

# BERING STRAIT NARRATIVES AND COLLABORATIVE PROCESSES OF EXHIBIT DEVELOPMENT IN NOME, ALASKA

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## ABSTRACT

The Carrie M. McLain Memorial Museum in Nome, Alaska, reopened in November 2017 following final installation of the exhibition *Nome: Hub of Cultures and Communities across the Bering Strait*. Over 70 community collaborators participated in interviews, shared stories, and contributed materials to a series of immersive displays that blend technology with hands-on interactives to inspire visitors and connect past and contemporary narratives from the Bering Strait. This article explores challenges and opportunities for engaging local communities and integrating multivocal dialogue into exhibit frameworks.

## INTRODUCTION

Reemergence of cultural autonomy within Indigenous communities and the proliferation of tribal museums and cultural centers have contributed to a gradual deconstruction of museums as dictators of authenticity into venues for self-determination and civic engagement (King 2017; Lonetree 2012; Pullar et al. 2013; Sleeper-Smith 2009). The need for more robust cross-cultural understandings of museum collections has led to interdisciplinary paradigms of collaboration that involve, among other fields, anthropology, oral history, Indigenous aesthetics, and scientific evidence (Ahtone 2009; Crowell and Howell 2013; Cruikshank 1995; Griebel 2013). Changing philosophies toward equal representation and decision-making power in the exhibitionary space have also prompted an increasing number of museums to renegotiate displays of historical and cultural heritage. New exhibitions developed within a post-museum framework strive to decentralize authority through shared ownership in the collaborative process (Chavez Lamar 2008; Lindauer 2007; Phillips 2011), integration of multiple ways of knowing (Ames 1994; McMaster 2007), emphasis on microhistories (Beier-de Haan 2006), and communication of divergent histories through controversial subjects (Bennett 2006; Dubin 1999).

This article explores challenges and opportunities encountered when engaging a local community in exhibition development for the new Carrie M. McLain Memorial Museum in Nome, Alaska. *Nome: Hub of Cultures and Communities across the Bering Strait* opened in 2017 in the main gallery of the Carrie McLain Museum and includes over 500 cultural and historical objects and works of art from the Bering Strait region (Fig. 1). The exhibition revolves around experiential themes that address topics of Arctic concern, including subsistence and the environment, mining, the built landscape, transportation, and community sustainability.

The Carrie McLain Museum received \$1.1 million in funding to develop the new 3200-square-foot exhibition as part of a larger capital campaign by the City of Nome to construct the multiuse Richard Foster Building. The designated exhibition funds supported two phases of design and fabrication, audiovisual programming, shipping, and installation. Content development and writing was led by the Carrie McLain Museum (Amy Phillips-Chan, director), with guidance from the Nome Museum and Library Commission (MLC). Formations, Inc. (Portland) provided design and fabrication services. Atlas Fine Art Service (Seattle) crafted artifact mounts, Farthest North Films



Figure 1. Visitors explore the exhibition *Nome: Hub of Cultures and Communities across the Bering Strait*. Photograph by Michael Burnett, 2017.

(Juneau) offered media production, and *The Nome Nugget* newspaper and University of Alaska Fairbanks (UAF) Oral History Office and Film Archives contributed audio and film resources. Both the Nome Eskimo Community and Kawerak Eskimo Heritage Program (Nome) assisted with the transcription and integration of Inupiaq language and object names into exhibit content. Finally, a diverse group of over 70 local historians, cultural knowledge bearers, artists, and students contributed to exhibition planning and development from 2015 to 2017. *Nome: Hub of Cultures and Communities across the Bering Strait* is scheduled to be on display through 2027.

Development of *Nome* drew on and greatly benefited from previous models of successful museum–community partnerships. Community and tribal museums in Alaska have been at the forefront of multivocal and collaborative exhibitions over the past two decades (Crowell et al. 2001; Fienup-Riordan 1999; Lee 1998). In Kodiak, the Alutiiq Museum hosts an ongoing roster of community-led exhibits such as *Naut'staapet—Our Plants* (2019) focused on

local plant lore that opened in conjunction with an Alutiiq Plants smartphone app.<sup>1</sup> The Sealaska Heritage Institute in Juneau strives to promote Indigenous curation of exhibits, as seen recently in *Yëil Yádi—Raven Child: A Nathan Jackson Retrospective* (2019) curated by master carver Steve Brown.<sup>2</sup> Likewise, a growing number of metropolitan museums are demonstrating commitment to collaboration with Alaska Native communities, as seen in the exhibitions *Gifts from the Ancestors: Ancient Ivories of the Bering Strait* (Chan 2013a; Fitzhugh et al. 2009) that ran at the Princeton University Art Museum and *Objects of Exchange: Social and Material Transformations on the Late Nineteenth-Century Northwest Coast* (Glass 2011) held at the Bard Graduate Center in New York.

Construction of new museums and creative redesign of existing galleries in Alaska over the past 10 years have offered timely opportunities to involve communities in exhibit-making processes. In 2010, the exhibition *Living Our Cultures, Sharing Our Heritage: The First Peoples of Alaska* opened in the new 10,000-square-foot Smithsonian

Arctic Studies Center in the Anchorage Museum (see Crowell this volume). *Living Our Cultures* represents the culmination of an eight-year multi-institutional partnership that involved over 100 cultural advisors who contributed their voices to the gallery space, catalog, and website (Crowell et al. 2010). In 2016, the Alaska State Museum (ASM) reopened with new permanent galleries in the Father Andrew P. Kashevaroff building in Juneau. Exhibit development at ASM involved community consultation that influenced thematic content and the layout of displays, including a Tlingit clan house co-designed by members of the *Áak'w Kwáan* (see Carlee and Ehlers this volume; Miller 2015). In 2017, the Alaska Gallery at the Anchorage Museum reopened with 12,000 square feet of new thematic areas focused on human interaction with the Alaska landscape. Displays of museum objects in the Alaska Gallery are enlivened by immersive soundscapes, videos, and interactives informed by recent work with representative community members (Dunham 2016). In Ketchikan, renovation of the main gallery at the Tongass Historical Museum offered an opportunity to collaborate with the local community through forums, inter-

views, and social media to develop the multivocal exhibit *Ketchikan is...* that opened in 2018 (Ketchikan Museums 2018). These museum–community collaborations offer an example of how seeking balance between curatorial formulations and community aspirations can lead to a new museology focused on (re)presenting cultural heritage through multiple perspectives (e.g., Peers and Brown 2003). The pursuit of collaborative projects by museum colleagues across the state also provided valuable guidance for a new exhibition in Nome.

