

## The Past Becomes the Present

The story of the great buffalo jumps should not be allowed to simply fade away. At least for Head-Smashed-In, it will not. It lives on in the stories of elders like Billy Strikes With A Gun, who carry the history of their people. As long as Blackfoot children and those of other First Nations continue to be taught the traditions of their ancestors, the stories of a glorious past will persist. Archaeological study of buffalo kills adds another layer to our knowledge of the past. More importantly, the story of Head-Smashed-In will stay alive for generations to come thanks to the presence of a stunning interpretive centre built directly into the cliff of the buffalo jump.

Sunk into the sandstone bedrock and prairie soil at Head-Smashed-In is a maze of huge concrete slabs that form an odd-shaped structure: a 2,400 square metre building that spans seven stories of elevation but is barely visible to a person standing outside. Welcome to the Head-Smashed-In Buffalo Jump Interpretive Centre. Located about twenty kilometres west of the town of Fort Macleod, Alberta, the



*A part of the cliff at Head-Smashed-In has been transformed. A seven-storey high interpretive centre was nestled into the slope to blend with the bedrock and the surrounding land. (Courtesy Royal Alberta Museum)*

centre has been open for two decades and has told the story of the great buffalo jump to two million visitors. That a ten-million-dollar project was dedicated to the telling of Aboriginal history is amazing in itself, and this book would not be complete without telling at least part of this story.

## Beginnings

As with so many stories of wonder, this one begins with people of vision and persistence. You'd be hard pressed to find a person in Alberta more responsible for the public interpretation of heritage resources than Dr. William J. Byrne. A southern Alberta boy, Bill earned his PhD in Anthropology from Yale University, and as a student before that he excavated at many important archaeological sites on the Alberta Plains, including Head-Smashed-In Buffalo Jump. Soon after earning his doctorate, Bill took over as the director of a newly formed organization called the Archaeological Survey of Alberta. He brought with him a certainty that Head-Smashed-In would be a wonderful place to celebrate the story of what had transpired at the sandstone cliffs. But as part of a provincial government, his voice was a lonely one in the corridors of power. In the 1970s there were not many powerful people inclined to spend large amounts of taxpayers' dollars on the preservation and interpretation of what was then thought of as Indian history. Heritage development, for the most part, consisted of commemorating European settlement and the history of the province – a trend not restricted to Alberta, but one true for virtually all of North America. Dr. Byrne spent many a fruitless meeting extolling the virtues of Head-Smashed-In only to have his words fall on deaf ears. This all changed in 1981.

By the late 1970s Dr. Byrne began to toy with the idea that Head-Smashed-In Buffalo Jump just might be a worthwhile addition to the prestigious list of UNESCO World Heritage Sites. There were only a couple hundred such sites in the world at the time, including the pyramids, Stonehenge, and the Parthenon. It must have seemed unthinkable to many that a lonely stone cliff in the hills of southern Alberta, containing buried layers of buffalo bones and arrowheads, could share the company of the most famous works of human endeavour on the planet. But not to Bill Byrne. He hired Dr. Brian (Barney) Reeves of the University of Calgary to write the nomination package

arguing that Head-Smashed-In should be included on the UNESCO World Heritage List. Dr. Reeves had directed archaeological excavations at Head-Smashed-In (of which Bill Byrne had been a member) and had written the most important scientific papers about the site. In 1980 the package was submitted to UNESCO, and the following year Head-Smashed-In Buffalo Jump was designated as a World Heritage Site.

Suddenly Dr. Byrne had some leverage to take with him into budget meetings. Power brokers not previously moved by the thought of developing an Indian site were forced to sit up and pay attention. The cachet of having a UNESCO site in your home province was simply too strong to ignore. Bill asked for ten million dollars to provide some form of public development at Head-Smashed-In, and, somewhat to his own astonishment, he got it. Thus began the next phase of the life of this remarkable place and with it the assurance that the story will never be forgotten.

## A Beer-soaked Bar Napkin

Cattle, cliff swallows, marmots, arrowhead collectors, and archaeologists are about all that had disturbed the silence at Head-Smashed-In for the decades leading up to the 1980s. It had become part of ranching country. Land too rough to farm, suitable only for grazing of large herbivores, just as it had been for thousands of years. Ranching lays a gentle hand on the landscape. There are barbed-wire fences, a few dusty roads, houses scattered kilometres apart, and not much more. The land around Head-Smashed-In looks today much as it would have several thousand years ago. This was a key factor in the UNESCO designation and in the decision to put millions of dollars into the development of this site rather than one of the many other known buffalo jumps.

Soon after UNESCO designation and allocation of funding, Bill Byrne handed the Head-Smashed-In ball to Dr. Frits Pannekoek, then Director of Historic Sites Service of Alberta. From here, Frits managed the project. As if making a film, you could say Bill was the producer and Frits was the director. A team of people from the Alberta government was established – planners, project managers, researchers, display artists – and began to think about what could and should be done with Head-Smashed-In Buffalo Jump.

The first decision that had to be made was where to locate the new interpretive centre. Buffalo jumps by definition are characterized by considerable topography. This fact presented significant challenges with regard to the planning of such features as parking lots, hiking trails, handicapped access, bus drop-off areas, water and sewage, and other infrastructure demands. More fundamentally, the topography of the site was an essential part of the storyline. The final run to the cliff, the plunge from the escarpment, the butchering of carcasses below the jump, the camping on the lower prairie, all were components of one grand story. How could we interpret the site in such a way as to allow visitors to experience the major parts of the story of Head-Smashed-In?

Achieving this goal set in motion a series of meetings and field trips involving the planning team and consultants to examine prospective building sites. Architectural models were made of possible building locations on the prairie below the cliff and above the cliff back from the jump off. The former allowed hiking access to the kill and campsite area below the cliff but precluded the experience of standing at the brink of the cliff. A building on top of the bedrock escarpment permitted experiencing the final portion of the drive and the terrific view from the edge of the cliff but precluded access to the actual kill site and the lower butchering area. Both were highly desirable for public interpretation of the full story of Head-Smashed-In, yet the options seemed mutually exclusive. Like bison, the team was wallowing.

Honesty requires an admission that the solution to the dilemma of the location of the building site was arrived at one evening in a bar. I was enjoying libations with a friend and colleague, Charles Schweger, explaining to him the options that confronted and confounded us. As the night wore on, and glasses refilled, pens came out and bar napkins were scribbled upon. Ideas were debated, alternatives sketched, napkins crumpled and tossed aside. Eventually, though our memories of the evening are also sketchy, an idea emerged. What if the building could be sunk into the bedrock of the cliff, where it would straddle both the upper and lower portions of the site? If this could be achieved, access would be permitted to both the upper jump off viewpoint and to the lower butchering area. I regret that I didn't save the original bar napkin that roughly sketched a slanted, multi-storey building straddling the bedrock cliff of Head-Smashed-In. Surely it should be framed for posterity.

