



Banff Park Museum National Historic Site of Canada

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credit: Amar Athwal

The Significance of the Banff Park Museum National Historic Site

The Victorian era heralded an age of transformation in which momentous changes in the field of natural history coincided with the rise of new visual displays and presentation of taxidermy collections as objects for study and education. Opened in 1903, the cross-log motif of the Banff Park Museum exemplifies an architectural style common in the town at the time. Norman Bethune Sanson, Banff's first citizen scientist and the museum's curator from 1896 to 1932, energetically developed the collections, initially put together by the Geological Survey of Canada. Throughout its early years the museum dealt with natural and human history but by the late 1950s was limited to natural history. While the building was refurbished in 1985, the exhibit reflects museum interpretation current to 1914. The Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada recommended designation of the Banff Park Museum as a national historic site in 1981 for these reasons.

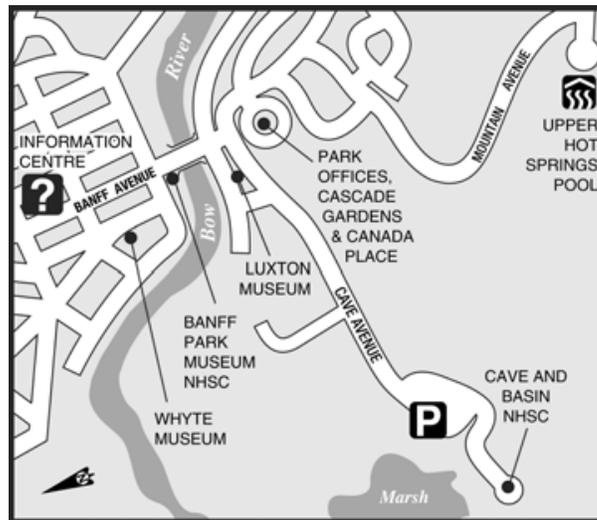
“The Banff Park Museum is of national historic significance because this “museum of museums” developed by Norman Bethune Sanson reflects an early approach to the interpretation of natural history in Canada and because of the architectural style and detailing so characteristic of early federal buildings in Canada. The original exhibits reveal how natural history used to be presented. The exhibits also show an early transition to dioramas - specimens in a natural setting - which most modern museums have today.”

Key Milestones

- 1885** The Hot Springs Reserve at the Cave and Basin was established.
- 1887** The Reserve is enlarged and renamed Rocky Mountains Park of Canada. The town of Banff has six hotels, nine hotels, nine stores, two churches and a post office. The study of natural history is popular, but exploring the Rocky Mountains is difficult.
- 1891** John Macoun and William Spreadborough, from the Geological Survey of Canada (GSC), come to Western Canada to make a collection of specimens of flora and fauna proposed to be established at Banff.
- 1894** The building at the Banff Springs Hotel originally constructed to house the park superintendent is moved to corner of Spray and Mountain Avenue for the first museum.
- 1895** The natural history museum opens on the south side of the Bow River, with various specimens donated by the Geological Survey.
- 1896** Norman B. Sanson becomes the museum curator and local meteorologist.
- 1903** The museum moves to the north side of the Bow River into the new Banff Park Museum building, with an expanded collection and a Superintendent's office.
- 1904** The Banff Park Zoo opens behind the museum.
- 1914** Dr. Smith designs avant-garde exhibits and writes the museum's first handbook.
- 1932** Sanson retires and no one replaces him. The museum becomes neglected.
- 1937** The Banff Park Zoo closes.
- 1950s** Many deem the museum a firetrap and outdated; however, plans to demolish it are abandoned when prominent citizens object. It is decided that the museum will focus on the park's natural history and unrelated items will be moved to other museums or displayed separately.
- 1980s** The museum undergoes major restoration.
- 1981** The Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada recommends designation of the Banff Park Museum as a National Historic Site of Canada.
- 1985** Banff Park Museum National Historic Site reopens to public during Parks Canada 100th Anniversary.
- 2002** The museum is closed and a major structural repair project is undertaken to the upper mezzanine.
- 2007** The Banff Park Museum National Historic Site Management Plan is approved.
- 2008** Updating the exterior landscape with new pathways and interpretive media, and a reroofing project are completed.

Location

The Banff Park Museum is located two hours west of Calgary in the town of Banff, in Banff National Park of Canada.



History

The Banff Park Museum National Historic Site is one of Canada's oldest natural history museums, and the oldest surviving building in a Canadian national park. Under the curatorship of Norman B. Sanson, the collection at Banff's first natural history museum quickly outgrew the small building formerly located at the corner of Spray and Mountain avenues. In 1903, a new building was completed. John Stocks designed the building, incorporating the exterior cross log motif that is characteristic of early national park architecture. He added a lantern to allow for light in pre-electric Banff and the interior was finished in Douglas fir. The design included a cantilevered truss system that supported the second floor and roof without obstructive interior columns that would have blocked light and exhibit space.

Representative examples of most of the park's birds, animals, insects, fish, geology, and plants were on display and most of the specimens were mounted in typical Victorian era scientific fashion on simple wood blocks. However, the Banff Park Museum has some of the earliest examples worldwide of dioramas, placing the specimens in a display of their natural setting. During this early days of the museum, the study of natural science was very popular. In the nineteenth century, museums, botanical gardens, and other scientific exhibitions educated and entertained the general public and introduced them to the discoveries of science. Some of collection in Banff was started with specimens and display cases from the 1893 Chicago World's Fair and the Panama–Pacific International Exposition World's Fair held in San Francisco in 1915. Sanson continued to expand the collection to represent as much of the park's flora and fauna until he retired in 1932. The Banff Park Museum went through a period of decline after Sanson's tenure. By the 1950s, there was serious talk of disposing of the collection and dismantling the building. Fortunately, its historic value was recognized as a viable visitor attraction and plans to revitalize this special place began. In the early 1980s Parks Canada restored the museum to its circa 1914 appearance.

Past to Present

From its early beginning in 1895, the Banff Park Museum National Historic Site has functioned in part as an interpretive centre and the “University of the Hills”, providing an opportunity for visitors to see first-hand much of the flora and fauna of Banff National Park and Western Canada. Visitors to the town of Banff are drawn to the Banff Park Museum National Historic Site as one of the main architectural landmarks on Banff Avenue. Today, visitors can appreciate the Banff Park Museum’s unique architecture and experience over 5000 natural history specimens on display as it was presented in the early part of the last century. Complete with most of the original collection and original exhibit cases, this “museum of museums” continues to present visitors with Banff National Park’s natural and cultural heritage.

“Exploring the museum is like walking through a three-dimensional field guide. Beginning with the loons and grebes near the entrance as you enter the building and ending with the songbirds, the exhibits are laid out in an order similar to most guides to the North American bird.”



Parks Canada Collection

Once inside the building, visitors discover that the Banff Park Museum National Historic Site is not only a window to the past, but also an accessible platform through which they can connect to science and research practices of Parks Canada and community partners. In addition, the side rooms of the museum are set to host an annual contemporary exhibit functioning as a bridge between the Victorian/Edwardian era and contemporary forms of science and conservation.

Cultural Resources Management

Safeguarding the museum’s condition, heritage character elements, collections and authentic setting is a primary goal. Cultural resources at this and other national historic sites reinforce a sense of connection to Canada and to Parks Canada’s protected heritage places and the stories they tell.

The Importance of Partnerships

Working with new partners to develop and deliver high quality interpretive programming and events will be an important part of the future of the Banff Park Museum National Historic Site. By sharing multiple perspectives and presenting an annual thematic exhibition people can discover more about the natural world – its past, present and future.