Alberta Museums Project:
A Final Report on Phase I of the Research

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This research project, whose full title is “Museums in Small Town and Rural Alberta: Sustaining Identities, Economies and Places,” began in 2014 with an Insight grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC; Principal Investigator: Lianne McTavish). Our purpose, in the broadest possible terms, has been to discover, analyse, and compare community-based museums and their practices, understanding them on their own terms, not as smaller versions of large, urban museums. Among other things, we strove to discover what common issues are faced by non-institutional museums, and what strategies they employ for sustainability and growth. Key to understanding the nature of this project is the fact that the term “museum” itself is hotly contested. The traditional role of the museum as an institutional teaching environment is challenged by sites that present personal collections, virtual museums without material artefacts, and commercially-oriented museums. Today there are so many claims on the term that it presents a great diversity of material to sift through, and complicates any attempt to identify, categorize, or evaluate museums.

Equally contested is the role which museums play in their communities. The cultural and economic impact of a museum in a small town, although difficult

to measure, is an important consideration for communities that are often dealing with declining populations, closed businesses, and dwindling tax dollars. Community-based museums often feel the pinch of forces beyond their immediate control, but a case can also be made for valuing the museum for its contributions. These can range from providing employment and volunteer experience to its staff, bringing in tourist dollars, and offering educational programming.

Research on community-based museums is important for several reasons. First of all, much existing scholarship tends to focus on large urban institutions rather than community-based museums, although such scholars as Amy Levin, Fiona Candlin, and Tammy S. Gordon have recently made important contributions by examining small house museums and private collections, some of them in remote locations. We join them by expanding this effort to include the small town and rural museums in Alberta, with a greater emphasis on how these museums articulate conceptions of place, in many cases by subverting rather than adhering to supposedly "professional" museum standards. Secondly, even without the infrastructure, funding levels, and staffing that can be expected in a larger, government-supported museum, we find that rural museums nevertheless engage audiences more effectively, convey messages about local heritage, and create innovative outreach programs. What differs is due to their grass-roots nature, the heightened role of volunteers, and the stronger cultural impact on their communities. Even as we search for the patterns that are specific to small town and rural museums, distinguishing them from larger ones, we recognize that they are all different, subject to unique circumstances depending on their location. While some of these museums are seen by those in the community as money pits for maintaining dusty, irrelevant collections, others are valued as tourist attractions and for their engagement with citizens.

My own role on this project has been as a research assistant. I am currently a PhD student in the History of Art, Design, and Visual Culture at the University of Alberta, and my dissertation is on the historiography of caricature. One of the driving questions of my doctoral research is how we can judge the effectiveness of caricature (or political satire generally) as a tool of persuasion. Although the

museum project is not directly related to this work, it provided me with a second line of research that I have found very rewarding. Interestingly though, both projects hinge on questions of value that are not easily quantifiable – in the case of caricature, its persuasive capacity is difficult to measure, and in the case of museums, the cultural life of a community or the economic spinoff from tourism can only be estimated.

From the start I was given a great deal of freedom to design and fulfil project goals. Early in the project we identified four distinct phases of research, and although they overlap somewhat they have helped us keep track of our progress. Phase 1, field research, has been the most time-consuming but is now complete. This phase allowed us to assemble some concrete, reliable numbers on the museum movement in Alberta, striving to identify and visit all museums, not just small town and rural museums. Phase 2 is conference presentations and structured interviews focusing on selected small town and rural museums, some of which is continuing. To date presentations have been made to the Canadian Historical Association and the Alberta Museums Association at their respective annual conferences. Interviews have been conducted in person or electronically on specific themes. Phase 3 is the design, testing, and launch of our website, which you are now seeing, and Phase 4 is our forthcoming book project, a critical study of community-based museum practices, ethics, and issues in Alberta, embedded within the scholarly literature stemming from critical museum theory and critical heritage studies. This last phase is additionally based on broader research on national and international community-based museums, with another team member undertaking comparative field work in Ontario, Australia, and England.

The initial data-gathering phase of research involved a great deal of road travel to visit rural museums, some of them quite remote. Many rural museums are only open between Victoria Day and Labour Day, and this had an impact on our timeline, but it also gave us an opportunity during the second summer to visit additional museums as we travelled to conduct interviews. I personally drove about 18,000 km in 2015 and 2016, and I visited 202 of Alberta's 311 currently operat-

ing museums[1]. We knew we could never hope to visit them all, but we were also certain that we could visit a more than representative sample: at least a half to two-thirds. In fact at the time of writing we have collectively visited 221 or 71.1% of Alberta museums.

