

# *Supplement: The Archival Legacy of the Department of the Interior*

## *Legacy in Limbo: An Introduction to the Records of the Department of the Interior*

by TERRY COOK\*

The Department of the Interior is a central part of the Western Canadian experience. From 1873 to 1930, the department touched so many aspects of western life and society that its records form an essential underpinning of the history of the prairies from the end of the fur trade era to the Great Depression.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, in 1870 the Old West of explorers, missionaries, and fur traders interacting with independent native groups was replaced in short order by a West dominated by federal government officials and their activities. Such activities were inextricably connected with the Department of the Interior and its many branches, divisions, and units.

Archivists will be interested in the records of the Department of the Interior for reasons other than their significance in exploring the roots of Western Canadian history, relevant as that is to many of their record series and their clients' research topics. The case of Interior also raises general principles that are applicable in other archival contexts or that address some of the more hotly debated issues of the profession. For example, because the Interior records were rent asunder between 1930 and the mid-1950s as a result of the Natural Resource Transfer Agreements signed by the federal and provincial governments in 1930, the fundamental archival principles of *provenance* and *respect des fonds* are challenged. The dispersal of the Interior's documentary heritage following the 1930 agreements means that its records are now found in the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta, and British Columbia, the two territorial archives, and the National Archives of Canada, as well as among the dormant records of many resource agencies of all seven jurisdictions. Can the original integrity and *provenance* of these records be reestablished for modern users through inter-institutional collective inventories, a national system of descriptive standards, automation, and microfilming? Because the West during this period was in a colonial relationship to Ottawa through its agent, the Department of the Interior, a major part of the western archival record remains unrepatiated and concurrently a major part of the federal record has been fragmented. Can both dilemmas be solved in ways analogous to those Canada as a nation has used to retrieve its archival heritage from Britain and France? Because of the dispersal of the Interior's archival legacy, patterns of research and historiographical interpretation have varied depending on which part of the legacy is consulted or emphasized. Broken

*provenance* leads to truncated history. Because of the complexity of the department, it is also a prime example of the necessity of the “history of the record” approach by archivists to the records in their care. A failure to understand in some depth the creator of the record leads to a failure to locate, acquire, describe, and make available the records themselves.

All these issues are addressed, explicitly and implicitly, in the three articles which follow by Gabrielle Blais, Doug Whyte, and Doug Bocking. They retrieve Interior’s legacy from limbo and place it on the archivist’s agenda for active consideration. Their efforts are a useful stimulus to researchers working in any one of those seven jurisdictions, especially those wishing to see the broader picture outside any one particular jurisdiction or those seeking to place their local concerns within their regional or national context.

In order to set these three detailed case studies in their historical and archival contexts, the present piece offers an overview of the Department of the Interior — its initial mandate, changing functions, organization, and records — and the interplay of these factors with each other over time.

The Department of the Interior was created by John A. Macdonald in 1873 to fulfil his nation-building vision in the West. Indeed, so important was this agency to the successful realization of the National Policy that, upon returning to power, Macdonald appointed himself his own Minister of the Interior for the key years 1878 to 1883. The department and the federal control it represented were to be central to the West because, unlike the other provinces which joined Confederation, the prairie region was to have no control over its land or other natural resources. These were reserved “for the purposes of the Dominion” and vested almost exclusively in the federal Department of the Interior. The same was true for the Peace River Block and the Railway Belt in British Columbia. This inferior constitutional position did not end with the creation of the separate provinces of Alberta and Saskatchewan in 1905 or with the gradual expansion of Manitoba, but only in 1930 when the West was fully settled and the original “purposes of the Dominion” were completed.

