

Interpretation

Interpretation on the New Frontier: The Alberta Experience

by Frits Pannekoek



The origins of interpretation

Cartoon courtesy of Ed Wiens.

The author has provided a thought-provoking analysis of the origins and influences of the heritage interpretation field in Alberta. He explores the effect successive generations of immigrants have had on the culture of the province, and how these waves of immigration have been reflected in our cultural institutions. Finally, he discusses some possible correctives aimed at developing a more cohesive, integrated whole.

L'auteur fournit une analyse inspirante des origines et des influences du domaine de l'interprétation du patrimoine en Alberta. Il étudie l'effet que les générations successives d'immigrants ont eu sur la culture de la province et comment ces vagues d'immigration se reflètent dans nos institutions culturelles. Enfin, il examine certaines mesures correctives visant à développer un tout cohésif et solidaire.

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Interpretation as a discipline is relatively recent. It was apparently first observed at Lake Tahoe in the United States in the early 1920s, and was enscriptured by Freeman Tilden, "the father of interpretation," a few decades later.¹ As late as 1975, leading British interpreters, employed as most interpreters are by government or government-funded agencies, acknowledged that their work:

*merely translated [their] experience into a British context, adding little or nothing to the fundamental principles so eloquently expressed by Freeman Tilden's book and demonstrated in several hundred areas administered by the United States National Park Service.*²

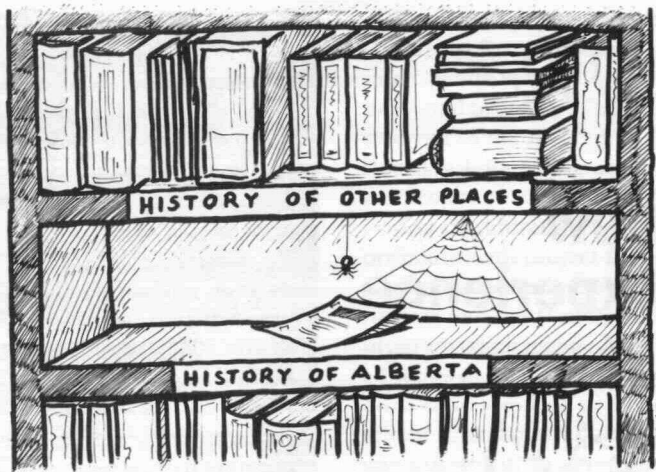
Evidently, interpretation as a discipline is a product of the American cultural and parks experience. It is widely and expertly taught in American universities, and the products, whether student or text, dominate the planning strategies and program delivery of in

situ heritage resource agencies. Freeman Tilden argued that the discipline of interpretation focuses on relating personal experience to the environment through hands-on learning. This is certainly the case in Alberta, and the phenomenon is not without serious implication.

Alberta has an exciting history with a strong folklore and historic resource base.³ 60,000 buildings constructed before 1945 are still standing. The oldest building in Alberta on its original foundations is at Fort Victoria. A modest fur-trading post, the clerk's quarters date to 1865. The site is where so much of Alberta's history comes together. It was the first home of the famous McDougall missionary family, and it later became the centre for the Methodist missions to the Ukrainians. It was also a critical point on the trail from Edmonton to Winnipeg.

And yet this site is not well known among Albertans. The names Johnny Chinook, Wop May, Tim Buck, "Eye Opener" Bob Edwards and John Ware should be as familiar to the average Albertan as Isaac Brock, the defender of the Canadas during the War of 1812, is to Ontarians, or George Armstrong Custer is to Americans, but they are not! In fact, the first serious collection of Alberta's folklore was undertaken by an American folklorist, Robert Edward Gard. Funded by the Carnegie Institute from 1943 to 1945,⁴ Gard popularized much of Alberta's lore, particularly in his book *Johnny Chinook. Tall tales and true from the Canadian West*, illustrated by Manitoba watercolourist and print-maker Walter Phillips. The book was first published in 1945 in London by Longmans, Green. Only in 1967 was it reprinted in Alberta by ardent Canadian nationalist, Mel Hurtig.

