

Dorothy Duncan 2003.02.194

Introduction:

Dorothy Duncan is currently Executive Director of the Ontario Historical Society. She is a former teacher. Her museum experience includes Curator of Black Creek Pioneer Village in Toronto, Curator of Historic Houses, Toronto Historical Board, she worked as a consultant on Hugh John MacDonald House in Winnipeg and Old Fort William, Thunder Bay. She has also served as museums advisor for the province of Ontario. We are indeed honored to have Dorothy Duncan here today and I would like to call on her now to present the keynote address. Dorothy.

Ms. Duncan:

Thank you Eric and good morning. It's a pleasure to be with you this morning on this occasion of the 11th annual meeting of the Alberta Museums Association. I had the pleasure less than a month ago of being with the Newfoundland and Labrador Museum Association for their annual meeting as well. And I think these two occasions combined with some of the annual meetings of our own associations in Ontario brought home to me how much we have in common in the museum community. And so, although my comments are being made with you in this room on this morning I really feel that I could be saying and asking the same questions of any museum group across Canada because I do feel we have the same concerns and the same questions that we should be asking ourselves and each other. My title, "Are your museum and your community on speaking terms?" On speaking terms. I guess that that really brings us to a consideration of a relationship. Are we friends? How well do we know each other? Do we have that kind of old fashioned relationship that we can borrow a cup of sugar from each other if we need to? What does "on speaking terms" really mean? And I think that to, to clarify that in our minds and perhaps to come up with an answer we need to define ourselves and who we think we are and what we think we're doing. We'll need to define our communities. What is our community? Is it the province? Is your community your county? Your municipality? Is it a city, a town, a village, or is it international? Do you feel that your museum serves the world? I think first of all you need to define who is my community, who is it that I'm really trying to serve? How well do we know that community? Do we know it well historically? Have we really researched our community and do we know exactly and precisely what its history is or do we depend all too often on legends? It's very important that the whole area of oral history is extremely important and I think we're beginning to realize it more and more each day that, particularly in areas where homesteading is not too far behind us, oral history is extremely important. But have we advented the oral history that we know about our history with sound, solid research?

How well do we know our community geographically? When was the last time you walked your community? If it has streets, how long ago since you walked up and down every street and looked at every building and looked at everything that remains of that community? I think we had a perfect example of that yesterday

on our bus tour and I thought it was very interesting that we, a group of museum people spent a day learning so much and having so much fun and we hardly looked at one artifact. We looked at holes in the ground and we looked at lumps and we looked at pits, but we didn't really look at three dimensional artifacts and yet we learned a great deal about those areas and districts. How well do you know your community geographically?

In human terms, how well do you know your community and the people that make up that community? What ethnic groups have they come from and what are they still today? How much have they changed in the last few years?

How well do you know your community financially? I throw that one in because in Ontario, too often our museums reflect ourselves. White, middle class, too often middle aged, ah, they're just mirrors or reflections of ourselves and our history. We really don't want to recognize the people in our communities who are perhaps poorer than ourselves that came from very different backgrounds that ah, were ah, rascals, rogues that filled our jails. That isn't the part of the history of our community we want to show but we should know what that community is, ah that, that part of our, our history is and we should recognize it.

What common bonds do the people that live in our communities today have? What are they interested in? We often fear that they're not interested in us. "My community doesn't know I exist," is a common saying. Why doesn't it know you exist? What, first of all, are people interested in? Well, they're interested in their churches. You'll find some of them there on Sunday morning, on the weekend, on one day of the weekend. They belong to clubs and groups. They have an already built-in interest. They need to shop and buy things so they go out to shopping malls. Those are the kinds of interests they have, those are the kinds of human interests they have. How can we tie in to those very human interests and needs? Where do we find people in our communities in large numbers in already organized groups? Well of course one the first places that we think of are the schools. We want to get the schools to visit our museums. What do we really know about the school system locally? What do we know about our Ministry of Education, our curriculum that they've designed? What do we know about the course of study that our local boards are using? What do we really know about our local Board of Education? When did you last visit a school? What is a modern school in 1982 like? I'm afraid that too often we think of the schools that we attended and assume that that's exactly what's going on at schools today. And of course that's not true at all. Why do teachers bring students to a museum? What motives do they have? And too often we think "well, it's June and they want to get them out of the classroom, they want to take them on a field trip." And that's true, that's partially true. But we have school classes at many other times of the year as well, or, if we were open, we would have school classes at other times of the year. Why do they, do these teachers come? Well, if we knew the course of study we would know why they came. They came because in grade 7 the course of study says "learn about something to do with Canadian history," and that's why they're there and that's why they're hoping that you can give them an extension of a classroom experience. When do our teachers have their professional development days? When are the teachers' institutes? Is there any possibility that at the next one or one in 1983 at any time you could invite the teachers in your region

or district to come and have part of that day or all of that day in your museum and explain to them exactly what would happen if they brought their students?

