dexter Lord ed., *Planning Our Museums*, National Museums of Canada, Ottawa, 1983.

16. Lee Jolliffe, op. cit., p. 172.

### The Case of the Sam Waller Museum

The Museum's founder, Sam Waller, immigrated to Canada from England as an adolescent in 1911 and began a lifelong and truly Victorian penchant for collecting an amazing variety of artifacts and natural history specimens in his private collection. In 1939, his career as a teacher and lay missionary brought him to the "Gateway to Manitoba's North" and he opened his small teacherage on The Pas Indian Reserve to any who wished to view his growing personal teaching collection.

As early as 1949, Mr. Waller began to lobby for the creation of a municipal museum by promoting the value of heritage preservation and enlisting the support of community groups and leaders as well as outside museum professionals. To start this public facility, he offered his own valuable collection and services as curator free of charge. This project foundered on the lack of confidence among supporters in their ability to raise \$18,000 to construct a new facility (or \$5,000 to renovate) and on overriding municipal priorities in the area of sewer and water projects. Some town councillors opposed the very idea of a municipal museum and feared "being saddled with a bunch a junk."

Having failed in this gambit, Mr. Waller proceeded with plans to launch his own private museum which he opened to the public in 1958. Run on his meagre pensions and the proceeds of the donations box, the Little Northern Museum, as it was then called, soon became a widely recognized asset to the town. However, his request for an easement on \$200 in property taxes was narrowly defeated in 1959.

In the late 1960s Mr. Waller allied himself with a movement to create a combined community

library-museum complex. This too failed to obtain the necessary municipal and community support. Then, in co-operation with the local Rotary Club, a 1970 Manitoba centennial project was undertaken to construct a new museum building that would house Mr. Waller and his growing collection at a cost of \$25,000, which included a \$6,000 capital grant from the Town of The Pas. To achieve this, Mr. Waller had given his capital assets and collection to a corporate entity established by The Pas Rotary Club which undertook to operate the Museum as a volunteer project for the community.

With this influential backing, in 1973 — nearly a quarter of a century after first broaching the subject — the Town of The Pas signed an agreement to assist with operating expenses and to take over the facility upon Mr. Waller's death. This eventuality occurred in 1978 and the municipality then assumed full responsibility. Subsequently, the Museum was integrated as a full line department by means of a by-law passed in 1983.

In the same year, after the tenure of untrained staff, the town hired a curator with professional training and experience. By 1990, the Museum had developed along several lines, including the achievement of regional museum funding and the addition of a second full-time curatorial position to assist with the growth of the Museum and its programs in a new \$1.5-million facility.

The seven-year period ending in 1990 saw the Museum's operating budget increase by 272.7%. The contribution from the Town of The Pas had risen by 165.4% and non-municipal revenues had also grown by a substantial 4,331% to make up 34.3% of the funds required. Per capita spending on the Museum by the Town of The Pas has ranged as high as \$7.40, standing at \$7.23 in 1990.



