

A Brief History in Time

Editor's Note: The following is an adaptation of a talk given to the members of the BCMA at the 1974 Conference by Willard Ireland (1914-1979), Former Provincial Archivist and Librarian.

Many will not know much about the back history, and yet that's been one of the strengths of the whole movement of the BCMA. There has been a progressive influx of new people, and to me the amazing thing is that they've always been absorbed. You may come in thinking you're new and different, and you find out that you've got just as kooky a group to work with in the Association as you have at home!

Well, we'll say in 1953 there wasn't a single provincial historic park in BC. There wasn't one national historic park in BC. There really wasn't a provincial museum as we think of it today, because by law, it was

simply the Provincial Museum of Natural History and Anthropology and consequently, it couldn't do anything about what you might call 'human history'.

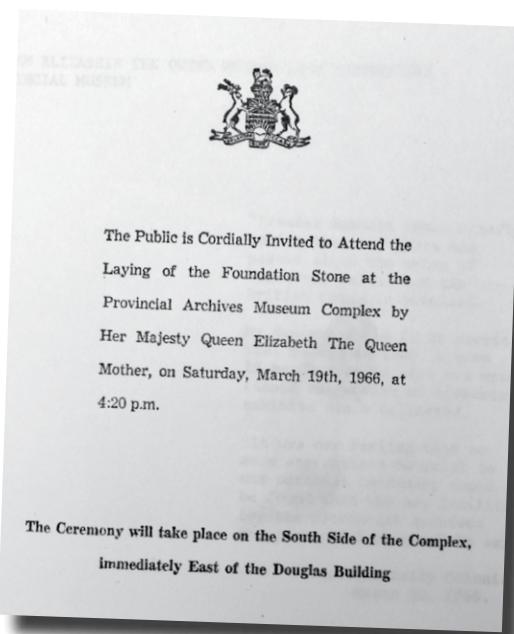
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There was no legislation in BC covering historic or archaeological sites or their preservation. Now some of you are going to say, "he's crazy, he doesn't know, there was!" There was quite the most ridiculous act known to man. It was called the "Historic Sites Marking Act", or something like that. What we could do was put up a sign which said that this was a Historic Site, and there was a penalty if you defaced the sign, but there was no penalty if you defaced the site!

There was no formal structure, and that was the museum world of BC roughly twenty years ago.

But there was a change in the air, there really was. What I want to do is give you some of the roots of why things happened, because in a matter of about really, four years, from '57 until '61, the pattern was changed appreciably in more ways than one, and there were a number of factors that were at play. Looking back on it now I can realize the real significance of the 1958 Centennial, the first one. British Columbia has never been the same. It happened just at the right time, and we were able to do things that I guess only British Columbians could do. We went to both Alberta and Saskatchewan to find out what they had done for their Golden Jubilees. It was curious, because everything that we thought we wanted to do they said, "at pain of death, don't try it!" But some of us remembered that we were British Columbians and they

But some of us remembered that we were British Columbians and they were Albertans and Saskatchewanians and what they could do maybe we couldn't, but what they couldn't do, we could!



Left: An invitation posted in Roundup 1966 for the opening of the Provincial Archives Museum Complex, now known as the Royal BC Museum. Published in Roundup 1966.

were Albertans and Saskatchewanians and what they could do maybe we couldn't, but what they couldn't do, we could! It transformed things, because for the first time we began to move around the Province, they became interested in their history, and for the first time we began to get money for buildings.

Part of our concern was that the Seminars should not come under the control of the big museums, either Vancouver or the Provincial ones, and that we should meet out in the field where the problems were and where the people were. We've really moved around!

I hope that the BCMA will always hang loose. I hope from the way I've described it, you realize how loose we hung in those early days. That was really the secret of success. I say I hope it will continue to be that way, because I would hope that, if I should be here in ten years from now, this Association will be similar in some respects, but will probably be performing quite different functions. I suspect that for generations to come it's going to be there. The one thing that will really make us unique is to avoid the "gee-ing" and "haw-ing" between the big museums and the intermediate museums and the small museums. I just hope that we never forget that our main concern is we're MUSEUMS. The location is not that significant, the size is not that significant. It's the spirit of the people who are trying to do something for the rest of the people of this Province that is the important thing. And I'm proud of it.



Above: Original pamphlet for the "Stop of Interest" markers along BC highways, 1967. These markers are currently under debate due to their cultural insensitivity to Indigenous communities. Photograph first published in Roundup 1967.