

THE SAM WALLER MUSEUM SCENE

NO. 10, FEBRUARY 1993

*** SPECIAL ISSUE: ON THE VALUE OF OUR MUSEUM ***

Editor's View

For the first time in the 53 issues of this vehicle and its predecessor the Little Northern Museum Scene, the regular format of our newsletter has been set aside in order to present a special issue focussing on the value of The Sam Waller Museum to its community.

This move was stimulated by a 19 November 1992 letter from the Hon. Bonnie Mitchelson, Minister of Manitoba Culture, Heritage and Citizenship, which was the subject of December's editorial. In brief, she warned museums to plan on a reduction or total elimination of the already very small operating grants provided in light of the government's deficit difficulties as if the miniscule provincial government expenditure on museums is breaking its financial back. Beyond this sophistry however are more serious misunderstandings and, indeed, misrepresentations of reality.

The Minister intimates that taxpayers "can not afford" to fund museums. In fact, we know that government expenditures on museums are offset by resulting tax revenues to say nothing of the tourist and other stimuli to local economies. It also might be argued that museums have already received cutbacks in greater proportion than our share of the deficit. Witness the reduction in funding by the rate of inflation each year since current levels were set and frozen in 1985, a 22% cut to the Manitoba Heritage Conservation Service, and a 48.3% cut in the funding available through the Manitoba Heritage Federation.

The Minister also implies that museums are not "essential services" and that "priorities" must be chosen carefully. However, in the face of many requests to undertake a policy development process in the museum field, no action has been taken by the province to determine exactly what priorities should be maintained. Cuts have been made in the past and will be made again in this round of restraint with absolutely no discussion with museums about what the priorities should be.

According to the Minister, museums are liable to have their operating grants eliminated because they are not considered--even by her, the provincial politician charged with the responsibility for these institutions--to be "vital social services". In her very next sentence, she states "Our province is increasingly recognized as an attractive place to live and raise a family, work, start a business, and create jobs." The Minister seems to ignore the significant role healthy museums play in this very attractiveness. In the emerging service based economy, both employees and businesses are mobile and local amenities become crucial in holding employment investment and in marketing in search of new investments. Museum services add to the quality of life in a community and are significant elements in what is referred to as the "stay option". A study by the United States Senate found that the most important factors in business de-

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VITAL

cisions relating to economic development are not the tax rate or labour costs, but the quality of life and the cultural attractions in a community. Businesses have realised that human resources are their most precious assets and that local cultural facilities such as museums help to attract and hold an educated workforce.

In short, it is clear that cutting back spending on museums would damage the economy more than it would serve deficit reduction. We may be disappointed, but perhaps not altogether surprised, that this kind of threat is being made by the present provincial government. It surely is a sign of the current political if not economic times that museums must now call a halt to our primary activity--preserving and educating the public about our heritage--and spend precious time and energy justifying our existence. In an attempt to persuade the Minister and others who deny that museums are affordable, essential to the well-being of our communities, and vital social services, the following will focus in detail on exactly how The Sam Waller Museum benefits this community.

Museum activities can be broken down into four essential parts: 1) collecting heritage objects, 2) properly preserving these collections for posterity, 3) studying these objects to produce knowledge, and 4) using the resulting knowledge and objects to educate the public about their heritage.

COLLECTING

It is well understood that a society is built on its past culture and history and that a basic function of every society is to perpetuate itself by transmitting a central body of traditional knowledge, skills, values, and beliefs to new generations. Of course, museums are dedicated to this purpose and, by so doing, they support the development of a collective identity and pride in the society's own traditions. A society without a clear understanding of its own past is simply a helpless amnesiac. As George Santayana wrote: "Those who cannot remember the past will be condemned to repeat it."

The Sam Waller Museum has done a significant service to the people of this community by collecting elements of its past which otherwise would have been destroyed and lost forever like the many resources we all regret not having preserved. Who now would not wished to have preserved heritage resources like the last operating steam paddlewheeler on the Saskatchewan River or the records of The Pas Lumber Company which the community previously burned and left on the river ice to be destroyed.