Do we have any understanding of how our museum and its collections tie into other groups in our communities? The Women's Institutes, many of whom are the ancestors of our museums in Canada. They were the people who first of all began preserving local history through their ****treats on**** history books and now through their house logs, the history of every house in which everyone lives in Canada and this program which they are encouraging everyone to get involve in. The 4H clubs, what are they doing that ties in our museum collections, how can we assist them? The Scouts, the Guides, the Cubs, the Brownies. In Ontario we still have a lot of those four groups and they have badges that they try for on an annual basis. Do we know what those badges are? Do we know how our museum collection or museum programs could tie into helping ah, a Girl Guide leader and her Girl Guides get a certain, a heritage badge?

Who is our government? How are we governed wherever we live? And of course once we come down from provincial level, what's our local government? Who are our ****reeve,**** our mayor, our councilors. When was the last time you invited your council to lunch at your museum? When was the last time you invited them for a cup of coffee or to open a new exhibit at your museum? I can think of a museum within a mile of my home in a city that has nearly a million people, has members of the museum board who have never been in the museum. [laughter] That's very significant. The board does not meet in the museum, it meets somewhere else. The mayor of that municipality has never been in that museum. I don't think he's ever been invited. Small wonder that when that museum goes for funding to that municipality that they have a really difficult time because they don't really know and understand what it is they're being asked to fund.

Who is the cultural family in your community? And I think we all belong to a cultural family. Sometimes we want to feel that we are special and isolated and alone, and the work that we're doing is very special, and only we can do it, and only we hold those collections and can tell those stories but really when we examine ah, our family, our broader cultural family, there are many other groups who are doing the same type of work as we are, perhaps with other types of collections. And I think of the art galleries. I think of the historical societies. I think of the libraries. In a way, I think of the schools. The schools are trying to educate just as we are while they entertain, they're trying to make education entertaining and that in a sense is what many museum should, or could be doing.

Now then, let's look inward at ourselves. I think the first thing that we have to do is look realistically at our present operations. The present way we operate our museum, whether it be tiny, few square feet, or whether it's an enormous building. What are our open hours? When are we open to the public? At what time of the year, first of all, and what time of the day? And then think about the community. When is the community free? Well, may of us are open between 9 and 5 or between 1 and 4 in the afternoon. Is that really when our community is free and could come and visit us? In most communities that's when people are busy at work. At their own jobs. So think about that.

Let's think about the way we present our material. We may understand the way we have laid our exhibits, created our vignettes, told our story. Does a stranger or someone who doesn't have your depth of knowledge or understanding of your collection come into your museum really understand the story you're trying to tell in the way that you have presented your artifacts or your collection? We should never lose sight of the goals every museum should have to collect, to conserve, to research, to exhibit, and to interpret that collection of historical artifacts. But I think we must continually look at ourselves as we would look in a mirror. And I think that one of the most useful things that we can do if we can roleplay, is to park our car in the parking lot where the visitors park their car. Enter the museum they way, the museum, the visitors enter the museum and try to clear our minds of everything we know about our collection and look at what we see with new eyes. And for the first time you realize, there's a garbage can right by the front door. That's the first thing a visitor sees of the museum, is a garbage can. Is that really what I want the visitor to see first and know about me? And it may not be a garbage can but it may be something just as dramatic. Too often, we go off to work, we park in the staff parking lot, we park at the back of the building, we go in the back door, we rush in, turn on the lights, and we're ready for business and we don't see our institutions through the eyes of the visitors. The visitor, of course, has often been conditioned many, many, many hours or days before he reaches us. And that's something that we need to be, to be, to recognize too.