Alberta's folklore and historic past are not part of the "consciousness" of most Albertans. Until recently, historical resources associated with the province's folk characters have not been aggressively preserved or commemorated,⁵ a direct result of the formation of Alberta's cultural and historical consciousness. Alberta has always been thought of by its newest arrivals (who have generally arrived in large numbers concentrated in two or three narrow time frames) as the "last frontier."⁶ Their collective vision of the province has always been as an unsettled corner



No sufficient historical material
or interest to sustain it

Cartoon courtesy of Ed Wiens.

of North America, tucked into the shadow of the Rocky Mountains and skirting the edge of the northern boreal forest. To many of these immigrants, Alberta had no history or at least none worth preserving. It was the immigrant who would write the province a new history — a history from the proper perspective.

A lengthy examination of university history courses relating to Alberta suggests that, until recently, only a select few undertook Alberta scholarship seriously. There was some suggestion when *Alberta Studies*, a semi-scholarly journal examining the arts and sciences in the province, was founded in 1988 that there would be neither sufficient material for the journal, nor sufficient interest to sustain it. A common quip among Easterners to those moving westward to find employment in the heritage preservation field was that any heritage preservation position in Alberta was equivalent to early retirement since there was no heritage to preserve. The comment reflects not only an Eastern ignorance of Alberta and its rich heritage, but a persistent belief that Alberta remains despite centuries of occupation, a *tabula rasa*. Where there is no past, any newcomers create a future and, more significantly, a new past.

In general, newcomers are expected to create a new future, but where there is an apparent past, they are left at liberty to create a "new past" as well. The first to write this new history arrived

with the North-West Mounted Police (NWMP) in the mid-1870s. They were followed by Ontarian and British ranchers.⁷ These two separate but related groups generated the first Euro-Albertan folklore in which the history of the northern fur trade or the southern Indian was of little interest. Within 20 years of their arrival, they were consciously endeavouring to preserve the past they had created themselves.

Few in number, the ranchers and police/ranchers throughout the south of the province were soon overrun by a new type of settler, the American and Ontarian wheat miner. Alberta became their new frontier where they could forget their past, rewrite history and create a better future.⁸

The immigrants who settled the north of the province, especially those from Eastern Europe, also saw themselves initially in the future not the past, although it was a past from which they could not escape. Their cultural baggage became in itself a critical part of their new history. In a province dominated by the Ontarians and Americans who controlled both the political and social culture of the province, "success" in the new land seemed to elude them. In increasing numbers, they attempted to recreate the past they had left behind — to find emotional shelter in the preservation of an earlier culture.⁹ Rather than their past becoming their future, for many Eastern European immigrants who yielded to this pressure (responded to this rejection) by turning in upon

themselves, their future became their past. As a result, the disparate immigrant groups tended to see their own history in exclusive and isolated terms.

In a few decades these immigrants faced the Depression, which now, more than any single event, forms the basis of southern Alberta settlement mythology.¹⁰ Ironically, like the settlers it had brutalized, Alberta turned inward upon itself simply to survive. There was little desire to commemorate failures so vividly represented by the Depression, so the only efforts to remember the past were made by the descendants of southern Alberta's ranching and police community, who had lived a few golden decades before the Depression hit.

Only with the discovery of large quantities of oil in the 1950s did Alberta share in the prosperity of industrialized North America and Albertans became part of the North American mainstream. Those who came in the 1950s and the greater number that came during the boom of the 1960s and 1970s were convinced, as the ranchers and settlers had been, that they too were writing history. Many Albertans who had lived through the Depression, especially those in urban areas, knew that they were also now making the history that had been denied them for two decades. It must be emphasized that this was not true of all Albertans. In the stable communities of southern Alberta, historical consciousness tended to be much better developed than in the north of the province. It was no accident, for example, that the Glenbow-Alberta Institute emerged in Calgary.

What has all this to do with interpretation?

Because Alberta has generally had a poorly developed historical sense, historical writing and historical resource commemoration were very late in developing.¹¹ Alberta was, for example, the last province to establish a provincial museum or a provincial archives. It might be argued that the recent moves to commemorate Alberta's past are the result of recent immigrants to the province trying to find a past useable in the context of their own traditions, rather than an acknowledgement of Alberta's rich heritage.

The oil boom of the late 1970s

demanded a sophisticated technology and drew highly educated American and Ontarian professionals in unprecedented numbers to Alberta's urban centres.¹² These new immigrants brought with them tastes and lifestyles nurtured in the industrialized urban East, which included a preservation consciousness molded by their early experiences. For example, the first heritage preservation officers for both Calgary and Edmonton came from the East. The first preservation district in Alberta, Old Strathcona, was the product of agitation by Heritage Canada, an Ottawa-based lobby group. It is argued here that both the planning approach and the interpretation techniques chosen by these "recently arrived" professionals have, to a degree, molded the public's understanding of Alberta's heritage and may well have contributed further to the distorted sense of Alberta's past. This is not necessarily bad. Indeed, it can be argued effectively that the social benefits were positive, but the phenomena must be understood.

