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Marianne Bell,  
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& Kathryn  
Gagnon

# REPORT BACK FROM THE SMALL MUSEUMS PANEL

at the *Museums as Learning Environments*  
Course, Cultural Resource Management  
Program, University of Victoria, June 2019

This article presents the themes that emerged during a Small Museums panel in Victoria in June of 2019. The panel was part of the course, *Museums as Learning Environments*, offered by the University of Victoria's Cultural Resource Management Program. It was held at the Royal BC Museum and was facilitated by Dr. Darlene Clover. The four panelists identified some of the

particularly challenging and rewarding aspects of working in small museums, which are shared here.

The Small Museums panel event included a variety of participants from BC and beyond, some of whom are currently working in the field, while others are developing their career plans. Participants were invited to reflect on how the terms education and learning are applied in museums, and to consider their own educational philosophy, values and approaches. For example, participants were encouraged to reflect on whether the



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goal of museum learning is to fill visitors with facts, or to engender citizenship, dialogue and social transformation. The participants were also invited to design a learning program for a museum exhibit or space, which produced some wonderful and thought provoking results. *The Museums as Learning Environments* course also included opportunities to learn with the educational staff at the Royal BC Museum, the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, and the Maritime Museum of BC.

The Small Museums panel consisted of Gillian Booth from the University of Victoria Legacy Galleries, Kathryn Gagnon of the Cowichan Valley Museum & Archives, Lorraine Bell (who works at the Qualicum Beach Museum and is also studying small museums for her PhD work at the University of Victoria) and Marianne Bell of the Cumberland Museum & Archives. We were asked what drew us toward small museums, and to describe how we understand them to be qualitatively different learning environments compared to larger institutions.

Pauline Joe, using an Indian Head Spinner, *Knitting Together: Cowichan Communities & Cultures* exhibit, 2008, Cowichan Valley Museum & Archives  
Photo credit: Eric Marshall



In terms of the challenging aspects of working in small museums, a few common threads emerged. These included the struggle of many small museums to just keep the doors open due to limited and often precarious funding arrangements. We also noted the difficulty of providing professional development and organizational education opportunities for staff and Boards, due to geographic, time and financial challenges. Finally, there are the persistent issues of adequate storage spaces and achieving professional museum conservation standards, and in developing the in-house capacity for exhibit design and fabrication.

With all of that out of the way, let's get to the good stuff! The panelists and class together identified many of the wonderful aspects of working in small museums.

Opening of the *tthu hwsteli hwulmuhw / Coast Salish Canoe Pullers* exhibit, 2015, at the Cowichan Valley Museum & Archives.  
Photo credit: Beth Wetherill

**At the opening of the new gallery, some visitors also brought their own precious objects and memories that linked them to their families and their town.**

The first was that one can experience a strong community connection when working or volunteering in a small museum. Kathryn Gagnon placed this in the wider context of new curatorial paradigms around shared authority and community engagement, which positions the museum curator/educator as a facilitator of knowledge exchange rather than an expert who transmits information. She suggested that this paradigm shift has happened with ease in small community museums as it has always been the foundation of our work.

By way of example, Gagnon described the development of the new social history gallery at the Cowichan Valley Museum & Archives (CVMA) as a culmination of several years of community consultation and exhibit development with groups such as the Cowichan Tribes, the Métis Association, the community of Paldi, and Chinese-Canadian and Japanese-Canadian resident associations. At the opening of the new gallery, some visitors also brought their own precious objects and memories that linked them to their families and their town.

Gagnon also explained how the major themes of the new gallery were generated by the community, such as “what does it mean to be Métis?” The panel participants were invited to share their stories in their own words, in a conscious minimization of the curator voice.



CVMA has also engaged with local members of the Japanese-Canadian community, many of whom lost nearly everything during the internment, including family documents and photographs. A local Japanese-Canadian mother and daughter contacted the CVMA about class photos in the archives, since all their photos had been lost.

“We found one that included her mother as a little girl and I’m pretty sure we were all crying,” Gagnon explained. “This is one of the many reasons why the collection of class photos, like the ones donated by Joan Mayo to the archives, is so important.” The CVMA has also helped connect members of the community who have gaps in their genealogy, including locating one visitor’s second cousin.

Walking tour  
from Miner’s  
Memorial Weekend,  
Cumberland, 2018.  
Photo credit:  
Lorraine Bell

Marianne Bell described how her deep roots in the village of Cumberland are woven into her approach to educational programming at the museum. She shared her view that the entire village can be a learning environment, as she conducts activities that range from school groups in the museum, to organized walking tours, to impromptu history lessons in the line-up at the deli counter.

“Someone in the line-up might ask, ‘I wonder why they are logging like that on the mountain?’ so I just jump in and explain how the history of the E and N land grant has shaped land use right into the present,” she explained.