Macdonald’s creation grew rapidly as the West expanded and the role of government broadened. The eventual mandate of the Department of the Interior (and thus the principal subject foci of its records) was to explore the western region; remove the natives from the open plains; settle outstanding grievances with the Métis; survey and subdivide the area; establish land reserves for schools, the Hudson’s Bay Company, railways, towns, and swamp lands; grant or sell millions of acres of homestead lands; encourage immigration; lease lands and collect royalties for timber, grazing, mining, water power, and irrigation purposes; create the national parks system; protect wildlife and sponsor similar conservation activities; and administer and conduct scientific research on a whole range of natural resources. At one time or another over its sixty-three-year existence, Interior had, in addition to its central administrative, fiscal, and legal units, the following distinct branches and agencies under its umbrella: Dominion Lands, Timber and Grazing Lands, Mining Lands, School Lands, Ordnance, Admiralty, and Railway Lands, Swamp Lands, Land Patents, Supervisory Mining Engineer, Indian Affairs, Half-Breed Commission, North-West Mounted Police, Immigration, Geological Survey of Canada, Topographical Surveys, Legal Surveys, Geodetic Surveys, International Boundaries, Chief Geographer, Dominion Observatory, Irrigation, Water Power and Reclamation, Natural Resource Intelligence Service, Forestry, National and Historic Parks, Wildlife, Tourism, and most aspects of the administration of the Northwest Territories and Yukon.



Figure 1: *Cypress Hills Camp Near Big Plume Creek, North-West Territories (now Saskatchewan), 11 June 1883, G.M. Dawson, photographer, PA 50745. Parties of surveyors traversed the entire prairies under the aegis of the Department of the Interior to prepare the area for settlement and resource development. All photographs are courtesy of the National Archives of Canada.*



Figure 2: *Canadian Advertising for Immigrants in Britain, n.d., Mines and Resources Collection, C 9671. This mobile display, with its many symbols of agricultural prosperity, was one of numerous tactics employed by the federal government to attract settlers to the Canadian West.*

Neither the administrative structure nor operational focus of Interior remained static over these six decades. For the first ten to fifteen years, surveying the West was the central concern — at one point in the early 1880s the Surveyor General was also the Deputy Minister of the Interior. Immigration (and thus settlement) was not yet part of Interior's mandate while the various resource branches of the department did not come into their own until the turn of the century. The early emphasis rather was to prepare the West for settlers by removing the Indians to reserves, permitting the North-West Mounted Police to establish order, encouraging the construction of the railway, and especially subdividing the actual land for settlement. During this first period, scores of survey teams — topographical and geological — traversed the West. The records which they created not only documented their official activities but also contained fascinating sidelights. Geological surveyors, for example, were schooled in the natural history studies which dominated Victorian science; they collected specimens and maintained displays of them — the National Museums grew out of such activities on the part of the Geological Survey of Canada. Ethnology naturally fit in with these scientific interests and the surveyors' notebooks contain many surprisingly detailed observations of the native life and customs then vanishing — in addition to the expected geological calculations and figures, and botanical and mineral notes. To what use these were put, why they were kept in some cases and not in others, what impact this had on the Geological Survey of Canada and its evolution and its record-keeping will only be known by further study.

By the early 1890s, with the West peaceful from Ottawa's perspective, the Indians pacified, the land surveyed, and the region connected to Central Canada by a railway, Interior's operational focus changed to filling the prairies with settlers. This shift was graphically marked by the transfer of the Immigration Branch, which had been part of the Department of Agriculture from before Confederation, to the Department of the Interior in 1893. Here again the history of the record offers insights. Agriculture had not been a total failure in attracting immigrants to the prairies: groups of Icelanders, Jews, and Mennonites had been settled in the 1870s; some colonization companies with block settlement schemes had had moderate success; and a steady trickle of individual immigrants went west as well. Yet Agriculture's bureaucracy (whatever its other failings) was not equipped, from a records perspective, to cope with a huge systematic programme of immigration. Until the early 1890s, Agriculture did not use subject files, but rather individual docketts for incoming correspondence and separate letterbooks for outgoing replies to maintain its information over a wide range of distinct government programmes — immigration, agriculture, public health, census, archives, copyright, exhibitions, and others. Information on these programmes was scrambled together in the docket records system, indexed by name rather than subject, and indexed only on an annual basis rather than cumulatively over the years. This older records system made efficient, active administration very difficult: information on any one subject might be found in fifty separate locations under ten different indexing terms rather than on one subject file. Such systems were throwbacks to the era of passive, *laissez-faire* government. The expansion of government and new approaches to office organization and information control made many institutions abandon the cumbersome docket-letterbook system in favour of modern registry subject files which, by keeping incoming and outgoing correspondence on a specific subject over many years on a single file, combined with nominal, subject, and geographical indexes, permitted headquarters and field staff to respond to, follow up, and modify initiatives efficiently and effectively. In 1873-74, Interior was among the first federal departments to adopt this new records-keeping