What beliefs did these new Albertans bring?

First, they believed that Alberta had no history, at least not in the grand pageant sense that either the United States or eastern Canada have. The result has been an overwhelming emphasis being placed on the natural environment even in historic site interpretation. Alberta's heritage resources are subtle and require both detailed study and detailed exposition before they can be understood. It is frequently easier to interpret Alberta's spectacular mountains and varied wildlife than the subtle meandering of Alberta's coal-mining, industrial, settlement or intellectual history. Second, there has been a transfer of eastern Canadian and American immigrant mythologies to Alberta. This phenomenon occurs indirectly and insidiously, not because of lack of understanding or cultural sophistication on the part of Albertans. Even in the face of a considerable understanding of Alberta's past, the interpretation emphasis will be more determined by an interpreter's cultural background than the reality of Alberta's history.

What are the consequences? What mythologies now dominate our historic sites and museums?

The first mythology is of the Wild West, particularly prevalent in the interpretation of ranching. The concentration is on the life of the individual cowboy and his struggle with the environment, rather than on the ranch owner and the unique British-Ontarian culture he brought to the ranching industry. Frank Anderson's pamphlets illustrate these

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tendencies. In the 1960s and 1970s he wrote pamphlets on over 25 episodes of Canadian history, most on southern Alberta. They "mythologize" the West by focusing on murderers, capital punishment, train robbers, rumrunners and "frontier guides" emphasizing the bizarre and unique events in our history in the American manner.

The second mythology is of pioneer struggle and trekking. At many museums it has become fashionable to emphasize the trek to the homestead, the initial efforts at clearing, and again the struggle against the environment. Listen carefully to the interpreters at the various historic locations. Read museum labels carefully. Do they emphasize struggle against the eastern railways, the eastern bankers or the eastern grain monopolies? While these battles against institutional forces might be mentioned, the struggle against the environment emerges time and time again as most important. The interpretive vogue at heritage villages through the 1960s and 1970s emphasized the three-dimensional and the weather that are in the foreground. The larger struggle against corporate domination or the local fight with the anti-ethnic regional school superintendent are subtle

threads of history not easily understood without considerable explanation.

The third mythology, one that is at the root of our national folklore, surrounds the role of the police and railway in the building of the West and the nation.¹³ The Canadian Pacific Railway and the NWMP are central to the Ontarian notion of nation building. The general myth is that railways were hated and the police were loved. To the public learning about east central Alberta at the Ukrainian Village, for example, it comes as a surprise that not all railways were enemies of the people. Indeed, the Canadian Northern was loved as a people's railway. Similar misconceptions exist about the NWMP. In fact, stories of the NWMP were less well known in east central Alberta than the legends surrounding the Alberta Provincial Police.

The fourth mythology that can be isolated is so prevalent in the American West that it overwhelms any separate understanding that we as northern peoples might have; that is, the importance of the individual over the group. The struggle of the single man is seen as the motivating force in history. In Canada, historians have observed otherwise. The role of the ethnic organization, the churches, the family and the bloc settlement are thought to have been critical to the formation of the Canadian historic fabric.¹⁴

Accompanying the mythology of the individual and the mythology of the Wild West is the mythology of Alberta underdevelopment. Most people, including long-time residents, believe that Alberta had no industrial base until a synthetic oil industry was developed. In fact, Alberta was heavily industrialized in the period before World War I. The province had a complex coal-based economy in the Crowsnest Pass and most communities had industries of one kind or other. Medicine Hat, for example, produced most of the clay ware for Canada's hotels and had also succeeded in the manufacture of trucks. Federal procurement politics during World War I decimated a strong nascent industrial base.¹⁵

The mythologies of the Wild West, the predominance of the individual and exploitive underdevelopment, as powerful as they are, are no match for the mythology of environmental determination. For the new oil immigrants,

the environment has always been the principal motivating factor in Alberta's history. When eastern-trained planners, museologists and historians search for cultural interpretive themes, they invariably give pre-eminence to the "conquest of the environment." In fact, a careful study could indicate that in certain areas of the province the dominant historical moving force has been the fight to preserve group culture against Alberta's dominant Ontario-American political and social culture.