The seemingly bizarre suggestion was brought to the planning team for consideration. It was initially assumed that the blasting out of a huge hole in the bedrock and building a staircase-like structure on a steep slope would be either prohibitively expensive, technically untenable, or both. Surprisingly, neither was the case. When the architect priced out the options, the cost of constructing a building that straddled the cliff (about \$6 million) was only about \$500,000 more than the previous above-ground options. As the idea of a staircase design gained support, the next innovative idea was to bury the building into the cliffside. What better way to minimize the visual intrusion of an interpretive centre than to put it underground? A buried building would also result in savings in utility costs owing to it being sheltered from the extremes of weather.

The stage was set for what turned out to be one of the strongest selling features of the Head-Smashed-In project: the striking architecture of the interpretive centre. In total, only about 10 per cent of the total surface area of the building is visible. The remainder is buried into the cliff and covered with soil and vegetation. Clearly, the Head-Smashed-In building itself is a statement. It asserts the importance of not intruding on the landscape in which the story of the buffalo jump took place and the desire to convey to the visitors the nature of the vast, open prairies in which these remarkable events transpired.

## Cranes on the Cliff

Armed with a dramatic vision of an interpretive centre, the next task was to figure out where to situate it so as to avoid the deep deposits of precious artifacts at the buffalo jump – the very resource that had given us the UNESCO designation. The architect, Robert LeBlond, walked the slope with us, scanning the rugged topography for a suitable building site. Though the project eventually brought him considerable acclaim, I can't help but think that there must have been anxious moments at the beginning when Robert wondered what he had gotten himself into. The approximate location of the main archaeological deposits was known, but not their full extent. The Head-Smashed-In team eventually picked a spot several hundred metres to the south of the main kill site, hoping this would prove to lie beyond the location where ancient hunters left their traces. My archaeology crew went to work testing and exploring the proposed

building site. To Robert's great relief, the area was clear of the kill site, and we gave him the green light.

By 1985 huge cranes appeared on the cliff at Head-Smashed-In, explosions rocked the earth, and construction of the interpretive centre began. Built adjacent to the actual archaeological site, the Head-Smashed-In Interpretive Centre is a premier example of in situ interpretation of an archaeological resource in North America. The concrete was stained to match the colour of the local sandstone, and the portions of the building walls exposed above ground were etched with horizontal grooves designed to simulate the natural bedding planes of the sandstone. I still remember the day that Robert LeBlond drove his shiny BMW across the prairie and part way up the slope so that I could load a loose chunk of bedrock into his trunk, Robert hovering over me to ensure I didn't dent his precious car. The bedrock block was on route to Calgary for colour matching. Once the natural vegetation was re-established a few years after construction, the Head-Smashed-In Interpretive Centre became almost invisible as a feature on the landscape. Indeed, after construction was completed but before the road signs were installed, there were a number of complaints from people who had set out in search of the interpretive centre and, failing to see the building, had driven right past it. The centre has won a number of awards, including the prestigious Governor General's Award for Architecture, Canada's highest award in this field.

Unfortunately, it is not as easy to hide vehicles and parking lots. These ubiquitous features of any interpretive facility require careful planning. The initial proposal for the Head-Smashed-In project was to have the main parking lot on the level prairie below the jump. Aesthetically this was a poor solution, because the lot and vehicles would be highly visible from the cliff top and the centre. However, this was the only level ground anywhere around the building. As with all phases of the project, archaeological inspection of the area was required prior to construction. This time the architect didn't like what I had to tell him.

The entire level prairie proposed for a parking lot turned out to be a shallow and rich archaeological deposit thick with the remains of butchering and processing thousands of bison. I told Robert that none of this area (indeed none of the flat land anywhere around) could be used for a parking lot. Archaeology outweighed practicality. Robert was exasperated. Flailing his arms in the air he implored me to tell



*Building the Head-Smashed-In Interpretive Centre required blasting a huge hole in the bedrock to situate the seven-storey building. (Courtesy Royal Alberta Museum)*

him where the heck he was supposed to put one hundred cars and twenty RVs and buses? I surveyed the region and my eyes settled on the steeply sloping cliffside further south of the building location, a rugged zone that links the cliff top with the lower prairie. A worse place to park vehicles could scarcely be imagined. But as I knew that there was little potential for archaeological deposits on such a steep slope, I pointed to the hillside and told Robert he could have all of that area that he needed. Robert stared at me in disbelief.

In the end, this was the only place we could identify that lacked archaeological deposits. No doubt many visitors are befuddled by the layout of the parking area. It snakes for hundreds of metres in along the toe of the slope. If you are unfortunate enough to have to park at the far end, you are looking at a walk of nearly half a kilometre to the building, much of it uphill. While this formed a challenging but acceptable architectural solution for the parking, understandably it did not meet with the favour of some visitors. The walk from the parking area brought an initial rash of questions and complaints. These stopped almost completely when signs were erected informing the visitors that the parking lot was placed so as to avoid damage to significant archaeological materials. People will put up with seemingly unreasonable circumstances when they are told that valid and important reasons lie behind them.

## A Rubber Cliff

The interpretive centre has seven levels, the upper two permitting access to hiking trails along the top of the cliff and the lower five composed of displays, administration, and service areas. The storyline proceeds from top to bottom, with the five display levels devoted to the topics of bison and the environment of the Plains, the culture of Blackfoot people, the operation of the buffalo jump, the coming of Europeans and the end of the buffalo hunts, and the archaeology of Head-Smashed-In. The centre also features an eighty-seat theatre, a cafeteria, and a gift shop. When first opened, it even boasted a well-equipped archaeological laboratory where my staff sat in full public



*The signature display in the interpretive centre is a replica of the killing cliff with buffalo perched at the top and an archaeological dig at the bottom. (Courtesy Royal Alberta Museum)*

view, cataloguing bone, examining artifacts, and answering questions. As envisioned on a bar napkin long ago, trails take the visitor out the top of the building to a spectacular view of the killing cliff and out the lower doors to trails that wind around the bonebed and the butchering area.

The Head-Smashed-In Interpretive Centre is a magical place. Staffed almost entirely by Blackfoot, it has a wonderful feel to it, like the past coming to life. The regional landscape is so unspoiled that you can still easily picture – and almost feel – the dramatic events of a buffalo jump unfolding much as it did hundreds of years ago. A walk outside is a crucial part of the visit. This is where the story unfolded, and there can be no substitute for getting connected to the land that ancient hunters once trod, land that echoed with the bellowing of wounded animals.