What motivates a visitor to come to see us? What starts them on that road to visiting the museum? Well, quite often it's word of mouth. Someone else has visited your museum and says, "Gee, go and see the museum, they've got some great stuff there." Or they see a brochure or they see your folder or your flyer or they see some kind of material advertising you and they decide that they will come and they start off. I don't know whether it happens here or not but certainly in Ontario a great number of visitors, of museum visitors, potential visitors go in circles before they find the museum. First of all they don't have a good map. Secondly there isn't good signage and it's like, it's a little like a homing pigeon going in circles, round and round and round and then finally, after stopping perhaps two or three times to ask directions they finally find the museum because they really didn't have good directions in the first place, so that a visitor could easily have built-in frustrations by the time he finally arrives at your door. And so then, your first impression is extremely important, as I say. What is the first thing a visitor sees when he enters your door, because he's going to become conditioned now to what's going to happen to him.

I think we need to look realistically at our own attitudes first of all about ourselves and then about our collections. I think we all suffer from a typical Canadian malady of being too modest. I think that too often we think, "Well, we just work at a museum. How does that add up against the lawyers and the teachers and accountants on and on and on in our own communities? We just work in the museum." Too often we're modest about our collections. "Well we don't have a very big collection, you know, we just have a collection of local artifacts." I think that, those are two serious problems that we need to correct, to overcome. We need to learn to brag a little. We need to learn to be just a little pushy. We need to use every

opportunity that we can to further our cause, to get our name in the newspaper, to get our name in front of the radio and TV screens. Do you know your newspaper editor? When was the last time you wrote a press release about something that's happening at the museum? What are you doing that you could write a press release about? Because I think that's a key word. There has to be some action to tie some publicity to to get the ear of the public, so if there's activity in the museum, a new exhibit, a new program, a new hands-on activity then that's something to tie some publicity to. And you may again say, "Well, my community is not interested. My community is not at all interested in my museum and they really don't know I exist and they really don't want to know I exist." Ah, recently someone in Ontario said to me, "All the people in my town want to do is stay home, watch TV, and drink beer." And I said, "Well then, if I were you, I would do an exhibit on beer. [laughter]" What's the history of beer? I mean, 19th, 18th, 19th, and 20th century cookbooks are filled with recipes for how to make beer, how to make beer at home. Maple beer, hot beer, on and on and on and on. I said, "I would do an exhibit on the history of beer and maybe throw in pretzels." And um, I'd have some kind of tasting party at the museum. I'd make beer and I'd offer samples. I'd do something. If that is really and truly the only thing that your community is interested in then tie an activity to that, because somehow you have to get their attention. You have to make some kind of a way that interests them enough to, to take notice of you. So, get their attention.

Returning to collections, I think that sometimes we feel our collections are just too quaint or too unique or too small or they're just a collection of curiosities that just happen to have been donated to the museum. And I think that we tend to think that they couldn't really have been important in the overall Canadian scene. After all, history was what was happening somewhere else. It was happening in Ottawa, or it was happening in our legislature, or it was happening on the battlefield we heard of, a good deal of um, battles and massacres and uh, unhappiness yesterday. We feel that it wasn't really happening here in our village, in our town, and this butter churn or butter paddle or ice cream maker couldn't really have some significance in history that's worth bragging about. I think we have to recognize that what was going on in the international scene and the national scene in any country is always reflected in the everyday lives of the people. They are being influenced by what is happening far away in other places. And it's happening right now. I mean, we're talking about how bad the economy is because we're hearing about it from Ottawa, we're hearing about it from our own province, we're hearing about it every day in the media. And yet, um, we're being influenced by that. We might have money in the bank, we might need a new car but we aren't going to buy it because we better keep that money in the bank, everybody says the economy is bad. Ev-, everyday people are being influenced by things that are happening far away. And so those artifacts that you hold in your museums are reflections of those everyday and important activities that were happening far away. I think that we should never underestimate the importance of that message of local collections. They're what it's really all about and they are really what can tie any story we want to to interest people today. People who visit museums aren't really interested in hearing about politicians in Ottawa or hearing about uh, even people in our own legislature or people far away that they cannot imaging what they were possibly like or what

everyday life, uh life would have been like for them. They want to know what life would have been like for me if I had been here and I'd faced those problems and those challenges and that situation, what would I have done? And when you can interest them at that level then you really have their attention.