It can be argued that these mythologies are inadvertently and subconsciously strengthened through various interpretation techniques, which themselves are a product of American and Ontarian educational and cultural experiences. Oral communication and live demonstrations are particularly suited to the reinforcement of introduced mythologies. Abstract concepts are difficult to emphasize in the three-dimensionality of most museum. They can be articulated, but usually through text and film or other audiovisual media. Alberta's museums continue to face great challenges because of the need for subtle argument if they are to be successful in their provincial context.

Interpretive Techniques

Oral communication is said to be the most effective interpretive technique, although it is the most costly. Guides also present the greatest challenge to interpretive historical authenticity. First, they are trained by interpretive officers, who are, for the most part, followers of Freeman Tilden. Thus they invariably use the skills of environmental interpretation, which tend to accentuate historical misconceptions. It has been shown that information from guides is often less disputed and more easily accepted than the written word. It can be argued that, with proper training, this need not be so, but it can also be argued that what has become "proper interpretive training" tends, by its very nature, to emphasize historical distortion. Subject material must be "made relevant" to the individual. Experiences of the past must be related to the present, leading to the dangerous acceptance of "progressive presentism." The focus on endless progress and the roots of success means that those elements of the past that reinforce the directions set by the new

Albertans will dominate interpretive programming. Failure be damned! But if authentic oral interpretation is to succeed in Alberta, it will have to be completely rethought to emphasize the complexities of immigrant cultural and corporate experiences rather than environmental and individual experiences.

The re-enactment societies that emerged in Alberta in the 1960s also pose problems. Some of them are eastern in concept, and they also tend to accentuate a certain type of interpretation. The one at Fort William, Ontario is an excellent example. As the President of the Friends of Fort William said, he loves to "play Fort." The word "fort," as distinct from the frequently used word "factory," conjures up images of walls, defences, man against nature, and Indian attacks. Indeed, I suspect that Indians are often seen as the "threatening" element of nature. Until recently in many if not most museums, Native cultures were exhibited in conjunction with natural history.

Black powder shooting clubs, mounted patrols and canoe brigades all have considerable followings. But do they not dramatize the spectacular, rather than the typical, the grisly rather than the normal? They serve in many instances to enhance the military and frontier heritage of a largely non-military and non-frontier people. Many fur-trade enactment groups enhance the colourful Northwest Company image of the individual voyageur rather than the corporate Hudson's Bay Company man. Since colour always supersedes authenticity, perhaps it can be no different.

But the myth of the struggle and the pioneer ethic is so great that we may not be able to overcome the mythologies that have been created. Pioneer crafts are more fun than the poverty and the loneliness that faced Alberta's women in the first years of settlement. Making soap is considered *de rigueur* at historical sites, despite its emphasis on Ontarian or mid to late 19th-century skills. Alberta settlement took place largely in the industrialized age and many goods were "purchased" rather than made at home. It was the machine and the store that provided many basics, particularly in the areas dominated by wheat monoculture. Certainly many pioneers made bread and clothes, but many often bought the essentials from the store or



The myth of the struggle of the pioneer

Cartoon courtesy of Ed Wiens.

the Eaton's catalogue. It is no accident that West Edmonton Mall is located at the edge of the last major settlement frontier. Shopping, *not* crafting, formed our identity.

What are some of the correctives?

They are for the most part obvious, although their outcomes may be far ranging. The first is thorough research. In the 1960s, largely spurred by the Canadian Centennial, many local historical groups undertook the writing of their local histories. These provided the first opportunities for many communities to discover their past. Not only did they discover their past, they found it exciting and acted to preserve it. Out of the local history movement, Alberta saw an incredible growth in local museums and in the preservation of local historic sites. It is in these Alberta communities that the past and the impact of past experiences can be discerned. Scholars have not yet used these local histories and the expressions of local community sense in any reasoned ways. There have been graduate students working on the phenomenon, but a careful analysis at the post-graduate level remains to be done.