Community connections are also evident in the ownership of the Cumberland Museum & Archives. Local people, often descendants of the historical figures in the exhibits, will organize meetings and social events in the museum, and will frequently share their knowledge of local history with museum staff. M. Bell also shared an example of a ten-year-old participant in her school program, who later took the initiative to conduct his own tours of the museum with family and friends.

A second theme that emerged during the panel event, was how smaller museums can present the details of local stories, artefacts and issues. Lorraine Bell commented that smaller museums can be a valuable archive of everyday life, and can present alternative perspectives on history that may have only been documented in that specific location. Place-based accounts of historical events, family histories, local characters, and folk histories can resonate deeply with visitors and provide unique avenues of empathy and meaning-making.

Gagnon offered the example of the multi-cultural community of Paldi, whose history has been documented by the CVMA. She also argued that encouraging visitors to connect personally to histories of injustice, such as the Japanese-Canadian dispossessions and the Chinese Head Tax, can help develop empathy and awareness of similar contemporary issues.

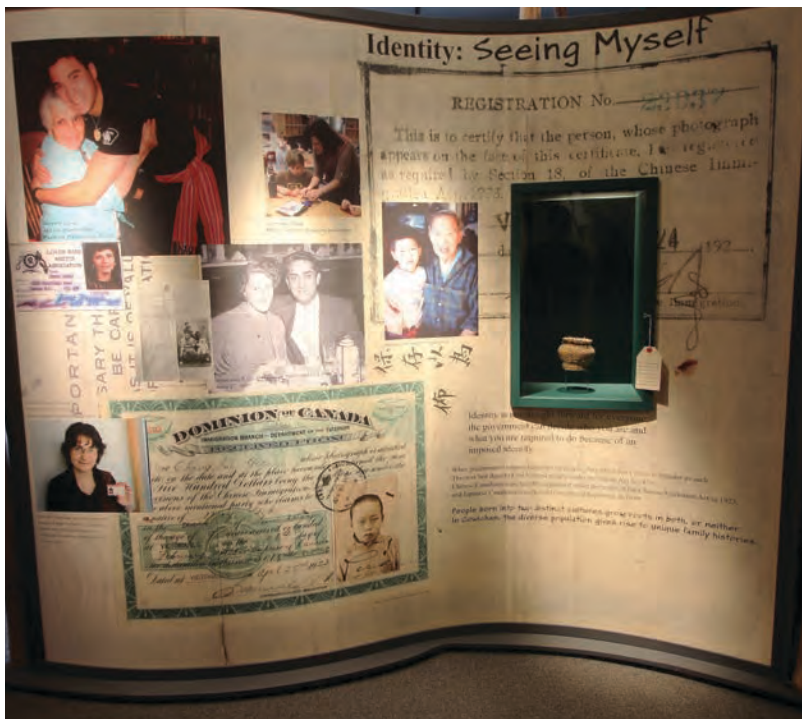
Marianne Bell discussed how local history education can go beyond famous names and well-known facts to share a more personal and local perspective. She suggested that the relatively well-known story of Ginger Goodwin (who lived and organized in Cumberland) was only part of a complex story of community and place, and the struggle to create social change. A fascinating project involving the Cumberland Museum & Archives and the Village of Cumberland is the naming of alleyways after local people as a means of

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Identity: Seeing Myself, at the Cowichan Valley Museum & Archives.  
Photo credit: Lorraine Bell

honouring and sharing local history. The main streets were already named after counties in England and Robert Dunsmuir, but the alleyway naming project has increased local interest in researching the village's history. It has also involved consultations with the local K'ómoks First Nation, as well as renewed attention to the historical role of women in the community.

A third theme touched upon the idea that small museums can be both nimble and accessible. Having small staff numbers with broad job descriptions can lend a degree of ease to collaboration between departments, as curatorial, interpretive and educational responsibilities tend to overlap. In addition, there can be a degree of freedom to take risks or experiment with new ideas such as applying a post-colonial or labour perspective to exhibits. Accessibility is not really an issue at small museums given their lower admission costs to visit, their geographic proximity to local people, and the widely accepted idea that the community museum belongs to everyone. This approach can position the

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museum as very open to suggestions, ideas and feedback from community members. As Gillian Booth expressed, everyday visitor engagement can have a personal, one-to-one, and conversational nature.

The panelists dispelled any idea that small museums are simply smaller, lesser versions of large urban institutions. Instead, we proposed that they are qualitatively different, and offer something unique to their communities, the museum profession and to the wider cultural landscape.

All event participants envisioned many opportunities for museums of all sizes to work together to combine their unique strengths and perspectives. We expressed enormous gratitude to the BCMA, the RBCM and to UVic's Cultural Resource Management Program. Together they have created many learning opportunities to help develop the potential of small museums, and to help small museum workers advocate for the much needed resources and support that will expand this important work.