Certainly the signature display within the building is a group of three bison perched at the edge of a ten-metre-high cliff and an archaeological dig sunken into the floor below the cliff. So realistic looking is the replication of the sheer bedrock face and the dig beneath it that many visitors have gasped at the sight and remarked (I'm not making this up) at how ingenious it was to build the interpretive centre right around the actual cliff and the real archaeological dig, as if we had enveloped the UNESCO World Heritage site within the concrete walls. During the many years I strode the floors of the building in dirty jeans, running shoes, and T-shirt (looking, I suppose, like an archaeologist on his break), I can't count the number of times people pointed at the replica dig and asked what time the archaeologists went back to work, intending, apparently, to hang around with their families until we resumed our excavations.

There is one thing you might like to know. The cast of the cliff on display in the interpretive centre is not of the cliff at Head-Smashed-In. The display is a magnificent piece of work, and the genius behind it was an exhibits contractor named Ewald Lemke and his son Kurt. Ewald was for years a museum display designer, so he knew the importance of not disturbing real artifacts. And the cliff face at Head-Smashed-In is in a sense an artifact. Ewald explained that the process of casting the cliff would involve spraying a fine layer of latex rubber on the rock face, backing this with fibreglass to give it strength, and pulling the whole thing off. So precise is the technique that grains of sand and bits of lichen would come off the cliff and be transferred

## *Imagining Head-Smashed-In*

to the final cast. Ewald was concerned that pulling off the rubber mould might leave a cleaned stripe some four metres wide and ten metres long across the face of the bedrock. This different-coloured stripe would be visible to visitors for years to come. Ewald suggested we find another cliff from which to take our cast. Puzzled, I think I must have felt like the architect Robert LeBlond did when I told him he couldn't have his parking lot.

There's no shortage of rock in this region of the Porcupine Hills. But we needed a straight, vertical face that was ten metres high. Fortunately, I thought I knew just the place. One of the goals of our years of archaeological research was to scope out other important historical sites associated with Head-Smashed-In. This is what led to our study of the drive lanes, a nearby vision quest site, and other buffalo jumps. It had long been thought that all the drive lanes of the Head-Smashed-In gathering basin led to one paramount jump. Over the years, however, research by Dr. Barney Reeves and ourselves proved that there were several more kill sites in the immediate vicinity and that these were occasionally the object of the drives of buffalo herds coming out of the basin. One of these, named the Calderwood Jump after the local landowner, is situated about a kilometre north of Head-Smashed-In. Its distinct cliff, jutting out to a prominent point, is clearly visible from Head-Smashed-In. Our crew excavated a portion of this site to gain a better understanding of the scope of bison killing that took place along

*Making the replica of the cliff was an arduous exercise, requiring a semi-trailer truck to reach the top of the Calderwood jump. Two sections of the cliff were sprayed with latex rubber and the pieces were merged together into a single cast. (Courtesy Royal Alberta Museum)*



the cliffs of the Porcupine Hills. The cliff at the Calderwood Buffalo Jump is indeed impressive. It is even higher than Head-Smashed-In, and the slope below it is rockier, steeper, and more rugged.

Along with the Lemkes, we went to the Calderwood Jump and surveyed the cliff. It seemed perfect: high, foreboding, dangerous, and remote enough that if the casting pulled a clean stripe off the face, only us, the landowner, and some cattle would see it. But could we get a semi-trailer loaded with tonnes of gear to the Calderwood cliff? There were no roads, not even a trail, leading to the cliff. Approaching from below was impossible; the land is way too rugged and steep for any vehicle. Ewald surveyed the landscape, scratched his head, and said, let's try getting the semi in from the top.

So we did. As winter neared in 1986, an eighteen-wheeler semi-trailer, loaded with casting equipment, including massive aluminum scaffolding and heavy-duty tarps worth ten thousand dollars each, rolled across the prairie and low hills behind Head-Smashed-In. It was an unnerving sight, a tractor trailer perched at the edge of a high cliff in the Porcupine Hills. The scaffolding was erected against the cliff face, and the Lemkes scaled the framework going about their business like a family of monkeys. In freezing conditions, the crew sprayed a mist of latex rubber against the rock and tried to protect the surface with huge tarps. To remove it, they had to cut the mould into many small pieces, to be reassembled later on the floor of a giant warehouse in Calgary.

The cast of the Calderwood Buffalo Jump is the cliff face on display inside the Head-Smashed-In Interpretive Centre. And a fine specimen of a killing cliff it is, made all the better by virtue of the fact that it is from an actual buffalo jump.

## And a Rubber Dig

Having the Lemkes' semi-trailer parked above the Calderwood Jump had a second benefit. Our excavation of that site was still in progress and the pits were left open over that winter. The interpretive centre was being designed to incorporate a mock-up of an archaeological excavation. The ground-level floor was to be recessed several metres deep to accommodate the dig. But there were no excavations going on at the Head-Smashed-In kill site, nor were any planned for the immediate future. What was I going to use to fill that two-metre-deep

## *Imagining Head-Smashed-In*

*I found it a harrowing experience, as an archaeologist, to watch a carefully excavated pit be covered in rubber, but the resulting detail of the reproduction was spectacular. (Courtesy Royal Alberta Museum)*



pit inside the building? You can build a replica dig from scratch, creating fake layers of soil interspersed with artifacts. But they never look convincing; they look sterile and contrived, which of course is what they are. Far better is to replicate a real dig, getting an exact impression of the walls and floors of the pit with real rocks, bones, and artifacts in their actual place.

I was the one who wanted this exhibit. I thought we should have a view of the layers of bones, rocks, and tools found at the base of the cliff. After all, this is what the story of Head-Smashed-In is all about. The Calderwood Jump offered a handy and convincing solution. Our excavations at the base of the Calderwood cliff had exposed buffalo kill deposits that spanned several thousand years. The pits were about two metres deep, just what was needed. So the Lemke crew moved their gear to the bottom of the Calderwood cliff and commenced spraying latex rubber all over our excavation walls and floors. It was an arresting event for the archaeology crew: a milky white substance covering the ancient layers of a buffalo jump that had taken weeks of painstaking work to uncover. But my anxiety was worth it; the replica that emerged from the cast is extraordinary.

As with the cast of the cliff, the casting of the excavation pit had to be cut into pieces and then reassembled. I made many trips to the Calgary warehouse, crawling over the pieces of the cast, like a giant jigsaw puzzle, making sure that each section of wall and floor was



*When the pieces were assembled, the replica dig inside the interpretive centre was completely convincing. (Courtesy Royal Alberta Museum)*

lined up with the appropriate joining piece. When the completed display was finally installed, it was an exact copy of the real dig that we had in progress a kilometre away. My crew then set about making everything around the replica dig look convincing. We raided our own supply of battered metal buckets, dirty trowels, rusty tape measurers, broken line levels, clipboards with dirt-smudged sheets of graph paper, crumpled brown paper bags, beat-up backpacks – the stuff you would see were you to drop in on any ongoing archaeological dig. The realistic look of the dig inside the Head-Smashed-In Interpretive Centre accounts for the many tourists who have asked when the archaeologists are going to scale the glass barrier and get back to work.