But even before these trips could even begin we needed to first identify all the museums in the province, a task that turned out to be more daunting than we had envisioned. No complete list of Alberta museums existed prior to our project: the Alberta Museums Association website, for example, only documents its member museums – complicated by the fact that its membership fluctuates over time, as member museums gain or lose recognized status. Other museum networks are regionally or thematically specific, often with overlapping membership, while some museums have no official network membership at all. A travel guide from 1996 – the *Heritage Hunter's Guide to Alberta Museums* – was much more complete but almost immediately outdated[2], as many museums have either started or ended operations since then. Several museums have also undergone name changes in recent years. Further investigation revealed a Wikipedia page[3] featuring 226 Alberta museums, as opposed to the AMA website[4] which featured only 120 at the time of access. The Wikipedia page was a far more productive starting point, and I have since expanded that list to a total of 311.

Given the population of Alberta, which is currently 4.05 million,[5] the number of museums per capita is 1 for every 13,021 people. This is considered roughly average for developed countries worldwide – perhaps even a bit below average.[6] Some confusion ensued in tabulating this data where defunct museums still had an online presence (a digital ghost), while several new museums either opened

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1. An additional twenty museums were visited by other members of our research team; they also visited many of the same museums as me.
2. Roberta Hursey, *Heritage Hunter's Guide to Alberta Museums* (Edmonton: Brightest Pebble, 1996). This book also featured ratings based on visitor experience – an approach very much at odds with our project.
3. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_museums_in_Alberta
4. http://public.museums.ab.ca
5. According to the latest provincial census figures compiled in 2015: http://www.municipalaffairs.alberta.ca/documents/msb/2015_Municipal_Affairs_Population_List.pdf , p.12.
6. Unofficial sources have estimated this number at 1 in 10,000. However, given the difficulty of obtaining accurate data for a single province, confirming the ratio on a global scale would be correspondingly more difficult.

during the 2015–2016 period or are planning to open in the near future. In addition, some museums which have been renamed are still represented by their old name on many websites – a different kind of digital ghost where information is copied but not updated. But we now have what appears to be a very complete and up to date list of all Alberta museums.

Finding a consistent way to classify these museums was the next task, in order to determine which ones are most relevant to our study. A simple thematic taxonomy, a seemingly obvious approach, quickly proved to be unworkable as there were far too many cases of overlapping museum content. Characterising a museum as simply “heritage” or “natural history” would have been far too limiting and idealized to accurately reflect the wide variety of actual museum content. A heritage museum might also contain a significant natural history display (Sundre Museum and World of Wildlife), while a dinosaur museum might also include elements of archaeology (Badlands Historical Centre). I eventually decided to identify broader themes which could be broken down into sub-themes for more careful analysis. No matter what choices I made, there were always some borderline cases which defied easy categorization. Some of these became Multi-Focus museums, usually larger institutional museums which could afford to split their resources into different research and exhibition streams, or smaller ones which gave equal weight to more than one theme. Others were classified as Unique, due to their idiosyncratic nature (The World Famous Gopher Hole Museum). More obvious themes include Heritage, Natural History, Art, and Science. Natural Resources includes many oil, gas and coal museums, but also covers less obvious resources such as forestry (Alberta Forest Service Museum), water (Brooks Aqueduct) and clay (Medalta Historic Clay District). Finally, Transportation includes all museums based on modes of travel, whether by rail, road, or air. Organizing museums in this fashion allowed for a more detailed and accurate categorization of thematic content (see Table 1), useful for Phase 1 but not crucial for the more detailed case studies to be disseminated in future publications.

Table 1: Themes and Sub-themes

Themes	Sub-themes	#'s
Art (5)		5
Heritage (237)	Agriculture	8
	Biographical	12
	Cultural	20
	Education	2
	General	183
	Health	3
	Military	3
	Political	2
	Ranching	1
	Sports	3
Multi-Focus (10)		10
Natural History (17)	Avian	3
	Botanical	1
	General	2
	Equine	1
	Local	3
	Prehistoric	7
Natural Resources (12)	Clay	1
	Coal	3
	Forestry	2
	Natural Gas	1
	Oil	2
	Water	3
Science (3)		3
Transportation (17)	Air	7
	Rail	8
	Road	2
Unique (10)	Commercial	5
	Heritage	1
	Private	2
	Public Service	2

