

Obituary



Michael D. Swift, 1936–2013



Image courtesy of Provincial Archives of New Brunswick P154-193.

The archival community lost an exceptional gentleman, archivist, archival administrator, mentor, and colleague on 11 September 2013 when Michael David Swift passed away in Ottawa. I valued deeply my long friendship with Mike, as I know so many others did, and I would like to recount some aspects of his unfailing generosity and contributions to our archival legacy.

Mike Swift was born in Minto, New Brunswick, and was educated at St. Dunstan's University in Prince Edward Island and at the University of New Brunswick (MA). He joined the Manuscript Division of the Public Archives of Canada (PAC) in 1964 after teaching for four years. I, too, graduated from the University of New Brunswick with an MA in History. My supervisor suggested that I introduce myself to Mike when I went to PAC in late 1967 to undertake thesis research. It was my first visit to the "mother" archives, and I was very happy to have at least the name of one archivist at PAC who might show me the ropes in this large, new facility. I need not have worried. Mike made time for me, checked in with me on several occasions during my stay, and introduced me to other archivists, who also assisted me with my topic. My research experience was so much more than I expected – competent, helpful staff and a facility that never closed – it was a dream for a student on a limited budget! This experience led me to contemplate a career in archives at PAC. The next spring, I answered a recruiting call from PAC and was successful in landing an archivist's position. On 2 July 1968, I began my archival career at PAC and, as luck would have it, Mike Swift was my first supervisor for a period of time. He remained a true mentor for many years.

Mike was always approachable – no question was too trivial to answer. He was ever the calming influence in an institution that was undergoing unprecedented growth in the late 1960s and into the 1970s. He played a key role in the Archives Section of the Canadian Historical Association and then in the formation of the Association of Canadian Archivists (ACA) in 1975. Mike's level demeanour, astuteness, and hard work meant that he was taken seriously and respected. Not surprisingly, when Hugh Taylor left the position of Provincial Archivist of New Brunswick (PANB) in 1971, Mike was selected to replace him. Thus began a seven-year stint in his native province, where he accomplished a great deal, including moving the Provincial Archives to prominence and developing its records management program.

In 1978, Mike returned to PAC as Director of the Archives (Historical) Branch, which had responsibility for all separate media divisions (for all government and private sector records) within the institution. This was no easy task. Attempting to get all divisions moving in the same direction was at times, I am certain, akin to herding cats (think total archives, tyranny of the media, and a very interesting cast of characters as division chiefs, along with some very strong minds within the divisions). But Mike was up for the task, unflappable, even-handed, and always fair. He was bright, articulate, and not easily spooked! And he needed all of these qualities.

A year after he returned to PAC, several of us were relaxing over a beer during the ACA conference in Saskatoon. I asked Mike if he ever regretted leaving PANB, given the hectic nature of his new job. He did not hesitate to reply: "Every day!" And then followed that Mike Swift signature grin and laugh, which told me it was true but that he would not have changed things for a minute. I had various occasions to interact with Mike during the period 1978 to 1985, and he always had time for me and my colleagues, regardless of our position or the issue.

Mike was appointed Assistant National Archivist in 1987, a position he held for the next ten years, until he retired in 1997. These were exciting times at the National Archives of Canada (NAC) and across the country, with the establishment of the new *National Archives of Canada Act*, the expanded role for PAC/NAC in the management of government records, the formation and development of the Canadian archival system via the Canadian Council of Archives, the state-of-the-art preservation facility in Gatineau, Quebec, and many more significant accomplishments. Canada's archival reputation at the international level experienced a significant boost during these years, led by Jean-Pierre Wallot, National Archivist, and other Canadian archivists involved with the International Council on Archives (ICA). Through all of this, Mike Swift brought his considerable talents into play – he was very much the steady hand at the wheel during those years at NAC.

Mike certainly played an important role internationally as well. In 1988, he was appointed the chair of the Program Committee for the 1992 International Congress on Archives (ICA) in Montreal. Since 1986, I had been Provincial

Archivist of Nova Scotia, and Mike asked me to join the ICA Program Committee. It was the first time, I believe, that the committee had a good deal of responsibility for putting together the program, as it had previously been very tightly controlled by the ICA inner sanctum. Once again Mike's diplomatic skills were put to the test, and once again he came through with flying colours. He never lost his cool.

After I retired in 1997 and began consulting, I had the pleasure of being asked by Mike to join him and some other former PAC/NAC colleagues to carry out a major review of the Saskatchewan Archives Board. It was another grand association with Mike for all of us. The final project report by Mike Swift and Associates was very well received, thanks in good part to Mike's strong editing, which turned six separate consultants' reports into one that read as if it had originated from a single pen – no small feat! In retirement, Mike and I had occasion to meet at ACA conferences and interact on cultural property matters since Mike was a member of the Canadian Cultural Property Export Review Board from 1998 to 2004. Once again his strengths came through on the board. For years, he was a regular player at the annual ACA East-West ball games; he always enjoyed the social aspects of ACA conferences as well as the intellectual side. For his significant contribution to the Canadian archival community, Mike was awarded an honorary membership by the ACA in 1997.

Mike was a devoted family man and a wonderful husband, father, and grandfather. He was an avid sportsman over the years and a long-time curler. He and his wife, Ann, attended a good number of Canadian and world curling events with friends. In retirement, he also joined the Rotary Club of West Ottawa, where again he gave back to his community. Rotary International's motto is "Service above Self," which describes Mike's life so very well.

In summary, Mike Swift provided invaluable service to the local, national, and international archival communities. He was a leader, a thinker, and a doer. But those who knew him will always remember his kind and gentle ways, his infectious laugh, his wise counsel, and his many other strengths, including his capacity to treat everyone alike. Few have been so universally respected and liked. Thank you, Mike.

Mike was predeceased by his son David in 2010. He is survived by his wife, Ann, his sons Peter and Andrew (Jamie Reardon), and David's wife, Chrissanthi Pahinis, as well as six grandchildren. We extend our deepest condolences to Ann and family.

Carman V. Carroll
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