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Royal BC Museum digitizes First Nations photo and audio-visual collections with support from FortisBC

VICTORIA, BC—For staff in the Royal BC Museum’s Indigenous Collections and Repatriation department, some of their most meaningful work involves sharing materials in its care with members of Indigenous communities—often family of the cultural creators or of the people captured in photos or audio.

But when source materials are antiquated and fragile, poring over dog-eared old photos or playing open-reel audio tapes becomes challenging.

Happily, with sponsorship support from FortisBC, the museum has been able to digitize many of its ethnographic audio-visual and photo collections, a process that makes it far easier for family or community members to gain access to these materials, which often hold enormous cultural value—and very often personal significance, too.

“Digitization helps us preserve original source materials, but it also facilitates easier access—and that benefits Indigenous communities,” said Prof. Jack Lohman CBE, CEO of the Royal BC Museum. “The support from FortisBC has meant a surge in our output, and a commensurate surge in our ability to serve Indigenous communities that want their culture back in their hands.”

The Royal BC Museum was particularly pleased to see a connection between some photo records and many of the Indigenous communities served by or in partnership with FortisBC. Supporting communities as they reclaim and celebrate culture and history is an important part of relationship building at FortisBC.

“Our overriding goal is to develop and maintain authentic and respectful relationships with Indigenous Peoples and communities,” said Doug Stout, VP of Market Development & External Relations. “FortisBC has made substantial progress on its Indigenous relations activities by implementing a holistic program that includes communications, visibility, providing training and business opportunities, supporting community and cultural interests, and collaboration with other industry players.

In the 2018-19 fiscal year, FortisBC’s support allowed the Royal BC Museum to digitize 489 recordings of First Nations audio tapes and 10,381 First Nations photographic index cards. The result is that the museum is able to provide better access to these cultural materials now and for future generations.

Since January 1, 2019, the Royal BC Museum has shared nearly 400 audio recordings with Indigenous communities and the families of recorded speakers; this is more shared than in the last four years combined.



The subject matter is as varied as recordings of language lessons and in-depth interviews of lives lived. With digital recordings in the hands of Indigenous communities, the result is greater local stewardship of intangible culture.

The funding from FortisBC also permitted the Royal BC Museum to hire a scanning technician and purchase a scanner and software to support these efforts.

About the Royal BC Museum

The Royal BC Museum explores the province’s human history and natural history, advances new knowledge and understanding of BC, and provides a dynamic forum for discussion and a place for reflection. The museum and archives celebrate culture and history, telling the stories of BC in ways that enlighten, stimulate and inspire. Located in Victoria on the traditional territory of the Lekwungen (Songhees and Xwsepsum Nations), we are a hub of community connections in BC—onsite, offsite and online—taking pride in our collective histories.

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