

HODUL'EH-A: A PLACE OF LEARNING

The Exploration Place, Lheidli T'enneh, and the Rethinking of a Local Museum

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IN 2017, THE EXPLORATION Place Museum and Science Centre in Prince George and the Lheidli T'enneh First Nation received a Governor General's History Award for Excellence in Community Programming for their new permanent gallery, Hodul'eh-a : A Place of Learning, which, in the words of the award citation, "serves as a model for how Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities can work together to reclaim traditional spaces, protect cultural assets and promote a greater understanding and respect for Indigenous history and experiences."¹ The award celebrates a new gallery in the Exploration Place but it also recognizes a shift in the way a regional museum thinks and in how it works with and represents the First Nation in whose territory it is located.

When it reopened in 2001, the Exploration Place's Ted Williams History Hall exhibited photographs and artefacts depicting life during the earliest pioneer days in Prince George, the impact that settlers had on the landscape, and how the landscape shaped the community socially, culturally, and environmentally.² Focusing on the period from the establishment of Fort George in 1807 at the junction of the Fraser and Nechako Rivers to the arrival of the Grand Pacific Railway in 1914, the History Hall conveyed a sense of the resiliency and determination that early settlers showed in creating the community of Prince George. What it failed to convey was how settler society affected the Lheidli T'enneh, whose traditional territory includes the Prince George townsite. While there was a separate gallery called All the Time We Have Lived on the Land, exploring the seasonal round and displaying some Dakelh material culture, the exhibitions did not represent Lheidli T'enneh culture or portray that nation's resiliency and determined efforts to keep its culture alive in the face of colonial oppression and loss of lands and

¹ Canada's History Society, *Governor General's History Awards*, ecentricarts, n.d.

² Founded in 1958, the original museum burned to the ground in the winter of 1976, losing its entire collection and building. The museum was rebuilt and reopened in 1981 and subsequently expanded and reopened again in 2001 as the Exploration Place.



Figure 1. Cultural Expressions: Two Elders visiting the Cultural Expressions of the Lheidli T'enneh exhibit done in partnership with the Lheidli T'enneh for the 2013 Elders Gathering. Copyright The Exploration Place - Photo taken by Dave Milne

resources. The museum was missing valuable insight and a large piece of our region's history.

Realizing that it needed to change, the museum, beginning in 2006, embarked on research that ultimately resulted in two temporary exhibitions, each one diving deeper into controversial and unexplored topics – namely, residential schools and the first public discussion of the 1913 expulsion of the Lheidli T'enneh from their village site. The success of this work expanded the basis of trust between the museum and the Lheidli T'enneh and culminated in 2013 with an award-winning third temporary exhibition, *Cultural Expressions*, to coincide with the Lheidli T'enneh's hosting of the Provincial Elders Gathering. The museum, in partnership with the Lheidli T'enneh, has continued to work towards the common goal of telling a more complete story of Prince George's history by correcting the lacunae in its galleries while developing programs and deepening relationships with the local Indigenous community. We are working together to raise the level of literacy with respect to the sometimes dark history of post-contact relationships between settlers and the First Nations of the area. There have been some controversies and difficult conversations that have emerged from the museum's presentation of this information, which was new to some members of the public and



Figure 2. Knowledge keepers from the Lheidli T'enneh First Nation, Elder Mary Gouchie and Elder Violet Bozoki in Hodul'eh-a: A Place of Learning. Copyright The Exploration Place- Photo taken by Rob van Adrichem

challenged some non-Indigenous views of our regional history. Since a large portion of Prince George's non-Indigenous population did not have any insight into this history, these exhibitions reset the museum's relationship with its non-Indigenous audience as well.

The Lheidli T'enneh, a Dakelh people, were known as the Fort George Indian Band when a reserve was established at the current site of the city of Prince George in 1892.³ The name Lheidli T'enneh, which means "the people who live where the two rivers flow together,"⁴ emphasizes the deep connections between Lheidli T'enneh culture and place.⁵ The Exploration Place Museum and Science Centre is located in the newly renamed Lheidli T'enneh Memorial Park, which encompasses the historic Lheidli T'enneh cemetery and sits on the original village site of Lheidli. The importance of this site cannot be emphasized enough. In this place, for at least nine thousand years, the Lheidli T'enneh have met the challenges of their environment and followed the rhythms of the seasons. Over the last two hundred years, with the arrival of the fur trade and settlers, the Lheidli T'enneh have faced official attempts at cultural assimilation;⁶ however, they and their culture have not only

³ F.A. Devereux, "Fort George Indian Reserves," Report BC314, Canada Lands Survey System (Department of Indian Affairs: Ottawa, n.d.).

