Connecting with Community
The Galt Museum and Archives and the Blackfoot Shirts Project

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The Galt Museum and Archives is located in the middle of Blackfoot traditional lands, in Lethbridge, Alberta. The museum is supported by the city council and governed by a volunteer board. It has a locally focused human history collection which includes some 20,000 artifacts, 600,000 photos, and 130 linear meters of manuscript and print materials, as well as books, maps, and audiovisual pieces. The permanent gallery tells the human history of southwestern Alberta and a special exhibit gallery and several smaller areas change three times a year with in-house and travelling exhibits. Curriculum-based school programs are presented to over 10,000 students annually and community programs are offered to people of all ages. Approximately 45,000 people visit yearly.

Over the past several years, the Galt has made a conscious choice to work closely with people from many Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal groups in our diverse community. One example of this community-focused work is the Ákaitapiiwa / Ancestors exhibition (King and Wood 2002), which brought together Kainai artifacts now in the Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto, and the British Museum, London, with people from the nearby Kainai Nation who have clan connections to these materials. Although we hosted this exhibition, it was not curated in-house, and until we got involved with the Blackfoot Shirts Project we had worked closely with only a few Blackfoot individuals. We saw the project as an opportunity to strengthen our existing relationships with them but also to meet other people from the four Blackfoot nations and to develop new relationships with them that could allow us, as an institution, to be more responsive to their needs and concerns.

THE BLACKFOOT SHIRTS PROJECT AT THE GALT MUSEUM AND ARCHIVES

When Laura Peers approached the Galt Museum and Archives to ask whether our museum would be interested in participating in the Blackfoot Shirts Project,
we were happy to get involved. As the Galt’s representative, I joined Laura and Alison Brown as they visited the four Blackfoot communities during the project planning phase. We also held meetings at the Galt to which people from all four nations were invited to discuss the project, to decide how we would expand the core exhibit, and to talk about what would be involved in the associated programs. This allowed me to begin to learn of the complexities and nuances of Blackfoot culture—an understanding critical to the success of the exhibit and programs at the Galt.

The Blackfoot Shirts Project did not have a formal advisory board, though Alison and Laura worked closely with ceremonial leaders and educators from across the Blackfoot nations. We felt, though, that it was important for our institution to nurture our own relationships with Blackfoot people. The Galt Museum is located in traditional Blackfoot territory, where Niitsitapi lived for thousands of years prior to contact. Aboriginal stories of this territory and the places within it also weave into the stories of settlement generated by more recent arrivals to the area. All these stories are important to the history of southern Alberta and how it is understood today. We continue to explore Blackfoot history through exhibitions and programs, and developing long-term friendships and working relationships is an integral part of our ongoing community interaction.

Our Blackfoot advisors provided critical contacts for potential sponsors, shaped the development and realization of programs, and expanded the exhibition from the version curated by Alison and Laura at the Glenbow to include complementary artifacts and information. The Blood Tribe Economic Development Officer introduced us to TransCanada, an oil pipeline company currently working on the Kainai reserve, and the company provided funds to support the exhibition.

The exhibition was our major summer show, and following guidance from our own advisory panel, we decided to expand it to highlight items from our own collection and to raise themes specific to our location. Our advisors felt that it was important to show that everyone in the family dressed in beautifully decorated clothing for special occasions, and so they asked that we include ceremonial clothing worn by women and children as well as men. In order to do this, we borrowed two dresses—a woman’s and a young girl’s—from the museum at Fort
Macleod, a town not far west of Lethbridge that lies between the Kainai and the Piikani reserves.

In southern Alberta, the trade with which most non-Aboriginal people are familiar is the illegal whiskey/buffalo hide trade that took place in the river valley near Lethbridge during the late 1860s and early 1870s (Dempsey 2002). This trade inundated the Blackfoot with whiskey and resulted in an increase in social problems associated with intense alcohol consumption. Museum staff felt it was important to tell the story of the earlier beaver fur trade in which the Blackfoot were equal partners if not in full control. We exhibited trade items such as copper kettles, ribbon, strike-a-light fire starters, muskets, tobacco, metal knives, and beads that, unlike whiskey, added to the economy and family life of the Blackfoot people.

