

CONFERENCE COVERAGE: THE CANADIAN HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION:

Archives Section

University of Alberta, Calgary, June, 1968

"THE CANADIAN ARCHIVIST: A SYMPOSIUM OF ATTITUDES"

Speakers: W.I. Smith, Assistant Dominion Archivist
A.R. Turner, Provincial Archivist of Saskatchewan
W.W. Bilsland, Public Archives of Canada, Records
Management Branch.

Mr. Wilfred Smith introduced the session with an account of the operation of the Public Archives of Canada in which the keynote was its specialization and diversity. Out of 300 employees, between fifty and sixty could be regarded as being engaged in archival duties. Some were in reference work, others arranged and described documents, others were map and picture curators, and there were programmes for audio-visual records and publication. The question is, how many of these are archivists? The Federal Public Service recognized only the Dominion Archivist and the Assistant Dominion Archivist; the remainder are in the historical research group which includes the editor-historian. The Public Archives has also developed the concept of the professional support group, and this again raises a question whether it is possible, feasible, or desirable to draw the line in the definition of an archivist. Mr. Smith believes that this line should definitely be drawn by an examination of the professional content of the work (of particular importance for personnel administrators involved in classification and job description). The test is the use made of professional judgment and knowledge based on an academic background.

Mr. William Bilsland followed and reinforced much of what the previous speaker had said. He himself had been an archivist and a librarian at both the provincial and federal level. He had moved into records management and records scheduling, and he still considered himself an archivist, along with several of his colleagues.

It is, however, important to recognize that many others besides archivists make important decisions on the preservation of documents; and in the Federal Service, it is only necessary to cite the departmental classifier, who is the person who decides on the contents of the files and their relative importance (policy, operational, etc.). He may have only a grade 10 to 11 education, but he has a thorough

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knowledge of the organization, which an archivist often lacks. Of course, the archivist makes the final decision on preservation, but he cannot examine every file. He must rely on the classifier not to burden him with a greater bulk of records than is necessary.

Mr Allan Turner wished to have us consider the archivist as historian, to ponder his role in records management, and to review his relationship with agencies other than those which are purely archival, in which the archivist often becomes involved nowadays.

The archivist must be a graduate and have engaged in post-graduate work, but he may emerge from other backgrounds; and if he does, then he must master historical process and show competence in this. We should draw on graduates from other disciplines, and encourage them to become archivists so that they may bring their own special insights to the records in our care, and help us to realize that often a statistical analysis of the records as a whole may be more valuable than the sampling technique which was usual in the past. Failing this, we can of course consult specialists from time to time as we reassess the value and resources of our records.

The archivist may also be the resident provincial historian by virtue of the fact that he is the most available professional who, with his staff, is able to assist the general public in their special interests and is likely to be resorted to on all and every matter historical.

With regard to government records, the provincial role of the archivist is similar to that of the federal. He should have the ultimate authority on what should be preserved, but the person directly responsible for modern records should be the records officer unless the records centre is concerned with making available the older records of government for research and is involved in the assessment of records for preservation. In this case, the provincial archivist should be directly in charge, and this side of the work carried out by archivists. At the provincial level, we have not yet worked on the professional support group concept and, as a result, our classifications may be too rigid.

There is, today, a growing demand for composite historical resources and agencies, and the archivist often finds himself working in association with historic sites, museums, and libraries. This raises several questions as to the status of the archivist in relation to these branches and to what extent he should become involved in this kind of work. It would be impossible for an archivist to identify himself and his interests with all these professional groups.

At this juncture, the chairman drew attention to the paper by Mr. William Gray, founder of the Records Management Company of Canada, which had been distributed to those taking part in the session, and stressed several points from that paper (published elsewhere in this issue).

During the discussion which followed, Mr. Bilsland suggested that archivists might well arrange a joint session with the local executive of records management groups, such as ARMA, etc. Much time was spent by the session in assessing the value or otherwise of routine documents and whether the information contained in them could be obtained elsewhere. It was agreed that only a small percentage of this kind of material could or should be kept; and that sampling should be carried out on the basis of a thorough knowledge, but with the proviso that because certain automated techniques depend in many cases on a vast aggregate of individually trivial pieces of information to establish trends and patterns, retention periods should be reviewed from time to time with this in mind. This, of course, does not apply to the bulk of automated accounts, which can be safely destroyed, but rather to case work data or complex statistics with a great many variables. Mr. Bilsland produced the awesome figures that 300,000 cubic feet of records were generated by the Federal Government each year, and that, if preserved, this footage would fill 40,000 four-drawer filing cabinets at a cost of \$20 million for equipment plus an additional \$1 million for floor space and 100 extra staff, making a probable total of about \$25 million a year. **The Department of National Defense alone** generated 3,000 cubic feet of travel claims and supplies accounts each year, and this type of document accounts for 95% of all government records.

It was recognized that there would have to be archivists who were skilled in the complexities of computers and programming so that an accurate and professional assessment can be made of the material stored within magnetic tapes. Mr. Smith gave an example where on learning that a tape was to be destroyed, Public Archives called for the preservation of the files used in preparing the tape. This may well be an intermediate stage until it becomes acceptable to preserve the tape itself.

Mr. John Bovey, Provincial Archivist of Manitoba, would like to have heard more about the archivist as keeper of private papers, and to what extent there should be legislation for the preservation of private records. Mr. Smith spoke briefly of the programme in the Public Archives by which certain people were listed as the probable possessors of valuable papers and were systematically contacted about this. However, whether or not these papers were preserved or deposited was entirely a matter for the owners themselves.