⁴ The Village of Lheidli was situated at the confluence of the Fraser and Nechako Rivers.

⁵ Lheidli T'enneh First Nation, *Lheidli T'enneh First Nation* (Prince George, BC: Lheidli T'enneh First Nation, 2017).

⁶ Adrien-Gabriel Morice, *The History of Northern British Columbia*, 3rd ed. (Toronto: William Briggs, 1905).

survived but also become a key element of Canadian society. In 2006, they negotiated a historic treaty with British Columbia and Canada, the first one to be initialed within the framework of the British Columbia Treaty Negotiation Process.⁷ Although the treaty was not ratified, it indicated the Lheidli T'enneh's intent to assert their rights and title to traditional territories in north-central British Columbia and the strength of Lheidli T'enneh culture today. The Exploration Place needed to show the rich culture and history of the Lheidli T'enneh First Nation in its exhibitions and programs.

The 2015 renaming of Fort George Park to Lheidli T'enneh Memorial Park is another example of this work. While there were many who at first criticized this action, today we see a far greater acceptance of the past we share and of the truth behind the expulsion of the Lheidli T'enneh Nation from the area that includes Prince George's most popular park, not to mention its entire downtown core. There is a fast-growing interest in learning about the archaeology of the area too, as lithics are uncovered and dated back some nine thousand years, proving that people have been here much longer than some had previously thought possible.⁸

Through projects such as these, we have established an atmosphere of trust and understanding with the Lheidli T'enneh and their elders. As trust has grown between us, the Lheidli T'enneh have reached out to the museum with new images, archival documents, oral histories, artefacts, and friendship, all of which are helping us to compile a Lheidli collection and body of knowledge that will ultimately form the basis for a collective understanding of Lheidli T'enneh culture and contributions to the development of this region from the era before European contact to today.

In addition to these initiatives, the museum, in partnership with the Lheidli T'enneh First Nation, embarked on the creation of the new permanent gallery exploring Lheidli T'enneh material and oral culture. *Hodul'eh-a: A Place of Learning* began construction in 2016, but the relationship between the Exploration Place and the Lheidli T'enneh First Nation has been built over twenty years. The Lheidli T'enneh Nation chief and council as well as the Lheidli Elders Group engaged in multiple consultations and made vastly significant contributions to the conception, content, language, and style of the gallery. It is a partnership: the Exploration Place and Lheidli T'enneh opened this new gallery together.

⁷ Lheidli T'enneh Nation, *Lheidli T'enneh Treaty* <http://www.lheidli.ca/Treaty/index.php>.

⁸ Archer CRM Partnership, "Archaeological Investigations at Site FiRq-013 on the Fraser River in Prince George," Permit Report (Prince George, British Columbia, 2008).



Figure 3. Hodul'eh-a 2: From L-R Curator Alyssa Tobin, CEO Tracy Calogheros, Chief Dominic Frederick, Board member David Bird and Board member Todd Whitcombe cut the ribbon on Hodul'eh-a: A Place of Learning. Copyright The Exploration Place- Photo taken by James Doyle



Figure 4. Hodul'eh-a 5: Cultural items currently on display in Hodul'eh-a: A Place of Learning as chosen by Lheidli T'enneh Elders. Each item tells a much larger narrative and is an important part of the Lheidli T'enneh tradition and culture. Copyright The Exploration Place- Photo taken by James Doyle



Figure 5. Hodul'eh-a 4: Visitors attend the opening of the new permanent gallery, Hodul'eh-a: A Place of Learning. A community favorite, this particular exhibit features changing images ranging from the late 1800's to present times of Lheidli T'enneh life and culture. Copyright The Exploration Place- Photo taken by James Doyle.