## *Imagining Head-Smashed-In*

In fact, we did occasionally hop over the wall and clamour around beside the replica dig. Since we had robbed our own gear to supply the replica, when extra crew or volunteers showed up, we occasionally found that we ran short at the real one outside. So, much like a real dig, the equipment scattered throughout the replica excavation moved around and changed from time to time, with no grand design or purpose and oblivious to the concerns of exhibit designers, which is the way I think it should be.

### The Blackfoot Get Involved

I would be remiss not to mention the important role the Blackfoot people played in the development of the Head-Smashed-In Buffalo Jump Interpretive Centre. When the idea to construct a centre was first hatched, it was assumed that the project would be orchestrated and executed by the team of government workers and consultants, all of whom were non-Native. But this view did not last long. We knew, even in the early 1980s, that consultation with local Aboriginal people would be required. Head-Smashed-In is located just a few hundred metres from the boundary of the Piikani reserve, and the site was known and revered by this group and other members of the Blackfoot Nation. At first we thought we needed permission of local Native people, but it quickly became apparent that we needed a lot more than permission. We needed their support and their help. This job, and a daunting one it was for a young archaeologist with little experience working with living Native people, fell to me. It was a task that changed my life.

*Members of the Piikani Nation recount stories of the buffalo hunting days during interviews for the development of Head-Smashed-In. (Courtesy Royal Alberta Museum)*



Sheepishly, having no idea what to expect, I began attending band council meetings at the Piikani tribal council in the town of Brocket, the headquarters of the Piikani people. This was in the early 1980s. Up until that point I had excavated many sites, often in remote locations such as the Canadian Rockies, where an entire summer could pass with no more contact with the outside world than the checkout clerks at the local grocery and beer stores. Not with Aboriginal people. It may seem archaic to people today, but traditionally archaeologists in North America were not taught to interact with the people whose heritage they investigated. This is a recent, and welcome, trend. I entered the Head-Smashed-In project with all the training of a scientist who studied the dead and none of the preparation needed to deal with the living. The learning curve was steep and sometimes rocky.

I began discussions with the Piikani filled with enthusiasm. After all, what archaeologist wouldn't be wildly excited when faced with the opportunity to spend ten million dollars planning and interpreting a UNESCO World Heritage site. Surely, everyone else would be just as excited. This assumption proved to be a trifle naive. While I knew a fair bit about the more ancient aspects of Blackfoot history, I knew next to nothing about the contemporary situation on reserves, especially with respect to dealing with representatives of government. My first big shock was the discovery that I was a representative of government.

I thought of myself as an archaeologist and anthropologist, one who happened to be employed by the government of Alberta. Since my chosen field of study was the ancient Native culture of western Canada, I assumed there would be some bond between the Piikani and me. But when the band council meetings got around to my item on the agenda, it was announced that "The guy from the government wants to talk about the buffalo jump." Nobody learned my name, nobody knew what my title was, nobody cared that my training included knowledge about their own history. I was that guy from the government, not just for the first meeting or two but for several years of meetings. It took me a long time to figure out what was going on, but eventually I think I did.

First, I came to realize that these people's lives had been filled with representatives from government showing up and excitedly telling them that a plan was afoot that would be really good for their people. There had been a parade of such guys with such plans. Most

plans either never came to pass or turned out to be not really good at all for the Natives. They had developed a healthy and experienced skepticism for anyone from government showing up and announcing they had something good in the works for them. I was just another government guy with big promises.

Second, I quickly learned how transient most government people were in the lives of Native people. Often they saw someone once and never again. Occasionally, a person stuck around for a few meetings, but rarely did anyone hang around in their world for any length of time. This added a further element of skepticism for the messages brought by government agents and also accounted for the general reluctance to bother learning your name or what you did. I knew little about these trends when I started meeting with Native people. But that works both ways. They knew little about me. As they would eventually find out (and I would eventually get known by my name), I was in this for the long haul.

## Meeting with the Piikani

The whole story of the Blackfoot involvement in the Head-Smashed-In Buffalo Jump project is not just long and complex. It is ongoing. The Niitsitapi continue to play a major role in the operation of the site, holding the great majority of jobs inside the centre, including all of the jobs as site interpreters. Indeed, they are the only interpreters the site has ever had; this has been something on which all parties have insisted. Blackfoot people interpret their own history and culture.

Once I started attending Piikani band council meetings, it soon was apparent that my major contact would not be with the political elements of the band but with the elders. Repeatedly the councillors told me that the elders were the ones who would have to speak on the issues I raised. I was directed to meet with staff of the Piikani cultural centre, where the elders regularly came for meetings, and I was told that I would be appointed an elder as my senior working colleague. I had no idea if I would get a say in who was directed to work most closely with me, but it hardly mattered because at this point I knew no one in the Piikani community. Since I knew that this could be an important decision, I thought I would try to get some advance information just in case I had a voice in the matter. I placed a call to Hugh Dempsey.

Hugh Dempsey is a distinguished scholar of the Blackfoot people and their history, and the author of many books on the topic. First, I asked Hugh if he thought I would have a voice in appointing an elder to work with. His response was a quick and unequivocal “No.” He explained that this would be a decision out of my hands. Second, just to humour me, I asked Hugh whether, in the unlikely event I had a say in the matter, could he recommend some names of Piikani elders I might mention as preferred working partners. Hugh thought for a while and then began to rattle off some names of senior and respected elders. Many of these were followed by comments such as “But he’s probably too old now,” “He might have passed away recently,” and “He moved to Montana.” In the end he listed a few individuals who he said would be good. Of these he singled out Joe Crowshoe. “Get Joe Crowshoe,” Hugh said; “If you have any say in the matter, get Joe.”

On my first day at the Piikani cultural centre, a group of elders and I sat around in a circle, me talking about the project, an elder translating into Blackfoot. It was still common in the 1980s (and, rarely, even today) for elders not to speak English. There was lively discussion about the possibility of having a major interpretive centre built just around the corner of the reserve at the buffalo jump. Most thought it was a good idea. A few voiced concern that we might mess things up. But all agreed on one point. If we do this we have to do it right. This was a phrase I was to hear many times over the coming years, and I learned it had a special significance to these people.

