



The Curious Case of John Hellson

Traditional Knowledge in
Archival Records



John Charles Hellson



John Hellson passed away on May 5, 2016 at the age of 84. A Graveside Service will be held at Canon Stockton Cemetery, Siksika Nation, Alberta on Tuesday, May 10, 2016 at 2:00 pm.

To view and share photos, condolences and stories of John please visit www.choicememorial.com.

Arrangements entrusted to the care of Choice Memorial Cremation & Funeral Services (403) 277-7343.

The Story of John Hellson

- Immigrated to Canada in the early 1960's, working as an anthropologist
- Worked on contract with the Government of Alberta from 1964-1970's, acquiring items for the collection of the new Provincial Museum of Alberta (1967)
- Married into the Blackfoot Confederacy of Treaty 7 in Southern Alberta
- Wrote "Ethnobotany of the Blackfoot Indians" (1974)
- Became internationally known as a Blackfoot expert, working as a consultant until his death in 2016

Man, 74, gets 2½ years for stealing rare library books

September 16, 2008
The Associated Press

“A 74-year-old man convicted of stealing thousands of rare books and documents from libraries in Alberta and the U.S. was sentenced Monday in Montana to 2½ years in prison.

He stole thousands of books, maps and other papers from about 100 libraries in Alberta and the United States, then sold the documents online from his Great Falls home.”

Largest artifacts theft in history reported

BERKELEY, Calif.

July 27, 1981

United Press International

“John Hellson, 49, has pleaded guilty to receiving stolen property in connection with the thefts, but he has denied taking the items.

Hellson was arrested in April and charged with possessing the stolen Indian pieces after a Seattle, Wash., museum curator recognized one of the prized artifacts when he was asked by an art dealer to appraise the item.

While free on bail, Hellson was arrested in mid-May and charged in the theft of the Japanese pieces.”

The (Truthful) Story of John Hellson

- While working for the Government of Alberta, he was paid a finders fee for items that were acquired, sometimes by any means necessary
- Items were acquired from across Western Canada and the Northern Plains of the United States
- Reel to reel audio recordings were created as part of the acquisition process that were later logged, transcribed, copied, and digitized
- Documents and recordings were transferred from the Provincial Museum of Alberta to the Provincial Archives of Alberta in 1978
- Copies of the recordings and other information were sold to individuals and institutions from Hellson through until the 1990's

The (Truthful) Story of John Hellson

- The textual and audio records at the Provincial Archives of Alberta contain traditional cultural knowledge and sacred teachings from dozens of different Blackfoot, Plains Cree, Woodland Cree, and Métis communities from across North America
- Copies of these records can be found in collections at:
 - Glenbow Museum in Calgary
 - University of Regina's Canadian Plains Research Centre
 - Canadian Museum of History in Ottawa
- Many of the transcriptions and audio recordings are available for public access online

The (Truthful) Story of John Hellson

- In 1981, Hellson was sentenced to a two-year term in US Federal Prison for theft from University of California's Lowie Museum of more 250 items worth more than \$500,000
- In 1985, a warrant was issued for Hellson's arrest in Montana for theft from Bob Scriver, a friend who was documenting items for donation to the Provincial Museum of Alberta.
- From 2006-2008, Hellson was implicated in a series of rare book and document thefts from institutions across the US and Canada.
- In 2008, charges against Hellson were dropped in case involving the transport and sale of eagle feathers and other bird parts.

The (Truthful) Story of John Hellson

- Additional research records were donated personally by John Hellson to the Provincial Archives of Alberta in 2009.
- As recently as 2011, Hellson and his book have been referenced in master's thesis and PHd dissertations as a Blackfoot knowledge keeper.
- Since 1996, Elders from the Blackfoot Confederacy have been aware of the holdings at the Provincial Archives of Alberta and have been requesting repatriation documents and recordings.
- In 2018, all related audio recordings at the Provincial Archives of Alberta were digitized and copies provided to Blackfoot Elders.

Learnings & Considerations

- Copyright and Ownership
 - Who owns the physical recordings?
 - Who owns the information on the recordings?
 - Who has the right to copy the recordings or provide access to them?
- Recognition and Attribution
 - Who are the recordings attributed to?
 - Who should be recognized as the keeper of this knowledge?

Learnings & Considerations

- Collection and Care
 - Who should collect and preserve this information?
 - Who should be responsible for the care of these recordings?
- Access to Information
 - Who should have access to the information on these recordings?
 - How should the information be accessible?
- Decision Making Authority
 - Who has the right to make these decisions?



QUESTIONS?

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