Figure 3: *Menonite Settler Returning to Farm for Dinner after Discing. Taken Near Colonsay, Sask., n.d., Interior Collection, PA 44418. Individual homesteaders followed the surveyors to carve out farms from the virgin prairie.*



Figure 4: *Sheep Ranch on the Prairies, c. 1900-10, Western Development Museum Collection, PA 308791. Interior promoted ranching and other resource activities in the West where grain farming was not profitable.*

methodology. The Immigration Branch adopted the same system immediately after moving from Agriculture to Interior in 1893, perhaps facilitating in ways not yet fully understood the immigration boom a few years later.

While the suggestion that new records-keeping practices significantly affected the success of the 1890s immigration programme may cause some readers to smile in disbelief, archivists better than most realize that there is a close link between records-keeping systems and information control in an agency and the efficiency and effectiveness of that agency's bureaucracy in carrying out its programmes successfully. This influence of records-keeping systems has a long-term impact. It is not fanciful to suggest that the vast majority of studies of immigration concentrate on the post-1893 period simply because the records for that period are better organized than for the earlier one and far easier for researchers to use. Because of these contemporary and subsequent influences on our perception of the immigration activity of the 1890s, these new records management techniques perhaps deserve to rank with "the men in sheepskin coats" as an important causative factor in our history textbooks!

As the West filled with settlers who provided markets and a ready labour supply, the exploitation of its natural resources aside from agricultural land began to increase. Bureaucratic evolution hints at this process: a very small Timber, Mines and Grazing Branch emerged from the central Dominion Lands Branch in 1881; by 1898 this had evolved into the Timber, Mines, Grazing, and Irrigation Branch. Mining so grew in importance following the Klondike gold rush and the coal boom in Alberta that it necessitated a separate Mines Branch in 1906. By 1908 Irrigation followed suit in a new Forestry and Irrigation Branch, thus leaving behind a revamped Timber and Grazing Lands Branch. By 1912, Irrigation, spurred on by the apparent success of dryland farming in southern Alberta, had also achieved independent branch status. National Parks had gained a similar status in 1911.<sup>2</sup> Some of these sub-units in Interior were responsible for the exploitation of natural resources: receiving applications, issuing leases and permits, collecting rents and royalties, conducting inspections, levying fines, or, in the case of National Parks, promoting tourism. Each new unit in Interior began and maintained distinctive file registries and records offices. Other sub-units in Interior were concerned with scientific research into resource questions rather than with the exploitation of and generating revenue from resource development. Forestry evolved, for example, from early concerns over tree windbreaks on the prairies to sophisticated studies of silviculture through a system of forest reserves; National Parks grew from its initial base in the Western Rockies as a tourist appendage to the Canadian Pacific Railway to dedicated conservator of natural ecosystems, threatened wildlife, and historic sites; Water Power similarly changed from local concerns over stream diversions and settlers' dams to important work in water conservation and dryland reclamation through irrigation.

