



# MAKING THE INVISIBLE VISIBLE

## Negotiating change in small museums

**Kathryn Gagnon**  
Curator/  
Manager  
Cowichan  
Valley Museum  
& Archives

**“This community was invisible to me.”**

*Visitor comment, Cowichan Valley Museum & Archives, 2014*

The above quote demonstrates the power of small museums. A visitor expresses their surprise after seeing the exhibition *Otipeyimsowak: We Are Our Own People*, exploring the culture and identity of the Cowichan Valley Métis Nation, at the Cowichan Valley Museum and Archives (CVMA) in 2014. A small museum such as ours is able to engage with the diverse

communities we serve, and construct narratives in partnership with them. In doing so, the dominant narrative of settlement history is tempered by the inclusion of previously omitted voices.

Who is telling the stories, and whose stories are being told? “We’re still here!” exclaimed Quwqumalwut Joan Brown, Executive Director of the Snuneymuxw First Nation, during a discussion about the connection between language preservation and contemporary canoe culture. Small museums provide a platform for featuring once excluded communities; people made invisible in the past are finally made visible.

## History through the lens of a small museum

Through a local lens, small museums can show how world events, or even unethical government policies, can have catastrophic effects on families, friends and neighbours. Our 2016 exhibition, *They Were Just Gone: Japanese Canadians in the Cowichan Valley*, provided the springboard for a new permanent display that looks at the devastating and sudden impact of internment on the Japanese community, and all that its members lost: their land, their belongings and, for many, their citizenship (in most cases Canadian). In our small space, the display offers a powerful learning opportunity for visitors. After watching the video, *Do You Remember Me?*, about Asian Canadians in the Cowichan Valley, a young man said of the forced removal of people of Japanese ancestry, “I had no idea that this happened in Canada.”

Small museums serve their communities by addressing issues relevant to them. The CVMA, located on the unceded lands of the Quw'utsun Tribes, has been exploring issues of language and culture over the years through a variety of exhibitions, while collecting materials for permanent display. The 2015 Hul'q'umi'num' language preservation exhibition, *tthu hwsteli hwulmuhw | Coast Salish Canoe Pullers*, provided an environment for Indigenous Elders and youth to both teach and learn about identity, living history and traditional culture. Much of the narrative was presented in both Hul'q'umi'num' and English, including audio/video recordings of language speakers. By embracing the principles of Truth and Reconciliation, the museum's ties with a previously underrepresented community have been strengthened.

Sent Away from Home -  
 Japanese Canadians in the  
 Cowichan Valley, 2018  
 Photo credit: Eric Marshall







*Do You Remember Me?*  
Asian Canadians Gallery, 2018  
Photo credit: Eric Marshall

---

**A small museum such as ours is able to engage with the diverse communities we serve, and construct narratives in partnership with them. In doing so, the dominant narrative of settlement history is tempered by the inclusion of previously omitted voices.**

---

Small museums can respond quickly to community concerns about local issues and to local events. The CVMA exhibition, *Kinsol Trestle: Past, Present, Future?*, advocated for the preservation of the historic railway bridge, threatened by demolition in 2006. Over 12,000 people added their names to a petition to save it, which was presented to the legislature in Victoria by then-MLA John Horgan. Visitors to Cowichan for the 2008 North American Indigenous Games were offered complimentary cultural experiences with the exhibition, *Knitting Together: Cowichan Communities and Cultures*, about the iconic Cowichan sweater, and *Cowichan Voices*, a language preservation project with Quamichan Elder Ruby Peter and Dr. Donna Gerds. A small museum can collaborate with a community to provide a place of learning. The 2018 exhibition, *halhukw' siiye'ue / Flying Friends*, was curated by students in the Master of Arts Linguistics of a First Nations Language program at the ta'ulthun sqwal Hul'q'umi'num' Language Academy in Duncan.

Small museums inspire communities through collaborative relationships. After the permanent outdoor display, *Duncan's Chinatown*, was installed in 2010, families featured in the exhibition — and whose personal archives hold the evidence of exclusionary government policies, such as head tax certificates — commemorated local Chinese Canadian pioneers by donating a statue to the City of Duncan.

We rely on partnerships with local organizations, such as the Cowichan Intercultural Society, and partnering in university-initiated projects that help us achieve far more than we could on our own. For example, *Asian Canadians on Vancouver Island: Race, Indigeneity and the Transpacific*, is a community-based archival research project at the University of Victoria that supported the museum by providing interns and funding for our exhibition. *The Chinese Canadian Artifact Project* allowed us to create more access to our collection. *The Punjabi Canadian Legacy Project* — an initiative of the Royal BC Museum, the South Asian Studies Institute and the University of the Fraser Valley — helped us spotlight the multicultural community of Paldi, a former logging town known for its harmonious, but distinct, residential enclaves of people of South Asian, Japanese, Chinese and European ancestry.

### **An unexpected visitor experience**

Although we are a small community museum, the sophisticated presentation of our new displays signals to visitors a larger, urban museum, thanks to the expertise of André & Associates Interpretation and Design (AAID), an award-winning company known for its national and international projects. Working with AAID seemed out of our reach (we're small, as is our budget); however, after contacting president Bianca Message and sharing our vision for new



Quamichan Elder  
Ruby Peter blessing  
the *tthu hwsteli*  
*hwulmuhw* | Coast  
Salish Canoe Pullers  
exhibit, 2015



galleries and new interpretative goals, they took us on. In 2013, we commissioned AAID to prepare a Preliminary Site Assessment Report. Bianca worked closely with us to elicit a new, less didactic storyline and develop a plan to achieve our targets. A substantial BC | Canada 150 grant allowed us to move forward with a renovation.

Collaborating with the AAID team was an inspiring process, requiring preparation, the ability to respond to new requests, and compromise. With extraordinary volunteer support for the project, the renovation has culminated in vibrant, relevant galleries, developed with, and for, our communities.

### A vision for all

Organizational transformation is a process of examining an institution's values, vision and mission, and its relevancy to the communities it serves — an essential journey for any small museum. Do we recognize the paradigm shifts in our industry and incorporate them into our planning? Are we evolving to reflect the needs and priorities of our communities? To re-envision our organizations, we have to challenge our assumptions and the reasons we need to embrace change. All stakeholders — volunteers, members, staff, governance, community members and the director — need to be included in the process. One of our goals is to create organizations as diverse as the communities we serve.

### Seeing oneself

The absence of stories about diverse communities denies their members the opportunity to see themselves — their faces, names, work, families and homes — in the museum's narrative. It can also be a lost opportunity to examine our understanding of "difficult" history. The forced removal of Japanese Canadians during World War II is a national story with a local chapter. Mrs. Yano of Paldi, a beloved friend and mother, was torn from her home and community to be detained in the livestock barns at Hastings Park in Vancouver. The inclusion of her experience in the museum's narrative is an acknowledgement that this happened — *here* — in the Cowichan Valley. Descendants, families and friends of those like Mrs. Yano see their stories made visible in our small museum.

---

**The absence of stories about diverse communities denies their members the opportunity to see themselves — their faces, names, work, families and homes — in the museum's narrative.**

---



KATHRYN  
GAGNON

Quamichan Elder Ruby Peter and her daughters blessing the canoe for the *tthu hwsteli hwulmuhw* | Coast Salish Canoe Pullers exhibit, 2015  
Photo credit: Beth Wetherill