I believe that these local histories contain the germ of self-discovery for this province. While they tell us of our immigrant experience, they may also tell a great deal about the culture evolution of Alberta. Although many of the new oil boom immigrants came in the hope of finding an uncharted West where they could achieve new life, and write their own history, they are really part of a continuing process of settlement. The challenges being faced by these current newcomers have been



Shopping, **not** crafting, formed our identity

Cartoon courtesy of Ed Wiens.

faced before. Each successive group need not impose its past on Alberta. The province has its own past that forms a distinct and integrated whole. Perhaps by understanding the implications of ignoring the past and creating it anew with every new wave of immigration, Alberta can become a more understanding and more integrated community. This can only happen, however, when Alberta's heritage and the resources that are scattered around the province become an integral part of every Albertan's life.

We have to develop new methods of "cultural transmission" in our museums and at our heritage sites that allow the messages to be transmitted unencumbered by the prejudices of media. This will not be easy. Several museums and interpretive centres are experimenting in this field but their success can only be measured by future results. The Reynolds-Alberta Museum, for example, has created places in the museum — the factory, grain elevator, garage, farm storage shed — where visitors are encouraged to interact not just with the resources but with each other. Questions are posed and artifacts so arranged as to encourage people to talk and share experiences. I have watched these nodes, or "hearths" as they are called, with some interest. Indeed, where interaction is encouraged, it does occur. Elders who have lived their history by contributing to Alberta share their experiences spontaneously. Often they correct errors and misconceptions, but

equally often they are posed difficult and probing questions that cause them to rethink their own past. Using such techniques, Alberta museums should facilitate interactions between immigrant groups and between the generations to produce a self-questioning and a better understanding of past relationships and current directions.

Another mechanism that has real potential is the *ecomuseum*. Alberta is experimenting in the Crowsnest Pass and in east central Alberta. Neither has existed long enough to undertake any meaningful evaluation. An *ecomuseum* is an agent for managing change that links education, culture and power.¹⁶ The *ecomuseum* is as much a process as an institution. It taps the collective memory of the community and links events, objects and structures to this memory. The *ecomuseum* helps individuals realize the dynamics of their own past, their evolving present and perhaps something of their future. The attempt is to link change with historical experience. By becoming involved in the process of community and cultural change, heritage becomes not an obstacle to change, or a vehicle for ensuring the entrenchment of existing elites, but an instrument for social integration. It has worked to that end in France, where the concept originated, and in Quebec where it has flourished. *Ecomuseums* have been largely rural and the concept seems to demand a larger landscape base. In fact it can be replicated in urban areas, in neighbour-

hoods and in single streets. In an *ecomuseum* no single mechanism should dominate cultural interpretation. The sheer diversity of "interpreters," that is buildings, landscapes and above all, real people, can ensure that a fully authentic interpretive experience is available. Social relationships are generally complex. Differing methods help to emphasize components of different traditions. Ceremonies rooted in tradition, oral histories and social relationships all encourage individuals and groups to hold on to their heritage. As a consequence, the responsibility for heritage stays with the community, not a central institution like the museum. This is the solution. Housewives, miners, merchants, school children, old settlers and new immigrants can become curators of their own heritage and its various manifestations. All contribute, all receive, all share. □

Frits Pannekoek is the Director of Alberta Community Development's Cultural Facilities and Historical Resources, Historic Sites and Archives Service.

Ed Wiens is senior graphic designer with the Historic Sites and Archives Service.

Endnotes

1. Freeman Tilden. *Interpreting our Heritage*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1957.
2. Don Aldridge. *Guide to Countryside Interpretation*. Edinburgh: H.M. Stationery Office for the Countryside Commission for Scotland, 1975, p. 2.
3. Alberta Culture. *Master Plan for the Protection and Development of Prehistoric and Historic Resources within Alberta*. Edmonton: Historical Resources Division, n.d.
4. The Gard and Alberta folklore materials are on deposit at the University of Alberta Rare Book Room (Bruce Peel Special Collections). This rich collection of Alberta folklore has not been widely used by scholars.
5. Gloria M. Strathern. *Alberta, 1954-1979, A Provincial Bibliography*. Edmonton: The University of Alberta, Department of Printing Services, 1982. An exhaustive listing of Alberta material is provided. What is noticeable is the late date — post-1960s — of most of the materials.
6. Howard and Tamara Palmer, eds. *Peoples of Alberta: Portrait of Cultural Diversity*. Saskatoon: Western Producer Prairie Books, 1985. This sound study of the immigrant mentality reinforces the idea that individual groups thought they had come to a new land with little past and that they would be writing both its future and its past.