## NOME /SITYASUAQ

Nome (known today as *Sityasuaq* [Inupiaq]) stretches across the southern edge of the Seward Peninsula and merges into the rough coastal waters of Norton Sound (Fig. 2). Rolling tundra blanketed with lichen and berries melds into the foothills of the Kigluaik Mountains and provides a home for a diversity of mammals and birds including moose, muskox, fox, ptarmigan, and tundra swans. Clear, fast-flowing rivers provide nutrients for northern pike, whitefish, Arctic grayling, and all five species of Pacific



Figure 2. Three main roads lead out of Nome and stretch across more than 250 miles of coastline, tundra, and rocky hills on the Seward Peninsula, Map from Sutton and Steinacher 2012.

salmon returning to spawn. During spring and fall, migratory seals, walrus, and whales can be spotted following the pack ice as it moves steadily through the Bering Strait.<sup>3</sup>

Alaska Native communities have relied on the rich natural resources of the Bering Strait region for over 4000 years (e.g., Anungazuk 2009; Burch 2006; Seeganna 1988). The area is home to 20 villages and three cultural groups, including Inupiat, Central Yup'ik, and St. Lawrence Island Yupik peoples. Bering Strait Native communities practice a seasonal cycle of culturally based activities that are guided by a set of time-honored values and framed by a reverence toward nature.<sup>4</sup> Visible reminders of the area's deep cultural roots can be seen at Cape Nome, where dozens of over-500-year-old house depressions surrounding the old village of Ayasayuk speckle the tundra (Bockstoce 1979:81–85). Recent archaeological findings at the mouth of the Snake River also indicate year-round habitation in the Nome area before frequent interaction with Euro-Americans (Eldridge 2014). Successful fishing, cross-cultural trade fairs, and increasing numbers of Western ships during the late 1800s prompted new generations of Bering Strait residents to establish summer camps and more permanent residences along the northern coastline of Norton Sound (e.g., Ray 1975).

The 1898 discovery of gold on Anvil Creek brought waves of steamships and *umiak* (open skin boats) to the Nome beach, and by 1900 the population had swelled to 20,000 individuals seeking their fortunes on the sandy shore and crowded streets (Cole 1984; McLain 1969; Phillips-Chan 2019). Over the next 100 years, Nome experienced dramatic changes in development patterns following drops in gold prices, the advent of world wars, and a series of catastrophic Bering Sea storms and citywide fires (Gillette 2008). Despite the harsh environment and rural location, the town of Nome has continued to endure with steadfast residents who forge a connection to the land that generations of people have called home.

## A NEW MUSEUM FOR NOME

Smithsonian field collector Edward Nelson traveled along the snow-cruised coastline of Norton Sound in the spring of 1880 and stopped close to Ayasayuk, where he acquired over 500 items of Inupiaq material culture from bird spears and seal net floats to engraved ivory drill bows and decorated boxes for arrowheads (Chan 2013b:79–83; Nelson 1899).<sup>5</sup> The heritage objects assembled by Nelson

represented the first sizable collection from Cape Nome, and it would be 20 years before another collecting craze swept through the area.

The Nome gold rush enticed thousands of prospectors from the Lower 48 to the crowded tent city sprawled along the beach. Families from King Island, Little Diomed, Wales, Savoonga, and Gambell also traveled to Nome, where they set up camps on the Snake River Sandspit. Native families launched diverse economic ventures that included hauling freight for steamships, selling wild game and furs, and keeping up a steady production of ivory carvings and sealskin mukluks for sale (Borden 1928:132; Renner 1979:14, 75).<sup>6</sup> Old household articles such as skin scrapers, bola weights, wood ladles, and stone blades also made their way into a burgeoning consumer market eager for Indigenous representations of Arctic life (Ray 1980:7).

Summer tourists to Nome, as well as local business owners, miners, and homemakers, sought out ivory artwork, fur clothing, and other cultural items for sale from Bering Strait families and mercantile stores, such as the Golden Gate Store and A. Polet Store (Phillips-Chan 2019:48, 70). Collectors displayed new curios and older cultural items inside both Victorian homes and rough-hewn cabins as part of fashionable arrangements along walls and atop side tables (Krug and Krug 1998:156–160; Kunkel 1997:92, 146). Over the ensuing years, large and small collections of Bering Strait material would be assembled; some objects remained in Nome with established families while other collections traveled aboard steamships, and later airplanes, on return journeys to reconnect with relatives or seek out fortunes in less-demanding environments.

During the late 1950s, Nome historian Carrie M. McLain traveled across the country to visit former residents and locate historical photographs and objects to start a museum in Nome.<sup>7</sup> Carrie McLain's efforts to preserve local history were soon followed by State of Alaska initiatives during the 1960s to celebrate the centennial purchase of Alaska through capital projects dedicated to showcasing the state's history. In 1967, the City of Nome applied for and received state funding to build a small, 1000-square-foot museum on Front Street.<sup>8</sup> One of the founding donations included a collection of photographs and ivory artwork from Carrie McLain. Upon her passing in 1973, the Nome Common Council renamed the museum the Carrie M. McLain Memorial Museum in recognition of her efforts to preserve and share Nome's history.

Over the past 50 years, the Carrie McLain Museum has benefited from generous donations of artifacts, photographs, and archival materials from individuals looking to return family treasures and memories to Nome. The museum collection now contains over 15,000 historical and cultural objects, 12,000 photographic prints and negatives, and several hundred boxes of historical documents. The museum's greatest collection strength includes ivory carvings and heritage objects from the Bering Strait acquired during the height of the gold rush. The collection also features a significant number of items related to gold mining, sled dogs, and reindeer herding, as well as business and household articles from early Nome and archaeological material from the surrounding region. A small but growing collection of contemporary Alaska artwork, including pieces by Sonya Kelliher-Combs and Ron Senungetuk, strives to bridge the temporal gap with the historical material and give voice to individual narratives and ideologies (see Hooper-Greenhill 1992; Macdonald 2006).<sup>9</sup>

The museum collection in Nome quickly outgrew the 1967 building, and by the 1990s objects and records were spilling into facilities and storage spaces across town with limited organization and environmental controls.<sup>10</sup> The building's prime location on Front Street also placed the museum in a flood zone, which forced staff to evacuate the collection several times. Lack of space and natural threats to the collection provided the impetus for City of Nome staff and community members to advocate for a new museum beginning in 2003. City efforts to procure funding for a new museum coincided with endeavors by Kawerak, Inc., a regional nonprofit corporation organized under the Bering Straits Native Association, to develop and fund construction of a cultural center in Nome. Early discussions for the city and Kawerak to join forces and build a shared facility fell flat, as questions arose over construction costs, space allotments, collections stewardship, and decision-making authority (*Nugget* staff 2004:12, 14).

In 2010 and 2011, the City of Nome received capital funding from the State of Alaska to construct a new building to house the Carrie M. McLain Memorial Museum. A flurry of tense deliberations ensued over the next three years that focused on the location of the new building and whether the facility should include Kawerak's Katirvik Cultural Center as well as the City of Nome's Kegoayah Kozga Public Library (Medearis 2014:1, 4).<sup>11</sup> Additional financial support from private, corporate, and founda-

tion partners ultimately ensured the inclusion of both the cultural center and the library in the new Richard Foster Building (RFB), named after long-serving Alaska Representative Richard Foster (1946–2009).<sup>12</sup> General contractor ASRC SKW Eskimos broke ground for the RFB in 2014, and in 2016 the 18,000-square-foot facility was completed at a total cost of \$19 million. The grand opening celebration featured speeches, dances, and a feast that focused on coming together as a community (Phillips-Chan 2016:19–20).