One thing that immediately becomes clear from this list is the high preponderance of heritage-themed museums. These tend to focus on the last 200 years, from the first European explorers and fur traders, to the early settlers and growth of towns, normally ending with a 1930s focus. This type of museum (Heritage: General) constitutes 183 or 58% of Alberta museums, with a mix of single-building and open-air types. Heritage museums more generally, which include grain elevator museums, historic houses, and culture-specific museums, make up 237 or 76.2%. Only two sub-themes are numerically significant: there are 12 heritage homes based on a specific individual or family, and 20 that are culturally-specific – mostly First Nations (Blackfoot Crossing), Scandinavian (Norwegian Luft Haus), or Ukrainian (Ukrainian Canadian Archives and Museum of Alberta). Although there are 17 natural history museums, these include dinosaur museums (Devil's Coulee) as well as nature centres (Kerry Wood Nature Centre), bird sanctuaries (Alberta Birds of Prey Centre), and more traditional collections of taxidermy (Den Wildlife Museum), provided that they included interpretive elements. There are also 17 transportation museums, mostly aerospace (Bomber Command Museum of Canada) or railway museums (Alberta Railway Museum). Finally, there are 10 unique museums: some privately-owned and open only by request (Canadian Museum of Making), some purely commercial museums (Fossil World), and some addressing themes that did not fit into any other category (YouthLink Calgary). Given the frequent overlap of themes and types these numbers are somewhat arbitrary, but they do give an indication of the variety and thematic dispersal of museum types.

I also encountered a number of borderline cases, of which I could not be immediately certain of their status as a museum. This forced me to define exactly what constitutes a museum, to elucidate the minimum conditions that have to be met in order for a facility to be considered a museum. Two factors eventually became apparent due to their ubiquity: museums have at least some historical content, and they present that material to the public. Answering this question first became important in regards to the Big Valley Creation Science Museum. My initial feeling was that since this museum was anti-science, deeply ideological, and

full of rhetorical and factual errors, it should be excluded from our project. But on what grounds? How could I ethically defend its exclusion in a way consistent with the project goals? The Creation Science Museum does deal with historical content and it does address the public didactically, even if I do not agree with what it teaches. Furthermore, every museum has a narrative and an agenda, even a typical heritage museum which tells a story about settlement and social progress from a particular perspective of power, race, gender, and class. These narratives and agendas are always ideological in nature, with the proviso that ideology normally operates unconsciously. In the case of the Creation Science Museum, ideology was instead very consciously employed, with the end result that the narrative was unconvincing. But it was clearly not necessary for me to agree with a museum's interpretation of its content in order to include it in our project. In practice, the town of Big Valley treats the Creation Science Museum as one of several attractions, with cross-promotion in their tourist literature.

Additional cases also put these minimum conditions to the test. One was the Fluevog Shoe Museum in Calgary, a commercial museum that displays shoe designs – many of them discontinued – from its own corporate history, along with didactic panels about the founder and the company. Since it meets both conditions it was included. Other privately-owned collections were added or removed primarily according to their public accessibility. Those which have regular hours and public access, such as Edmonton's Militaria Museum, are included, while several significant private collections were left out as they had no pedagogic function, and were only open to private tours. Two of these are rather extraordinary collections belonging to well-known millionaires: Fred Phillips' car collection in Calgary, and Jack Cross' tank collection in Edmonton. However, a third private collection was included – Ian MacGregor's Museum of Making near Cochrane – because it has detailed interpretive elements and curatorial staff despite having limited public access.[7]

Three art museums were also excluded: the Southern Alberta Art Gallery, the University of Lethbridge Art Gallery and the Walter Philips Gallery. In these cases the determining factor was the lack of an historical element: these insti-

7. These three collections are discussed in a 2011 article in Alberta Venture (http://albertaventure.com/2011/11/meet-three-albertans-who-take-collecting-things-to-the-next-level/).

tutions focus exclusively on contemporary art and therefore fall outside of our parameters. Other art museums that include a mix of contemporary and historical exhibitions, such as the Art Gallery of Alberta or the Whyte Museum of the Rockies, were retained.

With these and other data points in place – year of origin, keywords, GPS locations – I began building a searchable database which now forms the core of our website. This initially served as a record of our visits, and allowed us to easily track certain features: how many museums were institutional versus community-based, how many were centennials, how many had archives. It will also serve as a trip planner for tourists, and a research tool as well. Users will be able to cross-reference their keywords to search for themes, locations, regions, or other factors such as archives or network affiliations.

