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## The Importance of Museums To Rural and Small Towns In Manitoba, Canada

**Author:** Christopher D. Malcolm

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## **The Importance of Museums to Rural and Small Towns in Manitoba, Canada**

**Christopher D. Malcolm**  
Brandon University  
Brandon, Manitoba, Canada  
[Malcolmc@brandonu.ca](mailto:Malcolmc@brandonu.ca)

### **Abstract**

As natural resource extraction economies continue to restructure, contributing to rural population and service decline, the potential and limits for rural tourism development as an element of economic diversification have received increased attention. Community museums often already exist as a component for tourism attraction. Often, the museums are located in heritage or period buildings which add value and importance to their success. The key to their success is in ensuring they are offering the experience visitors desire. The results of the 2-year study of 18 museums, including a survey of 218 visitors and 15 museum directors are analyzed. In a two-stage survey, visitors were asked about their expectations prior to visiting and their levels of satisfaction after their visit. Visitors generally reported high expectations and satisfactions for seeing, learning, and reading about museum displays. Directors were surveyed about the issues related to their particular museum, including future prospects. The conclusions point to both hope and despair for museums in rural and small towns located beyond the urban fringe.

**Keywords:** community museums, rural, tourism, importance-satisfaction, Manitoba

## **L'importance des musées pour le milieu rural et les petites villes du Manitoba, au Canada**

### **Résumé**

Alors que les économies d'extraction de ressources naturelles continuent de se restructurer, contribuant au déclin de la population rurale et des services, le potentiel et les limites du développement du tourisme rural en tant qu'élément de diversification économique ont reçu une attention accrue. Les musées communautaires existent souvent déjà en tant que composante de l'attraction touristique. Souvent, les musées sont situés dans des bâtiments patrimoniaux ou d'époque qui ajoutent de la valeur et de l'importance à leur succès. La clé de leur succès est de s'assurer qu'ils offrent l'expérience que les visiteurs désirent. Les résultats de l'étude de 2 ans de 18 musées, y compris une enquête auprès de 218 visiteurs et de 15 directeurs de musées sont analysés. Dans une enquête en deux étapes, les visiteurs ont été interrogés sur leurs attentes avant la visite et sur leur niveau de satisfaction après leur visite. Les visiteurs ont généralement exprimé des attentes et des satisfactions élevées pour voir, apprendre et lire les expositions du musée. Les directeurs ont été interrogés sur les questions liées à leur propre musée, y compris les perspectives d'avenir. Les conclusions pointent à la fois l'espoir et le désespoir pour les musées dans les villes rurales et les petites villes situées au-delà de la périphérie urbaine.

**Mots clés :** musées communautaires, rural, tourisme, importance-satisfaction, Manitoba

## 1.0 Introduction

As natural resource extraction economies continue to restructure, contributing to rural population and service decline, the potential and limits for rural tourism development as an element of economic diversification have received increased attention. While urban regions are often attractions in and of themselves with a population base for tourism, large-scale tourism products, and transportation infrastructure, in rural regions—given the effort and expense of accessing remote regions—the tourism products themselves are the attraction. In this vein, community museums often already exist as a component for tourism attraction. The key to their success is in ensuring they are offering the experience visitors desire. However, as rural and small-town areas often face issues of depopulation and ageing within the community and given that community museums are most often public or not-for-profit entities that rely on government grants and volunteerism for basic operations, maintaining and operating community museums can be difficult.

While there is growing attention being paid to rural tourism (e.g., Biddulph, 2015; Pearce, 2002) generally, there is little research on rural and small-town museums (eg., Crooke, 2008; Porto et al., 2012). Museums are often anchors in small communities—usually located in heritage buildings such as converted rail stations, post offices, banks, or stately homes—as preservers of history and promoters of community pride. Understanding the importance and complexity (Kozak & Kozak, 2018) of such institutions is a key measure of community economic development. The Canadian Prairies represent an example of economic restructuring, population decline, service withdrawal, and lost heritage. Museums, it is argued here, offer a way to preserve culture, including architecture. This work was inspired by the desire within the regional rural museum community to investigate their role in rural tourism. Following Malcolm & Ramsey (2014), the Association of Manitoba Museums (AMM) wished to explore the roles for rural museums that continually struggle with remoteness, seasonality, maintenance, funding, and volunteerism to keep the museums running.