## ENVISIONING A COMMUNITY EXHIBITION

Museums in rural Alaska are uniquely positioned to form long-term relationships with local communities that can advance collaborative projects based on the unique cultural values of the region (Gaither 1992:5; Griebel 2013:10). A new exhibition for Nome offered an opportunity for fresh local representations and narratives on Bering Strait culture and place. The exhibition also held promise for an inviting setting where parents and Elders could teach children about their cultural history, an engaging area where objects could evoke oral histories and traditional knowledge, and a creative space where artists could draw inspiration from historical material (Brumfiel 2003:214; Henrickson 2001:93).

A need to connect the historical collection with our contemporary community led to adaptation early on of an upstreaming method used by ethnohistorians to look at a period of study from the present and then backward to the past (Burch 2010:131; Jensen 2012:145). Together, museum staff and the Nome MLC envisioned thematic areas around collection strengths that could address topics of current concern and historical relevance to the Bering Strait. The five selected themes included *The Natural Landscape*, *The Tent City*, *Building a Town*, *Staying Connected*, and *Nome Today and Tomorrow*.<sup>13</sup> Displays within themes were visualized to feature modern and archival photographs as well as contemporary artwork and historical objects to help illustrate patterns and connections between historical eras (Fig. 3).

The new exhibition carried significant potential to communicate commonalities within the blended histories and cultures of Nome. For instance, a cursory reading of the collection as Native and non-Native overlooks specific nuances and connections that the objects hold. A squirrel-skin parka worn by musher Gunnar Kaasen



Figure 3. A display on Bering Strait Native celebrations emphasizes connections between historical eras with dance beads from the 2000s, a raven mask from the 1960s, and a photograph of children dancing from the early 1900s.

in the collection can speak to the knowledge and skill of an Inupiaq seamstress, but it also provides understanding into the history of sled dog racing, clothing assimilation, and the interrelationship of our community members. Rather than delineate our differences, the exhibition was envisioned to celebrate our connections and strengthen us as we move into the future. Immersive areas, such as one on food and fishing, also offer an example of these shared experiences with images and stories that illustrate the compositional richness of our families (Fig. 4). Conceptualization of a community-focused exhibition that could play a formative role in cross-cultural engagement and historical understanding offered critical guidance as exhibition planning and design began in 2015.

### EXHIBITION STARTUP CHALLENGES

As plans took off for *Nome*, a number of challenges rose to the forefront that may resonate with other museums juggling projects while striving to incorporate best practices of collaborative exhibit development. First, a delayed start to building construction meant we were designing

an exhibition for a yet-to-be-built space. This necessitated a balancing act in staff time and financial resources between building decisions such as flooring, lighting, and fixtures and exhibit decisions such as object layouts, graphics, and interactives.

A second challenge was the lack of existing data on the objects and archival materials, as well as the dispersed nature of the collection. Before we could conceptualize a major exhibition, we needed to know what there was to work with in the collection. A comprehensive inventory was undertaken of all the historical and cultural material along with detailed examination of the photograph and archival collections. Due to the impending move, objects were inventoried, entered into the database, and immediately packed for relocation to the new museum. Although this assembly-line method proved effective in processing the collection, it left little time for exhibit work involving hands-on discussions of objects with community members.

Finally, each phase of the two-part exhibition had a turnaround time of less than a year, which had to encompass content development, writing, and design as well



Figure 4. Thematic areas on food and fishing communicate the shared importance of these activities to the Nome community, 2017.

as fabrication, shipping, and installation. This fast-paced production stretched the resources of our small museum staff and limited opportunities for lengthy community involvement. Outside of exhibit development, community members were encouraged to stay connected with the museum through site tours, open houses, and volunteer opportunities, from helping to break down old exhibits to cataloging and labeling objects (Fig. 5).

### COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN THE EXHIBIT PROCESS

During initial exhibit development, it became clear that community collaboration needed to encompass various modes of engagement. Reliance on discussion of objects for exhibit content, involving hands-on examination of materials and construction, was not going to be possible

with a building under construction and objects being packed for the move across town. The museum needed to create additional avenues for community involvement. As emphasized by Byrony Onciul (2013:81), a community is not a homogenous entity but “multifaceted, ever-shifting, loosely connected groups of people.” This lens is helpful when seeking out museum–community partnerships, as discovered in Nome where some community members wanted to look at and discuss objects, while others wanted to share oral histories, contribute objects and photographs, or lend their unique skills. Flexibility in the collaboration process allowed the museum to partner with more individuals, support participant strengths, and foster local ownership in the exhibition process and product.

As a starting point, the museum drew on existing relationships with local groups for discussions about the new exhibition. Members of the Nome MLC met with



*Figure 5. King Island Elder Grace Pullock (left) discusses a skin scraper with Hannah Atkinson (center) and Daphne Stein (right) during a museum cataloging workshop held in partnership with King Island community members and the Nome Archaeology Camp in 2015.*

museum staff and the design team to recommend themes and share oral histories for exhibit content (Fig. 6). MLC members also participated in filmed interviews and donated materials, including a rocker box, for displays. A group of Elders from the King Island Native Community also met with museum staff to envision a new skin boat display. Elders participated in the review of shop drawings, selection of objects, and discussion of appropriate content to share with visitors (Fig. 7).

Group discussions helped to foster shared understandings of exhibit content, but internal hierarchies sometimes hindered communication from all participants. To increase the diversity of voices, the museum extended an open invitation for local “community historians” to share photographs and stories within the new exhibition. Minimal response to the community-wide invitation led to the museum seeking out specific individuals who possessed knowledge on historical and cultural topics.<sup>14</sup> Personal invitations to participate in the exhibition were met with more success, and interviews were held with a diverse cross-section of the community, including subsistence hunters, fishermen, gold miners, birders, mushers, artists, traditional dancers, and local business owners. Interviews were recorded and filmed on site where possible, such as at fish camp, inside gold dredges, and during a dance festival (Fig. 8). Transcriptions of audio and

film footage were integrated into the exhibit and added to the museum archives for future community research and programming.

Several Nome community members sought to be involved with the exhibition by contributing their unique skills and resources. Museum and Library Commissioner Charlie Lean helped to prepare a 17-foot kayak frame for display and used the restoration process as a teaching experience for museum staff (Fig. 9).<sup>15</sup> Nome historians Carol Gales and Jim Dory donated a double-pane window from the Discovery Saloon, and miner Ron Engstrom donated a 100-year-old pump organ from St. Joseph Catholic Church to be used in a display on historic preservation (Fig. 10). Local photographers, including Esther Pederson and Wilfred Anowlic, donated images from around the region to help illustrate exhibit themes (Fig. 11).<sup>16</sup>

The museum also sought to engage local youth in the exhibition process and explored several options for involvement, including collections research, creative writing, and making artwork. Based on expressed interest, the creation of artwork was pursued through a two-day watercolor workshop in August 2017. Fifteen youth between the ages of 8 and 16 participated in the workshop led by local art instructor Angela Hansen (Fig. 12). Students painted the people, places, and activities that made Nome special to them and shared their thoughts in short interviews.