The journey to completion has been an important one. We have discovered first-hand the importance of friendship and inclusiveness, and the strength of cooperation. Built entirely in-house, this new gallery features a stylized pit house entry, large cases displaying archival and textile objects, a new dugout canoe, photographic and documentary materials, culturally modified trees, and room to grow. It was important to all of us that Hodul'eh-a was created as a “living gallery.” Both the Lheidli T'enneh and the museum wanted it to be a place where cultural learning and practice takes place. We needed to ensure that everyone who enters would feel comfortable and welcome. Benching was built around the pit house entrance, facing the central hearth, as a place to hold school and community programs. New programming space allows for in-depth teaching and learning as elders work to transfer yesterday's knowledge to tomorrow's leaders. As teaching inclusive First Nations history moves into British Columbia's elementary and high school curriculum, spaces like Hodul'eh-a will become ever more vital as we seek to engage all youth in the oral histories of First Peoples in Canada.

One of the first public projects for Hodul'eh-a was the creation of a dugout canoe, carved from the trunk of a cottonwood tree using



Figure 6. Hodul'eh-a 1: Chief Dominic Frederick signs the Memorandum of Understanding between the Lheidli T'enneh First Nation and the Fraser-Fort George Regional Museum. Copyright The Exploration Place- Photo taken by James Doyle.

traditional techniques.⁹ In the summer of 2016, Lheidli T'enneh elders Robert Frederick and his wife Edie were commissioned to take on this work and spent several weeks crafting the canoe at the Exploration Place. They said this was the first time a canoe had been carved in the traditional grounds of the historical Lheidli T'enneh village in over one hundred years. Interviewed about the project by the *Prince George Citizen* newspaper, Edie Frederick explained:

[My husband] grew up with the last generation of elders who made the canoes in the 1950s, and was able to learn from them, so he is an invaluable resource for Lheidli T'enneh in keeping our history and traditions alive. There are only a few people like my husband left, whose stories and traditions were passed down to him directly from the old elders, like his mother and father. Learning about the tools, art, history, and culture of the Lheidli T'enneh from the people who have an intimate knowledge is the best way of learning.¹⁰

⁹ Like many other canoe-carving projects recently undertaken in British Columbia, this project was intended to create a more meaningful understanding of reconciliation through community participation.

¹⁰ Frank Peebles, "Carving Out a Piece of History," *Prince George Citizen*, 4 July 2016, <http://www.princegeorgecitizen.com/news/local-news/carving-out-a-piece-of-history-1.2293860>.

Robert Frederick, who had made four dugout canoes before this one, was eager to share his knowledge, and visitors to the Exploration Place were encouraged to join in and work on the dugout canoe. Some visitors returned daily to work on the project because they wanted to be a part of the entire process. With over one hundred different people joining the project, the canoe was created and launched in time to be paddled in the annual Northern Hardware Canoe Race along the Nechako River – the first dugout canoe ever to participate in this event. The canoe project, an example of living history and cultural exploration, inspired many to embrace this tradition, and the permanent exhibition in the museum is stronger for it. This project in particular not only enhanced the profile of Hodul'eh-a but also provided the public with a very tangible reason to come and visit. The canoe now sits at the entrance of the gallery where children can get inside it and enjoy the work that so many different hands helped create.

In 2013, there were six people, all of whom were over the age of sixty-five, registered as fluent speakers of the Lheidli T'enneh dialect of the Dakelh language.¹¹ Now the number is as low as three or four. As a small effort to help preserve an increasingly endangered language, all the Latin species names in the Explorations Place's galleries have been replaced with the Lheidli T'enneh terms. The museum and Lheidli T'enneh Nation are also working to find the resources and budgets required for digitizing a large collection of tapes of oral histories housed at the museum within the Lheidli T'enneh Collection, which are an invaluable source of knowledge. Working with the last of the elders who are fluent in the language to translate this material is urgent as tapes degrade and elders grow older.

With the signing a memorandum of understanding (MOU) between the Lheidli T'enneh First Nation and the Fraser-Fort George Museum Society (the governing body of the Exploration Place) on 21 June 2017, we began long-term repatriation work with the Lheidli T'enneh First Nation. The MOU transfers the legal ownership of all Lheidli T'enneh materials in the Exploration Place to the Lheidli T'enneh Nation. The Exploration Place will house the objects in a secure collections space and all conservation and restoration requirements will be assessed during the decision to acquire an object. All objects accessioned into the Lheidli T'enneh First Nation's Collection (LTFN Collection) will be documented, all treatments and all methods of conservation and preservation recorded.

