

Outreach in a Small Archives: A Case History

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Over the past few years, “outreach” has become a buzzword in the Canadian archival community; archivists can feel positively threatened by the pressure from colleagues and sponsoring institutions to undertake outreach. There are situations in which the time, trouble, and cost will outweigh the benefits, but on the whole outreach is a positive and rewarding experience, both for the archives and for the archivist. Excuses such as “That wouldn’t work here...” and “That will cost too much...” are common but unjustified.

One of the most important types of outreach activity is still an area of unexplored opportunity. The relationship between the archival system and the educational community has not been particularly fruitful in Canada, especially in smaller archives where staffing and budget problems allow little time or energy for creative outreach programmes directed at children. Kenneth Osborne’s essay “Archives in the Classroom” (*Archivaria* 23) noted that, while the British have experimented successfully with several novel approaches to training teachers and students, Canadian archives have been slow to follow suit.

Fortunately, this situation is slowly improving, and in many instances it is Canada’s smaller archival institutions which are blazing the trail. The Region of Peel Archives and the Peel Board of Education have cooperated in the production of a series of teaching kits designed to introduce students to their community and its heritage through facsimile archival documents. These kits are the result of an evolutionary process which began five years ago with the Region of Peel’s first tentative steps towards an outreach system. Peel’s case history is not dramatic, but nicely illustrates how one archives has developed and refined several small outreach ventures, and should eliminate some of the doubts which many archivists harbour about outreach and educational programming.

Perhaps the biggest stumbling block was the traditional role of archivists as “record-keepers” rather than “record-givers.” Unfortunately, many archivists have been guilty of playing an obstructive role in their relationship with the public. If we are honest with ourselves, we must admit that we could provide better service to certain segments of our public audience. Genealogists, children, and the elderly are all accommodated, but still lack archival services completely tailored to their needs.

Part of the reason lies in the old issue of preservation versus access. It is much easier to say "No children allowed" than to prepare a teaching unit or kits containing reproductions of documents. However, it is important to keep in mind that public access to records is essential to the very existence of archives themselves. Archivists must recognize that they are both "preservers" and "promoters."

There are always exceptions to the rule, but on the whole archivists are not particularly aggressive. There is something vaguely undignified about "selling" your collections, especially when the result might be hordes of children or genealogists. Our mistrust of flashy selling methods gets in the way when we sit down to design a public relations campaign, and when we promote our product we always do it through accepted channels and in accepted ways. For example, it seems to be an unwritten rule that brochures must be printed in sepia tone on cream coloured paper. Hats off to the Archives of Ontario for its fuchsia pink multicultural poster! Archivists must learn to become more assertive. Often through lack of resources or a clear mandate, we are forced into a fairly passive collecting policy, and this passive attitude sometimes slips over into our public relations campaign. We must adopt an action-oriented philosophy when undertaking a public relations programme of any description. Another defense mechanism commonly used by archivists is the avoidance technique. We put off active outreach activities until "a time when we have more time and more money." Unfortunately, that time never seems to come, and once again we are left waiting patiently for our public to "discover" us.

Other archivists will say, "I don't need a public relations programme because I'm not a publicly sponsored institution," or "It's not part of my mandate." The problem here is a misunderstanding of the words "public" and "outreach." A "public" should be thought of as an audience. Every archives exists to serve a public, whether that is the general public or a specific public like a board of directors. When we reach out to this group in any way, we are involved in public relations, a process which might be as simple as preparing a narrative for a company's annual report or as complex as organizing a tour and presentation for executive officers.

Determining the shape of an outreach programme should involve four basic steps; the Region of Peel Archives completed the following tasks: we assessed the goals of our institution; we evaluated the needs of our institution and the resources available; we assessed the needs of our clients; we chose an appropriate type of programme, planned the logistics, and prepared a time line for its execution.¹

Peel's first venture into the "outreach" game began almost six years ago. Philosophically, staff have no problems with the idea of selling archives to the public. We are a publicly funded institution, and therefore it is vital that we demonstrate to Regional Council that the archives programme is beneficial to the public in a very tangible way. Verifiable statistics regarding public use of the archives are one of the best means of monitoring progress, so that our immediate goal became an increase in user statistics. A note of caution, however: make sure that if a target has been set that you have adequate staff and that you can continue to deliver quality reference services.

We looked at our resources — staff who were interested and able to provide some time for an outreach project; a good photographic collection; a strong, community-

oriented manuscript collection containing excellent sources for genealogy, local history and land and property research; a modest budget; access to a darkroom — and then examined our audience.