Doing it right to the Niitsitapi was nothing remotely like what a young and idealistic archaeologist thought it meant. I was treated to a litany of instances where museums had gotten it wrong: artifacts placed facing the wrong direction; artifacts placed next to each other in a way that would never have occurred in their culture; where the music played in a gallery was wholly inappropriate for what was on display. The list went on. It was a list of which I was completely unaware. It told a story of a people who had been excluded from decision making about the telling of their heritage, a people who could only look in from the outside and shake their heads at the mistakes made, and who, quite reasonably, must have wondered why someone simply didn’t ask them.

In those days, no one asked. I hoped that Head-Smashed-In would be different, and I tried to assure the elders that we would want to do this right, in their sense of the word. There was a lot of talk in Blackfoot

that excluded me, and you could tell they were debating the pros and cons of what amounted to a very big decision. Should they co-operate with a planned government development of the great buffalo jump that was so emblematic of their proud past and so revered by people of the day? Hoping, I suppose, to court their favour, I informed them of the council's decision to appoint a senior elder to work with me on the project. As there would be a regular salary involved, I assumed that this perk would result in someone in the room being designated. More discussion in Blackfoot ensued. A spokesperson announced that the group was still somewhat skeptical of the whole idea, but they agreed that I should work with an elder to further develop a plan. And the person I should work with was Joe Crowshoe.

I looked around the room. I didn't know who Joe Crowshoe was, but I assumed he must be present. I was wrong. As I found out later, Joe never came to these meetings. In fact, he was openly critical of the regular elders meetings, stating that the criteria for who was considered an elder were too lenient (he once told me with a laugh that anyone who can make a pair of moccasins was considered an elder). As I thought back about this later, I was deeply impressed by the decision of the elders committee. I was at their mercy. They could have appointed anyone as my co-worker – a relative, a friend, themselves – and secured a monthly government salary. Instead, they chose someone who not only wasn't there that day but who also was something of a black sheep in the elder community. They chose Joe because they knew he was the best person for the job. They were right.

## Joe Crowshoe

It would be hard to overestimate the contribution Joe Crowshoe made to the Head-Smashed-In project. In a very real sense, I'm not sure we would have been able to pull this off without his support. He greased so many wheels, spoke to so many people, interviewed so many other elders, logged so many miles on the road, and spoke forcefully in favour of the project. I soon met with Joe and his incredible wife, Josephine. I liked them both immensely. They were, at the same time, both intrinsically good people and folks who wanted to improve the lot of fellow Blackfoot. We discussed the idea of developing the buffalo jump and how the Blackfoot people might be involved. Joe

was immediately supportive and wanted to get to work. I couldn't spend the necessary time in southern Alberta away from my office, so I contracted an anthropologist from the University of Alberta, Roger McDonnell, to work with Joe in the early days. Together they hit the road, talking to other band councils and interviewing elders, all in an effort to do it right.

In the mid-1980s Joe was already a man of considerable influence and respect. Once he dropped in on a Blackfoot band council meeting wanting to discuss our project. Typically, Joe had made no provision to be on the agenda that day. But quickly and silently people in the room began making sign language regarding Joe's desire to speak (sign language is still widely used), and in short order, without a word said, the chair recognized Joe and he rose to speak in favour of the Head-Smashed-In project. Few other Blackfoot could have commanded this attention.

Joe's reputation was a formidable boost to the Head-Smashed-In project. I soon learned that the degree of respect other Native people gave an elder was closely related to how much that person knew about the traditional culture of the Blackfoot. It was common knowledge on the various reserves who the great keepers of the historical information were. When any of these people were present in a situation where traditional culture was discussed, all the others would inevitably defer to him or her: "Let so-and-so tell it," they would say, "He [she] knows the real stories." Joe's reputation was such that others frequently deferred to him. But the other advantage of having Joe on the project was he knew practically all the other Blackfoot who were widely regarded as the keepers of the most authentic information. Many were personal friends; those who weren't knew and respected Joe's reputation. Joe could call up just about anyone and say he wanted to come over and talk about the old days, and off he would go.

Although Joe's involvement served as a great promotion for the project, this was an ancillary benefit; promotion was only one of his interests. Equal in Joe's mind was the opportunity to gather information about the old days, especially buffalo hunting, from precisely those people who still remembered the most about it. He didn't care who the person was, what group of Blackfoot they belonged to, or where they lived. He wanted the best people who spoke with the greatest authority. This was an ideal opportunity for Joe. Someone

else provided the car, paid the gas, bought meals, worked the tape recorder, and provided small honoraria to the speakers. All Joe had to do was talk and ask questions of his esteemed colleagues about subjects that interested him deeply. Many of the people Joe interviewed in the mid-1980s are dead now, as is Joe Crowshoe. But their stories have been preserved as a precious record of traditional Blackfoot culture. Some of them are told inside the Head-Smashed-In Buffalo Jump Interpretive Centre. Also inside the centre is a room used for education, especially of visiting school groups. After his death, and in memory of his importance to the project, it was named The Joe Crowshoe Lodge. I was honoured to be asked to write the text for a small plaque that hangs in the room, recounting the enormous contribution this man made.

During those years, and many that followed, Joe and Josephine became my friends. I shared coffee at their kitchen table, attended Blackfoot ceremonies as Joe's guest, stood with him at speaking events, and was adopted into his family and given a Blackfoot name. Once Joe asked me if I wanted to go with him down to the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota. The Sioux were bringing back the traditional piercing Sundance ceremony where young men put skewers through their chests and then tore them from their flesh. Joe, one of the most respected medicine men on the northern Plains, was asked to come do the piercing. I was a little queasy about witnessing the piercing, and more queasy about being a white guy showing up on the Pine Ridge Reservation, a place that was having considerable trouble at about that time. I declined. Although I have since attended other piercings and Sundances, I regret that I didn't take that trip with Joe. I'm sure it would have been an incredible experience.

## A Painted Skull

As Joe and Roger McDonnell conducted the research interviews, it became apparent that we would have permission from the relevant Native groups to move forward with the project. Many other pieces of the puzzle started to fall into place. As people began working on the building design, I began cobbling together the outline of a story to be told inside the building. Major consulting firms were brought in to further develop these and to plan and orchestrate the entire project. Throughout, the Blackfoot stayed involved. As ideas developed

for possible displays, I would run these by the elders at the Piikani cultural centre. The same was done with the text as it was produced and artifacts that were slated for display. Most of the items on display are replicas of real artifacts, many of them made by Blackfoot people. While it might seem a simple thing to make and display replicas of real artifacts, I discovered this was far from the case.

