

Pot-pourri

“Some of the Books are Worn Out”: The Klondike Gold Rush and Records Conservation

by **TERRY COOK**

The dilemma of balancing use and conservation of records is not a recent one. In the aftermath of the Klondike Gold Rush, for example, federal officials faced this same problem. On 12 December 1907, O.S. Finnie, then Chief Clerk in the Office of the Gold Commissioner of the Yukon Territory,¹ wrote thus to the Commissioner of the Yukon:

I beg to advise you that a number of our records require transcribing. Some of the books are worn out and the others are filled to such an extent that there is little room left for further entries.

I think this work should be assigned to the members of the staff who are constantly using the records. They are more familiar with them and more competent to transcribe them accurately. These records are in use during the day, both by the clerks and the public. For this reason they must be copied after office hours.

I think eight men working two hours a day about two months would copy those records which require it most.

1 Oswald Sterling Finnie is an important figure in northern administration. After his Yukon career, he became Chief Mining Inspector of the Department of the Interior and thus second-in-command in the large Mining Lands and Yukon Branch. Following the Great War, with renewed threats to Canadian Arctic sovereignty, lobbying pressure from the famed Vilhjalmur Stefansson, widespread concern over fragile northern wildlife, and the discovery of oil at Norman Wells, the Deputy Minister of the Interior decided that the heretofore scattered and unfocused northern functions of the department were worthy of an independent, comprehensive unit and therefore established the Northwest Territories and Yukon Branch in 1921-22 to meet that need. Finnie was chosen as its first director and thus helped to set the tone of an enlarged and coordinated federal presence in the North in the 1920s.

Since they would have to come back at night to do this work it would be only fair to allow extra remuneration. I think \$1 an hour would be a reasonable amount.

This is a matter which really needs attention and should be taken up during the present winter.

Alexander Henderson, the commissioner, recommended this approach to the Secretary of the Department of the Interior in Ottawa on 13 January 1908, and requested the department's approval of this expenditure.

This missive from the North excited the attention of several senior officials at headquarters. H.H. Rowatt, Chief Clerk of the Mines Branch and Secretary of the Yukon Territory,² wrote to the Deputy Minister of the Interior, W.W. Cory, on 12 February 1908 seeking his advice. Although similar recommendations for copying had been made in the past, the department had never made a decision on the payment of overtime for this work. Rowatt explained why overtime was necessary, as well as why these crucial registers of mining claims were so heavily used:

Section 9 of the Placer Mining Act provides that all books of record and documents filed shall, during office hours, be open to public inspection free of charge. As a result of this provision of the Act all of the record books are at the disposal of the public from 10 to 4 each day, and, of course, during that time not very much work could be done in transcribing these records. There is no doubt the record books are in very bad condition owing to their frequent handling. Some of them are very much crowded and it is now very difficult for the public to obtain the information in respect of mining property to which they are entitled under the Act.

The two-way relationship of use and physical deterioration was clearly apparent to these early custodians of permanently valuable records.³

Yet deputy ministerial authority was insufficient to embark on a rescue mission of the frayed and torn registers. Cory annotated Rowatt's memorandum with these instructions to Interior's chief accountant: "I think you should take this matter up with the Auditor General and see if we can properly allow such an arrangement. If we can it is the best way

2 Rowatt's branch was expanded during the 1908-09 fiscal year to the Mining Lands and Yukon Branch to reflect more accurately the significant number of northern functions it had. In the reorganization of 1921-22 mentioned in note 1 above, however, Rowatt lost out. His second-in-command, O.S. Finnie, jumped over him to head the prestigious new Northwest Territories and Yukon Branch, while Rowatt's own branch was reduced to a Mining Lands Division. But Rowatt got his revenge. When seniority brought him the deputy ministership of Interior in 1931, he abolished the Northwest Territories and Yukon Branch and forced Finnie into early retirement. For more details on the history of northern administration, see Terry Cook, "Administrative Outline," *Records of the Northern Affairs Program [and its predecessors]* (Ottawa, 1982), pp. 1-24. See also his *Sources for the Study of the Canadian North* (Ottawa, 1980).

