Preparing to Travel

In terms of how museums work, taking the shirts from Oxford to Alberta was a massive undertaking. This loan required special conditions, including controlled temperature, humidity, and light levels, all of which had to fall within a certain range to ensure that the fragile shirts would not be damaged. In order to offer access to all four Blackfoot communities, it needed to be based at more than one host museum, and required spaces for handling sessions and for exhibition at each museum. It also required multiple transportation links by ground and air (truck from Oxford to Heathrow airport in London, air freight from Heathrow to Calgary airport, truck from Calgary airport to Glenbow, truck to Galt, truck to Calgary airport and back again). All of this involved security issues to consider during transport and at the host museums, insurance for shipping, and customs forms. Heather Richardson also had to plan a safe way of folding and cushioning the shirts for transport and storage in their crate. PRM staff also underwent training to obtain “known consignor” status from the UK government, which allowed them to pack and seal the shipping crate so that it would not then be opened by customs or security officers in transit. This was, in part, so that we could ensure their complete security during transit but also so that we could abide by Blackfoot protocol, which requests that menstruating women not touch the shirts.

The most challenging aspect of the project was the handling sessions, which were very different from the usual model, in which museums lend artifacts to each other for exhibit inside glass cases. This required more negotiation than usual for a loan. The director of the Pitt Rivers Museum, Michael O’Hanlon, and some museum staff had to be convinced that handling was necessary and would not damage these rare and fragile shirts. Museums are legally responsible for the objects in their care, and must be able to prove that they have not exposed the collections to risk or damage, so these were legitimate concerns. Laura Peers had several meetings with colleagues to explain how the sessions might work,
why Blackfoot people needed to touch these ancestors and see them outside glass cases, and how normal museum standards for security could be maintained during handling sessions. The turning point for the project was when Heather Richardson agreed to travel to Alberta to participate in the handling sessions. It was after this decision that the loan was formally approved by the director and the museum’s Board of Visitors, its official governance body.

The shirts then had to be prepared for travel. After 170 years, the hide and quillwork is extremely brittle in areas, and they were covered in coal soot from their time in Edward Hopkins’s home. A number of decisions had to be made. Conservators don’t “restore” artifacts: they stabilize them while keeping all physical evidence of how the artifact has been used. They also make recommendations for how objects are displayed to protect and preserve them for the future.

Before any work was done on the shirts, Allan Pard, a Piikani ceremonial leader, and his wife Charlene Wolfe travelled to Oxford to help us start the project according to Blackfoot protocol. Allan was one of the few men who had the rights to own hairlock shirts, and who knew the protocols, songs, and rituals associated with them. It meant a great deal to us to be taught about the shirts by Allan in Oxford: it felt like an important joining of worlds that needed to happen to ensure the project went well. Alison joined us from Aberdeen that week, and with the entire Pitt Rivers Museum team who would be working with the shirts—the museum photographer, collections curator and assistants, and the loans and conservation teams—we gathered in the conservation lab with the shirts to be painted and blessed for spiritual protection. During that week, as we examined each shirt together and Allan talked to staff and students about Blackfoot culture and history, we learned a great deal. Such opportunities are rare in museums in the UK, even though many of the historic collections from First Nations are there.

**Figure 40.** Allan Pard with shirt and project team, Pitt Rivers Museum, 2009. Photograph by Alison K. Brown.