As I have tried to convey in previous pages, many things in Blackfoot culture have, for lack of a better word, power. Their traditional world was a spiritual place, and many inanimate things in it were (and still are) infused with spiritual power. There was spirited debate among the Blackfoot elders about what kinds of stories and artifacts stemming from the spiritual world could be used in the building. On the one hand, they wanted visitors to the site to know that they were spiritual people, not pagans as some stereotypes portray. On the other hand, they didn't feel it was appropriate to put powerful artifacts out on display. Stuff of the spiritual world was not meant to be ogled at by tourists. Initially it seemed that making replicas of these objects was the obvious solution. But here's the rub. The elders were adamant that it would only be acceptable to replicate a powerful object if the person replicating it had the spiritual authority to do so. For example, Joe Crowshoe was a medicine pipe bundle owner, so if a bundle were to be replicated, a bundle owner (Joe) would have to do it.<sup>†</sup> Just as I thought we had come to some agreement, someone spoke up: "If a real bundle owner makes a replica bundle then isn't it a real bundle?" Well that sure got a lot of discussion going.

It seemed at times we were back to square one. The process turned in ways I could never have imagined but that never ceased to enlighten me. In the end, replicas of powerful objects were made by people with the recognized authority to do so. They became, *de facto*, equivalent to real objects. In this respect, nothing was more important than a painted buffalo skull.

There is a buffalo skull on display at Head-Smashed-In that was painted by Joe Crowshoe with traditional designs in black, red, and yellow paint. It is one of the most powerful objects in the building. Although Joe painted it expressly for display purposes, the skull is now indistinguishable from one that would be prepared and used at the annual sacred Sundance and other vital Blackfoot ceremonies. As required, sweetgrass is stuffed into the nasal cavity of the skull, and, as required, the glass case is occasionally opened and the sweetgrass

<sup>†</sup> Bundles are the most powerful objects in the Blackfoot ceremonial world. They are wrappings of buffalo hide, which contain items such as pipes, that are used in specific ceremonies. They exist for the good of the people and are not so much owned by someone as they are cared for by the people who have them. Of the many different kinds, the medicine pipe bundle is one of the most powerful.

## *Imagining Head-Smashed-In*

*Elder Joe Crowshoe painting a buffalo skull for use inside the Head-Smashed-In Interpretive Centre. (Courtesy Royal Alberta Museum)*



replaced. The skull itself has been removed and taken to local Sundances for blessing. When this happens, only people possessing proper authority are permitted to lift the skull from the case.

Once a film crew working for the government of Canada showed up and wanted to film the skull. They were making a commercial to be shown in Europe promoting travel to Canada. They didn't want to film through a glass case; instead, they wanted the skull placed outside on the windswept prairie. They were told in no uncertain terms that this would not happen, that no one was around who could handle the skull, and that even if there was, such a use of the skull would not be permitted. The film crew was sent packing.

In many ways, this painted skull serves as a metaphor for the buffalo jump. It tells of times past but uses the present to do so. It reaches deep into Blackfoot culture, but is a bridge to the modern world. It evokes a fierce and unwavering connection to tradition. With Joe's permission, the image of the skull became the centerpiece of the poster for the jump. It is, in my opinion, one of the most stunning posters for any site, museum, or centre I have ever visited. It is simple, powerful, memorable. Which is why Joe's son, Reg Crowshoe, and the Aboriginal staff of Head-Smashed-In gave their permission to use the skull as the cover of this book. No other image would do.

The skull also serves to remind us why Head-Smashed-In is such a unique place – because it remains an object of reverence but also one of controversy and debate. Some Aboriginal people feel it is too powerful to be on display. Others feel it is appropriate for display but not for other uses. Still others see a wider, more public role for the skull

as acceptable. While the skull has been the poster image for twenty years, it has never (despite being by far the most striking image of the site) been featured on a T-shirt. You have to appreciate that T-shirts are the top-selling souvenir of almost any visitor centre, and this beautiful painted skull on a shirt would be a certain hit. So why is it never seen on a shirt? When asked about this, I recall Joe Crowshoe's words: a poster is like an art object; people hang it on their walls and appreciate it. A T-shirt could be worn by anyone to do anything – rob a bank, commit other bad deeds. If the skull were to be seen in this context, it would bring great disrespect to the power of the skull and shame on the people who let this happen. So the skull has never been on a T-shirt, and never will be.

Once there was considerable debate among staff at the site as to whether or not it was appropriate to use the image of the skull on a highway billboard promoting the buffalo jump. To help resolve this debate, I was asked to write up a short history of Joe's painting of the skull and his words regarding its use. The issue was debated among the Blackfoot staff, and it was decided that the image of the skull

*The buffalo skull painted by Joe Crowshoe was initially made for educational and display purposes but over the years has become emblematic of the deeply held Aboriginal traditions that are kept alive at Head-Smashed-In. (Courtesy Royal Alberta Museum)*



hanging on a billboard was similar to one hanging on your wall. For me, this brought home the message that Aboriginal people continue to care deeply about matters of their traditional culture. They alone made the decision regarding the billboard, not government communication officers. This is all part of what makes Head-Smashed-In an intensely interesting place to work and be associated with. The power of the painted skull continues.

### Where Are the Blood?

Up till now I have mentioned only working with the Piikani band of the Blackfoot people. This certainly seemed the logical place to start, since one corner of their reserve begins just a few hundred metres from Head-Smashed-In. But there are two other bands of Blackfoot in Alberta: the Siksika (Blackfoot) located on a reserve about eighty kilometres east of Calgary, and the Kainai (Blood), whose home reserve is about fifty kilometres southeast of the buffalo jump. I had not thought to include either of these two groups in my initial meetings and conversations about developing the jump. I simply assumed that, because of proximity, the Piikani were the one relevant band to talk to. This was perhaps the biggest mistake I made in my years working on the Head-Smashed-In project, and it was one that cost me considerable good will.

Here's an illustration of how important these matters are to Native people, and how memories of transgressions are long lived. In 2005, a full twenty years after my discussions with the Piikani were completed, I was meeting with respected elders of the Kainai Nation, a group called the Mookaakin Foundation. I was there on a matter unrelated to Head-Smashed-In, but it did involve participation of the Kainai in the public development of another important heritage site. During the meeting, one of the elders, Pete Standing Alone, launched into a discussion about the importance of meaningful involvement of his people. He started to tell the story of Head-Smashed-In. He talked about how for several years the Kainai were left out of the whole development process, how some government people continued meeting with the Piikani, and so on. At this point I raised my hand and stopped Pete. I told him I was that government guy who had only talked with the Piikani. I told him it had been a mistake. Everyone

was quiet for a moment. Then there was a good laugh all around the room. Enough time had passed; we were all different people now, and we knew that despite transgressions a greater good had been served. But twenty years before it was no laughing matter.