Additional data could be drawn from our research, for example a distribution of museums by region (see Table 2). However, this is of limited use since it tells us nothing new; a strong correlation between population density and number of museums is only to be expected. Furthermore, our regions are borrowed from Alberta Culture and Tourism, which defines regional boundaries rather arbitrarily according to a mix of branding, public perception, common cultural tropes, tradition, and even driving distances.

Table 2: Distribution by Region

Region	#'s
Calgary & Area	29
Central	125
Edmonton & Area	47
North	39
Rockies	9
South	63

Another area of interest that our data may shed light on is how small-town museums are formed (Table 3). As expected, there are strong correlations with several significant grant-based projects, most notably the Centennial

grant program of 1967, Alberta's 20/20 Vision program, Alberta's Main Street Revitalization program (started in 1987), and the more recent Tale of a Town program (some of these, of course, only bore fruit after several years). However, this data is skewed to favour only those museums still operating – indeed, no museum known to have ceased operating has been included in the dataset, as the available information is too sporadic to obtain a consistent view. Even so the table remains incomplete: 49 active Alberta museums or 15.8% are missing key data due to various factors.

Since it is nearly impossible to account for museums that no longer exist, rates of longevity are exceedingly difficult to determine. A lone document from 1958,[8] published by the Canadian Museums Association, lists all the active museums, public galleries, and archives in the country, based on 158 days of field work by a team hired from the Smithsonian – a project not dissimilar to our own. The husband and wife authors list sixteen active museums in Alberta, including a few that are no longer in operation, such as Gurney's Museum in Lethbridge.[9] They also tabulated which reports and directories each museum was listed under, as well as what sources of income the museum reported. Our own data shows that only eleven of these museums are still in existence. This gives a better view of museum longevity, albeit only of a single year.

During my own travels, I came across evidence of at least five museums which had recently closed, some permanently (private collections for the most part, where the owner either passed away or sold the collection) and others which might yet be resurrected (Two Hills and District Historical Museum). The Hudson Antique Museum in Raymond, privately owned by Arc Hudson, closed in 2016 as the owner is retiring. His extensive heritage collection, which includes eleven Hudson cars, is going to be sold.

A table of dates for museums ceasing operation would give a more balanced view of overall support for museums, with an eye towards sustainability rather than museum creation. One thing we might expect to find from such data is that

8. Guthe, Carl E. and Grace M. Guthe, *The Canadian Museum Movement* (Canadian Museums Association, 1958).

9. The Gurney collection stayed in Lethbridge and eventually found its way to the Galt Museum, where it currently resides.

over time, average museum longevity has increased. However, this assumption might be proven false as several of the museums from 1895–1950 were founded directly by various levels of government, and are therefore institutional in nature. They have thus always been considered to be cultural assets deserving of continuing support, a status which community-based museums often struggle to attain. Nevertheless, a more useful version of the table as it stands (see Table 4) shows museum creation by decade, giving a better impression of overall trends that could be associated with broad historical economic and political factors.