This paper begins by placing the study within the context of the rural tourism development literature, generally, and the cultural and heritage tourism, specifically. Following a description of community museums based on secondary sources, the paper then reports on the results of a two-year study (2015 and 2016) of 18 museums, including a survey of 218 visitors and 15 museum directors. The purpose of this study is to examine the importance of museums to rural communities by developing an understanding of the demographics of who visits the museums and why they do so. Museum directors are also interviewed to gain an understanding of their view of the museums they administer and the challenges they face. The results point to both hope and despair for museums in rural and small towns located beyond the urban fringe in Manitoba, Canada.

The results suggest an important role for community museums to the communities themselves as well as for rural tourism but also illustrate significant operational difficulties that exist within the museums and communities. Visitors to the museums were composed primarily of tourists, with almost one-third of respondents indicating that they would be visiting other museums in the regions within the next few days. Visitors generally reported high expectations and satisfaction for seeing, learning, and reading about museum displays. However, open-ended comments often included statements that reflect difficulties in museum operations, such as desires for better lighting, air flow, labeling, and organization. My paper concludes with

comments reflecting on community museums as sources of community identity and pride that should be recognized as an important segment of rural tourism development, with appropriate support provided by local and provincial governments.

## **2.0 Literature Review**

### ***2.1 Rural and Small-Town Community Economic Development***

There is a solid record of research addressing development issues and constraints in rural and small-town areas. In a Canadian context, much of this work has focussed on maintaining services and institutions (e.g., Sullivan et al., 2014) and rural resource restructuring (Halseth et al., 2014). Increasingly, this work has included tourism as a driver to maintain an economy in rural areas and small towns (Carson et al., 2014; Douglas, 2010; Ramsey & Malcolm, 2018). In many regions of the world, Canada included, developing a tourism sector is often one response to a restructuring of traditional resource-based economies—for example, fishing, forestry, mining, agriculture (Ramsey & Everitt, 2007). Thus, tourism promotes an economy that was once but is now diminished or no longer prominent (Bramwell & Lane, 2012; Koster, 2008; Koster & Randall, 2005; Ramsey & Everitt, 2007; Sullivan & Mitchell, 2012).

In a tourism context, Lew et al. (2016) stress the importance of understanding resiliency in the community in understanding their capacity to respond to change. Museums, including the facilities they exist within and the people that administer them, represent an underrated example of community economic development. While some work exists on museum–community linkages generally, there is a gap in the literature examining museums as community economic development specifically. Crooke (2008), for example, provides a foundation for understanding the relationship between museums and community, and in particular “how museums work with communities” (p. 1). More specifically, her work is concerned with the complexity of the linkages among museums, heritage, and community. Most recently, Kozak & Kozak (2018) articulate the complexities between museums, heritage, and community, including preservation and commodification. Beyond the literature on the importance of volunteerism in rural and small towns (e.g., Halseth & Ryser, 2007), less work exists that extends the museum–community linkage specifically to tourism development, including Okazaki (2008) who examined the role of local voices in tourism development.

The research reported in this paper builds on these linkages in that it was the museum communities in Manitoba that asked for assistance in better understanding visitor experiences with the view of improving the quality of the museums and with this, improving relevance within their respective communities.

### ***2.2 Heritage Preservation***

Heritage is a broad term, including people, communities, places, artifacts, and architecture. In a tourism context, it is seen as a form of educating people about the past (Butters et al., 2017; Moscardo, 1996; Timothy & Boyd, 2006; Trinh & Ryan, 2016). This can include the built and cultural aspects of heritage. Museums, as spaces to celebrate past cultural identity (Urry, 1996), reflect both in most instances, and most particularly preserve heritage buildings to house cultural histories of rural and small towns. Beyond preservation in and of itself, others have examined aspects such as the purchase of souvenirs (Harrison & Shaw, 2004), commodification

(Cohen, 1988, 2002; Mitchell & de Waal, 2009), authenticity (Bryce et al., 2015; Chhabra, 2005, 2008; Croes et al., 2003), and the level of services provided (Frochot, 2004). Marketing initiatives (du Cros, 2001; Hume, 2011) and their impact on visitation has also been examined (Bantimaroudis et al., 2010). In rural contexts, marketing budgets and expertise are lagging.

Heritage is an important feature of cultural tourism which can be represented through experience, activity, and destination (Craik, 2001). Culture and heritage often comprise significant elements of rural and small-town tourism pursuits (Poria et al., 2003; Rockett & Ramsey, 2017). Heritage can provide tourists with a “glimpse into the pasts of traditional resource-based economies (e.g., fishing) that are no longer the mainstay of some rural economies” (Rockett & Ramsey, 2017, p. 304) which in the context of the research reported in this paper is applied to the agricultural economies of the Canadian Prairies.

