Potpourri

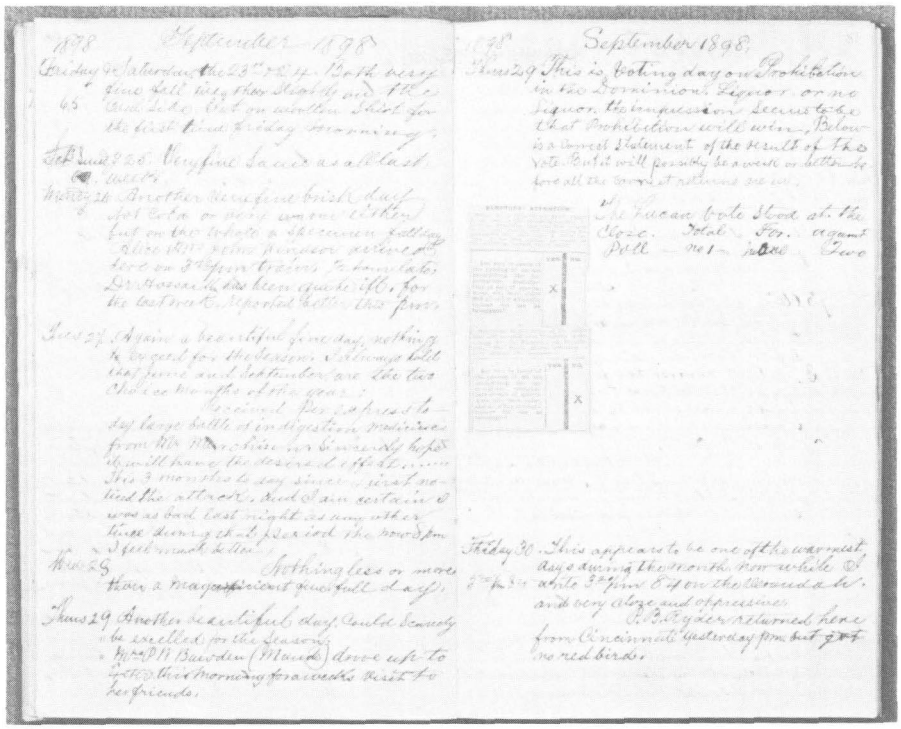
Pandora's Deedbox

by JAMES REANEY

My first experience with archival materials was seeing my parents examine the deedbox for our farm—a grim and battered metal cube which contained all the papers pertaining to Lot 39, Concessions I and II, South Easthope, plus a coffin plate for an aunt of mine who died at the age of twelve. My mother had been asked by one of my surviving aunts to prepare a history of our farm to be given as a paper at a Women's Institute Meeting. This was in the mid-Thirties when the kitchen history movement in the Women's Institute was just getting under way—a movement that resulted in the "Tweedsmuir Books", local Doomsday Books which I find valuable sources of local history and lore. I have just been examining the Amherstburg, W.I. Tweedsmuir Book and finding things at an angle college historians usually sneeze at.

My parents' examination of the deedbox nourished a feeling for the magnetism of the past—the idea! That you could actually figure out what the farm had once looked like, and when the house and barn were built, just from pieces of old and yellowed paper. Short of its being entailed, our farm had the most complex history imaginable—bought by an Irishman, Michael Lahey with three sons for whom he divided the land three ways with ten acres left over for himself. Several owners later, a man named Quirk slowly pieced the hundred acres together again and bought out the last Lahey; then he divided everything in half with a brickyard owner and developer named Roberts. After Quirk's disappearance, my grandfather slowly bought back the estranged pieces, and all this does not even mention the story of the farm's front field which lies in a different Concession—#I, where owners, tenants, a moved line-fence and a floating bridge on the Huron Road make for some more reflecting paper. If you should happen to look at a copy of the 1879 atlas for Perth County you will see the strange shape of the current subdivision and, of course, a visit to the Perth County registry office reveals several dense pages in the Abstracts Index. Out of this I made an emblem poem called "The Farm" which appears near the end of my collected; I also formed a tendency to cherish boundaries and closely examine newly plowed ground for telltale sherds of the three or four original homesites.

My next archival experience was a sudden urge, not long after my marriage, to look up the earliest files of the Stratford *Beacon*. The Public Library in Stratford kept them in a darkened basement room along with arrowheads, a cigar store Indian carved by an itinerant Italian sculptor, etc. Again came the magic feeling of the other world in time; for example, village poets apparently writing poems that began: "Hail Britannia, hail terrific Gal!" Actually, since the poem was about the alliance of Britain and France during the Crimean War, Gal turned out to be misprint for Gaul. I used some of this material in *Twelve Letters to a Small Town* and it started a passion for reading old newspapers in toto—page after page, as you would a novel. The next thing I tackled at Stratford was the 1933 volume of the *Beacon-Herald*. At first I started with the intention of seeing whether I



Diary of William Poste, Postmaster at Lucan, Ontario, 23-30 September 1898. (Regional History Collection, University of Western Ontario)

would bump into a cartoon strip incident I remembered; there's a sequence in *Bobby Thatcher* on a desert island where a bullet goes right through three people. I didn't find a memory-anchor of this sort, but I did happen across the accounts of the General Strike at Stratford which earned the town the nickname of "Little Russia". Since I was exactly six at the time, I could remember the processions and tanks as seen from my father's waggon; the newspaper zeroed in on the day.