The records of Interior demonstrate this overall evolution from preparing the West for settlement to filling it with people to tapping its natural resources. The records reveal too in their organization, evolution, emphases, and contemporary use the more general change from a passive, regulatory approach to a more active, interventionist stance. The records generated by this process obviously offer a unique opportunity to study the creation of a new society in detail and depth. Especially noteworthy from an archival perspective, however, is that the records needed for such study quite naturally have the same complexity as the department which created them.



Figure 5: *Canadian Pacific Hotel [the Banff Spring Hotel now stands on this site] and Mt. Rundle in the Distance, Banff, Alberta, n.d., PA 31580. The encouragement of tourism and conservation in the new national parks system demonstrated Interior's diversifying interests.*



Figure 6: *Gold Mine, Rex Hill, Wekusko Lake, Man., 1918, F.J. Alcock, photographer, PA 15702. Mining was only one of many natural resource development activities falling under the wide mandate of the Department of the Interior.*

Each of the many branches and agencies within the Department of the Interior had a life of its own. Some branches were big enough to become separate departments. Most were in a regular state of flux, existing in and then emerging from the general administrative core of Interior, merging with other branches, splitting apart again, shifting to and from other parent departments besides Interior, widening in most cases but sometimes narrowing their legal functions and mandates, still others coexisting in strange alliances (National Parks were once bedfellows with Irrigation; Western Petroleum fell under Northern Administration for a time), and all developing varying degrees of field office activity in the West, sometimes independently, sometimes through the local agents of another branch if circumstances failed to warrant separate agents. Moreover, almost all branches in Interior had their own internal and ever-changing sub-units which followed a similar pattern of flux. All these shifts naturally affected the records created and maintained by these units. Files were brought forward from one branch to another; new titles and numbers and file jackets belonging to new registry systems often replaced or covered up old ones; other files were left behind in parent or predecessor branches where they became buried among dissimilar material; still others were submerged in larger general administrative series.

To complicate further the records maze, when Interior was abolished in 1936, its records for those functions and branches continuing under federal aegis, such as Forestry, Mines, National Parks, Water Resources, Immigration, Surveys, Indian Affairs, and Northern Administration were carried forward to new parent departments, and to new branches and sub-units within them, all of which continued the Interior pattern of shifting, merging, and splitting functions and organizational units and as a consequence the records of those units. Each of these subsequent organizations has records created by Interior among its own registry systems.<sup>3</sup>

This complexity of Interior's archival legacy was even further reinforced by the four Natural Resources Agreements and Acts of 1930, which transferred to the western provinces control over their own land and natural resources. This was done because the West demanded equality with the other provinces within Confederation and because the federal government then considered the "purposes of the Dominion" to be completed. The resource transfer agreements explicitly stated that any Interior records relating to the *active* administration of those resources should also be transferred to provincial control, so that there would be continuity of administration. In effect, this meant that almost all *local* records of Interior created and maintained in Western Canada by the department's multitude of agents became provincial property in 1930. These local records were eventually assigned to numerous series in the lands, forests, and natural resources departments in each of the three prairie provinces and, as a result, some now rest in provincial archives. In addition to these local records, many hundreds of boxes of Interior's headquarters' files relating to issues still active in 1930 were also turned over to the provinces — thus explaining why the National Archives' holdings of some series of Interior records are very thin for the 1920s and 1930s. These records transfers were much disputed — what was "active" for the provinces and what was needed (and therefore retained) federally for "precedent" or "legal" value proved particularly troublesome — and thus, while some records were shipped west in the 1930s, the last crates did not leave Ottawa until the 1950s. Other Interior records suffered even less happy fates: many were consigned to furnaces by the economic necessity of freeing office and filing cabinet space during the Depression; others were pulped in the patriotic zeal of paper salvage campaigns during



the Second World War; and still others could not be given away to reluctant provinces and were destroyed on a wide-scale basis in the early 1950s.