Due to continual economic restructuring and depopulation, the Canadian Prairies are fraught with lost built heritage. Adding to the dilemma is that much of the built environment is of wood construction and the climate—with typical winters dipping to -30 degrees Celsius and summer temperatures approaching +40 degrees Celsius—is not kind to buildings of any kind. Further, with economic restructuring, agricultural landscapes have changed dramatically. It is estimated that while there were more than 5,000 grain elevators in Canada in the 1930s (Silversides, 1997), this number is now less than 100. Changing economies and loss of built heritage has drastically changed small town prairie ‘Main Streets.’ In addressing such losses, local heritage advocates often use museums as a new use to preserve historic buildings, including former train stations, banks, post offices, and heritage homes. It is therefore important to understand the role of community museums in heritage preservation.

### ***2.3 Visitor Expectation and Satisfaction***

Di Pietro et al. (2018) outline salient features to heritage and identity, including cultural identity and importance of community. To ascertain the importance and function of community museums to rural communities, it is important to understand the characteristics of the population that is visiting museums and how the museum experience is reflected in their reasons for visiting the museums and satisfaction of the experience. Research on museums and cultural centres has also focussed on visitor expectations and satisfaction; this line of inquiry has provided general satisfaction results and conclusions (e.g., Bonn et al., 2007; de Rojas & Camarero, 2008; Vong, 2013), but has also touched on elements such as service (Frochot, 2004), souvenir purchase (Harrison & Shaw, 2004), location (Johanson & Olsen, 2010) and interpretation (Malcolm & Ramsey, 2014).

Much of the museum-based literature focuses on collections, and related, visitors’ expectations and satisfaction (e.g., Bonn et al., 2007; Dragicevic et al., 2013; Harrison, 1997; Vong, 2013). Experience, attitude, and behavior are also key elements to understanding visitor satisfaction (Hume, 2011; Ramkissoon et al., 2011). Studies have also found that levels of motivation affect the levels of visitor satisfaction (e.g., Devesa et al., 2010; Rid et al., 2014). Other factors affecting motivation have also been identified, including de Rojas and Camarero (2008) who found that emotion along with expectation affected visitor satisfaction and Moreno et al. (2009) who found that visitor satisfaction differed between residents and tourists based on image formation in their study of visitor satisfaction Gran Canaria, Canary Islands, Spain.

Visitor engagement and motivation are also key considerations in evaluating heritage destinations and, specifically, museums (Taheri et al., 2014). Similarly, others have argued that understanding factors such as visitor intention and demographics is important to understanding overall satisfaction. We argue as others have (e.g., de Rojas & Camarero, 2008), that expectation needs to be also understood. The research reported in this paper is embedded in previous work examining visitors' expectations and satisfaction in visiting a science-based destination in a small town in Manitoba (Malcolm & Ramsey, 2014; Ramsey & Malcolm, 2018).

### **3.0 Study Area and Research Methods**

My study took place in the western province of Manitoba, Canada. According to the last national census in 2016, the population of Manitoba was 1,278,365, an increase of almost 6% from the previous census in 2011 (see Table 1). The capital, City of Winnipeg, comprises 61% of the total population (778,489). In Southwestern Manitoba (see Figure 1), the City of Brandon, the second largest city in Manitoba, serves as a regional centre. It is home to a university, college, hospital, as well as a host of other government services and businesses many of which cater to the surrounding agricultural sector. Table 1 lists the populations (2011 and 2016) of the communities with museums in southwestern Manitoba. It also delineates those that are seasonal or open year-round. As noted, there is a mix of communities experiencing growth and decline. Of particular note are those that have seen greater than average growth, including Hartney, Killarney, Neepawa, and Rapid City. Neepawa's growth is largely attributed to an expanding hog processing plant. Rapid City's growth is due to residential developments for retiring farmers and commuters from Brandon. Hartney and Killarney's changes are due in part to a recalculation of population counts in 2011.

Museums are not only places to preserve and promote cultural heritage. They also represent possibilities—and responsibilities—for preserving built histories (Porto et al., 2012). A scan of all museums in southwestern Manitoba was conducted based on directories—print and on-line—and field observation. Table 2 lists all 41 museums by community location, including two that are closed indefinitely. It is important to include these in the overall inventory for two reasons. First, it provides evidence of struggles faced by small community museums. Second, both are located in historic buildings. The former schoolhouse in Rapid City is a provincially designated heritage building. The designation is based on its brick architecture and that an acclaimed Canadian author, Frederick Philip Grove, was once a teacher at the school (Martens, 2007).

Beyond the five museums located in the City of Brandon, most of the other museums are seasonal (32). Most of the 41 (68.3%) museums in southwestern Manitoba are located in historical buildings. Of these, seven museums include multiple heritage buildings. These are important aspects to consider given that seasonality affects the ability to ensure structural aspects and heritage elements can be preserved.