*Figure 6. Nome Museum and Library Commissioners meet with museum staff and the exhibit team at Formations, Inc. to share ideas for the new exhibition during the collections move, 2015.*



*Figure 7. King Island Elders Ray Paniataaq, Wilfred Anowlic, John Pullock, and Joe Kunnuk Sr. discuss skin boat construction during planning for phase two of Nome, 2016.*



*Figure 8. Nome resident Nancy Mendenhall and granddaughter Ayla Kavairlook check on salmon in their smokehouse during a filmed interview for Nome, 2016.*



*Figure 9. Museum and Library Commissioner Charlie Lean and museum aide Sam Cross repair a Norton Sound kayak frame in preparation for the new exhibition, 2016.*



*Figure 10. Discovery Saloon homeowners Carol Gales and Jim Dory pose with a window donated to the museum and featured in Nome in a display on historic preservation, 2016.*



Figure 11. An immersive kitchen area in Nome includes images of subsistence foods donated by local photographers Esther Pederson and Wilfred Anowlic.

Digital images of the artwork, interview narratives, and photographs of the artists formed part of a new display focused on Nome's future.

## FINDING BALANCE IN THE EXHIBITION FRAMEWORK

Local knowledge and oral histories shared during engagement with community members helped shape content for *Nome*. The exhibit attempts to find balance between curatorial writing and local voices through a combination of interpretive text and personal stories communicated through authored quotes on photomurals, display case windows, and reader rails (information stands with graphic panels). Audiovisual components also offer visitors an opportunity to hear community stories, on topics from fishing and gold dredges to traditional dancing

and dogsled racing, via handsets, video monitors, and touch screens placed throughout the gallery (Fig. 13). Community member expectations and aspirations also impacted the physical structure of the exhibition, including the presentation, engagement, and delivery of exhibit content.

## DISPLAY CASES VS. IMMERSIVE ENVIRONMENTS

The Carrie McLain Museum is the only museum in the Bering Strait region, and for many of our community members it is their first museum experience. At the forefront of exhibit design was the inclusion of elements that could help visitors feel at ease, such as creating a familiar-looking environment with contemporary photographs from the region, local sounds, and natural colors. Inclusion of alternate presentation methods such as im-



*Figure 12. Art instructor Angela Hansen demonstrates a painting technique to Son Erikson during a watercolor workshop for phase two of Nome, 2017.*

mersive environments also sought to diminish physical and mental barriers that can surround objects housed in museums (e.g., Ames 2003).

Each of the five thematic areas delivers content via display cases, open decks, and immersive settings. Display cases reference wood crates that were packed aboard steamships that traveled to Nome (Fig. 14). Upper sections of the “stacked crates” provide space for signage, photographs, and authored quotes. Lower sections include pull-out drawers for open storage. Standard case interiors feature LED lighting with deep decks and slat wall panels that accommodate graphic panels, gravity shelves, and artifact mounts.<sup>17</sup> Enclosed display cases offer the museum controlled lighting, dust mitigation, and secure access to objects. The cases also assist in highlighting small and fragile items.

Flat decks with clear acrylic shields provide an alternative to enclosed case design. The decks offer clear views of objects while still keeping collection materials outside of the touch zone. Open decks also offer an effective and economical method to display large objects from the collection, such as a dogsled from the first Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race in 1973 (Fig. 15).

Immersive environments feature a range of touch props, interactives, audiovisual programs, and object displays. For example, visitors to the *Tent City* area can enter a stylized façade of a canvas tent to imagine life in early Nome and learn more about the McDaniel mining family (see Fig. 1). Inside the tent, visitors encounter a barrel with a tactile gold pan, a steamer trunk, and distressed gold pan, wood shelves with layered object displays behind a clear shield. Stacked “crates” on the right feature a showcase



*Figure 13. An immersive environment on gold dredges weaves together community narratives through local stories and knowledge shared in a documentary film, quotes, and photographs, 2018.*

interior for small items, and three lift doors on the front reveal answers to questions about the tent city. An interactive rocker box next to the tent invites visitors to experience a historic technique for mining placer gold. Since the exhibition opened, the diversity of presentation methods have been an effective technique for encouraging visitor engagement and potentially assisted in prompting a visual and mental switch that reignites interest and reduces visitor fatigue (Hill 2006).

#### DO NOT TOUCH VS. PLEASE TOUCH

Integration of open decks and immersive areas necessitated a strategic approach to the protection of museum objects. Rather than posting “Do Not Touch” signage, the exhibition attempts to make creative use of physical and visual barriers. Acrylic shields, stepped platforms, and

reader rails all help to position objects outside of the touch zone while affording up-close viewing opportunities.

Conversations with community members revealed strong interest in things to *do* in the new exhibition. The request for interactives influenced the design of diverse sensory experiences, among them pull-out drawers, animal fur squares, audio discoveries, lift-the-flap panels, touch props, scent elements, flip cards, and rotating wheels displaying exhibit content. Interactive experiences are not confined to a children’s area but appear throughout the gallery with labels such as “Pull” and “Push” to invite exploration by visitors of all ages.

The area on historic preservation offers an example of “Please Touch” with a stepped deck fronted by a reader rail that features two slide interactives and a series of tactile architectural elements (Fig. 16). Visitors can push a button on the right rail to hear organ music, while a nearby



*Figure 14. Exhibit cases reference old wood shipping crates and feature various configurations of open-display drawers, slat wall panels, and open decks as seen here in the phase one exhibit installation, 2016.*

reading bench invites visitors to peruse books on the built history of Nome. Active engagement with these rather simple interactives suggest that they are some of the most popular exhibit elements and help to foster interest in the associated content.

#### ANALOG VS. DIGITAL DELIVERY

Exhibit planning and design for *Nome* provided a timely opportunity to envision content delivery through the use of analog and digital techniques. Physical or analog methods to deliver exhibition information include wall labels, graphic panels, and reader rails, while digital platforms



Figure 15. A 10-foot-long deck with a clear acrylic shield displays a dogsled from the collection loaded with mandatory trail items for the Iditarod; visitors use a menu panel to view programs on a flat screen behind the sled, 2018.

encompass audiovisual programming, touch screens, and websites. Visitors to the Carrie McLain Museum span a range of ages and interests, and it was hoped that use of various methods to present content would appeal to a diversity of visitors from Elders to youth (Serrell 2015).

Analog techniques in *Nome* include graphic panels, reader rails, murals, discovery wheels, lift-the-flap panels, flipbooks, and bins of cards. Digital techniques include video monitors, touch screens, and iPads. Combined methods of content delivery appear in each thematic area, as seen in *Building a Town*, which includes an over-size book with photographs of Nome houses as well as a framed touch screen with categorized images from reindeer herding to mining. In *Staying Connected*, visitors can peruse display cases with text panels and museum objects, a bin of cards with images of historic transportation, and enter a phone booth to listen to oral histories. The area

also features a stylized section of a 1940s metal Quonset hut with content presented on graphic panels, a disc that can be turned to reveal aviation milestones, and an iPad featuring historic aviation films (Fig. 17). Delivering exhibition content through physical components and relatively simple digital technologies has been integral to reaching various interest groups of the community.

