



# FERNIE MUSEUM COLLECTIONS PROJECT

## THE FERNIE MUSEUM AND ITS COLLECTIONS

Collecting and safeguarding the community's tangible heritage is the very heart of what a museum does. The objects it acquires from individuals, families, businesses, organizations, civic government and, at times, from other institutions, are held in trust on behalf of the community in perpetuity. These collections must, as a result, be documented and managed carefully to fulfill this obligation.

Since it was formed in 1964, the Fernie & District Historical Society has acquired over 10,000 objects, 12,000 photographs, and 412 linear feet of archival records which represent the history of Fernie and the Elk Valley. From 1979 to 1999, the Society operated a museum in a building behind the Catholic Church. Forced to abandon the facility in 1999, the Society hastily inventoried and packed up the entire collection and put it into storage — a process that was managed with limited resources within a short period of time. After establishing a new museum facility in 2013, the Society must now focus on managing its collections according to today's accepted standards of practice.

## ARTIFACT COLLECTIONS: DOCUMENTING A COMMUNITY'S TANGIBLE HISTORY

The Fernie Museum's artifact collection consists of objects that represent our community and region's social, cultural, commercial and industrial history. To protect their value, maintaining a well-organized, managed and documented collection is necessary.

Managing the Fernie Museum's collection includes:

- Having a current collections policy that spells out how the organization will collect and manage its collections. *The Fernie Museum adopted a new collections policy in 2016.*
- Registering and cataloguing all incoming objects and any respective information. *To be completed as part of the project.*
- Utilizing preventative conservation techniques to lengthen collection's lifespan. *To be undertaken as part of the project.*
- Researching both new and existing artifacts. *To be undertaken as part of the project.*
- Continually assessing and improving the museum's artifact storage systems.
- Maintaining the museum's environmental and pest management programs.
- Managing and monitoring artifact and facility security. *Undertaken as part of the project.*
- Supporting exhibits and programming functions. *Currently ongoing.*
- Providing services to other museums (loans, access to objects for research purposes, etc.). *Currently ongoing.*

Provincial, national and international standards of practice guide how museums manage their collections; the level of operational funding a museum receives from various levels of government and private donors is often based on how well it manages its collections. One of the challenges the Fernie Museum will face as it catalogues objects in its collection is that the story of each object and its owner (called “provenance”) is not well recorded. Each item will need to be researched over the long term, to understand its importance in telling Fernie’s story. Some of this research will be undertaken as part of the project, some of it will be ongoing. New acquisitions follow the collections policy.

## **COLLECTIONS MANGEMENT PROJECT OVERVIEW**

The museum’s collection, largely stored offsite, will be moved beginning in June 2018. With a crew of professional staff, collections interns and community volunteers, the museum will re-inventory the collection and then begin the long and thoughtful process of triage, according to a set of criteria developed by looking at standards of practice, through community consultation, and by research. At the end of the process, the museum will possess a carefully curated collection on which a foundation for future collection can occur which consists of objects sorted into the following categories:

**Core Collection.** The core collection will contain artifacts and specimens that generally are complete and in good condition, and for which provenance or locality is well documented.

**Education Collection.** This collection includes objects for museum programming that can be operated or handled by staff, volunteers, students and the public, and that, ultimately, may be expendable.

**Objects to transfer to other museums.** The exchange of specimens or artifacts between institutions is an established and useful means of developing and improving a collection. This ensures that the objects donated to a museum remain within the realm of the “public trust.”

**Objects that will be deaccessioned.** At the Fernie Museum there has been a strong presumption against removing accessioned objects from the collection. However, the Fernie & District Historical Society recognizes that there are circumstances when deaccessioning can refine the quality and improve the relevance of a museum’s collection. Deaccessioning must be undertaken in accordance with the highest professional standards and ethics and must not be influenced by arbitrary taste or individual preference. Reasons

must be ethical, defensible, and objective. Deaccessioning must be undertaken with great scrutiny and requires institutional review and approval from the Board of Directors, to ensure a system of checks and balances.

