

Fernie curse explained at gallery

By YALE BELANGER

Lethbridge Herald

The year was 1964 when members of the Tobacco Plains Tribe made their way to Fernie, B.C., to take part in a curse-lifting ceremony.

Legend has it that a curse was placed on the town by the dispossessed Kootenai people after William Fernie tricked the people into showing him where the area's coal deposits were located by promising to marry the chief's daughter.

It's safe to assume the marriage never took place and the Indians' fear of a coal mine being constructed on their land came to fruition. It was from this point on that the town of Fernie became the site of successive mining disasters, massive floods and fires due, supposedly, to the curse.

This same story is one that Calgary-born artist Gwen MacGregor used to hear each summer as a child vacationing with her parents at the family cottage at Rosen Lake just outside of Fernie.

However, it wouldn't be until more than 25 years later that MacGregor would have the opportunity to explore the legend in a more serious fashion.

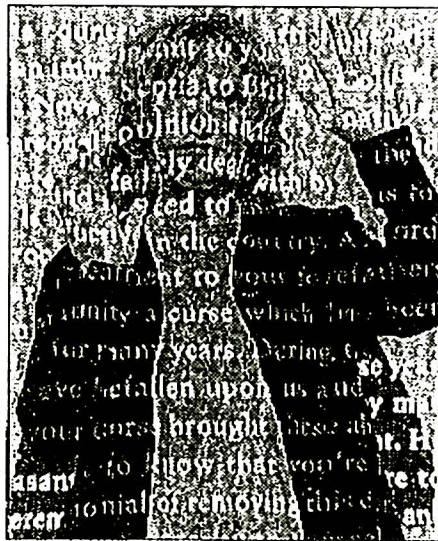
The result of her research is entitled *Fold it up and put it away: Fernie's Curse*, a multi-media exhibit now showing at the Southern Alberta Art Gallery through Jan. 18.

"I'm very familiar with that drive through the Crowsnest Pass and I know the area very well. I've known about the curse and I've had this idea for a long time," MacGregor says.

The exhibit is a combination of video, including footage of the curse-lifting ceremony shot by her grandmother back in 1964, as well as the voices of the people involved with lifting the curse.

What got the project under way was a visit to Toronto by SAAG curator Joan

Stebbins two years. It was here that Stebbins had the opportunity to view some of the photos MacGregor had collected about the curse, eventually offering her a residency in Lethbridge to allow MacGregor time to further develop her project.



HERALD PHOTO BY DAVID ROSSITER

PART OF EXHIBIT: Southern Alberta Art Gallery's Anne Vonkeman gives patrons a new look at Gwen MacGregor's exhibit.

During her stay in Lethbridge MacGregor took some time to research old newspapers books and archives for information on the curse.

In addition, she visited the Tobacco Plains band office and after plenty of time spent speaking with various members of the tribe who were involved with the ceremony and accumulating anecdotes, she had the information she needed to finish her work.

"Joan encouraged me with the residency and that gave me the time I needed to contact the people and to build trust about what I was doing and what I was looking for," MacGregor says.

MacGregor's exhibit is being shown in conjunction with that of Rhodesia-born artist Regan Morris, whose exhibit *MOAT* also runs to Jan. 8. This is part of SAAG's mandate to bring Canadian talent right to Lethbridge, something MacGregor is pleased about.

"The Southern Alberta Art Gallery has a good reputation across the country and it is seen as a place to come. It's quite prestigious," she says.

Another aspect about showing *Fernie's Curse* is it gives MacGregor the opportunity to tell her version of a story she says has more than one interpretation.

"There isn't one version; there are many versions to this story. That's the whole point of the piece, not to oversimplify the story and realize that everyone has their own version of the events," she says.

Beginning Jan. 24 and running until March 8, SAAAG will be presenting the work of Susan Shantz and David Merritt.