And I have brought several things to hand out today and I've piled them at the table at the far side. But one of the, one of the things I, whether you take one of these things or just look at it, is something that looks like (woops, I'm sorry) It looks a little bit like a Christmas tree, I guess this is, this is topical getting near Christmas. It's a chart, really, and it's called, "Remembering the Visitor." What does the visitor remember in our museum? Well, if he reads something, if he stays at home and reads your brochure, or he reads about you in the newspaper, he'll remember 10% of what he reads and the other 90 is going to float out of his mind. If he come into your museum and looks at an exhibit or looks at any other kind of picture or artifact or a building or whatever, he'll remember 30% and the other 70% is gone. It's only when the visitor gets involved, that is tries something, discusses something, has an opportunity to participate in something, he personally gets involved, that 90% of that experience will be remembered. So I think that we need to remember those kinds of statistics too when we're deciding how can the visitor be involved one they're in my museum, whether it's a small child with a class, whether it's a family group, whether it's a special interests group that's come for a tour. How can I really involve them in the collections that I hold?

I think that a museum building is a very unnatural setting for a collection of artifacts. And of course the conservators in our group are going to immediately get nervous and say, "Well if we didn't bring those artifacts in to the museums and look after them they'd be gone." And I couldn't agree more. That has been our main goal in collecting, to bring them indoors, to bring them into some kind of safe environment, to exhibit them in a way that will tell a story of their history and to preserve them so that future generations can see them and, and ah, appreciate them and enjoy them just as we do. However, we have removed them from the natural place they belong. And quite often we almost slam the door on that natural environment. We bring them in and we forget the community, we forget to tie the artifact to the community where it really belonged. And that again, I think, was one of the reasons the tour yesterday was so interesting, because we had an opportunity to get right out into the areas where things were happening. And with no artifacts at all, we were able to learn a great deal about those communities and what had happened in some of those settings. And if a museum did hold some of the artifacts how important that would be so that when we're programming, thinking about how we can reach our communities, we need to think about tying the artifacts to the community which it came from, whether that be through walking tours of starting in the museum, looking at the artifacts, walking out into the community and seeing where they came from if the sights are close enough that we can reach them by foot. Driving tours, such as we had yesterday. The museum that holds the mill wheel that we heard about on our bus, ah, what an interesting tour that would be to see the actual mill wheel in the museum and then sponsor a driving tour to the site and talk about the history of the mill, how it was built, who it served, how much did it cost to get grain ground into flour or whatever kind of mill it was, I'm, I've been assuming

all along that it was a grist mill but I don't know, and to hear that story and to hear about the people, the people that came and used that mill. And why did it close? What happened to the economy of that village, or what happened on a larger basis that that mill finally fell into disrepair and was closed?

The, the museum can use the community as an extension of itself if it wants to. The community is there, it's not going to move, it's right there. You can use it to help you do the job you need to do. I think that we need to get ourselves out into our communities more. We feel that we're here, people should come and see us. I don't agree with that theory. I think that we should attempt at every opportunity to get out where people are. There's an enormous shopping mall beside us. I think that local museums should have an exhibit in that shopping mall. Not every day, but perhaps on Friday nights. When do people go shopping? When do the greatest numbers of people go through the shopping mall? There should be something there to let them know that just a half a mile down the road is a museum and if they go and visit this museum, look what they're going to see. There are shop windows in all our communities. There are schools. There are libraries. There's a bus terminal. There's a train station. There's something. There's something where people are that don't expect to see us and we should tap those resources and get out there, whether it's a sidewalk sale or a flower show or a fair, or even a major sports event. And I'm sure you're saying, "Well all this is fine but I can't possibly do this myself. There's only me at my museum," or, "there's only three of us at my museum. We can't possibly do more than we're doing now. We've extended ourselves to the limit." And I think that this is when we need to think about who can we get to help us with our work. Who can, who are the resources or what are the resources in our community that we can utilize to help us. Well first of all I think we need to think about that cultural community that I mentioned earlier. The art galleries, the libraries, the schools, and so on. Other people who have like interests to our own. What are they doing now, because we don't want to duplicate their work. Is there any way we can tap them to be our, our ah, coworkers, our co-sponsors on any of these projects. What are we doing, or what would we like to do that they normally would like to do too and could help us do?