The other component the Galt introduced was principally aimed at non-Aboriginal visitors, though it may also have resonated with younger Blackfoot people. We wanted to help them recognize the significance of the five shirts in terms they could relate to, so we included some modern clothing symbolizing achievements in today’s society. Kainai ceremonial leader Frank Weasel Head had told us he wanted youngsters to understand that the five historic shirts had been earned by their owners through their prowess as leaders and warriors. Students today can also earn the right to wear clothing that symbolizes high status. They can remain in school and earn the right to wear a university convocation gown, a doctor’s lab coat, or a sports team jersey and be contributing members of their community. In a small alcove adjacent to the main gallery holding the Blackfoot shirts we displayed just such clothing.

Today, many citizens of Lethbridge only know Blackfoot people through the negative stories carried by print, radio, and television news outlets about Aboriginal people who are homeless or who have been found guilty of criminal offenses. The Blackfoot Shirts Project garnered extensive coverage of the shirts, as well as stories of many positive things happening in the Blackfoot communities. It was an important lesson for the media to learn—that there is more to the Blackfoot than negativity and homelessness. Charlene Bruised Head Mountain Horse, who sits on the board of the Aboriginal Council of Lethbridge, later made this point in an interview with Alison and Laura, when she noted that it was
tremendously important for Lethbridge citizens to be exposed to positive stories about Aboriginal people. She said:

Just with having the shirts here in Lethbridge and having them on display to the city of Lethbridge, I mean that’s huge gains for us as Niitsitapi, because we live in such close proximity. And there’s still those feelings of social isolation, the Aboriginal versus non-Aboriginal, and just the conflict that has existed. So having . . . artifacts like this to visit creates an opportunity for learning around us. Because it’s teachings that haven’t been welcomed by the outside community. . . . It’s breaking down those barriers, that sense of isolation or that resistance throughout Canada. Because there is such a resistance to acknowledge Aboriginal culture because of the history.

As one of the premier cultural institutions in southern Alberta, the Galt has a responsibility to do what it can to counter negative stereotypes, and our participation in the Blackfoot Shirts Project enabled us to do this in a way that brought together Blackfoot and non-Blackfoot visitors in dialogue—sometimes for the first time.

The Galt provided cultural awareness training facilitated by Trevor Prairie Chicken, a Piikani advisor, and Blanche Bruisedhead, the museum’s Kainai interpreter. They guided the Galt staff and volunteers into a new realm of understanding of Blackfoot culture, creating a new respect for Blackfoot people, their beliefs, and their heritage. The staff and volunteers, in turn, passed on this awareness to non-Aboriginal visitors. We heard from many Blackfoot people that we must get to know them by participating in Blackfoot activities. And so Galt staff and volunteers attend powwows, the Sun Dance on the Kainai reserve, blessing circles, book readings, Red Crow Community College celebrations and conferences.

The Blackfoot Shirts Project touched every aspect of our museum programming. The Galt presented a full slate of family and adult programming, school programs, and bus tours for people of all ages throughout the run of the exhibit. Most were developed and facilitated by and with Aboriginal artists and teachers. A play called Napi Stories, directed by Doreen Williams-Freeman, kept
the audience entertained with Blackfoot stories and humour and was the stimulus for a family puppet-making program developed and presented by Doreen and Nakoda artist Tanya Harnett. Blackfeet artist and educator Mari King taught people about dog travois as they made models of them.

