

**Alberta Labour History Institute (ALHI)**

**Oral History Interview**

Interviewee: Mary-Beth Laviolette

Interviewer: Winston Gereluk

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My name is Mary-Beth Laviolette. I've lived in Canmore full time since 1999, with my husband and son Duncan. I have been working as the administrator at the Canmore Museum since September of 2003. I'm the museum's first paid full-time employee.

I was born and raised in Edmonton. I was educated at Carleton University in Ottawa where I did a degree in Journalism in the '70s. Everybody wanted to be a journalist at that time, because of Watergate and all that sort of stuff, but I actually found Canadian history to be a lot more interesting. So I majored in Canadian History. Living in Ottawa, you live around a lot of big, large national institutions. I ended up spending a lot of time at museums, particularly the National Gallery of Canada. I worked for a student radio station out of Carleton University called CKCU. It was where I kind of got a lot of experience in radio. I hosted an arts program called Artistic License where I developed a sort of arts background, but I had a fairly strong interest in history as well. Then after that, I worked for 15 years with CBC radio in Ottawa and Toronto for the National Network, for the Stereo Network. I was a writer/ researcher and worked on a program called Arts National, which was on every evening from Monday to Friday.

Then, when I was laid off in a downsizing of CBC in the early '80s, I decided I was going to move back out west. I arrived back in Edmonton in 1982. By that time I was doing a lot of visual arts coverage, painting, artists and so on. I took a look around and decided that Calgary had a much more interesting arts scene in visual art, painting, sculpture, that kind of thing. A lot of it has to do with things like the Alberta College of Art and Design. It has to do with what was once called the Banff School of Fine Arts, and so on. So I moved to Calgary. I got married, met my husband here. He's an art dealer in a lot of Canadian historic and also Canadian contemporary art. I started working for CBC radio again. I worked for 10 years on the weekend programs as the writer/ researcher. I basically lined up all the interviews and did all the programming for it. The two programs were Sunday Arts and the other one, on Saturday, it was called Saturday Side Up. Those

were the 2 regional programs that I worked on. In 1995 I could see the writing on the wall again with CBC; they were going through a lot more cutbacks. I'd always been a contract employee, which was fine. I didn't mind that, but I knew that as a contract employee, you're always the first one to go.

At that point I became involved in a project to produce a book about the history of art in Alberta. I was working with another woman on it. She got involved in a very large exhibition on Maxwell Bates, and I decided I would continue my part of the book. My specialty is contemporary art, and I decided I would write a book covering the period from 1970 to the year 2000. That book will be coming out in a couple of weeks, finally after 10 years. The book is called *An Alberta Art Chronicle: Adventures in Recent and Contemporary Art*. It's being published here in Canmore by Altitude Press.

To make a long story short, everywhere I've travelled I've always gone to art galleries and museums, even small-town museums. I consider myself to be a bit of an aficionado in that area. It just happened very luckily that there was an ad in the newspaper looking for someone to do a job for the Canmore Museum. That job consisted of moving the museum and its collection out of a building which it had been in since 1988. It was an old Alberta liquor store. And move it into a new facility, the facility that we're in right now at the Civic Centre. Up to that point the museum had been a volunteer-driven organization. I was able to be there 5 days a week, sometimes longer. I was fortunate. I was working with a good board of directors, and that's always very key in non-profit organizations. Also I've had some real diehard volunteers as well, and you need those kinds of people as well.

The Canmore Museum was founded in 1983. That's the year of Canmore's centennial, when the CPR arrived and turned Canmore into a divisional point. It was shortly after that that the mining got underway. It was pretty obvious there was a lot of coal in the area. You could see it on the surface. Canmore was fortunate in the sense that there were coalmining operations going elsewhere in the Bow Valley. There's a large seam of coal called the Cascade Coal Seam. There was Bankhead. There was Anthracite, which was the first coalmining town. The Trans Canada Highway now drives through it. Then there was Georgetown, which was above where the Nordic Centre is now, and Canmore, which is the town that kind of lucked out, because it happened to have a good grade of coal, anthracite, or what they call semi-anthracite.

I'm not sure what distinguishes it. But it was the kind of coal the railway really needed to get their trains over the high mountain passes. High carbon content, burns for a long time, generates a lot of energy. That's what kept Canmore going for quite a while. Then it got into producing briquettes. I've actually talked to people from across western Canada who actually remember their homes being heated by Canmore briquettes. I met a gentleman recently in Winnipeg: he was here one afternoon this summer. He remembers his home; he remembers shovelling the briquettes into the basement. Then I met another gentleman from Vancouver last summer who told me that the way you could distinguish between people who had means and people who didn't have means was by what they heated their

house with. If you had means, it meant you could burn Canmore coal. If you didn't have means, you burned pulp and wood and paper and whatever you could lay your hands on. So there's a very interesting social comment there.