I think that we need to attract even larger and more diverse groups of volunteers to help us with our work. I think that we need to, to write description positions for our volunteers. Uh, I don't think it's fair to say, "Come and be a volunteer at the museum" and when the person says, "Well what will I do if I were a volunteer at your museum?" "Well, everything. We need people who can do everything." Ah, I don't think people want to make that kind of commitment. They want to know what are they being asked to do and how long are they going to be asked to do it? They don't really want to make a lifetime commitment. I think that perhaps the only lifetime commitment that any of us wants to make is to marriage and then that is a question mark too, sometimes. [laughter] Um, we have to, we have to think about the volunteer. We have to think about it from their point of view. If you were being asked to be a volunteer in the local museum, you'd like to know what you'd be expected to do and for how long you would be expected to do it so that if something else that interests you come along, you'd like to get into another line of work, you'd like to volunteer and help someone else in six months or a year

you can gracefully back out without anybody losing face. So, you need to define how long you need this volunteer to do this for. And you need to have many, many tasks for volunteers to do. Some people are good writing press releases and contacting the local paper and getting out and being friendly and, and ah, getting the high profile for the museum while others really would be much happier sitting quietly cataloguing the collection. So you need to have a variety of tasks that you can invite volunteers to assist you with. But you need to make those definitions. You need to be able to look at the total pie, the total work of your museum and how can you slit pieces into that total pie so that the result is the result that you want, because you want your museum to be controlled by yourself and your board, you don't want it suddenly to be controlled by a group of people who perhaps haven't yet grasped the total goals and objectives of your museum.

I think that, closing, I would like to leave two or three ideas with you. I would like to, to harken back to my comment about your profile and your image. I would like to stress that we must work very hard at raising our profiles. We must set aside our natural modesty and we must attend ah, in new ways to raise our profiles as important places in our communities. Advertising is often expensive, it is often difficult and takes professionals ah, to do sophisticated brochures. Perhaps that kind of thing, you feel, is beyond your local resources. Again, I've brought an example of a very modest little project that was done by a group of museums in Ontario, none of whom could have afforded a brochure of their own. They all operate on budgets of like \$1000 a year so there is not possible way that they could have had a brochure of their own. But a group of them in one county got together, this is the size of the county, and by each of them contributing less than \$200 they got a brochure that advertises them all. And that was a great strategy. They found this summer that their attendance has increased about 1000%. It's marvelous. The other thing that a group of them did was get together and do placemats which they then sold to restaurants in their um, county. And so while people were waiting for their meal, and well we all know how we have to wait for breakfast sometimes, um, they would study their placemat and see what, where the local museums were and they would plan their visit around that. And that was another thing that cost them all about \$48 each to be on the placemats and they managed to sell the placemats to the restaurants and that was another strategy that worked really well for them. I want also to harken back um, to our own modest about our collections and ourselves. I brought, ah, a booklet, which, there's a group of them on the table and if there aren't enough please sign up and I'll send you one in the mail. Anyways something that I did a couple of years ago and it's *The Artifact: What Can it Tell You About the Past?* And really, what it goes into is how to look at an artifact visually, what stories can one single artifact tell us? If we were to analyze this microphone, we know nothing about it, what could we learn about this microphone? What can the microphone tell us about the, this society, this society, the people sitting in this room, that needed this today? Why did we need microphones? Ah, how old is it? What kind of like has it had? What has it suffered? I feel that we never need to apologize for the size of our collections because I think with a single artifact we can tell a very human story that will tie back to every human being that might have lived in this part of Canada. And then finally, I have brought for you really just a checklist of just some suggestions,

things that have worked for other museums in the way of advertising, rather than having a pamphlet, have you ever had advertising in different ways? Instead of having just a tour of your museum, have you ever thought of varying that tour and ways that you could vary it? How to get that community into the museum, I've talked of two or three ways, there are some more suggestions here. Taking your museum out into your community, there's another group of suggestions here. And finally, I think that we need to have a great deal of pride in Canada in the fact that we hold collections, ah, that are so significant, that did serve the everyday needs of our everyday ancestors, in an everyday way, because that is really the true story of how Canada developed. Thank you very much. [applause]

Afterwards:

Thank you very much Dorothy. Dorothy has presented some, some thoughtful questions to us, and touched on many important matters that we live with daily in Alberta. Indeed, it's really good to know that we are not alone. Someone mentioned the other day that we are seeing a number of faces from Ontario on the Alberta museum scene and [TAPE ENDS]