Even while it was operated by Sam Waller as a one man private project, our Museum collected an extensive variety of valuable objects which illustrate our heritage. Products of the Joseph Reader printing press at Oonicup dating back to the 1890s showing the Cree intellectual history of this community; items illustrating our fur trade heritage such as the delicate French regime letter scale; as well as many natural history specimens such as local bird nests and eggs are among the more than 12,000 objects in our collections which provide a unique and irreplaceable conception of our natural setting and history. No other institution serves the community in this way. Without the Museum, the history and natural heritage of this community would certainly be much less well understood and appreciated than they are at present to the detriment of our own identity and that of future generations. The question is can a true community prosper, or even exist, without a firm grasp of its roots?

Once destroyed, heritage resources are non-renewable. Our Museum collects and preserves these irreplaceable resource materials for the benefit of present and future generations.

PRESERVATION

In our new facility located in a provincial historic site known as The Pas Community Building and Court House--which itself might now be a hole in the ground or a parking lot instead of a central symbolic anchor in a revitalised downtown core if it were not for the preservation and adaptive re-use project aimed at creating a new home for the Museum--we can provide the best possible physical care for the rare and fragile evidence of our heritage.

Paper, wood, and other organic materials such as natural history specimens represented in our collections become fragile and fugitive as they age, particularly so if they are kept in a poor environment with widely fluctuating temperatures and relative humidities. Because we were able to make such a good case to outside funders, we have been able to afford climate control, proper storage equipment, and other professional quality systems which will allow us to provide the best possible setting for preserving our collections long enough to benefit future generations. Collecting heritage objects confers an unavoidable responsibility on museums for the proper care of these materials, arising both from ethical and practical considerations (Why spend time and effort collecting if you cannot preserve the results?). The Sam Waller Museum can now provide the proper conditions for preserving heritage objects in a facility which is second to none in the province--indeed in the entire country--for an institution of our size and isolation from metropolitan centres. We plan to pass on our conservation knowledge to others by advising and training workers from other museums in the region as well as by offering programmes on topics such as instructing women on how to properly preserve their own wedding dresses.

RESEARCH

The third major responsibility of museums is research in order to provide accurate and complete information to the public in exhibits and programmes as well as to create knowledge for its own sake.

Any readers who are familiar with the published history on The Pas for example will realise that it is a very confused and contradictory body of literature. The research carried on at the Museum has helped to clarify some of this confusion--correcting the popular errors afoot on the date of the establishment of the first permanent Hudson's Bay Company post at The Pas (1856), or the date of the signing of an adhesion to Treaty 5 by the local First Nation (1876). Accuracy is a fundamental requisite for any history. Research now underway will attempt to clarify exactly when the French first built Fort Paskoyac here in The Pas for our new exhibits.

On the natural history side, if anyone is to truly understand the basis of our significant agricultural industry, we need to be clear on the origins of the soils in this region. Some sources refer to "delta", others to "flood plain". Simple accuracy in our exhibits and programmes demands that these kinds of issues be properly sorted out. Otherwise, our visitors will not be getting what they expect, and deserve, from a museum--an authoritative and accurate view of their heritage.

Apart from the research which will improve the quality of our own exhibits, the Museum assists outsiders with a variety of projects. The Museum receives requests from the general public, teachers, businesses, and governments (one in the midst of typing this newsletter for information on free trader J.H. Gordon, the namesake of a main thoroughfare in town) to which we respond throughout the year. For example, a researcher who is writing a book on the workers and working conditions on the Hudson Bay Railroad construction has used our archival collection and has discovered unique pieces of information, not the least of which was a photograph of the first train on the Hudson Bay line found nowhere else in his search.

The Museum also receives requests from scientists looking for data contained in our extensive collection of natural history specimens. For example, scientists have asked us for data allowing them to test for mercury levels in loon feathers from specimens collected during the 1940s in comparison to levels in specimens collected in the 1990s. Our knowledge about changes in our environment would be much poorer if it were not for collections of natural history specimens

made by enthusiasts such as Sam Waller and preserved in institutions such as our Museum. Indeed, our extensive collection of natural history specimens is recognised by experts in the field to be one of historic importance.