Table 1. *Community Populations, Southwestern Manitoba*

Community	Seasonality of Museum*	Population 2011	Population 2016	% Change 2011–2016
Belmont**	S, S	1,423	1,453	2.1
Birtle**	S	664	647	-2.6
Boissevain	S, Y, Y	1,572	1,656	5.3
Brandon***	Y, Y, Y, Y, Y	46,061	48,859	6.1
Carberry	S, S	1,669	1,738	4.1
CFB Shilo	Y	1,421	1,419	-0.1
Elgin**	S	1,480	1,561	5.5
Elkhorn**	S	471	479	1.7
Foxwarren**	S	2,167	2,088	-3.6
Gladstone	S	879	889	1.1
Glenboro**	S	645	624	-3.3
Hamiota**	S	868	841	-3.1
Hartney**	S	415	462	11.3
Killarney	S, S	1,974	2,150	8.9
Melita	S	1,069	1,042	-2.5
Miniota**	S	871	854	-2.0
Minnedosa	S	2,587	2,449	-5.3
Neepawa	S, S	3,629	4,609	27.0
Oak Lake**	S	383	407	6.3
Rapid City**	C	417	478	14.6
Sandy Lake	S	261	264	1.1
Shoal Lake	S, S	714	701	-1.8
Souris**	S, S	1,837	1,974	7.5
Strathclair**	S	744	709	-4.7
Virden	S, S	3,114	3,322	6.7
Waskada**	C	183	167	-8.7
Wawanesa**	Y	562	594	5.7
<b>Manitoba Total</b>		<b>1,208,268</b>	<b>1,278,365</b>	<b>5.8</b>

Source: Statistics Canada (2016).

\*S=Seasonal; Y=Year-round; C=Closed; Multiple letters—for each museum

\*\*Town/rural municipality dissolved and amalgamated but population still calculated

\*\*\*City population

Figure 1. Museum locations, southwestern Manitoba, Canada.



Source: Map prepared by W. Van Heyst, Brandon University.

As mentioned previously, in this region of Manitoba it is not uncommon to have temperatures of  $-30$  degrees Celsius in the winter months and  $+40$  degrees Celsius in the summer months. Most seasonal museums are not open during early spring and late fall which are typically characterized by wetter weather. For many, it is simply not possible to heat facilities in the winter months. Maintenance such as clearing snow from roofs and foundations is also not possible. These weather and climate considerations place greater pressure on museum operators, facts that were acknowledged by museum visitors and directors as is described in the following sections.

A mixed methodology (Creswell, 2003) was employed for the research on which my paper is based. Primarily, it includes three sources of information: (a) background secondary information on museums in southwestern Manitoba drawn largely from government and community listings, (b) a survey of visitors to museums in southwestern Manitoba in the summers of 2015 and 2016, and (c) a survey of museum directors working at museums participating in the visitor survey in the year of visitor participation.



Table 2. *Museums of Southwestern Manitoba*

<b>Community</b>	<b>Museum Name</b>	<b>Survey</b>	<b>Seasonality*</b>	<b>Historical Building(S)</b>
Belmont	Belmont Museum		S	Caboose
Belmont	Evergreen Firearms Museum		S	
Birtle	Birdtail Country Museum		S	Bank
Boissevain	Beckoning Hills Museum		S	
Boissevain	Irvin Goodon International Wildlife Museum	Yes	Y	
Boissevain	Moncur Gallery		S	
Boissevain	North American Game Warden Museum	Yes	Y	
Brandon	26th Field Regiment Museum	Yes	Y	Armoury
Brandon	Art Gallery of SW Manitoba		Y	
Brandon	Brandon General Museum		Y	Storefront
Brandon	Daly House	Yes	Y	Home
Brandon	Manitoba Agricultural Hall of Fame		Y	Ag building
Carberry	Carberry Plains Museum	Yes	S	Home
Carberry	The Seton Centre	Yes	S	Storefront
CFB Shilo	RCA Museum	Yes	Y	
Elgin	Elgin and District Historical Musuem		S	Bank
Elkhorn	Manitoba Automobile Museum		S	
Foxwarren	Foxwarren Museum and Memory Garden		S	Church
Gladstone	Gladstone and District Museum	Yes	S	Train station; Caboose
Glenboro	Burrough of the Gleann Museum		S	
Hamiota	Hamiota Pioneer Club Museum		S	Train station, church
Hartney	Hart-Cam Museum		S	Storefront
Killarney	J.A.V. David Museum	Yes	S	Post office
Killarney	Turtle Mountain Flywheel Club		S	

