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GALT MUSEUM BUDDHIST SHRINE PROJECT A CHALLENGING TASK

RESEARCH INTO HISTORY REVEALS IMPORTANCE OF TABER BUDDHIST CHURCH

Earlier this year, the Galt Museum & Archives received a donation of the Taber Buddhist Church Shrine – as a result of the closure and sale of Buddhist churches in Taber and Raymond and two Lethbridge-based churches as the congregation prepares to consolidate under one new roof in Lethbridge.

A \$12,000 project grant from the Alberta Museums Association to document and register the Taber Buddhist Shrine and the surrounding spiritual and cultural community has presented Summer Collections Assistant April Matisz a challenging but rewarding task – she discovered early on that the Taber Buddhist Church has been researched far less extensively than the Lethbridge or Raymond churches.

To begin, Matisz researched anything she could find about the Taber Buddhist Church, and received advice and resources from professors in the History, Sociology, Native American Studies, and Religious Studies departments at the University of Lethbridge to establish the best way to organize and conduct the project. David Major, president of the Buddhist Temple of Southern Alberta (BTSA), helped Matisz get in touch with many of Church's past members and reverends.

"We are extremely grateful to everyone involved for their generous support," says Collections Technician Kevin MacLean who is supervising the project work. "The project, to date, represents one of the steepest learning curves ever experienced by the Collections Department. No artifact research program of this scale or scope has ever occurred in the past. In addition to developing a research methodology and a list of relevant contact persons, April has also developed a list of questions tailored to the unique histories of each of the interviewees."

All the initial work is paying off. In recent weeks, Matisz has conducted interviews in Lethbridge, Coaldale, Taber, Bow Island and Calgary with people ranging in age from 60-90 who have provided hours of stories, information and personal, church-related photographs dating back to the Church's inception.

"Perhaps the most interesting thing I've found is how the Buddhist churches in Southern Alberta acted as social as well as spiritual hubs," says Matisz. "Many Taber Buddhist Church members were farmers, living in the remote countryside. Church events and activities provided entertainment and a place for people to socialize." Many such events occurred before personal television sets were available.

“In the 1950’s, the Buddhist Churches in Southern Alberta would invite a film projectionist to show Japanese films,” says Matisz. During this time churches would also hold concerts, dancing and plays during the long winter months, and were very popular among the Taber, Raymond, and Picture Butte Buddhist Churches.

For the remainder of the summer, Matisz will continue to interview others to complete the background history and importance of the Taber Buddhist Church. She will then research, catalogue and report on all of the Shrine items included in the donation. Eventually, the Shrine, the photographs and research materials will be incorporated into a permanent display at the Galt Museum to further visitor appreciation of Japanese Canadian culture and the region’s rich human diversity, and to enhance the Museum’s reputation as a topical research, study and educational centre.

The Buddhist Shrine compliments the existing, nationally significant Japanese Canadian collection at the Galt Museum. It totals over 1000 objects ranging from materials referenced in Joy Kogawa’s acclaimed book *Obasan* to artifacts associated with the area’s Japanese pioneers. Based on the strength of the collection, the Galt was able to develop the 2002 temporary exhibit *Nikkei Tapestry*. This exhibit highlighting the story of the Japanese in southern Alberta is the basis of a traveling exhibit, *Nikkei Journey*, currently under development at the Galt.

For more information please call April Matisz at 403.320-3154 or send an email to amatisz@galtmuseum.com.

Information on Galt Museum & Archives activities is available at www.galtmuseum.com.

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The Galt Museum is located at the west end of 5 Avenue South, off Scenic Drive, Lethbridge, Alberta
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