Table 3: Museum creation per year

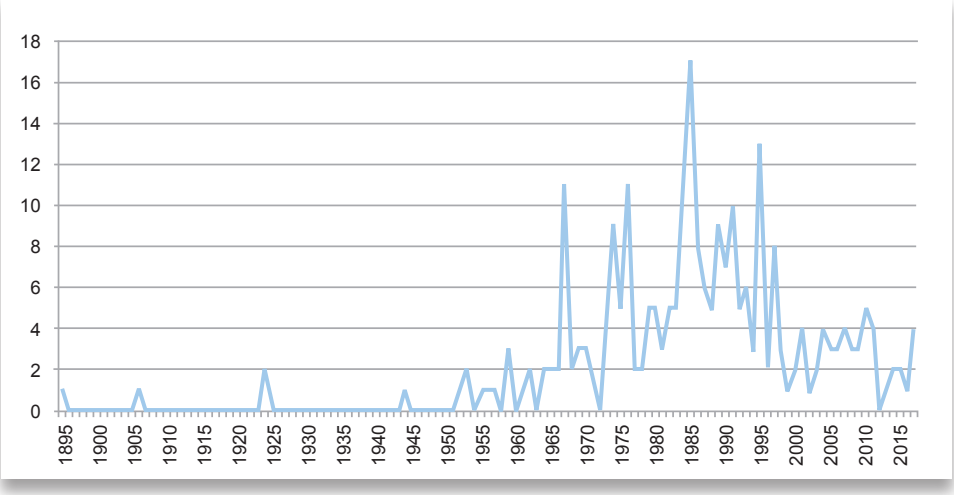
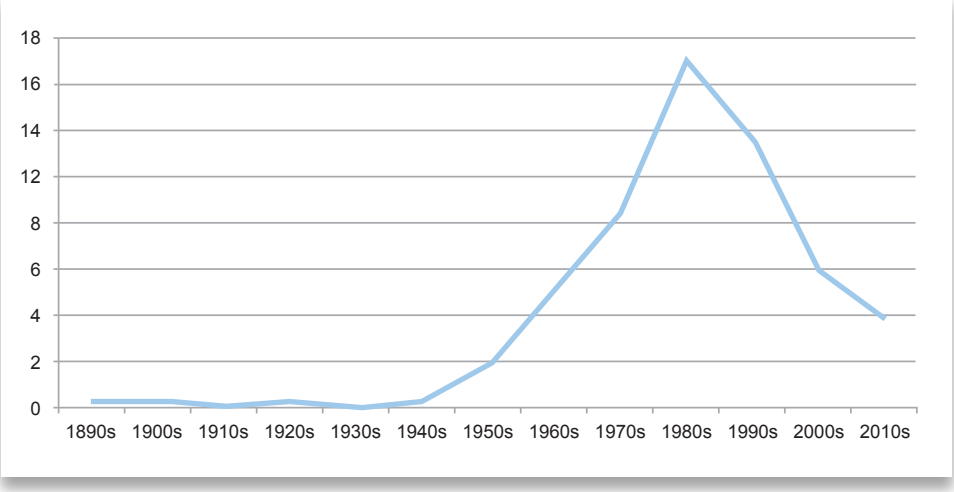


Table 4: Museum creation per decade



The earliest facility, the Banff Park Museum, predates the province's incorporation by a full ten years, and remains a popular tourist attraction operated by Parks Canada. The next institution, which eventually became the Provincial Archives, started as a department of the new Provincial Library in 1906. The Edmonton Museum of Arts (later the Edmonton Art Gallery and now the Alberta Gallery of Art) was formed in 1924, although it has always operated independently from the government. The Alberta Aviation Museum also traces its origin to this year, although what form it might have taken is unknown. A full twenty years passes before another museum is formed, this time the Alberta Branch of the Ukrainian Museum of Canada in 1944. It is not until the 1950s that we see a steady stream of museums beginning to open, with a gradual increase during the early 60s. A sharp rise in new museums occurs, predictably, in 1967, as grants were made available at multiple levels of government to celebrate Canada's centennial.[10] Montreal also hosted the World Exposition in 1967, and Canadians from coast to coast were encouraged to take their first cross-country road trip to Montreal on the newly-completed Trans-Canada highway.

Surprisingly, the best years for new museum openings in Alberta were the mid 1980s, a period of political and fiscal conservatism at both the federal and provincial levels of government.[11] However, this might be explained by several factors. Alberta's oil economy was booming and attracted an influx of job-seekers and immigrants, resulting in a massive population explosion. Also, many rural communities had taken advantage of a grants program in the late 1970s to research and publish their local history, forming historical boards in the process. After publication, many of these boards used their accumulated knowledge and experience to open museums, and many followed up their research with second volumes in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Since the late 1990s however, with the return of conservative governments and a widespread chilling effect on arts and culture funding, new museum creation has dwindled precipitously. This is where longevity data would be of the most interest. Alberta has achieved a roughly average rate of museums per capita

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10. Eleven museums opened in Alberta in 1967, although this rate dropped sharply for several years and did not recover until 1974.

11. To date, 1985 has been Alberta's most productive year by far for new museums, with seventeen new facilities. 1995 was also significant with thirteen new museums. These numbers have fallen ever since.

for the developed world, so one might conclude that a contributing factor to the drop off in creation is due to population saturation. However, it is clear that most museums, regardless of size or length of operation, have been experiencing chronic and increasing difficulty accessing once-plentiful resources. Museums are now finding that they must defend their existence and purpose to sometimes hostile bureaucracies, who judge success purely in terms of profitability. As this resource scarcity has become the new norm, the surrounding literature and terminology has shifted to focus on cultural capital, tangible outcomes, and economic plans.

Finally, a great deal of existing scholarship on museums deals expressly with institutional facilities, and although our project does include them, it is intended to focus on non-institutional museums – the rural and community-based museums that often play a significant economic and cultural role. This is important in part because such museums far outnumber those that can be considered institutional: fully 275 or 88.4% of Alberta museums are community-based (most of the institutional museums are run by foundations or various levels of government), and we are confident in assuming that such figures are typical not only for Canada but for other settler nations as well.