An analysis of researcher statistics indicated that there were some members of our general audience who were under-represented. Residents of Mississauga perceived Brampton to be distant, and difficult to reach by public transit. Deep-rooted historical differences also surfaced. Regional government was not particularly welcomed in Mississauga in 1974, and the choice of Brampton as the home of the regional government headquarters emphasized that problem. As a division of the regional government, we were part of a government system that nobody understood, and were hampered by a somewhat negative public image in the press. Furthermore our relationship with the educational community was haphazard. Teachers often established contact through the museum which shares space in the Peel Heritage Complex, and a very enterprising student would occasionally track us down, but it was depressingly clear that we had no cohesive marketing approach for this segment of our audience.

We therefore decided on two separate marketing ventures. One would target residents of Peel living in Mississauga, and the other would concentrate on the primary and secondary school system throughout Peel.

To reach the first group, which numbered almost 400,000 people, we needed a mechanism that would be cost-effective but would at the same time reach a large proportion of the population. The answer was Exposystem, a flexible, portable and relatively inexpensive display unit which can be used in a variety of situations. The unit does not require power or lighting, and incorporates velcro surfaces which permit the mounting of facsimile documents and reproduction photographs. Using our own darkroom facilities and a microcomputer with a reasonable printer, we have been able to produce a variety of thematic displays tailored to geographic areas or events in Peel. These have appeared at country fairs, seniors' homes, industrial sites, and commercial venues. Although portable displays reach an audience which is difficult to measure, they do generate significant "return" business for the Archives.

In addition to the Exposystem, the Archives began to cultivate a more active outreach philosophy by designing a "travelling road show." All of the Archives staff were trained to give a thirty-minute presentation on the Archives and its public services. We designed a standard slide presentation, selected a few appropriate original archival items, and, overcoming symptoms of nervousness, launched ourselves into the community, paying particular attention to the Mississauga area. Over the past four years, we have addressed Lions Clubs, Chambers of Commerce, senior citizens' groups, newcomers clubs, sororities, groups of librarians, historical societies, ratepayers groups, and Women's Institutes, with audiences of up to one hundred people.

We directed the next phase of our outreach programme at the educational community, having determined through an analysis of researcher registration forms that teachers and their students were under-represented in our user statistics. The prospect of thirty noisy, unappreciative Grade Eights in our reading room was daunting, but we still felt firmly committed to educating this portion of our population about archives.

A major influence on the development of the programmes was our relationship with the Region of Peel Museum. The Archives, Museum, and Region of Peel Art Gallery all share space in the Peel Heritage Complex. Because of our proximity and shared Heritage Administrator, the Museum has made many contributions to our education programme. Museums have traditionally led the way in this area, and we have learned through their experiences. In many instances, we have used their connections with the school boards in Peel; a museum is a familiar entity to most teachers, and this makes our introduction into the classroom much smoother. Our jointly marketed education programmes feature complementary publicity flyers which go out as a package to all teachers in Peel. We also host professional development days for teachers at the Archives, encouraging their investigation of primary sources for self-designed teaching units, or promoting our own education programmes.

The first component of our education programme, which grew out of our travelling road show, was a joint effort with the Museum, Art Gallery, and the Information Services section of the Region of Peel. Ontario's students begin studying their community in Grade Four and continue looking at either Canadian history, local history, or government systems up to Grade Eleven. In order to reach this vast audience in both the public and separate school systems, a Community Study Day programme was established in 1985. Groups of up to 120 students were bused to our municipal headquarters in the morning for a mock council meeting and presentations on local and regional government systems. After lunch, the group transferred to the Heritage Complex for tours and presentations in the Art Gallery, Museum, and Archives. This study programme worked reasonably well as a first attempt to bring children into an archives. The programme is now four years old and, although we are now in the middle of a hiatus because other sections are experiencing staffing difficulties, it should be reinstated in some form next year.

However, there were serious flaws. When 120 children came through the archives in four groups of thirty, time was short, presentations had to be kept very simple, and the burn-out factor for the archivists giving the presentation was very high. By 2:00 p.m., the younger children tended to be restless after a long day on the road. Some teachers have also expressed reservations about the combination of local government studies and heritage studies, since these two topics are not usually taught at the same grade level.

In order to find a better way to reach out to this huge audience, we began to work on a purely archival programme, upgrading the basic presentation that we had been using for Community Study Day and for public speaking engagements to adult groups. We expanded the basic portfolio to include reproduction items which can be passed around, and a slide presentation geared for school-age audiences. This material, along with an archivist, can be booked out by classes from Grades Four through Twelve anywhere in Peel. The presentation and the documents are customized to the geographic area of the school, and to the general study interests of the class. This is "Peel's Past," a versatile and adaptable classroom presentation which has been used for groups as diverse as home economics classes and developmentally handicapped groups.