The Siksika are the most northern Blackfoot, with their reserve situated along the Bow River, east of Calgary, Alberta. As I eventually discovered, they felt less attachment to the Head-Smashed-In area, conceding this region to the two southern groups. As I also found out, however, the Kainai felt strongly that their traditional lands and culture had very much included the region of the Porcupine Hills. They believed that their people had built and used the buffalo jump every bit as much as the Piikani (long ago, all the different Blackfoot groups may have been one people). Reserves are like small towns. There are no secrets. It didn't take long for the Kainai to hear about the dealings with the Piikani, about Joe Crowshoe's interviews, about the Piikani elders providing advice to people proposing to develop the site. And it didn't take long for a pickup truck full of some of the biggest Kainai people I had ever seen to descend on the site one day asking who was in charge. Unfortunately, I was.

It was summer. I was at the buffalo jump running an archaeological dig as well as continuing work with the Piikani. Construction of the building had just begun. I was the only government representative on site. A good portion of my crew that summer was Blackfoot, including some Kainai, a fact I thought might help me when the truck full of angry looking Kainai rolled in. It didn't. The visitors wanted to know what the heck I thought I was doing, who had given permission for this, which of their elders had been consulted, and on it went. I had a pretty wide strip torn off me. Clearly, people were quite angry. I was in a bit of shock. I had no idea that I had offended anyone so deeply. It was certainly not intentional, but it was a big mistake nonetheless.

The aftermath of this was an invitation for Kainai elders to visit the site. The group of us walked around the big hole in the ground where the interpretive centre would eventually be placed. I started explaining the plans we had developed for the storyline that would be told in the building. This of course had all been done in consultation with the Piikani and not at all with the Kainai, and none of it was lost on the elders. As they spoke in Blackfoot I kept hearing the word Piikani in their conversation. They were remarking on all the things

that had been discussed with and approved by the Piikani, and not with them. Obviously, they were not objecting to consultation with the Piikani but to the exclusion of themselves.

The other members of the Head-Smashed-In project and I found ourselves in a tough spot. Planning had progressed a long way. The building was basically designed, the storyline developed, displays were being researched and produced, text was being scripted. The Kainai had been excluded from nearly all of this. Do we form a new partnership with the Kainai and put all of this material on the table for review, or do we go with what we had? In the end we chose the latter, although we did try to solicit input from the Kainai on certain topics and displays. Something of a truce was reached. While the Kainai were not happy with the course of events, they recognized that we had been advised throughout by their close relatives – the elders of the Piikani – and that they respected (though not always agreed with) the voice of their fellow traditionalists.

## Hollywood North

A major video to play in the theatre had to be made. The script called for a re-enactment of an actual jump for which Blackfoot in period outfits were to be the actors. We had to find herds of live buffalo we could film, and, most importantly (given that live animals were out of the question), some dead buffalo to throw over the cliff at Head-Smashed-In. The latter is not a commonplace demand and required some inventive searching. Eventually we obtained two carcasses. One became available just before filming and so was still soft and fresh. The other was obtained several months in advance and was kept frozen until the time for action. To my knowledge, no one before us (or since) had thrown any dead buffalo – let alone a frozen one – over a cliff. As you can imagine, there was a fair bit of guesswork as to how this would be accomplished and what was going to happen.

It turned out to be one of those events laced with terrific memories. More than a hundred Blackfoot people, gathered on the slope below the cliff, whooped with delight at the sight of bison sailing off the cliff and slamming into the earth. Remember, no one had seen such a sight in a good one hundred fifty years. They called for an encore, and got their wish, since everything in Hollywood has to be done many times over. As the buffalo fell from the cliff, the loud noise of so

*The Past Becomes the Present*



*Making a film required throwing dead buffalo over the cliff, an event not likely seen anywhere in a century and a half. (Courtesy Royal Alberta Museum)*

### *Imagining Head-Smashed-In*

many clicking shutters completely stymied the sound man's attempts to record the thud of its impact. Needing some kind of audio of buffalo hitting the earth, the sound man and I returned to the cliff one evening. While I threw sandbags off the jump, he scurried around with his boom microphone dodging sandbags and getting the sound we needed.

Of course, no one knew what a frozen buffalo would do when thrown off a ten-metre-high cliff. It turns out that it makes some horribly unpredictable bounces – once careening wildly towards a half million dollar movie camera and crew, sending the latter scattering across the hillside. To simulate the fall from a buffalo's eye view, we packed an old, beat up camera in a box full of styrofoam, cut a hole for the lens, and repeatedly tossed it off the cliff. The camera survived; the footage was priceless.

In the same way Hazel Big Smoke had been with our bone breaking experiments, we discovered that modern-day Blackfoot were not quite so enamoured with bloody buffalo carcasses as were their ancestors. The script called for butchering the carcasses after the plunge from the cliff. Since we couldn't make a dent in the frozen one, only

*The film needed an authentic looking Native camp beneath the cliff, a considerable challenge when so much is unknown about camp life a thousand years ago. (Courtesy Royal Alberta Museum)*



the thawed one could be used, and by now it had travelled up and down the cliff several times over several days. To be kind, it was getting a little rank. Cutting into the thick hide revealed a repulsive green colour rather than a cherry crimson. Fake blood was brought in by the litre and poured over the hands doing the butchering. Only they weren't Native hands. The actors drew the line at putting their hands into a rancid carcass, and the archaeologists (who are known to possess no scruples) were enlisted as stand-ins.

An authentic looking tipi camp had to be erected on the flats below the cliff. Reg Crowshoe was his father Joe's principal acolyte in the practice of ceremonial Blackfoot culture. Like his father, Reg is well schooled in the traditional ways of his people. He provided competent direction in assembling the camp and dictating where the fires would be placed, where the poles for the travois would be stacked, and where the war shields would be hung. The biggest problem was that ancient tipis would have been made from buffalo hides, something nearly impossible to replicate today. We made all the tipis but one out of canvas and lit smoky fires to try and hide the fact. The one tipi used for close-up filming of the interior was made of cow hide. So realistic and powerful were the iniskim (sacred buffalo stone) ceremonies held inside the cow-hide tipi that the woman performing the ceremony quit a few days into filming. She was uncomfortable having to put herself, even in an acting role, in the position of handling the sacred materials. This was another lesson for me of the degree to which sacred ceremonies associated with the buffalo hunts are still remembered, of the power associated with them, and of the ongoing belief that only certain individuals possess the authority to journey into the sacred world.

## Opening and Aftermath

The time leading up to the grand opening of the Head-Smashed-In Interpretive Centre was chock full of special and unique moments, ones that won't be replicated no matter what we do with the rest of our lives. The juxtaposition of all these players and circumstances – Native elders, archaeologists, government senior managers, architects, politicians, band councils, display fabricators, film-makers – will never come to pass again. There had been nothing like it in the generations leading up to it.