With the support of the Blood Tribe Economic Development team, Galt Museum “Get Out of Town” bus tours took people to visit a former residential school (now Red Crow Community College), a medicine wheel, and the Kainai Indian Days powwow. Another bus tour went to Writing-on-Stone Provincial Park / Áísínai’pi National Historic Site where ancient pictographs and petroglyphs are interpreted by Blackfoot people. Through the exhibition and programs we were able to feature the skills and talents of Blackfoot people in the past and today. Our intent was to entertain and educate people from the city of Lethbridge and surrounding area and to validate Blackfoot stories and skills.

**INSTITUTIONAL CHALLENGES**

The Blackfoot Shirts Project did raise a number of institutional challenges for the Galt Museum and Archives. It was an interesting juggle to find the right space for the handling sessions; one that would work for the museum and the participants. Our archivist gave up the Archives Reading Room for this project, and visitors were redirected to a temporary space. The next thing to consider was the burning of sweetgrass, which is an integral part of Blackfoot prayers and blessings. Fortunately, our smoke alarms remained silent, but we did need to warn one of our staff members when sweetgrass was being used as she suffers from asthma. We found the smell of the sweetgrass was picked up by our ventilation system and spread throughout the building. When visitors noticed the aroma, we were able to explain about the burning of sweetgrass as a part of the Blackfoot visits with the shirts.

We learned that inviting Blackfoot people to events at the Galt requires a different form of communication; often, that means a personal phone call. Mailing out invitations doesn’t always work because many people living on reserves visit their mailboxes only sporadically, as the distance is too great to
travel every day. Email is not always an alternative because many homes do not have a computer and Internet service, although since 2011, the rapid adoption of cellular phones with access to Internet has increased the effectiveness of email as a means of communication.

Many Blackfoot people felt that admission charges to the shirts exhibition should be waived, but the Galt was not in a financial position to accommodate that request. We tried unsuccessfully to find a sponsor to cover those costs. In the long run, relatively few concerns were voiced at the admission desk, but we did wonder whether the entry charges had deterred others from coming to see the exhibition.

The relationship-building and the planning and implementation of the exhibition and programs took a great deal of staff time. This was both expected and welcome. Relationship-building is critical to being an inclusive museum—one of the major goals of our strategic plan—and management and staff understand the need to invest substantial amounts of time and effort into making this a success.

Despite these challenges, the Galt has seen great improvement in the relationships we have with many Blackfoot people and organizations. The Galt’s profile in the Blackfoot community was raised during the sessions and exhibition, and we had more Aboriginal people visiting the museum than ever before. We now experience more interaction with the regional Blackfoot reserves, sites, and organizations, such as Blackfoot Crossing Historical Park, Blood Tribe Economic Development, Red Crow Community College, and the Lethbridge Aboriginal Council. Staff are recognized and acknowledged when we attend Blackfoot events and even on the streets of Lethbridge. In 2011, we were honoured and touched to be awarded the Community Organization Award by the Aboriginal Council of Lethbridge “in recognition for your leadership in the development of building positive relationships with the Aboriginal Community of Lethbridge.” Since the Blackfoot Shirts Project, Aboriginal people have come to the Galt to see family artifacts, and the Piikani Women’s Group asked to see beaded Blackfoot items in the collection. They were looking for traditional beadwork patterns and in return we gained valuable information about some of the artifacts we showed them.
Participating in the Blackfoot Shirts Project was a major initiative for the Galt Museum and Archives. What we have learned through this process will help us with other projects. It will:

- Provide staff with the opportunity to maintain and build working and friendship relationships with Blackfoot people from all four communities.
- Help staff continue to offer Blackfoot-related exhibits such as “Picturing Childhood,” an exhibit developed through a partnership with the Opokaa’Sin Early Intervention Society and the University of Lethbridge Anthropology Department. The project featured photos of child-rearing taken by Blackfoot caregivers in an effort to explore how the separation of children and family during the residential school era has affected Blackfoot families today.
- Strengthen our resolve to work with other groups and people in our community to learn from their voice and share their knowledge and stories with the broader community.

Engaging with our diverse community strengthens our museum, and addressing issues prevalent in the Lethbridge area is a significant contribution we can make to the overall richness of our community.