**Table 2 continued**

Melita	Antler River Historical Society Museum		S	Schoolhouse
Miniota	Miniota Municipal Museum	Yes	S	
Minnedosa	Heritage Village		S	Heritage village
Neepawa	Beautiful Plains Museum	Yes	S	Train station
Neepawa	Margaret Laurence Home	Yes	S	Home
Oak Lake	Oak Lake and District Museum		S	Two churches
Rapid City	Rapid City Museum		C	Schoolhouse
Sandy Lake	Ukrainian Cultural Heritage Museum		S	
Shoal Lake	Prairie Mountain Regional Museum		S	Home, school, church
Shoal Lake	Shoal Lake Mountain Police Museum		S	1875 Replica
Souris	Souris Hillcrest		S	Home
Souris	The Plum	Yes	S	Church
Strathclair	Strathclair Museum	Yes	S	Train station; Church
Virden	Currahee Military Museum		S	
Virden	Virden Pioneer Home Museum	Yes	S	Home
Waskada	Waskada Museum		C	Bank, church, school
Wawanesa	Sipiweske Museum	Yes	Y	Storefront

Source: Data collected from community web sites; Association of Manitoba Museums web site.

\*S=Seasonal; Y=Year-round; C=Closed

A list of 39 museums was provided by the AMM. The AMM database was used to identify background information on each museum (e.g., location, season/hours of operations, museum websites, and contact information). This background secondary data was important in developing the museum context and landscape in the sparsely populated prairie region of southwestern Manitoba. The database and websites were also used to identify and contact museum directors who were then initially contacted either by telephone or through a cold call visit, during which we informed the director about the purpose of the project and asked if the museum would be interested in participating. In some cases, the director took the inquiry to the museum board for discussion before making a decision regarding participation. A total of 37 museums were contacted. Eighteen agreed to participate, two received initial contact but the project did not proceed due to difficulties in communication, fourteen either

did not answer the telephone during repeated calls or did not return voice messages, one was closed for renovations, and two elected not to participate. The level of non-participation could itself be seen as an issue of concern for rural museums.

Between June and September 2015 and 2016, visitation to the 18 participating community museums in southwestern Manitoba was examined. A questionnaire survey was designed to collect both quantitative and qualitative data regarding demographics, the purpose for visiting, expectations, and satisfaction.

Visitor surveys were subsequently dropped off at participating museums and questionnaire administration methods were discussed with museum volunteers and/or summer intern students, who undertook the administration of the questionnaire. It was hoped that this personal contact would increase participation by individual museums and improve the quality of its administration with personalized instruction. Visitors were approached upon arrival, informed of the project through an information letter, and asked if they wished to participate. The questionnaire was composed of two parts. Participants completed the first part of the questionnaire prior to beginning their museum visit, including questions regarding demographics, previous experiences visiting museums and learning about history, reasons for visiting the museum, and expectations for their visit. The second section was completed by the participant at the end of their visit, including questions regarding satisfaction with their visit and four open-ended questions again addressing satisfaction. Questionnaires were collected at the end of each of summer period in 2015 and 2016.

Directors were also presented with an information letter upon an initial meeting and asked whether they would participate in completing a questionnaire. The questionnaires were composed of 12 open-ended questions that inquired about the director's experience in their role, the role of the museum, operational difficulties, and future visions. The questionnaires were either completed during the initial visit or left with the museum for later collection. A total of 15 director questionnaires were completed. The research instruments were approved by the Brandon University Research Ethics Committee.

## **4.0 Results and Discussion**

### ***4.1 Museum Visitor Survey***

*4.1.1 Demographics and backgrounds.* A total of 218 visitor questionnaires were collected during the study period. Just under 60% of the participants were female. Most visitors were older than middle-aged: 37% were over 60 years old, and a further 22% were between 50 and 59. Almost half had at least some university or an undergraduate or post-graduate degree. The highest income category chosen by participants was CDN\$50,000–75,000, with half of the respondents earning under \$75,000.

Almost 80% were from within Canada, and just under 20% came from the USA. Within Canada, just over 60% came from within Manitoba followed by Alberta (15%), Ontario (10%), and Saskatchewan (8%). Eighty-six percent of the respondents were spending time in the community where they visited a museum. Sixty-seven percent of respondents had heard of the museum before visiting. Of those, most knew about it through family or friends (44.1%). The next three most

cited sources included “passing through town” (16.8%), “Travel Manitoba” (the provincial tourism agency) (10.6%), and “live or work nearby” (6.8%).