¹¹ First Peoples' Heritage Language and Culture Council, "Lheidli T'enneh Band," First Peoples' Language Map of British Columbia, <http://maps.fphlcc.ca/fphlcc/node/115>.

The museum has just received two years of funding from the BC Arts Council, Enhanced Capacity Program, to hire a Lheidli T'enneh member and to begin the process of training this individual to manage and work with the LTFN Collection. The Lheidli T'enneh may designate certain materials as "restricted access" at the time of their accession. People requiring access to any of the material may apply to the curator and consideration will be forwarded to the Lheidli T'enneh trustee for final approval. Publishing rights and copyright with regard to the collection will remain in the sole possession of the Lheidli T'enneh First Nation. The goal of the MOU is to protect and preserve the cultural assets of the members of the Lheidli T'enneh Nation while sharing their traditions, from their perspective. It clarifies the role the Exploration Place will play as the designated repository for Lheidli T'enneh cultural materials and establishes a protocol for the access, research, display, preservation, and collection of these objects and stories. The mutual goal of the organizations is to gradually bring Lheidli T'enneh materials into one secure space – currently the Exploration Place – under a single database and under the legal ownership of the Lheidli T'enneh First Nation. As expertise, time, and funds permit, the Lheidli T'enneh may in the future determine to move their collection into their own cultural centre.

Both partners recognize that repatriation can be a long and complex process. Because the basis of our relationship is friendship we are confident that we can work together to develop ceremony and protocols for the repatriations that will both respect traditions and celebrate our collective futures. We have begun important work in repatriation, starting with a large, at-risk collection of objects from the Diocese of Prince George that were legally transferred to the Exploration Place. This collection consists of 169 objects of cultural importance, including baskets, textiles, beadwork, lithics, and ceremonial regalia. All materials that were identified as Lheidli T'enneh were subsequently transferred to the Lheidli T'enneh Nation. All other material has remained part of the Exploration Place Collection, with research and identification being done by both partners in the hope of being able to repatriate the entire collection to other First Nation communities.

While the work is by no means complete, the relationship that the museum has with the Lheidli T'enneh First Nation has been vastly strengthened. The trust that we enjoy between the Lheidli T'enneh First Nation and the Exploration Place has grown over two decades of mutual effort. The history of Canada is presently being rewritten as we strive to correct past misconceptions and wrongs. The Exploration Place's work



Figure 7. Hodul'eh-a 3: Chief Dominic Frederick and Board member David Bird outside of Hodul'eh-a: A Place of Learning after the ribbon cutting ceremony to open the new gallery. Copyright The Exploration Place- Photo taken by James Doyle



Figure 8. Hodul'eh-a 6: The entrance to Hodul'eh-a: A Place of Learning. Constructed as a representation of a traditional winter home, also known as a pit-house, plans are underway to add to this structure. Copyright The Exploration Place- Photo taken by James Doyle

in Lheidli T'enneh Memorial Park on the banks of the Fraser River where it meets the Nechako River is our contribution to these collective efforts. The MOU and the Hodul'eh-a permanent gallery are significant waypoints on this path that we continue to walk together. Members of the Lheidli T'enneh First Nation have been patient with the museum. The resulting exhibition and programming space is relevant, useable, and professional. We are excited to continue filling the space with Lheidli T'enneh voices and cultural programming. The Lheidli T'enneh now have a permanent seat on the Exploration Place's Board of Trustees, which is currently filled by Chief Dominic Frederick.¹²

Before the official opening of Hodul'eh-a, a Lheidli T'enneh elder described her experience working on this project as “incredible.” She told us that the project felt “like working with family,” which was the highest compliment anyone could pay us. The same elder brought her mother in to do a cedar bough smudge in advance of the gallery opening. She shared with us the fact that this act was deeply rewarding and significant to them both as they never thought they would have the chance to heal so many wounds here in what is now the Lheidli T'enneh Memorial Park.

¹² Elders Barry Seymour and Edie Frederick are also members of the Board of Trustees.