In short, The Sam Waller Museum serves to increase knowledge in the local as well as national and international context. This benefits everyone now and in the future.

EDUCATION

Perhaps the most important, if only the most visible, benefit of our Museum lies in the field of public education. In philosophical terms, our Museum plays a role in fostering a self-awareness, positive identity, and pride in our community which serves in the development of social cohesion by providing a focus on common reference points in our heritage which belongs to everyone. By focussing on educating about heritage, museums foster a sense of stability and community rootedness. This serves as an antidote to the disruption of increasingly rapid social change--what Alvin Toffler refers to as "future shock".

In light of the overweening "presentism" characteristic of most modern media, museums provide important perspectives on the past to counter the narrow, exclusive concern for the present which ignores the origins and development of the issues in modern life. Everywhere except in museums we are losing sight of the concept that we all belong to a succession of generations stretching back into the past and ahead into the future making us only temporary stewards of our world with responsibilities to preserve it to hand on to future generations.

In more practical terms, museums provide associational spaces where people come to interact and have an enjoyable experience with family and friends, thus meeting a basic human need for affiliation and stimulation. Over the years since our Museum was opened to the public in 1958, more than 75,000 people have been able to enjoy such interaction and stimulation. Once open to the public in our new facility, we expect to host as many as 10,000 visitors each year. This is realistic because of the attractiveness of our new Museum as well as the emerging social trends. People are increasingly looking for more varied quality leisure experiences and "lifelong learning" experiences. Museums are ideally suited to meet these needs. The aging of the population profile and the associated increasing public interest in heritage are trends which museums are also well suited to serve.

Apart from the benefits to society in general, the Museum has identified school-age children as its primary target market. A primary function of any society is to educate its youth. Since all education is based on accumulated experience such as that found in our Museum's collections, we serve as a unique learning resource. Psychology teaches us that children's learning is founded on their experience with concrete objects and that the importance of objects to learning extends into adult life. Our schools tend to use few three-dimensional objects in their teaching and tend to operate primarily in the abstract, well removed from reality.

By using their collections, museums objectify facts for students, allowing abstract concepts to be taught by means of concrete objects. Museums enrich the curriculum and extend the capabilities of the formal education system by providing experience with real objects. Museums also help to develop visual literacy skills, extend metaphorical thinking processes, as well as to strengthen basic skills (reading, numeracy, etc.) by application in a new setting. Museums have also been found to be effective in meeting the needs of both exceptional and special needs students.

We know that many studies have found Canadian children to be "woefully ignorant" of their history. Where better to deal with this situation than in our Museum where the resources for the study of

this community are available? The Sam Waller Museum currently provides a variety of unique programmes for schools ranging from hands-on experience with rocks and minerals, through pioneer family materials, to historic walking tours and nature hikes. Once staff have more time after the completion of the exhibit development phase, more programmes will be offered.

The Museum also provides programmes for adults. In the past, we have offered workshops on oral history, conferences on local and northern history, and a recent slide lecture on The Pas at Confederation, 1867. The Museum has also provided space and expertise to the Northern Juried Art Show and has produced a variety of our own temporary exhibits. As a regional museum, we provide professional training and advice to other institutions across the north.

OTHER BENEFITS

The Sam Waller Museum plays an important role in promoting a positive image of this community. During a time when most of the media coverage concerning The Pas was of a negative character, the Museum received a good deal of attention regarding its success in our major capital development and other activities. We have earned an excellent reputation among outsiders regarding the quality of our institution and the level of support received from our municipality. We have been called on to distribute our products and have published articles provincially, nationally, and internationally. Our Museum is clearly a very positive element in the perceptions of outsiders about our community. As Tacitus said of the Greeks, "the most learned and polite people the world ever knew delighted in antiquities" --so too the people of The Pas.