This points to the importance of performing periodic studies such as ours. A great deal of activity is taking place in the museum movement, resources are being managed, and the public is being engaged, but to what degree is there any oversight, standard practices, and long-term policy planning? Those policies that are in place, at the governmental and organizational levels, exist because of the data provided by such studies, even when they take a broader view of heritage rather than focussing on museums alone. One such project, an online encyclopaedia of heritage and culture, was compiled in 2005 by the Heritage Community Foundation[12]. Alberta Source[13] comprises over 80 individual websites featuring museums, heritage and cultural projects, archives, studies, and networks. With a wide-ranging scope, Alberta Source is a portal to many physical and virtual collections that give a very broad and faceted look at the province's cultural life.

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12. Although the Heritage Community Foundation ceased operations in 2009, its online encyclopaedia has been archived by University of Alberta Libraries.
13. http://www.albertasource.ca/index.html

Another significant study is a report compiled by the Alberta government in 1986,[14] which lists detailed information on museum practices, funding, emergency preparedness, and audience engagement. Presented as a printed "Data-Base", the report is useful for its numbers but almost impenetrable in its style: based on a lengthy questionnaire mailed to museums, with 141 respondents, each page is a complex table in which certain mitigating factors are not readily apparent. For example, only those museums with the resources to complete a lengthy survey are represented; 47 museums did not return their questionnaires, and it is likely that they were simply unable to do so. As a matter of policy-setting for a provincial government department, the unwieldy nature of the survey may have limited its practical application, as noted in a 1987 report: "The original questionnaire was sent out July, 1983 […] The final version of the questionnaire contained 884 variables and it was estimated that, once all the information was entered in a computer, the computer would have to deal with over a half million separate items. The results of the questionnaire are a mass of statistics."[15] The report was not issued until early 1987.

Needless to say, although this painfully-acquired information is certainly valuable, our own project was not motivated by the search for quantifiable data. Rather, it is intended as a springboard for discussion, as we pursue more critical themes for our forthcoming book. This will address issues such as the relationship between museums and rural economies, the politics of museum representation of First Nations and Métis, and the effectiveness of interactivity in museum exhibits. Throughout, the increasing importance of museums as a forum for social change has become apparent, challenging the stereotype of the museum as a dusty storage space.

Robert Janes, formerly of the Glenbow Museum, clearly elucidates the modern tensions of museum operation in his book *Museums in a Troubled World*[16] by examining the role of marketplace ideology, social responsibility, and civic engagement. To what degree are museums – especially the small-town prairie museum

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14. Alberta Culture, *Alberta Museums and Related Institutions Data-Bas*e (Government of Alberta, 1986).
15. Alberta Museums Association, *Standards Investigation Committee Report* (Edmonton: October 1987), 13.
16. Janes, Robert R.*, Museums in a Troubled World: Renewal, Irrelevance or Collapse?* (London: Routledge, 2009).

which is the focus of our project – truly autonomous institutions? Clearly they share in a variety of social factors: they operate partly as businesses; they collect, conserve and display collections; and they offer a variety of knowledges and counter-knowledges to a variety of publics. Robert Janes argues for a model of stewardship opposed to the traditional one of the curator, in which engagement with the community far outweighs historical practices of collection and exhibition. Museums cannot afford to ignore their links to the sources of wealth generation, but are also in a unique position to catalyse civic change. Certainly, many of the successful community-based museums in Alberta have come to this conclusion independently, and are placing more emphasis on a wide range of community events, and in facilitating different kinds of research, rather than on maintaining collections and curating static exhibits. Perhaps the best example of this approach is the Wheels of Time Museum in Caroline. In recent years the museum greatly reduced its material collections in favour of increased cultural activities: a rentable heritage fire hall, a local crafts store, pie shop, nature walk, farmer's market, genealogical research station, classic film screenings, and educational programming such as a heritage school day, in which children attend a full day of class in the style of a one-room schoolhouse, with a costumed teacher. With such a wide range of offerings the Wheels of Time has become Caroline's cultural heart, and raised its profile both locally and provincially.

These are the type of stories that our project has encountered, stories of failure and of success. But the most profound discovery for me has been that the museum movement in Alberta is an active, connected, and engaged community, eagerly discussing the future of museums. Our purpose, then, is to widen this ongoing conversation in a way that engages an even more diverse and widespread community of museum operators, administrators, researchers, and visitors.