## REENERGIIZING PARTNERSHIPS

### SNAKE RIVER SANDSPIT SITE (NOM-00146)

In 2005, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Alaska District discovered a cultural site at the mouth of the Snake River during construction of navigational improvements to the Nome Harbor. Excavation of the Snake River Sandspit site (NOM-00146) by the Corps and community volunteers



Figure 16. An exhibit area on historic preservation encourages sensory exploration with tactile architectural elements, interactive graphic sliders, and an audio discovery. Photograph by Michael Burnett, 2017.

revealed two partial subterranean houses and a midden containing cultural artifacts and faunal specimens dating to the late Western Thule culture over 300 years ago (Eldridge 2014). The site holds significance for Bering Strait communities because material spans an entire year of subsistence activities, which indicates year-round habitation by Native peoples before the gold rush. Discovery of the ancient site prompted collaboration between local organizations but also resulted in conflict between the City of Nome and Nome Eskimo Community over the ownership and storage of uncovered artifacts (McNicholas 2007:1, 5).<sup>18</sup> A memorandum of agreement (MOA) executed in 2011 between the Army Corps of Engineers, Alaska State Historic Preservation Officer, the city, and the Nome Eskimo Community assisted in easing tension between local stakeholders and outlined stipulations for the archaeological collection, including cataloging by the Corps and exhibition by the Carrie McLain Museum, in consultation with the Nome Eskimo Community.

Exhibit development for *Nome* offered an opportunity to reconnect with the Corps and fulfill the final stipulation of the MOA: an updated museum exhibit and new display case provided by the Corps for the NOM-00146



Figure 17. Content is offered in physical and digital formats as seen here in the Wings and War display with information inside the Quonset hut and on the reader rail, along with an interactive disc that is turned to reveal aviation milestones and an iPad with historic films. Photograph by Michael Burnett, 2017.

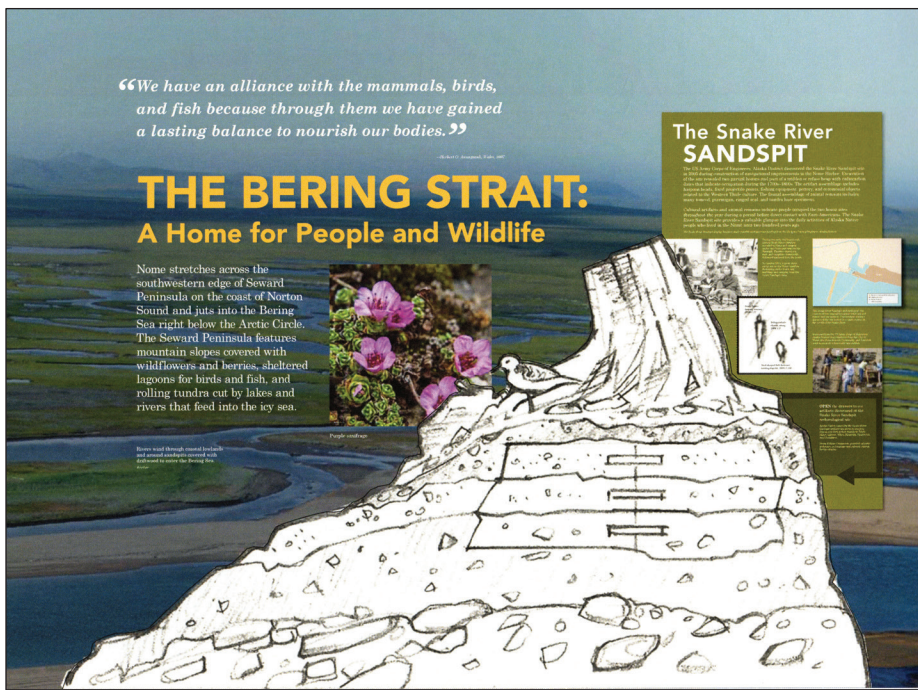


Figure 18a. The Snake River Sandspit display includes a ground roll with pull-out drawers that resemble archaeological sifting screens. Design by Formations, Inc.

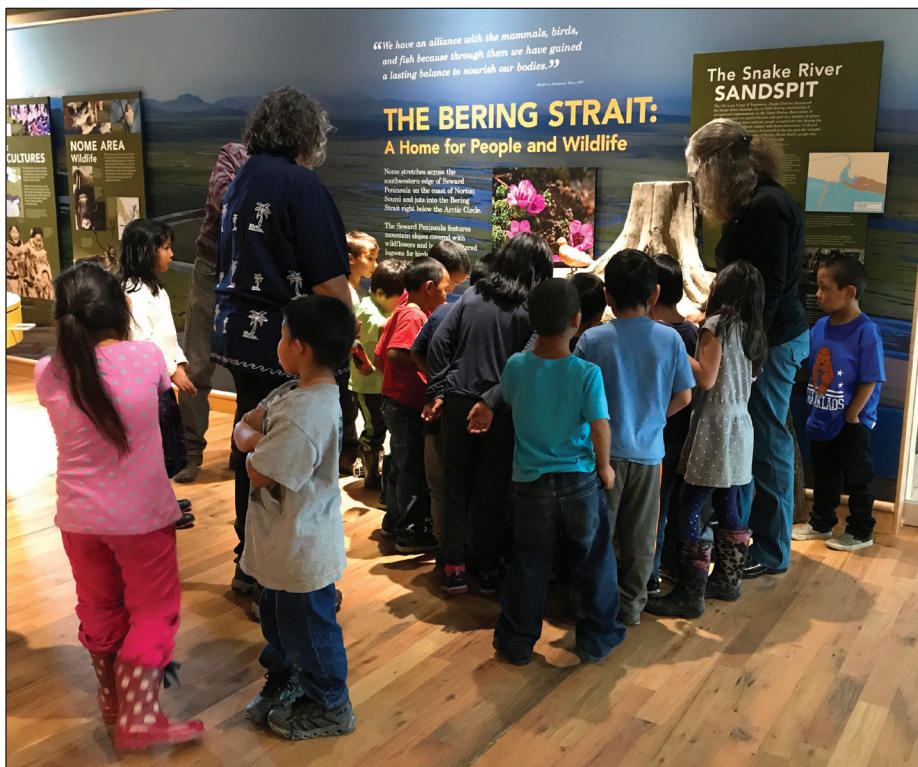


Figure 18b. Elementary students from Teller gather around the Snake River Sandspit display to get a close-up look at cultural material from their region, 2017.

artifacts. Plans for the new exhibit also reignited a partnership with the Nome Eskimo Community, which came onboard to provide valuable assistance on cultural content and object names given in Qawiarq Inupiaq. The Snake River Sandspit display is designed as a stylized section of ground covered with sand, sea glass, and other findings from the Nome beach and three discovery drawers (Fig. 18a). A sidebar panel provides an overview of the excavation and features a small showcase with objects from the collection. Drawers are designed to resemble sifting screens with gravel backgrounds and graphic inserts. The drawers contain material related to fishing and birding, marine mammal hunting, and household equipment. The scene is presented against a mural that introduces visitors to the Bering Strait and situates the archaeological site within a broader discussion of the natural and cultural history of the region. An audio program projects ambient sounds of migratory birds along the wall to help animate the material and communicate a message of a living culture. The Sandspit display is one of the most popular spaces in the gallery and serves as a visible reminder of the ongoing significance of early Alaska Native lifeways to our region (Fig. 18b).