Another important social benefit of this and other museums is found in the political realm. Philosophically and in real terms, museums have a political impact in the sense of helping to increase control over one's own life. We do this by collecting, preserving, and providing access to knowledge--and knowledge is power. Free intellectual access to information is an essential cornerstone of democratic life. The ideal in a free society is to decentralise and open up access to information in contrast to the Orwellian nightmare where Winston Smith's job in the novel 1984 was to destroy the historic record in order to uphold the tyrannical regime. Local collections of objects and records such as ours counter the centralising of knowledge power in metropolitan centres which is so frustrating to rural and northern people. For example, The Sam Waller Museum is now preparing to accept responsibility for the government records of the Town of The Pas. The Museum will be preserving and providing access to these significant records which document information, rights, and responsibilities which are of day-to-day importance to local citizens.

Of course, museums also serve recreational needs. In 1989-90 more than 56.8 million people visited Canadian heritage institutions which was up by 5% for museums--notable in contrast to other arts activities and in light of the economic recession. Surveys find that 79% of Canadians regard museums as an enjoyable experience. In fact, museums receive more visits each year than the total attendance at all professional sports combined. As noted above, The Sam Waller Museum has hosted 75,000 people and will certainly increase this rate of attendance in future.

The final social benefit of museums to be discussed here is economic stimulus. Even though economic spin-offs from museum activities are significant, however, we must be cautious about placing too much stress on economic justifications for our existence. The true value of museums cannot be measured on the balance sheet bottom line, but rather must be evaluated on their contributions to society as cultural and educational institutions.

Nevertheless, museums are part of a major cultural industry--Canada's fourth largest. Museums continue to be a growth industry. As noted

above, even in times of recession, museum attendance continues to grow. The museum labour force has also increased by 74% over the last decade compared with 39% growth in the overall labour force. Museum jobs are without a doubt low cost, labour intensive, and "smokeless". More jobs per dollar invested are generated by museums than by any manufacturing industry and we rank high with other service industries in this regard. As much as 85% of the money spent on museums goes to salaries and the purchase of supplies which all circulates in the local economy. Indeed, for every dollar spent on museums between \$3 and \$4 is returned to the local economy and subsequent tax returns to governments equal their initial expenditures on museums.

Museums also play an very important role in Canada's tourism industry. As much as 29% of tourist spending (the largest single category, greater than boating, skiing, hunting, and spectator sports combined) is generated by the sector including museums. Tourists inject between \$5.37 and \$11.28 into the local economy per visit to museums. Canadian government studies indicate that tourism (with the heritage field making up the largest proportion of this sector) has the greatest potential for growth of any industry in the country.

All of this positive economic activity has in the past and certainly will in future apply to The Sam Waller Museum in The Pas. More specifically in local terms, the redevelopment of our new facility in the downtown core of The Pas has certainly served to increase surrounding property values. More gas, meals, souvenirs, and beds will be sold as a consequence of our very existence. We have sponsored activities in the past which have brought many into the community. This will be repeated again as we sponsor a two-day course in early March.

Our Museum provides employment for two full time staff and as many as 7 seasonal positions. The economic impact of our 1992 budget ranges from \$300,000 to \$400,000. Our recent capital expenditures amounting to \$1.6 million were all made during a time of recession. It is also to be especially noted that the vast majority of these capital dollars was attracted from outside this community (\$1.37 million or 85.6%). The Museum has created an extremely high rate of return on the investment of local tax-based and donated revenues unmatched by any other capital facility in this community. Our new Museum facility will be a long-term asset for this community which will certainly add its services to the "stay option."

SUMMARY

In reviewing the above facts, it becomes clear that Madam Minister's assertion that Manitobans cannot afford museums is wrong-headed in the extreme. Spending on museums (many of which are located outside the perimeter of Winnipeg) is in fact a significant stimulus to the local economies affected and an important element in creating a "stay option" for our communities. Clearly what we cannot afford is the threatened elimination of funding for museums by the provincial government. This would be simply a dogmatic knee-jerk reaction which will damage local economies, not to mention undermine the primary social functions of museums, much more than it would help to solve our deficit problem.

It should also be apparent to anyone who makes an honest effort to examine reality that museums are indeed "essential social services" which are undeniably "vital" to the well-being, identity, education, democracy, and ultimately to the preservation of our communities. We all need to take the time now to make our politicians at all levels--federal, provincial, and municipal--acutely aware of this reality before irreparable damage is done.