

# BARKERVILLE

## JUST THE TIP OF THE ICEBERG?

By Julie Cowie



Currently there is an alarming trend towards the diminution of the importance of heritage by the government of British Columbia and the privatization of that heritage. The abolition of the BC Heritage Trust and the institution of the BC Heritage Legacy Fund, as well as the devolution of BC heritage properties, is indicative of a larger trend towards less or no government involvement and funding. The shift is being made to local community management of heritage sites where the government believes that community groups, local governments or individual businesses can be responsive to local interests. The assumption is that these groups have a better knowledge of community needs and that they can be more creative and innovative. Ultimately they are expected to do this without government funding. Where will these groups get the funding?

These trends are typified by one of BC's most celebrated heritage sites: Barkerville. It, too, has been earmarked for the devolution process. In essence, this process takes all government responsibility for maintenance, restoration, curation, liability, security, and overall management and places it squarely on the shoulders of the private sector. At Barkerville this means that funding would be reduced from \$1.2 million to \$750,000 and no funds would be given for maintenance, where it has been calculated that \$4 to \$5 million is greatly needed. In addition, the \$750,000 would be reduced to zero in five years. Whoever takes over responsibility for this site will have to find those funds elsewhere. But in times where funding is scarce and communities are battling for survival in the face of sweeping provincial budget cuts, will sites such as Barkerville survive? Private sector

proponents were asked to submit proposals for operating the site but none came forward. This is not surprising when the communities of the Interior have been faced with devastating cuts to all sectors. Barkerville brings in much needed revenue and jobs to the Interior, infusing the economy with \$5.4 million in 1994. The loss of Barkerville would be another blow to an area that experienced a downturn in tourism due to last summer's forest fires.

With no one to manage Barkerville, what will happen to the buildings and collections? By spring 2004, Barkerville staff will have been reduced from 17 to seven, an alarming decline for such a large site. Artifacts that were donated to Barkerville were done so in trust to the BC government. Families donated their family photographs and treasures with the implication that our government would preserve them for future generations. Without proper supervision, what will happen to these resources? If the site closes because there is no one to manage it, where will the collections go? To the Royal BC Museum, which is also faced with equally devastating cuts and must also look for private sector funding?

In response to the problem, the Barkerville Coalition was formed to serve as a unified voice for those concerned with Barkerville and to increase awareness for the need to preserve BC's heritage sites. It is a non-partisan, ad-hoc group that is supported by local municipalities, local businesses and Chambers of Commerce, Barkerville merchants, contractors and staff at Barkerville, the Friends of Barkerville, the BC Government and Services

Employees' Union and concerned citizens. More information can be found at their website <http://www.barkervillecoalition.com/>.

What does the situation at Barkerville indicate and why should we be concerned as citizens of British Columbia? In the face of sweeping government cuts to our health care and education why should we care about funding cuts to Barkerville, the Royal BC Museum, or the Archaeology Branch? Because if we don't fight to protect our heritage now, future generations will only know the wonder of BC's past through the internet instead of exploring with their own eyes. Protecting BC's heritage should not be entirely our responsibility as we have already contributed our tax dollars to create sites such as Barkerville. The government has a fiscal and moral responsibility to maintain BC's heritage, from the smallest archaeological site to the larger treasures such as Barkerville. Privatization is not the answer when heritage is concerned. BC's collective past should not be held up for sale to the lowest bidder. They not only dishonour our past, they short-change our future.

If you are concerned about BC's Heritage, please contact the Honourable Murray Coell, Minister of Community, Aboriginal and Women's Services at [murray.coell@gems3.gov.bc.ca](mailto:murray.coell@gems3.gov.bc.ca) or write to him c/o PO Box 9042 STN PROV GOVT, Victoria BC V8W 9E2.

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Julie Cowie completed her BA in Archaeology from the University of Calgary in 1994. Her main area of work has been the Northern Plains, with a specialization in faunal and lithic analysis, as well as a keen interest in Blackfoot mythology. She is currently the President of the Nanaimo Branch of the ASBC.

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