During development of *Nome*, the King Island Native Community emphasized that an *umiaq* (skin boat) should be included in the new exhibition. King Island families and those from surrounding Bering Strait villages traveled to Nome from the 1900s to the 1960s in long *umiat* that were covered in walrus or bearded seal hides and packed with hunting and fishing gear, clothing, and household articles (e.g., see Bogojavlensky 1969). Today, *umiat* are strong signifiers of cultural strength, Indigenous rights, and traditional ecological knowledge (Fair 2005; Pulu et al. 1980). The museum does not hold a full-size skin boat in its collection, and the last King Island *umiaq* was made over 40 years ago.<sup>19</sup>

Initial discussion for an *umiaq* display focused on potential relocation of an older skin boat frame from Anvil Square Park. The MLC weighed in on this possibility and determined the skin boat frame should not be moved as it was an essential landmark that greeted visitors upon their arrival to Nome. Next, King Island Elder Ray Paniataaq and I climbed on top of a local Conex (large metal shipping container) to examine and photograph an old *umiaq* frame. The King Island Elders Council reviewed the photographs and concluded that necessary repairs to the frame would leave little remaining of the original structure. Finally, we explored commissioning a new *umiaq* by a skin boat maker from the region, but a new boat could not be completed within the short timeframe.<sup>20</sup>

The museum finally pitched the skin boat concept to our design and fabrication team at Formations, Inc., which agreed to take on the challenge. A stream of communication ensued, illustrated with photographs, diagrams, and sewing techniques used for skin boats. King Island community members met at the museum to review shop drawings, look over accompanying objects and photographs, and share construction details for skin boats. Local direction also guided the inclusion of tactile features and the integration of a family scene of cutout images (Fig. 19a).<sup>21</sup>

Upfront distinction between a real *umiaq* and a skin boat prop was important for both flexibility of design and use of alternative materials. The final 23-foot skin boat features a rugged steel-and-wood frame (Fig. 19b) that fits flush against the gallery wall with an open interior to display objects. The cover is made from translucent reindeer skin, which offered a viable substitute for skin from marine mammals that are protected under the Marine Mammal Protection Act (1972). Inset graphic panels and

objects are organized into groupings of summer supplies, sewing skins, carving ivory, and artwork for sale. Smaller objects are presented inside display cases while other items are left in the open and secured to bases of packing crates. A curved interpretive rail system creates a barrier to the interior and provides additional stories and images, tactile features, and an iPad with historic film footage of *umiat* in Nome. The skin boat rests on a base of stylized beach sand that merges with a photomural on the wall to provide historical context and blend the display into the gallery space.

The circuitous journey of the skin boat display offers an example of the flexibility often required from communities and museums that undertake big ideas for new exhibitions. Although we originally wanted to offer an accurately constructed *umiaq* to visitors, the skin boat prop is an effective alternative. Within the display, the skin boat structure ultimately fades away and creates a backdrop for the stories that animate *umiat* and make the boats an integral component of Bering Strait lifeways.

#### WORLD WAR II—ERA PHONE BOOTH

Military personnel buildup during the 1940s at Marks Air Force Base in Nome ushered in a new era of telecommunications in the Bering Strait (Lewis 1945). Nome received its first public phone booth shortly after World War II. Patrons could visit the booth inside the Old Federal Building, where the caller would give the operator the number they wished to dial. After about 15 minutes, the call would connect and the operator would yell at the patron to pick up the phone and begin talking. After many years of active service, the phone booth, like other utilitarian objects, moved from the realm of defunct technology into historical artifact. The phone booth sat quietly in off-site storage for over two decades but was mentioned frequently by community members during exhibit planning for *Nome*.

The phone booth needed to be reenergized for the new exhibition, and the museum looked to produce audio recordings with local community members that could be integrated into the display. However, development of a new digital audio program proved too ambitious within our time frame. Searching for an alternative, the museum reached out to the UAF Oral History Program, which partnered with us to use and edit recordings from the 1996 Nome Communities of Memory Project.<sup>22</sup> In developing the phone booth interactive, the museum reached out to participants from the 1996 project to discuss the

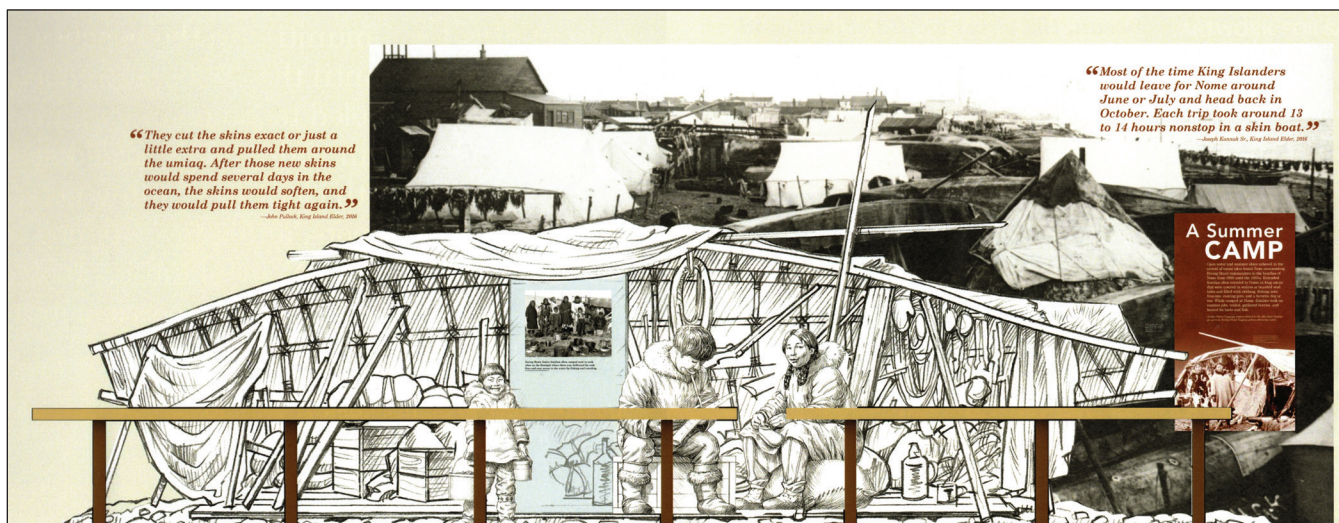


Figure 19a. The summer camp area features a 23-foot-long skin boat model loaded with props, objects from the collection, graphics, and life-size cutout images. Design by Formations, Inc.



Figure 19b. An interpretive rail along the front of the skin boat creates a barrier to display artifacts and provides additional stories, images, and tactile opportunities for visitors, 2017.

new exhibition. Former storytellers and their families provided photographs and biographical information to create an illustrated phone book for the display. Visitors can now step into the booth, pick up a rotary dial phone, peruse the phone book, and dial their selection to hear historic audio recordings from community members.