While 30% of respondents indicated that they would be visiting other museums in the next few days, 48.1% stated that they would be visiting other community museums in the future. With respect to museum visitation in general, 54% of participants stated they would devote 1–3 days during the year to museum visits, while 30.1% indicated they would devote 4–6 days. Sixty-two percent of respondents answered that they would make one to three 50–100 km trips from their home to visit museums during the year, and 64.2% indicated they would make one to three trips per year to museums greater than 100 km from their home. Altogether, 51.6% of participants indicated that they typically visit one to three museums per year, and 24.9% responded “four to six.”

When asked “About how many times a week do you spend time learning about history (e.g., The History Channel, books about heritage and history, Internet),” 68.5% responded that they spend 1 day or less per week, while 18.8% indicated 2–3 days per week. Specific to the museum they were visiting that day, 68.7% stated that they had previous knowledge of the subjects and time period(s) represented at the museum. Of these, there was a variation in the reported knowledge base, with 21.5% indicating they had a high amount of knowledge of the subjects and time period(s) represented at the museum, compared to 46.6% who said medium, and 31.9% who said low.

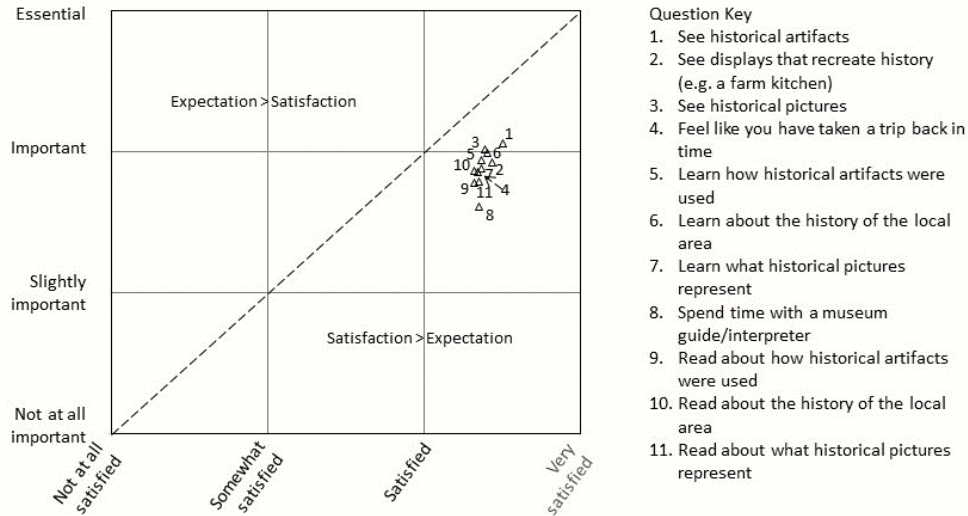
Respondents were also asked to contextualize their visit. There was a mix of planned and unplanned visits, including those who were already in the community and those who were passing through or visiting. When combining planned versus unplanned options, we found that approximately 60% of visitors had planned their visit beforehand. Almost 90% of respondents were from outside the community. This is important information to museums as it illustrates the diversity of reasons why visitors made the stop.

*4.1.2 Measures of importance and satisfaction.* Figure 2 provides a scatter plot of responses to expectation and satisfaction for 11 items that are divided into three main experiential sections: (a) see #1–4, (b) learn #5–8, and (c) read #9–11, along with two other items, one regarding feelings of taking a trip back in time and the other regarding guided tours of the museum. The answers to the questions regarding expectations were collected when the participants arrived at the museum and the ones regarding satisfaction followed the completion of their museum experience. The results are the means of each item, ranging from ‘Not at all important’ to ‘Essential,’ and ‘Not at all satisfactory’ to ‘Extremely satisfactory.’ In general, all but one expectation approached, but did not reach, ‘Important,’ the exception being ‘See historical artifacts,’ for which the mean was slightly greater than ‘Important.’ The ‘read’ items were all less important than the ‘see’ and ‘learn’ items. Spending time with a museum guide/interpreter was the least important expectation. All satisfaction items exceeded the linked expectation and resultant means placed all satisfactions between ‘Satisfactory’ and ‘Extremely satisfactory.’

To expand on the reasons underlying the measures of importance and satisfaction, Table 3 summarizes the details of a series of questions that gave respondents the opportunity to provide details about their visit through write-in answers. The top five categories in response to the question “Why did you visit this museum today?” accounted for 72% of the 243 answers provided. Some of the open-ended comments

were generic, including “I like museums”, “wanted to see what was here”, “passing through”, and “important to educate the young about our past” while others were location-specific, including “recommended by family” and “I read Margaret Lawrence’s [*sic*] books.”