This bewildering complexity graphically illustrates why archivists must study the history of the records in their care. This is certainly not for some scholarly conceit but rather as archivists seeking essential archival knowledge. In the first place archivists need the results of such study in order to perform the basic archival functions of locating and appraising all the relevant records, re-creating (on paper) their *provenance* and original arrangement within the context of their original parent body, describing this multi-textured and layered *fond* clearly, and conveying this crucial sense of context and original order to researchers. For the records of the Department of the Interior, this is a task which has only just begun and which will involve sophisticated and time-consuming research by archivists to complete.

At a second level, the interrelationships uncovered by this archival research reveal valuable *provenance* information about the functions of the creators of the records. It has been suggested that such *provenance*-based information on creating agencies' functions and mandates is the key to future archival description and retrieval in the age of information overload, rather than the traditional content or subject indexing of each particular record.<sup>4</sup> Take the example revealed in the mundane daily records created by the North-West Mounted Police officer on the prairies. In reality, the police constable was much more than the famed law enforcement agent of popular history who confronted Sitting Bull, Louis Riel, or Almighty Voice. Rather, he became part of the daily fabric of western life, dealing with prairie fires; medical aid, quarantine, destitution, and relief; animal health and veterinary services; fuel supply; seed grain shortages; construction of early trails, roads, bridges, and ferry crossings; and much else, until such time as the growth in population warranted the placement of more specialized agents and officers in the region to undertake these tasks. Only by studying the nature of records and the functions of the people and institutions which created them can archivists uncover those crucial "access points" necessary for researchers to approach collections in a rational way. Without such *provenance* information, archivists and researchers alike would likely not know to look among NWMP records for evidence of cattle diseases in the 1890s. What could be said in like regard about immigration officers, land agents, surveyors, Crown timber agents, mine inspectors, park wardens, and a myriad of other officers who also worked for the Department of the Interior? If we knew more about the activities — or "functions" in Bearman and Lytle's phrasing — of such officials (and their employing institutions), we would know more about the content and context of the records which they created — without having to undertake the impossible task of indexing each and every one of the millions of records involved. And what of those curious little cross connections such as the geological surveyor faithfully recording data on Indians as well as on rocks? How many more such obscure interconnections exist, and who better than the archivist to uncover them for researchers?

To take a different example — the case of the new Immigration filing system of the early 1890s — what impact did changes in office organization and in the technology of transmitting and recording information have on the records themselves and thus on history? In Interior an advance in records-keeping occurred from cumbersome dockets and letterbooks to subject files, from straight numeric classification systems to subject-block duplex-numeric ones, from the messenger boy to the telephone, from the transcribing clerk to the typist, and from the integrated central office to scattered branch

ones in separate buildings. If the medium is part of the message, then archivists must also account for the form and physical characteristics of records, as well as for their context and content, and the very power of records and records-keeping systems as active, often biased agents of change instead of mere passive, neutral carriers of information.<sup>5</sup>

Such archival analysis of records, their creators, and their context, on both the first and second levels noted above, is not a luxurious frill but essential knowledge to permit the location and appraisal of records, their arrangement and description, and their intelligent use by all manner of researchers. Blais, Whyte, and Bocking in varying degrees demonstrate the importance for archivists to carefully study changes in records organization and classification, in series and sub-series split off from original registries, in levels of decision-making, in central, regional, and local activity, in bureaucratic and office evolution, and in the actual physical ownership and transmission of the documents.<sup>6</sup>

The three papers which follow demonstrate the many possibilities of deeper research into Interior's archival legacy. Perhaps more important, these four interconnected articles may encourage better understanding and better cooperation between provincial and territorial archives and the National Archives of Canada about the nature of the Department of the Interior's records, which in turn will lead to locating and properly describing all of its rich documentary heritage.