3 This openness of the public record was no accident. In 1898 serious charges of wrong-doing were levelled at federal officials in the Yukon, including granting favoured Klondike claims to friends, relatives, and those paying bribes. A royal commission resulted to investigate the charges and to recommend more open, honest government. See Public Archives of Canada, Federal Archives Division (hereafter PAC), Records of the Commission on Charges of Malfeasance Against Officials of the Yukon Territory, 1898, Record Group (RG) 33/76.

out of the difficulty.” The Auditor General demurred, however, replying that on a similar case he had sought a ruling from Treasury Board: the verdict was that no such extraordinary payment could be made without a special order-in-council being passed to authorize it. Such an order was prepared in Interior on 24 February, sent to the Privy Council Office two days later, and passed on 2 March 1908. P.C. 439 of that date authorized the sum of \$950 for the night-time transcription of the records, which information was conveyed to the Commissioner of the Yukon on 13 March.

On 3 June, Finnie reported that the work had been done from 15 April to the end of May, and was now verified and found to be satisfactory. Mining claim registers for the Eldorado and Bonanza benches were done first (these areas of richest gold discoveries presumably also being the pages of the most used and sought-after registers), followed by the creek, bench, and hill claims of surrounding streams.

Given the success of this project, the Gold Commissioner requested on Christmas Eve 1909 that further registers suffering from wear also be transcribed on the same basis. While Cory and Rowatt agreed to this second request, the paperwork apparently got lost, for the Gold Commissioner wrote on 12 December 1910 that he had not yet had a reply to his note of a year before, and “the conditions [of the records] which obtained at the time of my said memorandum are more pressing now than they were then....” Eventually, by P.C. 49/1227 of 24 May 1911, the sum of \$1,000 was approved for this additional work.

There was an interesting sequel to this story. While the technology and methods changed over time, the concern of senior officials for the protection of their permanently valuable northern records did not. Between 1920 and 1950, Roy A. Gibson was the most powerful federal official involved with northern administration. He had been Assistant Deputy Minister of the Interior under Cory, and remained Assistant Commissioner of the Northwest Territories throughout these three decades. By the mid-1940s, he was Director of the large Lands, Parks, and Forest Branch of Interior’s successor, the Department of Mines and Resources. Within Gibson’s branch was the Bureau of Northwest Territories and Yukon Affairs, the unit then charged with all northern administration. In this senior capacity, Gibson wrote on 2 August 1946 to the Acting Controller of the Yukon, J.E. Gibben, to express his concern about “the fire hazard to which the records of the Yukon Territory are exposed in the Dawson offices.” While transactions under the Placer Mining Act and the Quartz Mining Act were documented in a fairly complete way on headquarters files, “it appears that our information concerning other records [homesteads, timber permits, water rights, local licences, etc.] is quite scanty, and, in the event of destruction of the original records, we would be indeed in a bad position.” As a solution, Gibson proposed sending a photostat machine from Ottawa to Dawson “with the object of making photostatic copies of at least the live records.” He asked Gibben, therefore, to send him the size of the sheets in all his record books, adding that “these measurements should be accurate to half an inch.” With this newer technology, he also needed to know the voltage, amperage, and cycle of the electrical supply in Dawson in order to find a compatible machine. There followed a comic three-year history of shipping a used (and apparently somewhat decrepit) photostat machine by train, boat, and cartage to Dawson, of musing by puzzled Dawson officials wondering how to assemble let alone run this machine which had been sent without instructions, of searching for an extra set of instructions and various lost parts, of disputing transportation bills, and of seeking the special chemically coated paper in the south needed for this lonely northern machine. With the value of hindsight and the knowledge of the rapid deterioration of wet-process

photostats from that period, one must wonder if the effort was worth it, but one cannot but admire the motives behind it.⁴

Such careful solicitude of valuable older records by their creators illustrated by these two northern examples was not uncommon.⁵ Nor is it today. Archivists would do well to recognize such concerns and exploit them when trying to sell the value of archival programmes to parent administrations and funding bodies. Maybe again, as with Rowatt, Cory, and Gibson, senior officials will recognize the value of conserving fragile original records and seek funding to undertake such work. It is perhaps too much to hope, however, that special orders-in-council will be passed authorizing overtime wages for the archivists involved in such conservation activity!

4 All sources, unless otherwise footnoted, used throughout this piece, on both the 1907-11 and 1946-49 incidents, are found in PAC, Records of the Northern Affairs Program (and its predecessors), RG 85, vol. 601, file 2435.

5 See Bill Russell, "The White Man's Paper Burden: Aspects of Records Keeping in the Department of Indian Affairs, 1860-1914," *Archivaria* 19 (Winter 1984-85), pp. 50-72.