During the presentation, small hands-on exercises are used to hold the group's attention; for example, copies of a cross-written letter are passed out, and students

are encouraged to decipher and analyze small sections. The presentation is never exactly the same, and obviously its effectiveness is dependent on the skills of the presenter. We encourage lots of questions and answers, and we always attempt to choose material with lots of “ooh and ahh” potential — Indian treaties, land patents, coloured maps, material produced by children, and lots of photographs. Emphasis is placed on the value of the original material, the importance of original research, the difference between primary and secondary resources, and how we use them for different purposes. In order to make the presentation even more effective, we are working on developing an orientation package which will go out to the class before our visit to make sure that the teacher has prepared the class with some basic information about archives and local history. Games and visual aids may eventually become part of this package.

The basic “Peel’s Past” served us well, but we felt that improvements could be made. Classes had been encouraged to visit the Archives, but because of the size of the groups we couldn’t permit original research and, with the high cost of school buses, many teachers opted for the cheaper route and invited us to visit the classroom. We were pleased with the response, but archives can be a very abstract concept for an eight-year-old, and we felt that it was important that students actually saw our reading room and storage area.

Our solution was the development of teaching kits, based on curriculum guidelines, using copies of locally created original materials. The curriculum guidelines gave us the backbone of this portion of our outreach programme. Developed by the Ontario Ministry of Education, these guidelines govern the Primary, Junior, Intermediate, and Senior levels of instruction. Other provinces have similar documents. Finding and using these guidelines are the single most important steps in designing your educational programme. Unless your activities and kits are based on curriculum guidelines, you will be trying to market a product that has no audience because it has no relevance to what is being done in the classroom. Teachers are fairly tightly controlled in terms of curriculum content, and it will be up to you to match their requirements. We also found that it was important to pay attention to the relative importance of topics in terms of the time allotted for each in the classroom. It is pointless to develop a detailed study of the 1837 Rebellion if the teacher will be covering that topic in a single afternoon.

It is also important to recognize that teaching processes and goals have changed dramatically over the last twenty-five years. In Ontario, a great deal of stress is placed on the development of three areas of ability at all grade levels. These are *knowledge*, *attitudes*, and *cognitive skills*. The following example from the Junior curriculum guideline should highlight the importance of understanding the differences among these three abilities. Assume that a Grade Four class is studying the settlement period in Upper Canada. Their classroom activities should teach them basic characteristics of everyday life in Upper Canada. This is simple knowledge. They should also develop an appreciation of the need for cooperation in community life. Lastly, they should be able to develop generalizations about coping with the isolation of pioneer life. This teaches them cognitive skills, such as deductive reasoning, comparison skills, and problem-solving skills. Any type of archival programme which aims to be useful and successful in the classroom must build on and add to these basic skills.

The other great value of our educational programmes to our local school boards is their relevance for children living in Peel. One of the curriculum goals, especially for Grades Seven and Eight is that students should develop a sense of personal identity and relationship with their own communities, an objective which is especially important in an area like Peel which has a high percentage of immigrant families.

All of our educational material uses local archival material created by people living in Peel. Although we have tended to restrict ourselves to the local sphere, it is also possible to look at a national issue or event from a local perspective. For example, local newspaper reports, diary entries, and ephemera have been used to good advantage to examine topics like the death of Sir John A. Macdonald or the outbreak of the Second World War.

We have developed four different kits, each based on a major curriculum area and matched to a grade range. Thus Grade Fours get "Pioneers in Peel," while Grade Sevens get "My Town." Each set of kits includes ten to thirty-five file folders containing copies of archival items and a series of questions based on that original material. Written at an appropriate level, the kits are designed to encourage the development of those skills which the Ministry of Education has targeted. The questions look for more than simple comprehension skills; deductive reasoning, problem-solving skills, comparison skills, and research skills are all elicited. Each set of kits also includes a teacher's guide which provides ideas for group activities such as cemetery studies or walking tours. Teachers are also given some sample lesson plans, a bibliography, and a listing of other resources in the community. When the kits are booked out into the community, they are accompanied by visual aids that are loaned for use with the kits. These include a large wall map of Peel in 1859, and a series of archival photographs. Everything can be kept for up to a month, although the actual classroom time allotted is usually only a matter of days.