### Notes

- \* This essay is based largely on a presentation made at a session at the Annual Conference of the Association of Canadian Archivists at Winnipeg, 4 June 1986. The session was entitled "The Department of the Interior: Records Dispersal and Patterns of Use." My remarks then were designed to set the larger historical and archival context for the more detailed case studies which followed by Gabrielle Blais, Doug Whyte, and Doug Bocking. They are presented here, with some revisions, for the same purpose. This version has benefitted from comments received from Gabrielle Blais, Doug Whyte, Bruce Wilson, Sheila Powell, and especially Candace Loewen, which helped clarify and refine my arguments.
- 1 From the 1890s to 1936, this generalization is even more true for Yukon and the Northwest Territories, which also fell under Interior's purview, but which, unlike the prairies, had even weaker local administration to offset the power of the federal department and its agents.
- 2 This growth was not just structural, but also concerned staff and records. In 1897, the timber, mines, irrigation, and grazing functions at Interior's headquarters' offices required five people; by 1907 this had grown to sixteen, and by 1914 to seventy-nine. The figures for the various records-keeping areas of the department for the same years were 44, 64, and 154. (Figures compiled from *The Civil Service List of Canada* (Ottawa, 1897, 1907, 1914). The increase in office paperwork was equally remarkable: in 1901-2 Interior used 1,976 pads of paper and 304,000 envelopes; ten years later the figures were 10,980 and 1.9 million. Department of Public Printing and Stationery, *Annual Report* (Ottawa, 1901-2), tables 10 and 16; (Ottawa, 1911-12), tables 9 and 15.
- 3 Just the *direct* linear federal descendants of Interior as a "parent" department include Mines and Resources; Resources and Development; Mines and Technical Surveys; Northern Affairs and National Resources; Energy, Mines, and Resources; Indian Affairs and Northern Development; and Environment.
- 4 See the suggestive comments by David Bearman and Richard Lytle, "The Power of the Principle of Provenance," *Archivaria* 21 (Winter 1985-86), pp. 14-27.
- 5 This is well suggested in Hugh Taylor, "My Very Act and Deed": The Role of Documents in Relation to Process," in manuscript form and to be published shortly. I made the same argument in "Paper Trails" (see full reference below).
- 6 It seems pedantic to fully document this brief overview essay. The archival debate on the "history of the record" is most completely stated in my "From Information to Knowledge: An Intellectual Paradigm for Archives," *Archivaria* 19 (Winter 1984-85), pp. 28-49. Footnote 2 of that article outlines many previous writings on the subject, while more recent issues of *Archivaria* contain pieces or passing references that continue to address particular aspects of it.

The evolution of Interior, and especially an analysis of its records-keeping systems and their influence on the agency's administrative "tone," is the subject (in part) of my fully documented piece, "Paper Trails: A Study in Northern Records and Northern Administration, 1898-1958," in W.R. Morrison and Ken Coates, eds., *"The Purposes of the Dominion": Essays in Honour of Morris Zaslow* (forthcoming 1988). That article also contains references to the post-1936 fate of Interior's records, and the nature of subsequent federal resource administration. The various transfers of records are well documented in the four-part file 5072360 in the National Archives of Canada (NA), Records of the Department of the Interior, RG 15, vol. 2006; and in the Records of the Public Records Committee, NA, RG 35/7. The present essay draws heavily as well from my "The Canadian West: An Archival Odyssey through the Records of the Department of the Interior," *The Archivist* 12 (July-August 1985), pp. 1-4.

The best published background study remains Chester Martin's *"Dominion Lands" Policy* (Toronto, 1938), while Gérard La Forest's *Natural Resources and Public Property under the Canadian Constitution* (Toronto, 1969) is very useful, especially chapter three. Peter Gillis and Thomas Roach's volume, *Lost Initiatives: Canada's Forest Industries, Forest Policy and Forest Conservation* (Westport, Conn., 1986), is essential reading for anyone wishing to understand federal and provincial resource administration in this century. The manuscript guides by Peter Gillis and by Irene Spry and Bennett McCardle referred to in the notes of the following papers are also highly recommended.