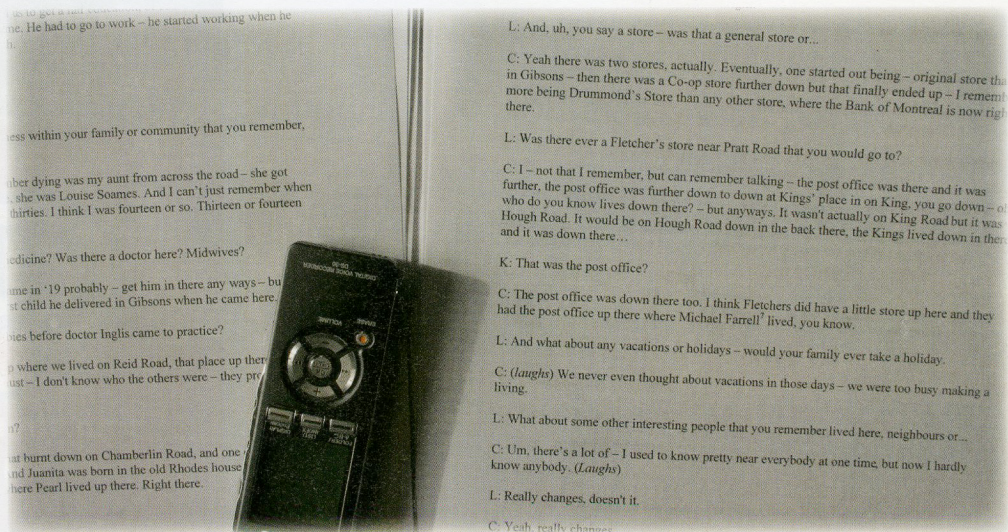


HISTORY IN THE MAKING



The museum's Day of Listening helps to preserve oral histories

When I worked at the Sunshine Coast Museum & Archives, I knew more about the history of this area than I ever had and ever would again. It wasn't being around the museum's exhibits or archives — I could come back to see those any time I wanted. It was the people I met on the job and the stories they told me.

Here's what I mean: I dropped by the museum the other day to say hi. Then, by way of conversation, I said something to Kimiko, the curator, about how I used to enjoy listening to the stories visitors — visitors of a certain age, I mean — told me. We chatted for a while about conversations we'd had with locals; Lorraine and Mike, both museum board members and long-time locals, were also in the office, and they joined in too. But then something funny, and very familiar, happened. Without any of us noticing, the conversation ceased to be about

conversations we'd had with interesting old-timers and slowly turned into a conversation about the big snow years of the early 1960s. Lorraine remembered how School Road used to be closed off when it snowed, and how kids would ride toboggans all the way down the hill and onto the wharf. Mike remembered how the roads would be so snowed in that there would just be one trench in the middle of the road that was clear enough to drive. We started off by talking about people reminiscing, and we ended up reminiscing ourselves. Which shows, I think, that being in a museum makes people want to tell stories.

(For my part, I stayed mum. The only big snow year I remember is '96, and that one had nothing on the big ones four decades ago.)

When I worked at the museum, this kind of thing happened all the time. Various old-timers would come in to visit and, after making their way through the exhibits, they'd stay to talk. We talked about all the things you'd expect to talk about with people who grew up in a different time — working in the woods, fighting in wars, playing in the bush, walking long distances (they were always walking — to school, to work, back home over miles of dark roads after nights out). And when the conversations ended and the visitors walked out the front door, I always thought: should I have written that down? I never did, and there were times when I regretted it.

In the archives room, there's a collection of oral histories. The oldest of them are from the late 1970s, and the newest are from last year. They're conversations between young and old Sunshine Coasters, though it's the elders who do most of the talking. Those conversations, preserved on hissy tape, have become history. Recorded, they have a kind of authority that they might not have had in the moment; maybe it's because you can consult them as many times as you like, and they stay the same, always telling the same story in the same way. So what happened to those stories I didn't write down? I hope that someone else heard them too, and listened closely enough to remember.

The thing is, although I learned a lot of what I know about the Sunshine Coast from

books (the car ferries came in 1951, Mt. Elphinstone is named for an eighteenth century naval captain, and so on), I learned what little I know about what it was actually like to live here from those hours I spent listening to recorded conversations and reading transcripts. I suppose that these were just anecdotes — whether about Saturday dances at the Women's Institute hall, long work days and short money in the bitter years of the Depression, or clearing land and blasting stumps to plant a rough garden and keep a few goats. But even so, they've changed the way that I see the Sunshine Coast, and I guess that means that those stories are still alive.

Back in November, the SCMA held its first Day of Listening. The idea behind the event is simple — you come down to the museum with someone you want to interview, and the museum provides recording equipment and space. After that, you and your interviewee are free to talk about whatever you want to talk about. The first Day of Listening was a great success — all the available time slots filled up — and there are plans to hold more of them in the future. Now's the time, then, to ask yourself if there's someone in your life whose stories you don't want to lose. The stories that we keep alive are history in the making.

But I can't stop thinking about the ones that get away. **CL**

Sunshine Coast Museum & Archives
716 Winn Road, Gibsons, 604-886-8232
Hours: Tuesday–Saturday,
10:30 a.m. – 4:30 p.m.