The phone booth interactive requires only modest technological features, but it is one of the most-frequented areas by children and adults (Fig. 20). Originally designed to connect Nome to the outside world, the phone booth now offers a micro setting of our town with a link to stories from the past. This short social biography of the phone booth is shared because often in the museum field we are pushed to continually develop new content and narratives for exhibitions. However, museums are often faced with real-time challenges such as galleries under construction, disorganized collections, or shortages of staff and resources that leave us discouraged at the extent we were able to collaborate with our stakeholders. In our pursuit of new knowledge production, we may overlook existing resources that can offer rich historical insight and be used as a valuable framework for contemporary perspectives.

## CONTINUING THE DISCOURSE

*Nome* is not intended to be a closed narrative but rather a living space with ongoing dialogue. Interactive features, such as a hands-on topographic map paired with iPads playing regional films, help to elicit continued stories about families, subsistence activities, and past ways of life



Figure 20. Students from Teller form a line outside the telephone booth for a chance to listen to recordings from local historians and knowledge bearers, 2017.

(Fig. 21). In 2018 the museum launched a gallery talk series that reinvents community collaborators back into the exhibit space for public discussion on contemporary topics utilizing collection objects and photographs as points of discourse. Objects are also made available for community research, discussion, and educational programming, including the annual Nome Archaeology Camp (Fig. 22).<sup>23</sup>

Spring 2020 will see the integration of a maker space into the exhibition to foster multigenerational engagement and conversation. The interactive area will be positioned around the *Building a Town* theme and feature KEVA planks, unique building blocks that encourage creative play and problem-solving for children and adults. KEVA models of Nome structures including a dogsled, steamship, and historic building will be on display as well as challenge cards to inspire and foster STEM development.

Conversations are continuing outside the museum in a multiauthored exhibit catalog that will expand on material presented in *Nome*. The catalog will feature over 50

historical and cultural objects from the Carrie McLain Museum along with archival materials and contemporary photographs from the region. Object stories will be framed by a series of essays from community members ranging from subsistence practices and ivory carving to the establishment of roads and airline services in Nome. The catalog seeks to offer insight into the unique social biographies of the collection and provide a space for community members to share their own perspectives on meaningful aspects of Nome history and culture.

## DISCUSSION

*Nome: Hub of Cultures and Communities across the Bering Strait* seeks to communicate the vibrant history and culture of Nome and the Bering Strait region through a rich assemblage of objects, images, and local stories. Development of the exhibition from 2015 to 2017 involved a multimodal approach to collaboration that involved the integration of local knowledge, resources, and skills from community members. Not all attempts to engage the local community in the exhibit process met with success, such as the unproductive community historian project. Likewise, the exhibition could have benefited from the perspectives and stories of more individuals from surrounding Bering Strait communities. Additional object discussions with local knowledge bearers would have further guided and enriched exhibit content. As a regional museum, we have



Figure 21. A topographic map of the region elicits stories of camping, hunting, and fishing from old and young visitors alike, 2018.



*Figure 22. Participants in the 2016 Nome Archaeology Camp work on a 3-D modeling exercise of an ivory harpoon head from the Snake River Sandspit site.*

the invaluable opportunity and responsibility to continue partnerships with our community members.

As director of the Carrie McLain Museum and one who was enmeshed in development of *Nome*, a critical review of the exhibition's success would be better accomplished through visitor surveys, tracking metrics, and other evaluative measures. However, I hope the preceding discussion offers insight, and perhaps encouragement, for other museums attempting to collaborate with communities and integrate local stories into the exhibit space. Real-time challenges such as buildings under construction and dispersed collections can prompt alternative and creative modes of engagement with your local community. Museums that hold in-depth knowledge of their local stakeholders have the unique capacity to reach out to specific groups or individuals and adapt exhibit involvement based on unique interests and skill sets. For our museum, local participation helped to shape the exhibition framework but also served, perhaps more importantly, to foster longitudinal relationships between the Nome community and the Carrie M. McLain Memorial Museum.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The new Carrie M. McLain Memorial Museum and exhibition would not have been possible without the support of the Nome community, including an invaluable cohort of over 70 collaborators who shared oral histories and local knowledge, contributed materials, and championed the new museum and exhibition from start to finish. A complete list of collaborators appears in the exhibition and will be featured in the forthcoming exhibit catalog. Generous financial support from the State of Alaska, Norton Sound Economic Development Corporation, the Rasmuson Foundation, and the Harry and Jeanette Weinberg Foundation allowed for construction of a state-of-the-art, multiuse facility suited to the shifting permafrost and harsh climate of the Bering Strait. Lead team members in design, production, and installation of the exhibition included Fred Paris, David Hancock, Stephen State, Chris Williams, and John Higgins (Formations, Inc.), Scott Jones (Atlas Fine Art Service), and Sarah Betcher (Farthest North Films). Generous use and coor-

dination of video content was provided by Diana Haecker (*Nome Nugget*) and Robyn Russell (UAF Oral History Program). Additional organizational support came from Kelly Eldridge (U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Alaska District), Yaayuk Bernadette Alvanna-Stimpfle (Kawerak Eskimo Heritage Program), and Mike Sloan and Jacob Martin (Nome Eskimo Community). Joe Horton, David Barron, Troy Miller, and JJ Alvanna (City of Nome Public Works Department) contributed their construction and electrical skills to help us reach our opening dates. Thank you to Amy Steffian, Ken Pratt, and the two peer reviewers for their comments and suggestions that greatly improved this paper. *Quyana*. Thank you!

