

Study Circles (Red Deer and District Museum and Archives, Red Deer, Alberta)

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When Canadians think of Sweden, they think of fit 60-year-olds, Volvo automobiles and Ikea furniture. The Red Deer and District Museum is drawing on a less celebrated Swedish Export for its work with the Canadian Image Project - the study circle.

Swedish communities initiated study circles 30 years ago to build sources of knowledge on local life. In 1968, Ernst Westerlund, of the Skellefteå Museum in Northern Sweden, helped start a circle in the village of Övre Bäck, where a few villagers wished to study the history of mechanized agriculture in the district. With the help and leadership of Westerlund and the museum, the group eventually produced a book on the topic.

Within ten years another 40 study circles had formed, bringing together small groups that met each week for a period of a few months. With museum staff serving as tutors, the circles established and built sources of local knowledge on a wide range of subjects: language dialects, place names, labour movements, small dairies and life during World War II. They also documented the lives and work of firemen, farm hands, farm maids and office employees.

The work from these circles resulted in publications, educational programs and exhibits. For example, an exhibit focussing on village life at Övre Bäck drew 4000 visitors during one week, representing a pilgrimage of sorts. The work also drew on different collaborations. The study circles on local dialects and place names, for example, collaborated with the Dialect and Place Name Archives at the University of Umeå.

The collected material from these circles resides in the Skellefteå Museum, a source for future research and programming. The links established with the community have benefited the museum, making it an organic part of the local scene. Overall, the study circles strengthened the sense of local identity to build a visual record of the cultural memory and traditions of the Norwegian, Icelandic, Russian, Chinese and Muslim peoples in the district, and to establish direct links between these communities and the museum, creating a focus for the study of local experience.