It's quite obvious from my most recent plays how newspaper files have contributed to style, plot and character in *Donnellys* and *Dismissal.* What is very good for a play is to have archival papers take opposite sides; in the case of the Student Strike at Toronto in 1895—the Star against the Globe and in the case of the Donnellys, Grit papers versus Tory ones. It also helps if the characters involved are good stories to begin with and I find no fault here with either the Donnellys or the young Mackenzie King.

But, of course, there are depths to a story that a newspaper cannot reach and in the case of *The Dismissal* a great many nuances are lost in the press reports which the archival copy of the Commission's report on the Student's Strike fills in like a Dutch painting gone amok; for example, most histories and even the daily newspaper acounts give you the feeling that the students had some cause to feel dissatisfied with President Loudon and that Mackenzie King in some way or other ratted on Dale, Tucker and Hellems. Some cause, some way or other indeed! For some reason or other, Tucker's assertion that President Loudon kept a man to oversee the student's use of toilet tissue in the lavatories at University College and King's very hostile assertions about Hellems stirring up disaffection among the students—these don't appear, save to the archival eye.

In the case of my trilogy *The Donnellys*, "depth" involves five years of reading two troves of courthouse papers—those of Goderich and those of London, Huron and Middlesex Counties respectively. I started at the earliest documents likely to contain the name "Donnelly" and vacuumed forward towards 1880. Since I'm not trained as an historian, I may have been doing the wrong thing, but at any rate if what I needed was feeling for a period then this discipline seemed to work. The Chancery and Criminal cases give you the best chance to see human motive and colour; since we lack canon law courts we'll never get the rich psychological detail possible in Southern France when inquisitors and heretics meet, but some of the Chancery cases come close. My characterization of James Carroll came "click" when I heard him in what used to be Chancery/Middlesex/416, threaten the trustees his father had established over the family farm: "I wouldn't like to be the man who works my father's farm this year." All of this material has proved rich enough and important enough socially to justify publication and for a change, there will be a book of documents not just a series of plays as the end-result of archivally spent time..

What most impressed me in research is the feeling of relentless time—day by day in the Sheriff's Daybook, case after case in the Crown Attorney's letter book, November wolves in the Wolfscalps' Certificate Book, April washouts in the Sudden Breaches register and a rising tide of chattel mortgages in years of bad weather or depression. What I want to make out of it for communities I live in is first a calendar, then a diary, then a primitive chronicle like the Anglo-Saxon one (... *this year, the Flanagans and the Donnellys had no accidents to their stage waggons till August when* ...) and finally a book that reprints the documents so that the reader can make up his own history; I think this feeling of what history-writing is may come from the initial deed-box epiphany where all the papers were there in one box; there was no interpretation—you either read all the papers or you didn't. Beyond that I've written plays in which another force than the spirit of historical truth takes over; to write a history in which you have to distort (so it seems to me) and choose which distortion is better—I'll probably never be ready for that. Edith Firth, author of such a satisfying book as *The Town of York* (a collection of documents), be my guide!

My experience with archives has ranged through Perth County beginnings (now sporting an excellent and well run County Archives) to the Regional Archives at Western, to Toronto, to Ottawa and the usual places in Ireland with a very satisfying summer spent in soaking up what the Goderich Registry Office had to offer; that poll book for the Tecumseh Electoral District, 1858—preserve it long, oh Lord! on the open shelf in the sunlight there. The only criticism I might make is that in the larger and necessarily more impersonal archives it sometimes happens that the clerk, who goes to bring what you hope the finding-aid promises you, looks so bored and moves so listlessly. Why not mix research and clerical-stack-boy skills more? It's certainly not possible for archivists these days to have read all their archives but between their scores of helpers (each responsible for a row?) you might get a mosaic of informed help. One thing I know—if I worked in the archives and they didn't let me read the manuscripts and newspapers in those intervals when no one comes to the counter, I'd change my job. Perhaps this is why my happiest, not necessarily my most productive, research experiences have been at smaller archives where the assistants know their material or this is at least a possibility—: one meets the same problem in bookstores when you realize that the assistants don't read books.

Sometimes I muster enough time to return to the Regional Archives at Western and try to recapture the past happiness. But the aftermath of projects such as *The Donnellys* has been a noticeable increase of work "in the world" and there never seems to be the time anymore just to sit brooding over the Huron County Treasurer's Accounts attempting to figure out if they paid Mitchell Haskett the reward money for catching Mr Donnelly or not: addition, endless—in effect I am trying to balance the Huron County account books for 1858! As of now, I can't seem to concentrate nor find long enough stretches of time. One statement by a fellow researcher at Western comes to mind though (genealogy, gravestones and grave yards):—"I know what Heaven must be like—something like this one, an archives."