



Sticky Notes and Food Labels

Reimagining Multicultural Experiences in the Royal BC Museum

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The Royal British Columbia Museum works closely with a myriad of different BC communities to celebrate the spectacular diversity and historic richness of our province. As the province's museum and archives, we are responsible for sharing their stories in our galleries, travelling exhibitions and public programs.

Recently, we've been working closely with partners in the Indo Canadian community to tease out some significant stories that we feel will help all British Columbians get a richer, fuller sense of our shared history. Sometimes, the perspectives we hear and the narratives we learn challenge how we've historically depicted historical events, era and contributions.

We *like* encountering challenges. Responding to them helps us build a more inclusive, contemporary and dynamic museum.

Recently, we collaborated with Indo Canadian communities to examine our Logging Exhibit. Like all the exhibits in the Royal BC Museum's permanent galleries, the Logging Exhibit boasts plenty of historically accurate and evocative detail: planks of timber that beg to be touched, descriptive text that provides fascinating background info, tools that look as though they were dropped 10 minutes ago when the crew decided to take a quick coffee break.

What's missing is any mention of an entire group of people who were pioneers in British Columbia's logging industry and—given the Douglas fir-sized importance of timber in our province's development—helped shape modern BC.

The Indo Canadian community has deep roots in British Columbia's forestry industry as workers and logging company owners but this exhibit doesn't mention their existence. However, the Royal BC Museum takes its re-

Top: Rajinder Singh Gill and Mr. Gurmail Singh Judge of the Indo Canadian community examining a temporary photographic addition in the Royal BC Museum's Logging Exhibit with Satwinder Kaur Bains, Director of the Centre for Indo Canadian Studies and Associate Professor at the University of the Fraser Valley.
Photo Credit: Royal BC Museum.

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sponsibility to accurately depict BC history with great seriousness and does its best to update old exhibits. Sometimes this means opening ourselves up to a little scrutiny.

So, on November 21, 2015, the Royal BC Museum invited Indo Canadian communities from the Lower Mainland, the Fraser Valley and Vancouver Island to stage an 'intervention' in the Logging Exhibit. The idea was for participants to reframe the historical record by including their stories and perspectives.

More than 100 participants, from teens to seniors, walked through the Logging Exhibit, examined the display and talked with Royal BC Museum staff and each other. Some of the most meaningful interactions took place within families as youth

expressed appreciation for their elders' stories, thirsty for more history they could claim as their own.

Organized by the Royal BC Museum, the Centre for Indo Canadian Studies at the University of the Fraser Valley and the David Lam Centre at Simon Fraser University, the intervention included multimedia stories told by community members and discussions at 'conversation tables' about what the exhibit might look like—and what messages it might convey—in the future. Armed with sticky notes and challenged to provide the museum with candid observations, participants had plenty to say.

Participants talked about many issues and diverse themes ranging from discrimination to the food

eaten at sawmills, from the role played by Chinese corner stores to the need to tell women's stories better, from sacrifices made during the Great Depression to the importance of talking about the Panama Maru incident.

Staging the event in the museum was a powerful symbolic act for the Indo Canadian community.

The event conspicuously and publicly marked what many community members hope is the beginning of a committed long-term relationship and a defining moment in the provincial correction of past wrongs.

Below Left: *Dr Balbir Gurm, Chair of the BC Punjabi Intercultural History Advisory Committee with the Royal BC Museum, in dialogue with community participants in the Modern History Gallery's Logging Exhibition. Photo Credit: Royal BC Museum.*



Below Left: *Generations of families watching the oral history video in the Modern History Gallery's Logging Exhibition. Photo Credit: Royal BC Museum.*



Inviting diverse cultural groups to help revise decades-old museum content is not a new concept for the Royal BC Museum, which successfully partnered with the First Peoples' Cultural Council to develop and create the award-winning feature exhibition *Our Living Languages: First Peoples' Voices in BC* in 2014.

The Royal BC Museum has supported other BC government initiatives to correct the historical record, recently developing school outreach kits, website articles and other materials to commemorate the Chinese Historical Wrongs.

The Ethnic Food History Project is another avenue we've developed to help share the stories of our diverse immigrant histories with the rest of BC. The project began in 2012 when the Royal BC Museum conducted research on Chinese Canadian food collections and stories. We showcased some results in the exhibition *Tradition in Felicities: Celebrating the History of Canada's Oldest Chinatown*.

To follow up, the Royal BC Museum began a close re-examination of food packages and container labels in our Modern History Collection. These artifacts reveal significant information about the past, including information about the appetites and consumption habits of multi-cultural groups in BC.

Reflecting the pulls of supply and demand, BC food suppliers have always catered to both mainstream and specialty cultural demand – including sourcing and selling imported and locally produced foods for cultural minority groups. In immigrants' new lives in a new land like BC, culinary practices are oftentimes the markers and carriers of cultural traditions. Food is a reflection of culture, and food labels are tangible clues of cultural habits and values.

But food labels are also easily perishable and few survive long. Happily, the Royal BC Museum's online team is developing a Food Packaging Digital Project – providing an easily-accessible, highly-visual platform to view and

share scanned images from our food packaging collection. The end result? British Columbians will be able to view and learn more about BC's food history.

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