

Aanischaukamikw: a Museum, a Collection and a Community

Stephen Inglis November, 2012

One of the hundreds of stories the late Chief Billy Diamond enjoyed telling about organizing his people to negotiate with the Government of Quebec centered around a very early meeting of Cree leaders. One old man proposed that ``the first thing we need is an electric typewriter``. Another responded ``but none of us know how to type``. The old man replied ``that`s why we need an **electric** typewriter!``

Behind the humour lies the extraordinary transition of a people who up to the mid 20th century lived in small family groups in isolated bush camps and survived by hunting, fishing and trapping. They have now become residents of northern communities that feature roads, airports, schools, clinics, and sports facilities.

The territory of the James Bay Cree that former Quebec Premier, Robert Bourassa, infamously described as ``this vast and empty land`` is vast no doubt, but was hardly empty. As the earthmovers began to roll and the dynamite exploded under the river channels soon to be dammed for hydroelectric power, the Cree leaders began a relentless campaign to establish their right to share in the decision making surrounding the economic development of the region and in the benefits that were to flow. That process continues to this day.

The knowledge and skill that enabled their ancestors to live on the land for at least 5,000 years may have contributed in some ways to the success of the Cree in the boardrooms, lawyers offices, and courtrooms of Ottawa, Montreal and Quebec, but this knowledge was also threatened by the new opportunities, lifestyles and communications.

While progress was being made in education, health, and housing, the Cree also maintained an active concern for language, culture and tradition. This included some ingenious strategies like subsidising trappers during periods when times were lean or fur prices were down, so that families could join their forest-dwelling relatives and continue to maintain traditional food preparation and other bush skills.

Other strategies included sponsoring elder/youth gatherings, snowshoe walks, and other traditional activities and assigning the arrangements for these to cultural co-ordinators in each community. But sometime in the mid-1990s a group of Cree leaders, elders and technicians also began to plan and raise funds for a centrally located

museum and cultural centre, a place that could draw on the experience and role museums have played in the big cities of the south while adapted to the particular needs of small northern communities. The construction of the building to house this centre began in 2009, first opened to the public in 2011, and celebrated a Grand Opening in June 2012. The staff is growing to meet the needs and Anischaaukamikw Cree Cultural Institute (ACCI) is on its way.

In this paper I focus on just two of the challenges posed by such a plan; first, the assembly of a collection where none existed before and second, the establishment of a network by which widely distributed communities can benefit from a single regional facility.

The Collection

The few objects gathered during the long years of planning seemed initially to defy the notion of creating a collection to support an extensive historical exhibition. On one hand, the material culture of the James Bay Cree appeared quite unlike that of other, better-known and museum-celebrated First Nations. Tools were made, used and discarded as needed and the year-round struggle to survive in a harsh environment and a nomadic pattern of hunting left little time for the celebration or accumulation of historic objects. On the other hand, such early and beautifully made objects that had been collected from peoples of the north-east subarctic over the centuries of European exploration and the fur trade were firmly lodged in museum collections in the cities of Canada, the U.S. and Europe.

The attempt to build a collection is nonetheless proceeding on several fronts.

The first and earliest objects available to ACCI come from the extensive archaeology that has taken place in the region since the mid 20th century. Both Cree-managed collections and those under the care of the government of Quebec can be accessed as needed and an active archaeology programme at ACCI is planned. Because much of the archaeological work in the Cree territory has been done in close co-operation with local people, it offers a rich element of oral history that will contribute to an understanding of all kinds of objects in the collections, both early and recent.

Through a second effort, it has been possible to purchase a small group of important historical objects for the permanent collection on the open market. These include a woman's hood, two decorated bags, and two toboggans all made in the 19th century. Several of these are featured in the opening exhibition. Such eastern Cree objects are rarely available in this way and are expensive for a small non-profit

organization, so this will be only a very slow and selective way of building the collection.

A third path has been through donations from scholars who have worked in the James Bay territory. These specialists, several of whom are retiring from long university teaching careers, are in various stages of making available to the Institute documentation, photographs and objects they have accumulated as part of their research. Typically, their knowledge of the makers, the context and their continuing ties to Cree communities make these objects and documentation particularly valuable additions to the collection. Although most of the objects date from the mid 20th century, the rapid pace of cultural change since when they were made make them important evidence of the transition to settled communities and wider exposure to designs, materials and techniques from beyond the territory.