## ENDNOTES

1. *Naut'staapet—Our Plants* opened at the Alutiiq Museum on May 3, 2019. The exhibition is based on the research of anthropologist Priscilla Russell, who worked with culture bearers in Kodiak communities to collect and prepare plants in 1990. The free Alutiiq Plants app for Android and iOS, designed by Jonelle Adkisson, features a selection of Kodiak plants and traditional uses along with audio files of Alutiiq plant terms. <https://alutiiqmuseum.org/visit/on-exhibit>
2. *Yéil Yádi—Raven Child: A Nathan Jackson Retrospective* ran at the Walter Soboleff Building in Juneau from April 5 to October 15, 2019, and featured approximately 60 pieces of Jackson's artwork from block prints to bentwood boxes. Jackson and Steve Brown are continuing their collaboration with co-development of a carved screen and house posts for the Alaska State Museum (Hohenstatt 2019).
3. For a detailed overview of the flora and fauna of the Nome area, including handy subsistence and wildlife calendars, see Sutton and Steinacher (2012).
4. For a detailed list of Inupiaq values and principles as outlined by the Sitnasuak Native Corporation, visit <https://snc.org/social-mission/mission-values/>.
5. In 1880, Nelson acquired around 543 cultural objects that he designated as "Cape Nome" that originated from Wales, King Island, Sledge Island, and other Inupiaq community members who were camped along the northern coast of Norton Sound due to food shortages in their home villages. (Smithsonian Institution Archives, Record Unit 7364, Edward William Nelson and Edward Alphonso Goldman Collection, circa 1873–1946 and undated, Box 11, Field Journals, March 13–16, 1880.)
6. The discovery of gold in 1898 permanently shifted the Bering Strait Native curio trade from St. Michael and Port Clarence to Nome. See Hollowell (2004) for further discussion on the growth of Bering Strait curio and archaeological markets.
7. Caroline "Carrie" Mary Stipek (1895–1973) arrived in Nome with her family on the fringe of the gold rush in 1905. After high school she taught in Teller, where she met and married Arthur T. McLain. Upon returning to Nome, Carrie raised four children, served as the Nome city clerk from 1943 to 1957, and wrote about life on the Seward Peninsula. One of her first efforts to share Nome history included a display of photographs inside the old Pioneer Igloo #1 located at the corner of First Avenue and Bering Street in 1959.
8. Centennial museums represented a statewide effort to gather and preserve cultural and historical material from diverse regions of Alaska. Museum displays of artifacts, including natural history specimens and archaeological objects, also served to publicize the importance of Alaska's rich natural resources and deep history to the rest of the United States. Other museums constructed in 1967 include the Alaska State Museum (Juneau), Pioneer Museum (Fairbanks), Centennial Building (Ketchikan), and Cordova Historical Museum.
9. Integration of contemporary artwork into displays of cultural history appears to be a growing trend among museums with historical collections from Alaska and the Circumpolar North. For a colorful example, check out the exhibition *Kachemak Bay: Exploration of People and Place* at the Pratt Museum in Homer (<http://www.prattmuseum.org/kachemak-bay-an-exploration-of-people-place/>) or visit the Hall of Cultures at the Alaska Native Heritage Center in Anchorage (<https://www.alaskanative.net/>).
10. The museum on Front Street underwent a major renovation in 1987 to reduce the cluttered appearance of collections and present new displays designed by Dorothy Jean Ray and local assistants Caroline Reader and Bonnie Hahn (see Hill 1987).
11. The RFB is on the north side of town in a relatively out-of-the-way area that inadvertently subverts what Tony Bennett (1995:87) describes as past power practices of the nation state to "show and tell" by placing

museums in the center of cities. The RFB can also be viewed as a social outcome of political exigencies held by various organizations involved in setting boundaries for the shared facility (e.g., see MacLeod 2005).

12. The Carrie M. McLain Memorial Museum and Katirvik Cultural Center share an overlapping mission to promote awareness and understanding of the history and cultures of our region. However, museum activities are often collections-focused, drawing from the museum's wealth of historical material assembled over the past 50 years. Although the cultural center contains a growing collection, programming is often at its forefront, from cultural orientation for new hospital employees to hosting support groups for substance abuse. In effect, the museum and cultural center enjoy intermittent partnership on community projects, such as the annual Nome Archaeology Camp, while staff more commonly focus on activities specific to their organizations. Increased collaboration between the museum and cultural center, as well as the library, represents a critical and ongoing area of need if the RFB is to serve as an active and inclusive community resource.
13. The Carrie McLain Museum had fostered a local reputation for accuracy over the years, but there was also skepticism about its ability to reflect a variety of community perspectives, interests, and knowledge. Steven Dubin (1999:9–11) describes museums as “battlegrounds” when complexities of community empowerment and social history vie for influence on the exhibitionary framework. For our museum, local stakeholders were primarily concerned that “their” topic, from sled dogs and gold dredges to skin boats and trains, be included within the new exhibition. This wide range of community interests guided development of the five broad thematic areas.
14. Invitations to participate in the new exhibition as a “community historian” were sent out via the local newspaper, social media, and community listserv. The museum also extended invitations to participate in the exhibition through newspaper articles and city reports, but these did not prove effective in recruiting community collaborators. Minimal response to the invitations affirmed that community members often need to feel personally invested, either in the project or staff, to participate in museum activities.
15. The Norton Sound kayak frame features a single hatch, straight line along the deck ridge, and handgrips on the ends formed by extensions of the bow and stern stringers. The frame features local and manufactured materials, including steamed and bent willow ribs, sealskin lashing, and an elegantly carved bowsprit from driftwood. The kayak had been damaged prior to museum acquisition, with a crushed hatch and a few broken slats. Restoration involved stabilizing the frame and repairs to the hatch using local materials.
16. The Carrie McLain Museum cares for a rich collection of historical photographs but very few contemporary images. In-depth knowledge of the Nome community was extremely beneficial to be able to reach out to specific individuals known for their particular photographic interests. Altogether, 18 local photographers shared images, which gave an invaluable contemporary perspective to the exhibition.
17. The museum explored several options to design artifact flexibility into the exhibit structure. The slat wall panels are an inexpensive method that can accommodate gravity shelves of various widths and positions. Additional objects are displayed on custom brass artifact mounts as well as standard acrylic risers. Many thanks to Dr. Aron Crowell, Smithsonian Arctic Studies Center, for his insightful comments and suggestions on removable artifact display systems.
18. Nome Eskimo Community advocated for tribal ownership of the artifacts and storage at a state facility in Anchorage or Fairbanks as the site was excavated under a federal program. The city argued that since the site was located on city lands, the artifacts fell under city ownership and should be stored in Nome. The Nome Common Council decided that the city retain ownership of the artifacts. In 2007, a public viewing of the artifacts was held at Old St. Joe's Hall followed by an exhibit at the Carrie McLain Museum on Front Street with a special reception for the Nome Eskimo Community, whose members expressed approval of the exhibit (Haecker 2007).
19. The last known skin boat from King Island was made in the 1960s by John Saclamana (Ray Paniataaq pers. comm., September 18, 2016).
20. The ongoing challenge of acquiring a skin boat for the new exhibition was captured in a newspaper article that began “*Umiag? Umiag??* Who has an *umiag?*” (Medearis 2016).
21. Community members stressed the importance of the boat construction process as well as the representa-

tion of women and children at camp. This direction guided the inclusion of tactile features for boat construction (driftwood, sealskin rope, walrus skin) and mukluk sewing (bearded sealskin, sinew).

22. The Alaska Humanities Forum sponsored the Alaska Communities of Memory Project from 1994 to 1996 for people across Alaska to share memories about their communities. Gatherings were held in Bethel, Fairbanks, Homer, Juneau, Kenai-Soldotna, Kotzebue, Nome, Unalaska, and Wasilla. The University of Alaska Fairbanks selected nine stories from Nome for the UAF Project Jukebox. Jim Sykes and Western Media Concepts videotaped the Nome sessions in February 1996. The original recordings are stored at the Oral History Office in the Alaska and Polar Regions Collections, Elmer E. Rasmuson Library, University of Alaska Fairbanks. To listen to the full interviews, visit <https://jukebox.uaf.edu/site7/comnome>.
23. The National Park Service Nome Archaeology Camp began in 2015 to bring students from Northwest Alaska to Nome for an immersive week of archaeology, oral history, and museum studies. The museum has partnered with the camp each year to offer a range of activities from a cataloging workshop with King Island Elders to hands-on examination of cultural objects and faunal remains from the Sandspit site.

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