It was also a time of considerable panic and excitement. The grand opening was set for 27 July 1987. The Duke and Duchess of York, Prince Andrew and Sarah Ferguson, were coming to cut the ribbon, so the opening date was immutable. Yet we were clearly behind in getting the displays installed and the building ready. As the opening drew near, my archaeological crew, which had been digging out on the flats of the processing area, was called inside to help pound nails and lay carpet. Senior civil servants showed up to sweep floors, clean glass, and hang displays.

One of my Blackfoot crew members, Clayton Blood, had a fondness for setting off small firecrackers. Out on the deserted prairie, where our digs were located, it was harmless, so I ignored it. As the grand opening approached, given that Royalty was to officiate, we were swarmed with British and Canadian security people. They combed the building, scouring for possible sources of trouble. My office, located deep in the bowels of the building and lacking windows, was selected as the safe house to which they would bring the royal couple in the event of trouble. I was turfed out, and the sniffer dogs were brought in. Suddenly there was a great commotion. I was escorted, at a spirited step by people who wore sunglasses inside and who talked into their shirt cuffs, to my office to explain why a German shepherd had gone ballistic sniffing one of the small backpacks used by my crew. With the SWAT team hovering, I dug into Clayton's backpack to reveal the firecrackers. Security forces, having had the obligatory humourectomy, were not amused.

You may recall Willy Big Bull. He's the Blackfoot who made the mistake of taking an axe to the head of the frozen buffalo used in the film. Willy showed up for the grand opening carrying a mounted, stuffed head of a buffalo to present as a gift to the royal couple. With at least a hundred members of the international media whipped into a frenzy, Willy carried the stuffed head onto the plaza of the interpretive centre and handed it to Sarah Ferguson. She actually held it in her arms for a few moments, smiling with delight, and the cover photograph for newspapers across Britain the next day was a done deal.

Five thousand people came to Head-Smashed-In on opening day. It was the biggest crowd the site has ever had. My crew was outside digging, as we were part of the great interpretive experience. But my senior assistant, Bob Dawe, and I got to lurk inside the building and rub shoulders with royalty. Six years of planning, thinking,

discussing, negotiating, compromising, working, building, sweating, and guessing had come to an end. Head-Smashed-In Buffalo Jump Interpretive Centre was open to the public.

## Of Time and Tradition

The greatest food-getting enterprise ever devised by the human spirit and intellect has not been forgotten. Head-Smashed-In Buffalo Jump is there for you to see and experience. Through three-dimensional displays, a theatre, several video productions, and real and replica artifacts, the story of the buffalo, the Plains cultures, and the buffalo jump are kept alive. Blackfoot guides tour you through the building and their history. Much of what they present is personal anecdote, something I could never do, no matter how many years spent at the site. Let me give an example.

Once my crew was excavating the remains of a well-preserved dog from the butchering area of the site. It was well known that dogs were a common feature of the ancient camps, so these remains were not unusual. One of the Blackfoot guides was leaning over the wooden railing watching us. He told me a story of how he and his father had once

*Tens of thousands of visitors each year come to the interpretive centre to experience the story of the buffalo jump. (Courtesy Head-Smashed-In Buffalo Jump)*



### *Imagining Head-Smashed-In*

been riding horses above the jump when they were hunting deer. Their trusty dog had gotten carried away with the hunt, and in the panic of chasing down some deer the dog had run over the cliff and plunged to its death. I looked down at the bones of the dog that I was excavating with new meaning and with the knowledge that Native people, not archaeologists, should be the ones who interpret this site.

It is a special place with special stories about the past, but also about the present. It is a place that Blackfoot people, despite government ownership, have come to claim as their own. It has been the site of weddings, funerals, medicine bundle openings, meetings of elders, and many other ceremonies that reflect the esteem in which the place is held. When two tourists died of heart attacks within the first few weeks of opening, staff insisted that the whole place be closed to the public (not an easy task at a government-run facility) and cleansing ceremonies held. This was done, and, incidentally, no visitors have died in the intervening decades.

When staff feels so inclined, the place literally shakes with the drumming and chanting of the Blackfoot who gather round a huge drum on the main floor. Visitors are positively transfixed by the ethereal Blackfoot singing as it reverberates through the seven-storey

*Development of Head-Smashed-In for the public ensures that the story of the buffalo jump will continue. (Courtesy Royal Alberta Museum)*



concrete building. A Blackfoot janitor, hired to sweep and vacuum, took up the craft of chipping out stone tools. When not cleaning the building, Ronald Four Horns would sit down in front of split glass doors that open into the public gallery and chip out arrowheads, explaining his work to the passing visitors. The same janitor acted as the head ceremonialist for the site, blessing each new season of work and the crew recruited for the task. The head of the interpretive staff, Lorraine Good Striker, books off a couple weeks each summer to head out to the hills and conduct her vision quest – four days of fasting in a remote, windswept spot to seek help and guidance from the spirit world.

For me, it is a place from which I will never walk away. Stepping back from the edge, I was unprepared for the force that such a facility exerts not just in my own life but in the lives of Native and non-Native people inhabiting small, rural communities. As an academic, I began the project with the excitement of having a permanent structure devoted to the subject of Native culture and archaeology, of the chance to build exhibits and tell stories about the past. If you are lucky, such a project comes along once in a career. Yet for some in my field these are passing projects; they move on to other research, their lives turn in different directions.

But the local community doesn't move on and doesn't go away. People involved in planning and developing historic places are not trained to see years down the road and imagine the social, economic, and cultural impact such a place can have on the lives of those who live every day, year after year, with the fruits of our handiwork.

There is a small roadside motel in Fort Macleod that I always use as a base when visiting the site. It is now run by Connie and Don Hunter, the daughter and son-in-law of the couple who operated it when I made my first visit more than twenty-five years ago. They know my favourite room and where to hide the key for my late arrivals. Twenty years ago Native culture was something located down the highway on the reserve. Now the cramped lobby of the Sunset Motel is packed with Native crafts for sale and brochures and maps of Head-Smashed-In. Cow and buffalo skulls hang on the walls, and staff are well versed in the promotional spiel they have delivered to thousands of visitors. You don't build a facility of this importance to the local people and simply walk away. You are not allowed to. You become woven into its fabric forever.

### *Imagining Head-Smashed-In*

The story of the great buffalo jumps and kills is only partially told. It is incompletely known from the voices of knowledgeable elders, from biased but priceless accounts of the final witnesses to these events, and from archaeological evidence that has been ravaged by the relentless forces of time. We can only imagine the fury of the chase, the taste of dust in the mouths of hunters as they trailed the pounding hoofs of a stampeding herd. We imagine the easy camaraderie and placid banter of men and women as they peeled away the blood-soaked hides of the slain animals. We imagine the chants of praise and thanks to the spirits, the songs that once echoed off the sheer cliffs, and the voices that will never be heard. Imagine how much is still untold.