A fourth and potentially central means of building the collection is through donations and loans from community members. Because there has, up to recently, never been a location in the territory where significant family or community material could be gathered, stored, protected, or presented, objects of importance have usually been kept in peoples' homes or camps. Slowly, the Institute is receiving donations or loans of objects from the donors' grandparents or great-grandparents generations. These include ritual objects, articles of clothing, and masterpieces of notable craftspeople. That these objects typically come with family histories and stories make them probably the most potent and educational aspect of collection building, partly because they are also a part of building a constituency for the Institute.

A fifth direction for building a collection has been through loans from other museums. Established museums have typically been reluctant to loan objects to smaller more remote locations whose standards of care and security may not meet the criteria set out in their policies. There has also been concern that objects loaned to First Nations might become hostages to political struggles as the slow but steady process toward the establishment of native rights continues. Nonetheless, ACCI has experienced consistent co-operation from museums in making precious objects from their collections available for the opening exhibition, in fact, such an exhibition would have been impossible without the support of larger museums in the south. I think that the care and attention the Cree paid to museum standards for the ACCI building, professionalism of ACCI employees and contract staff, and a growing willingness of museums to work co-operatively with source communities all help to account for this.

But how do loans, that have to be returned according to tight schedules, help to build a collection? One way is that they help make ACCI staff aware of the range and quality of historic objects that are part of Cree heritage and assist us to develop capacity and build a wish list for the future. The opportunity to study these materials, discuss them with elders, and juxtapose them with other objects is part of the development of the Institute. Many Cree have lost touch with the techniques and fashions of the 18th and 19th centuries and the loans have created renewed interest and respect for the past.

Another, is that our programmes will include a replication programme by which skilled Cree seamstresses will pattern and reproduce objects on loan that can then become part of the permanent collection.

Finally, loans will help ACCI to build ongoing relationships with larger museums, contributing to sharing of archival material and other aspects of collections. It is perhaps not too early to predict that museums with large holdings of early Cree material will eventually approve long term loans or strategic transfers of objects to local centres like ACCI, where they can become part of community needs and programmes, as well as serve the general public.

The Network

The immense size of the James Bay Cree territory and the distances between the nine communities (from Waswanipi in the south to Chisasibi, in the north, for example is almost 1000 kms by road and it is another 200 kms by boat or air further north to Whapmagoostui) seem to defy regular contact with and service from a single regional institution. Although the planning of the organization included input from all the communities, there are real barriers of distance and representation that must be addressed.

The ACCI is located in Ouje-Bougoumou, one of the southern-most communities but it is mandated to serve all the Cree communities and James Bay Cree living in other parts of Quebec and Canada. We have realized that regardless of how successful the institute is in attracting Cree to educational or cultural programmes offered at the Institute, or to visit the exhibition or library and archives, only a small number will ever, at any time, be present here. This being the case, it is critical to develop an imaginative and robust outreach and interactive presence and programme.

One way to do this is to develop partnerships with other Cree entities or organizations who have related regional mandates, in order to take advantage of their longer experience, marketing and publicity

opportunities, and share chances to meet the community constituencies. We have built office space at ACCI so that the Cree organizations for tourism and for arts and crafts will take up residence here and there will be a multitude of cross-programme possibilities.

Another approach is to develop a strong and interactive web presence, so that people in other communities can follow our progress and participate in the process of gathering knowledge. An example is the feature of our website whereby a visitor can see the artefacts on exhibit, view related historical photographs, hear elders commenting on these objects, and can leave their own comments and observations. (Note: thanks to the Canadian Interactive Fund at the Federal Department of Canadian Heritage)

Another example is a gathering space in the ACCI building that is equipped to host talks, performances and demonstrations that can be broadcast to other communities. A fibre optic cable now being installed throughout the territory that will be connected to ACCI will make such transmission practical. Community events in the other areas of the territory will also be accessible at ACCI. While the network among Cree communities is a priority, such planning as a communications hub will also permit people to better access and participate in experiences and learning opportunities from outside the territory as well.

Museums have typically operated as information providers and for the past few decades have steadily built their educational and "interpretive" capacities. The visitors have, for the most part, been treated as mute and passive recipients of very carefully groomed and ruthlessly edited messages, word bites limited by space, bi or tri lingual imperatives, and the diversity of the audiences. In contrast, ACCI is attempting to find ways to engage each visitor as a provider of information, as well as a recipient. We are presenting objects as stimulators or pretexts for the telling of personal stories or relating family history, rather than as transmitters of finite or definitive pieces of information. Both the collections we build and the network we establish have this goal in mind. Aanischaaukamikw Cree Cultural Institute will succeed according to the vision carried by the elders only if it becomes a committed scribe for the experiences, skills and memories of the people it serves, the "electric typewriter" of a people still linked to their land in northern Canada.