Canmore itself was not a well-off community. It was a mining community in comparison to Banff, which was kind of the jewel in the crown and where everybody wanted to go, Canmore was considered to be an old historical mining town, but with none of the flashy goods that Banff has. The other thing too is that there was a totally different kind of social makeup between the 2 towns. Banff attracted a lot of wealthy people, people of means - artists who could come from various parts of the continent and spend their summers and work at the school, or just paint. It was primarily an Anglo-Saxon community. Canmore was not. There were certain people of that heritage in Canmore, but it was a very different mix of people. It reminds me of Edmonton that way; it had that cultural mix from Eastern Europe and so on. So Banff could afford to have museums, because there were people there who had the means to support museums. A place like Canmore did not. Even if you look at the Glenbow Museum, you can ask: what started it? It was the huge amount of money that a lawyer who struck it rich during the oil rush out of Leduc in the '40s, Eric Cameron. He poured massive amounts of money into getting that museum going and into making it what it is today.

So Canmore didn't have those kinds of people. It's always interested me how communities without those means will get something like a museum together, and how will they sustain it. The sustainability question is a much more serious one for museums of that other heritage. I think Canmore has been fortunate in the sense that it's had small groups of individuals who have supported what the museum is about. They've all had different interests. I've gone through the files of various projects that have taken place over the years. At one point there was a woman who was looking into the history of the old cemetery, which is quite remarkable here in Canmore, and really should be a historic site and have its fencing restored and that kind of thing. So there was somebody who was fascinated with that. Her name was Brenda Gorris. There was a volunteer curator here for a number of years named Royal McKellar. He was very interested in the equipment, the sticks and stones of mining and cars and trains. He also did a lot of research on Anthracite, which was an early mining town that disappeared off the face of the earth. That was another contribution that was made. Then another volunteer that we've had in recent years--and it's a person whom I've come to know and have worked with quite closely-- is Cathy Jones. During the time of the museum packing up, moving, getting into this new building, she was the guns behind it. She had a lot of contacts with town officials. She'd been here in Canmore since the '70s, so she knew the ins and outs of the community. And she's persistent. So Cathy is very interested in heritage. So she as well has made her contribution in that area, and continues to do that as well. There's another interesting side to the museum.

[end of tape]



Q: What other resources was it necessary to access in order to get such a grand project underway?

ML: Another person who's played an important role in the museum in more recent years is a gentleman from Calgary named Rick Green. He's a geoscientist, or geophysicist, excuse me. He just has this real love of geology. He kind of got the geoscience centre going as part of the museum, and in a way it's ended up being quite a nice mix. Coalmining fits into the whole area of geology and geoscience and so on and so forth. The other thing, I didn't know this about the Canmore area, but we have a member of the museum who is a geologist from France; he's an elderly gentleman. He spends half his year here in Canmore and then the other half back in France. I asked him, I said, what are you doing over here? How did you find out about Canmore? He explained to me that geologically the Rockies, the Eastern Front ranges of the Canadian Rockies, are so accessible and it's so obvious what kind of geological forces have been going on in this part of the world for millions of years, that as a geologist he kind of wants to be somewhere like that. He's actually shown me some pictures of where he lives – he lives very close to the Alps. But his mountains are mostly covered with trees, and it's all nice and green. We live here in a much rougher landscape. So there's the geology connection as well too. That brings us in an audience as well too. There's lots of rock nuts out there. There's lots of people who come from overseas who come out of mining backgrounds. I've been surprised at how many Brits come to this museum and have stories to tell about their own mining heritage – a grandfather who mined, or whatever. Then also a lot of Americans. So it's not a small little topic with just a small few aficionados who really follow it. It's quite widespread. I even got a big black man from Fiji who was here, six feet tall, and he was fascinated with the mining that was done here, because he's a miner in Fiji.

Q: That's a fascinating aspect of the museum, that it marries the natural history with the social history. It seems that the formation of the museum coincides somewhat with the

closing out of the mines here. There was some concern among some of the miners I talked to that none of that side of this community's history was going to be preserved.

ML: I've heard from people, including Lena Shellian, that when the last mine closed in 1979 they were so eager to get that property cleaned up and disposed of that bunches of buildings went down. Mine records, the archives of this hundred-year enterprise, a certain portion of that went down a mine shaft and got covered over. It seems to me that at that particular point in time mining or the heritage of... well the heritage of working-class towns, whether it be in logging or mining or any kind of natural resource extraction type activity, they don't have the cache that a Banff has or other kind of communities that have had a different kind of social structure develop around them. I think that's really unfortunate that that happened. A lot of people will come in here and ask me certain questions about the mines and all of that sort of thing, and they're often quite flabbergasted that that was how it was done in 1979. People didn't care about. More recent people who have moved to Canmore are quite surprised by that.