Figure 2. Scatter plot of importance versus satisfaction item scores.



When asked “What did you like about your experience today at this museum?” the top five categories of answers accounted for 82% of the 255 answers provided. Similar to the first question, some answers were rather general, including “artifacts,” “kid-friendly,” and “friendly staff,” while others were more specific, such as “rooms organized by themes,” “First Nations depicted accurately,” “the animals,” and “the tour guide.”

The top five answer categories for the question “Was there anything you did not like about your experience today at this museum?” accounted for 66% of the 56 responses received. Approximately one-third of the answers were classified as “Nothing/everything was good,” with the next four categories individually accounting for much less. Examples of other answers included “better lighting,” “not enough information,” “no food,” “small,” and “it smelled funny.”

Lastly, respondents were asked, “Are there any changes you would make to improve your experience?” The top six answer categories accounted for 56% of the 66 responses received. A desire for more interactive displays stood out as a popular statement. Examples in other categories included “better lighting,” “more local content,” “better airflow,” and “rearrange as things were a little crowded,” One respondent noted that they wished to “have Margaret [Lawrence] actually there.” Margaret Lawrence was an author of some Canadian fame who passed away in 1987. The museum is located in the home of her grandparents.

Table 3. *Perspectives of the Museum Visited*

Question	Top Reasons	Selection of Comments
Why did you visit this museum today?	Visiting other attractions in the area 20% To learn 17% Something to do 14% Research my family history 11% See the displays 10%	“I like museums” “Wanted to see what was here” “Passing through” “Important to educate the young about our past” “Recommended by family” “I read Margaret Lawrence’s [sic] books”
What did you like about your experience today at this museum?	Displays 37% Staff 20% Learning 13% Everything 7% Pictures 5%	“Artifacts” “Souvenirs” “Rooms organized by themes” “Kid friendly” “First Nations depicted accurately” “The animals” “The tour guide” “Friendly staff”
Was there anything you did not like about your experience today at this museum?	Nothing/everything was good 32% Lighting 11% Too small /needs more 9% Too cold 9% More displays 5%	“No food” “No change tables” “Not enough information” “It smelled funny” “Better lighting” “Love to see more” “Small”
Are there any changes would you make to improve your experience?	Interactive displays 20% No/it was all good 9% Lighting 8% More displays/artifacts 8% Free admission 6% Better airflow 5%	“More local content” “Rearrange as things were a little crowded” “Too much text” “Have Margaret actually there” “Better lighting” “Some wildlife music?” “More interpretive and interactive” “Wish more people would visit” “Better air flow”

Source: Authors’ Survey.

4.1.3 *Museum directors survey.* All respondents (n=15) indicated that a board of directors operated their museum. Two stated also having sub-committees of the board. One indicated they operated with three paid staff. Eleven of the respondents reported that they employed a summer student, one as part-time. The average number of years working or volunteering at these museums was 9.9 years, with a range of between 3 and 24 years. Only one respondent, a summer student, indicated working at another museum at some point in time.

Not surprisingly, when asked why people visited their museum, many of the respondents stated that they feel people visit their museums to experience history.

They also reported that people bring their children to learn about the past and see the artifacts, including family histories, youth programming, and general education of youth.

When asked to identify three things that described what their museum represented, again history dominated the answers. Of these, most comments included stories about people as part of community history. Examples of responses included, “area history, change in fashions, machines”, “the tools of the pioneers..., history of the World Wars, way of life in the 1880s through 1980s”, “early history of the area, history of the people of the area, the hardy stock that today’s residents evolved from”, “people of the plains, small communities work together, family making a good living”, and the “historical importance of the railroad, pioneer achievements, challenges.”

In terms of what the museum delivers to visitors, respondents indicated that their museums offer a “sense of,” and a “glimpse into” the past, through an “authentic experience.” One respondent stated that the museum offered a “glimpse into the past way of life, try and understand how their parents and grandparents lived, the way pioneers made tools” while another described “stories from the past such as war times, learning at school, railway stories and grain elevators.” A specific example included the “authentic experience, unique, focussed understanding of Canada's role in WWII, remembrance of Canada's WWII sacrifice.”

In terms of operations, respondents were asked to describe the three main methods used to convey this museum’s message(s) to visitors. Most responses indicated “artifacts” and “exhibits”, but many of the responses also made reference to the people working in the museum, particularly volunteer guides. In addition to general comments about the importance of volunteers, one respondent specified that beyond the displays, it was the “volunteer[s] willingness to open up at visitors' request and give tours.”

