

LITTLE NORTHERN MUSEUM SCENE

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Editor's Scene

As part of the new regional museum pilot programme sponsored by Manitoba Culture, Heritage & Recreation, your editor has recently returned from visits to museums in Swan River, Thompson, Leaf Rapids, and Lynn Lake. These and other visits elsewhere earlier in the year were designed for me to get acquainted with the operations not visited previously and to determine what kind of services were required by these institutions over the next two years of the regional museum pilot project.

As one might expect, the museums in this vast territory (and the communities themselves) are so diverse that it is difficult to identify common problems which can be addressed (easily or otherwise) by a programme with limited resources. There was, however, one striking commonality found among paid staff and volunteers in nearly every situation. That similarity can be summed up in one word: "burnout".

The current situation facing all museum workers (both paid staff and volunteers) throughout North America is characterised by increasing complexity (e.g. the new G.S.T.), ever more intensive demands on staff/volunteers resulting from increased expectations among our visitors, more bureaucracy initiated by government funders, increased competition (both for leisure time and the charitable dollar), shrinking sources of support and inflationary pressures on operational funding bases, and the development of greater expectations within the museum field regarding the professional museological standards which need to be met. All of this is being compounded by the aging of museum volunteer forces which are not being replaced by newer, fresher troops at nearly the rate required.

The result is the folding of many small museums, the decrease in the quality of life among staff and volunteers, and ultimately the loss of experienced, motivated workers. In recent years, the focus of development in the museum field has been on physical plants and standards--buildings and bureaucracy. The development of and support for our invaluable human resources has not kept pace to the point of being ignored altogether.

To demonstrate this problem, one need only look at the recent publication of two important policy documents--one at the federal level and one in Saskatchewan. The governments in these two jurisdictions have spent a good deal of time and effort in developing new policies for museums. Unfortunately, apart from museological skill development (which in fact serves to increase expectations and demands on museum workers' time thus compounding the burnout problem), neither has seriously addressed the looming crisis in the human resource base in our museums. Little or no attention has been paid to the need to support museum workers, to attempt to reduce the mounting stresses in their lives, nor to treat the rampant burnout.

It is to be hoped that the appearance of the policy initiatives at the federal level and in neighbouring Saskatchewan will stimulate Manitoba Minister of Culture, Heritage & Recreation, Hon. Bonnie Mitchelson, to initiate a policy development process in Manitoba to fill the current vacuum. It is also imperative that this process will deal seriously with the real needs of our human resource base rather than focussing more attention on buildings and bureaucracy.