Q: How was what you're talking about preserved in this museum?

ML: Well that's interesting. I don't know as much about that as Cathy would. But from what I know, and I still get people coming in, people bring their memories. They sometimes bring in artifacts. They sometimes bring in old log books from the mines. Old photographs come in that way as well too. People are cleaning out their basement and they've got some things that came from their parents' era, and so on and so forth. So it's just been a kind of gradual accumulation of artifacts and archives and so on. There's a lot of research that needs to be done with those artifacts and with those archives. It wasn't built in a systematic way; the collection of the Canmore Museum was not built in a systematic way. Eric Harvie, when he was running what was called the Glenbow Alberta Institute, would hire curators and send them half way across the world with an agenda to collect certain items and bring them back to the museum. There was even an exhibition at

the Glenbow a couple of years ago, about eight or nine curators who worked for Eric Harvie in the '50s and '60s and traveled all over the world and collected things for that museum. That didn't happen in Canmore. There was just none of that kind of-- there just weren't the resources. People did what they could do and what they could contribute. The Canmore Museum has built up a collection in a more kind of organic but also in a more higgly piggly fashion. There's a lot of research that needs to be done on many of the artifacts and many of the archives. There's a big housing boom going on in Canmore, a big development boom, and I constantly have people coming in wanting to know about the old maps of the mines, where the mineshafts are, and all that kind of thing. Well there's only a certain amount of that information that's actually around, and it's come in sometimes through people who've had access to certain old historical documents. But in the case of Three Sisters development, the developers had to make an effort to get some of those archives together. But it's not complete; it's not complete at all as far as I know. People are often kind of surprised by that. But again, when the mines closed, none of that was considered to have any value. That was just the way it was.

Q: What's the purpose of that corner with the large pictures?

ML: Those are photographs that have been donated to the museum by local townspeople here. It hasn't really come from any other source other than that. What the museum has done, and this was long before my time, but the museum has approximately 6,000 historic photographs. What it has done several years ago is it put together a collection called The Centennial Collection, and they're in binders. It's a selection of photographs about different parts of the town and its history. There's a couple of binders on mining, there's a couple of binders on old buildings, there's a couple of binders on people of Canmore, there's a couple of binders filled with photographs about the trains and the CPR.

Q: How were you able to build and sustain this ambitious project?

ML: First of all, the Canmore Museum was lucky in that it had a fairly good board. It was a small board but it was a dedicated board, and it was a board that was willing to do a lot of volunteer work. But at the time of the building of the Civic Centre there was a sense that if this was going to be a major building in downtown Canmore it needed to have a public face. At the time, the political masters that be felt that the museum was a natural fit. It's not unusual to go to places in Europe where you'll have museums attached to the local city hall, and so on and so forth. The whole idea was to give this building, which houses many of the town's employees and does a lot of the town's work, to have a public place. So the museum was invited to be part of this whole building project. In certain respects, the museum lucked out, but it's much more complicated than that. There was the right political leadership at the time; there was the right kind of leadership happening from the board of the museum. It kind of came together. It didn't fit all perfectly, but it got together and it happened. People pushed it through. But Canmore is a town of many needs right now. It needs a new library; it needs more recreation facilities, infrastructure, and so on and so forth. A museum, to certain people, would be considered a bit of a frill.

Q: You were talking about how Banff was the kind of town that one could assume a museum would arise in. Canmore is kind of becoming that kind of town now.

ML: Yes, I think it is. I think it will increasingly become a community for the nouveau riche. We've got an issue going here right now with the Canmore Hotel being up for sale. That's a 115-year-old building. It's significant in the sense that it's actually a hotel, a wooden hotel. Many of those wooden hotels have burnt down now; they're gone. It's also a very old hotel, probably the second oldest or maybe even now the oldest in the province. But the money, the property value of it makes it a site of contention. It's my observation having grown up in Edmonton, which has been through several booms, having lived in Toronto and then having lived for about 20 years in Calgary, the more



prosperous a community is, the more buoyant an economy is, the more perilous it is for heritage buildings. Developers come and go. We've seen that in Edmonton, Thirty years later can we say that downtown Edmonton is a gem? So Canmore is kind of on this fast track, this development fast track, where it's having to struggle with a lot of those issues right now. It's hard to say what's going to happen with the hotel.

Q: It seems that the phenomenon of developers will always be with us.

ML: Yes, and they're necessary.