In order to encourage class visits to the archives, we normally require that the students visit the Archives for a basic orientation session. Students tour the Archives, where they receive instructions on how to use our catalogues, microfilm readers, finding aids, and photo collections, and are then dispatched with their kits. We also encourage senior students to return to the Archives individually to conduct further research. There has been some resistance to busing the children in for the orientation session because of the cost. The purchase of a Heritage Complex bus has been mooted, and may offer a solution at some point in the future.

These in-house sessions are also a wonderful opportunity to communicate our enthusiasm about archives, and about our jobs as archivists. We have received several requests to attend Career Day seminars at local high schools as a result of our orientation sessions, and one likes to think that we are having at least a small influence on the future of the archival system.

Much of the credit for this outreach system must go to the history and contemporary studies consultants at the Peel Board of Education. They were as pleased to find out about us as we were to find out about them! The timing of the development of these kits was fortunate, as the history consultants were just beginning to change Peel's curriculum to match the new Ministry guidelines at the Intermediate level, and they were happy to discover a resource of which they had not been aware. They

have evaluated our kits, and have included information about the Region of Peel Archives and its education programmes in their teaching units, so that every Grade Six, Seven, and Eight teacher in Peel knows who we are and what we offer.

Teachers are asked to fill out evaluation forms, and the response is generally positive. The only concern appears to be the length of time that can be allotted in the classroom, and the amount of material which the teacher has to absorb in order to become a useful resource for his or her class. We are now therefore in the process of streamlining the kits, reducing the number of individual folders, and suggesting that students work in pairs on the kits, or even in groups to speed up the process. At the same time, we are fleshing out the questions, activities, and archival extracts in order to make each kit meatier.

Perhaps the most attractive feature of these kits is their relative cheapness. A Hollinger box masquerades as a storage container for the kits, and the only other expenditures are for file folders and photocopying. The Archives absorbed the design cost of the advertising flyer, and the printing costs were negligible. Maintenance of the kits involves nothing more complicated than checking for missing pages and occasionally replacing a file folder.

Inevitably, there have been some problems, which must be considered before you begin this type of outreach. The programme has required a large commitment of staff time, both to prepare the kits and to conduct the orientation presentations. Having advertised the programme, we must continue to meet the expectations of the two school boards. This responsibility has caused stress among the archivists who administer this programme. Although we enjoy getting a world-weary Grade Nine to admit that archives are "kind of neat," outreach has taken its toll on other portions of our programme. Less time is now available for basic functions such as processing, and special projects such as the implementation of descriptive standards are being delayed. The solution might lie in an increased use of volunteers for the orientation section of the programme. Retired teachers would make excellent presenters, relieving the strain on professional staff, who sometimes give as many as four or five presentations in one week.

If you do not have the assistance of a volunteer programme, you must ensure that your staff can deal effectively with children. Patience and enthusiasm will go a long way with a young audience, but you must also be prepared to cope with physically or mentally handicapped children who may have specialized problems. There is no point in trying to pretend that children aren't noisy. As soon as they move, they talk, and in a constricted area sound seems to be amplified. We have a very modest reference area, so that it is impossible completely to separate our researchers from our school groups. However, there have been no complaints; in fact, most researchers seem intrigued, and often take time to listen to the presentation. We always provide a distant early warning for those who wish to schedule lunch or a coffee break in order to escape!

We have also found that teacher/archivist relations can be touchy. You may find that you have a difference of opinion about the goals of your education programme. Our primary purpose is to expose children to archives and archival practices, whereas teachers often prefer a nice little digestible history of Peel. Teachers have also been known to use the Archives as a free babysitting service, leaving the class

and their discipline problem to you. We have learned through experience to make the ground rules about a class visit very clear. Teachers are also accustomed to being presented with teaching material which has been pre-processed for ease of presentation. We are now working hard to encourage teachers to preview the kits at the Archives; it is vital to ensure that teachers understand what is required of them in terms of support for the programme *before* they book out the kits. Other preparatory work should include the creation of a pre-selected list of archival material for senior students who choose to return to the Archives to do additional research. This list will speed up their work and eliminate a tedious duplication of effort for the reference archivist on duty.

Kenneth Osborne's article identified many options for archivists interested in strengthening the link between the archival system and the educational community. The Region of Peel Archives has, albeit with limited resources, formulated an outreach policy which recognizes the important role of archives in the classroom. One looks forward to hearing from other archivists and educators as the archival profession moves towards a more proactive relationship with children, their teachers and, indeed, with the many other public audiences of archives.

Notes

- 1 For a full discussion of these tasks, see Ann E. Pederson and Gail Farr Casterline, *Archives and Manuscripts: Public Programs* (Chicago, 1982), one of the volumes in the Society of American Archivists' Basic Manual Series.