The project presents the Fernie Museum with the once in an institution's lifetime opportunity to "correct" past practices and create a carefully curated collection that provides a solid foundation on which future collecting can occur.

This 2 to 3 year project will be undertaken with oversight by the museum's curator, managed by a project leader with a background in collections management and with the assistance of trained seasonal staff and community volunteers.

## **THE CULTURAL HISTORY COLLECTIONS**

The Fernie Museum's cultural history collection documents the everyday life of men and women at home and at work in Fernie and the Elk Valley. It includes a variety of artifacts from household goods to children's toys, and small carpentry tools, personal mining equipment, and sporting gear.

With the arrival of the Canadian Pacific Railroad in Fernie in 1898, the production of coal in the Elk Valley began in earnest. Within 10 years, Fernie grew from under 200 people to a boom town of over 6,000 residents. Citizens and immigrants flooded the region to work in the mines, in logging, and in the towns. The population of Fernie ebbed and flowed with the demand for coal. Some workers put down roots for generations, others left after a short period. Everyone, however, left their mark on this community and region. Often, objects donated to the museum are the only tangible evidence of their life in Fernie.

The value of a museum's collection lies in the stories these objects tell. Part of documenting the story of the object includes recording the history of the individual or family that used the item; where and how they lived, how they acquired and used the object, and how the person donating the object to the Museum came in the possession of it. This information is known as the object's provenance and it helps define whether the object should be collected to be held in perpetuity by the museum. Managing the growth and strength of a museum's collection is a job to be taken seriously by museum staff and trustees.



## THE EDUCATION COLLECTION – HANDS ON HISTORY

The Fernie Museum recognizes the value of using artifacts and specimens in public and school programs. These programs require objects that can be operated or handled by staff, volunteers, and the public, and that, ultimately, may be expendable. To fulfil this need, the museum has established an education collection.

Artifacts and specimens may be acquired specifically for the working collection or may be transferred from the permanent collection to the education collection.

In both these instances, the designation of an item for the education collection is considered by a Collections Committee chaired by a member of the Board and consisting of three community members. The committee's recommendations are then sent to the Board for approval.

Artifacts or specimens designated as part of a education collection must:

- fulfil a program need;
- be appropriate to the program;
- be demonstrated to be expendable (e.g. a duplicate with no defined purpose, over representation in the collection);
- be safe to use;
- not contravene legislation (e.g. firearms)

## HOW MUCH OF ONE THING IS TOO MUCH?

One of the issues facing the Fernie Museum, as with many museums, is what to do with a significant number of similar and/or duplicate items. These items have often been collected by well-meaning volunteers in the early years of the institution, with whole collections of items sometimes coming in from one donor. With some community museums, it is salt and pepper shakers, for others, souvenir spoons. Or oil lamps. Or typewriters. Or dolls.

With the Fernie Museum, it is bottles - in excess of 400 bottles. Liquor bottles, milk bottles, medicinal bottles, and many more unidentified bottles. While some of the milk bottles have a cap indicating they were used by a local dairy and some of our beer bottles have a label indicating they were used by the Fernie Brewing Company, most do not have an identifying label. For most of the 400 + bottles in the collection, their history is a mystery. The only identifier, on some, is a manufacturer's mark.

## PHOTOGRAPHS

### CURRENT STATE

The museum collection was moved quickly from of the former Catholic Rectory into donated space in the basement of the Vogue Theatre in Fernie as a temporary measure. Now that the Museum facility is operating and issues such as a new roof and gallery upgrades near completion, the Museum can turn its full attention to the collection.



### DESIRED STATE

The triaging of the collection will allow the Museum to determine what is going to encompass the core and education collections. The museum will store the collections according to Canadian standards of practice for the long term, maximizing storage through shelving, rolled storage (for large textiles and rugs) and hanging storage (for artworks).