The most common response to the question “What is the most important role of this museum?” included the preservation of history. One respondent stressed the importance of the museum to keep the past of the community alive: “to maintain and promote the past of our ancestors and history of our area.” Similarly, another respondent stated that their museum was important “to keep alive stories of the past that make our community stronger.” More broadly, respondents were also asked to describe the role that their museum plays in the community and or region. There was a great deal of pride on the part of the respondents to this question. They felt that their museums play important roles in heritage and preservation, including that of local “treasures” and “artifacts”. Sense of community and pride was also evident in responses, including “to keep alive stories of the past that make our community stronger” and “collecting peoples’ treasures to be remembered and displayed.”

Managing rural and small-town museums is not without its challenges. There was a lot of concern for the future of the museums, including aging volunteer staff, expertise in museum curation, community interest, and lack of financial capital. One respondent noted the age and health of volunteers as a primary concern. Another expressed difficulty “finding volunteers—most are in their 70s and 80s.” More problematic was the concern that there is no longer community interest. One respondent stated that “once the community has seen the museum, it’s the same thing over again” so that return visits are unlikely. One respondent mentioned the difficulty in “getting visitors to come” while another expressed funding and difficulty in “keeping the museum in good condition, presenting the displays in a way that does them justice.” Related to this, one respondent stated that “all costs rise, but the operating grant has remained \$3,150 for 15–20 years.”

When asked about the future of their museum in 5 and 10 years, there was a certain amount of cautious optimism, mixed with concern for the future. There was recognition of the need to evolve with technology in the hopes of engaging young people. Utilizing social media in promotion was also cited as a future goal. Perhaps most concerning were comments about the difficulty finding people to work or volunteer at rural museums or as one respondent expressed, “without volunteers, we will be closed.”

The directors’ comments highlight some of the complaints in the visitor survey that pertain to lighting, air, and presentation of the museum’s artifacts.

## 5.0 Conclusion

Museums can be important centres in small communities. They instill pride in the community and can be a tourist attraction. In many cases, as shown in this paper, museums play an important function in preserving historic buildings and lands. The case study of southwestern Manitoba is important as it includes a mix of communities that are growing, declining, or simply maintaining their populations. Some population growth was above the provincial average (e.g., Hartney, Neepawa, and Rapid City). Having said this, smaller communities, regardless of their growth rates, face many issues, one of which is the ability to keep their museums open, maintained, and relevant. Several important points emerge from the data reported in this paper. Community museums are important tourist attractions. As the data showed, 86% of museum visitors were tourists to the area, and 60% of visitors planned their visits. Thirty percent indicated they would be visiting other museums in the region during their visit, and 48% indicated they would visit other community museums in the future. This illustrates that, although rural regions have difficulty in sustaining services (Sullivan et al., 2014), community museums are a service worth preserving, as they draw tourists to the community; these tourists may well avail themselves of other services in the communities. Further, visitation is primarily promoted by word-of-mouth through friends and family.

We feel that community museums—many of which already exist in numerous communities—should be supported and used as well as bundled with other attractions into an overall rural tourist package. There is potential to draw upon models of route-based tourism that can be both socially and economically beneficial to numerous, connected rural communities to boost tourism (Briedenhann & Wickens, 2004; Lourens, 2007; Nagy & Piskoti, 2020).

Although expectations did not score great importance, other than seeing artifacts, there was a high degree of satisfaction among visitors. There was some interest in the addition of interactive displays as well as expressions of concern about the condition of the museum (e.g., cold, small, cramped, smells). This shows that once the visitors are in the museum, they report a high degree of satisfaction with the overall experience. This result illustrates the importance of the educational and heritage preservation roles of the museums (Butters et al., 2017; Timothy & Boyd, 2006; Trinh & Ryan, 2016) and instils them as important services and tourism attractions in the communities.

The visitors’ findings support the concerns of directors in their interviews. There is an immense sense of pride within the museum operation community. Directors are passionate about the role of community museums in the region for much more than just tourism: for a community in time and place, education and preservation, and volunteerism. Having said this, museum directors report ongoing



difficulties in daily management with regards to funding, human resources, and conservation/curation of artifacts.

Together, the community museums in southwestern Manitoba are sources of community identity and pride and should be recognized as an important segment of rural tourism development, with appropriate support—monetary and promotion—provided by local and provincial governments. The results of this study, when presented to the AMM, were met with grateful acceptance and were acted upon by the AMM in advocating for greater provincial funding for community museums; this was achieved when a new grant, the Community Museums Project Support Program, was established by the Manitoba Government in 2022. Hopefully this can add some resilience to these important institutions.

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