Q: But they have their agenda.

ML: Oh god, yeah.

Q: Do you see the agenda of this museum reflecting the interests of the nouveau riche that you referred to who are coming into the town?

ML: It was interesting. I had this American woman come up to me this fall. She was rather upset about our documentary that we made where we interviewed 28 longtime residents of Canmore to talk about what they think of Canmore today. She said to me, I didn't know there was so much resentment in this town about all the new development. I said to her, you know, it's an underground current in the community right now. A lot of people in the old mining community, even the community of hippies and artists and outdoors people who came here in the '70s, they know that their children will not live here, because they can't afford it anymore. So there's this thing going on right now; yeah, there is. But, she said, everybody seems very nice. I said, well people are very nice, and they don't hold it against you personally. We get a lot of those people coming into the museum; we get a lot of the weekend people coming in. They are definitely interested. We are doing something for them, and this is Cathy Jones's effort. We're kind of

providing a bit of a context; the museum provides a context. The museum says, this is the kind of place that Canmore used to be – it was a coalmining community, etc. This is the kind of community that Canmore is becoming, and there are certain issues with that becoming. So our exhibition changes, which we did this year for the centennial, and kind of looks at that from one point of view. But we're going to now in the new year, work on an exhibition which is going to kind of grow and fill a large part of the space on land development, actually on human habitation in the Canmore area since the end of the Ice Age. Humans have been in this valley for quite a number of years. We're going to kind of start there and then we're going to carry it up to what we call the industrial development of Canmore, which was the mining and logging operations and so on. Then we are going to carry it from there into the recreational development period. We hope to provide people with some context about how this has happened, who have been the major players. How has this impacted on the town's boundaries? What about the role of wildlife? People want this to be a natural setting with a healthy wildlife population around, and so on and so forth. I think that certainly for newcomers to Canmore, we're trying to provide some kind of context for them as well. It's very important that they're involved, very important.

Q: What changes will be needed as this museum carries on into the future? What is your dream or vision?

ML: I think that a museum like Canmore is rather unique from other larger more well established museums, let's talk about museums close by – the Glenbow, the Whyte Museum, whatever. The Canmore Museum has a much stronger kind of social, well it's very interested in the social history of the community and how it's developed and what those issues are. That's a whole new subject that's coming up at various museum conferences: is/should museums be more socially active, rather than just showing precious objects and focusing on important people and that kind of thing. The Glenbow made a stab at it this year with their centennial exhibition on the history of the Bow, looking at the Bow River from a variety of different points of view, including how that

river has impacted on the lives of people from the top of the Bow right down to the very bottom. It had a very strong kind of social history to it. But the museums I'm familiar with, the more well-off ones, have not quite had that same sort of passion. Also the other thing is too that the Canmore Museum is lucky in the sense that there's still a group of people from the older communities who can contribute things. It's easier for us to have access to them, because we're not a very bureaucratic structure. We don't have these layers of bureaucracy that large institutions have to struggle with and deal with all the time. You don't have to pull everybody in for a meeting; you can run into them on Main Street and ask them what they think. For example, when Marra's grocery store closed this summer – celebrated their 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary, and then closed, bang, end of story – it left a lot of people shocked. We had this idea immediately, god, we've got to do a show on Marra's. We put it together in about two to three weeks, and we were able to use the atrium to put it on. Well you know what, a large institution could never do that. Even a medium-size institution would have trouble with the wheels of bureaucracy and the procedures and whatever to get that done in three weeks. I even had a museum director say to me, that's what museums are talking about now, is how can they be more responsive, how can they be more relevant to things that are going on immediately in the community. Most exhibitions, like for example at a large institution, are planned years in advance.

Q: What else besides the context of human habitation is going to be necessary in order to make it appealing to the newcomers?

ML: What else is going to be necessary to appeal to the newcomers? I think we have work to do in that area, but I think we also have work to do with our politicians and with our council members and people like that, many of them who don't know anything about the history of the museum or how it came about or how it even came into this particular location. These people have their own particular agendas and things that they want to support, a new library or whatever. That's understandable. So the political side has to be

addressed as well too. The newcomer community, aside from what we can do in programming and whatever, I don't have any other great answers. We need to devise a real bang-up fundraiser type thing that would involve those people, and we need to knock our heads on that one. Let me just get my earring on. In terms of asking about the museum and how it's gotten together, especially in the last decade, Cathy Jones could probably give you some interesting perspectives on that. I've only been here since 2003, but I bring a certain background in museums and I kind of know what makes some of them tick and how they operate and stuff. Being a smaller museum, you can just be so much more flexible. You can do so many more things so much more quickly and whatever.

[ END ]