

The Records Go West: Department of the Interior Records in the Saskatchewan Archives

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When Canada acquired Rupert's Land from the Hudson's Bay Company in 1870 it viewed the acquisition of new lands as an opportunity to promote national prosperity and development. To do so, the federal government decided it would be essential to retain control over the natural resources in order to use them to promote federal programmes. When Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta were granted provincial status the federal government retained control over the natural resources of the provinces. It was not until 1930, after long negotiations, that the federal government finally gave control to the provinces.

Responsibility for the federal government's administration of the natural resources included within the boundaries of the three provinces was, for the most part, assigned to the Department of the Interior which had been established in 1873. Consequently, the records created by Interior contained a vast amount of information on the West, including all aspects of land holding. In the course of time these records were partially dispersed to the provinces. Four hundred and thirty metres are now in the Saskatchewan Archives Board (SAB). This amount is considerable and its transfer to the archives is an interesting story. The records came to the SAB offices by two different routes and at different times.

The first series of records, consisting of local agency and federal headquarters files relating to forestry, mining, lands, parks, and game, came to the archives from provincial government offices. They are the records that were turned over to Saskatchewan by the Dominion government when control of the natural resources was transferred to the provinces in 1930. Most of these records were still active or were required for reference purposes to enable the province to carry out its new responsibilities in the administration of its natural resources.

The provinces wanted to take over all the records in Ottawa relating to their lands but it was finally agreed, after discussions between the two levels of government, that the federal government would be required to turn over only records of land that were then actually under entry, sale, or lease. The federal government also agreed to grant the provinces access to earlier records if needed.¹ Although the question of what records the provinces actually needed to enable them to administer their natural resources was debatable, the Dominion government did have an obligation to ensure that sufficient records were available to the provinces to make it possible for them to carry out their new

responsibilities. This partial dispersal of records of the Department of the Interior was the beginning of what was to become a very complicated archival situation.² The department remained in existence until 1936 when its remaining responsibilities and records were transferred to other federal departments. Subsequently, to complicate matters further, some of the archival records originally refused to the provinces in 1931 were transferred to them. Some of the records transferred in 1931, notably the land registers and survey records, continue to be used by provincial departments today. Most of the records, however, in the course of time ceased to be required by the provincial departments for administrative purposes or were superseded by provincial files. The records that were no longer active were, in the early 1950s, turned over to the Saskatchewan Archives where their identity was maintained even though some had been integrated into the appropriate departmental record group.

The second group of Department of the Interior records now in the Saskatchewan Archives consist of files of the former Dominion Lands Branch. These are the homestead files. In the fulfillment of its responsibilities, the Dominion Lands Branch created a separate file for each piece of land homesteaded in the western provinces. In addition to the documents that had to be completed by the homesteader, the files also contain any interdepartmental memoranda or correspondence between the department and the homesteader; sometimes documents such as citizenship records, will, and other similar records were added to the file. Once the homesteader had satisfied the Department that he had completed the requirements of the law, patent or title to the land was issued and the file was closed. At the time of the transfer of natural resources to the provinces there was a large number of these dormant homestead files which formed part of the old records of the Department of the Interior. These files were not among the archival records judged to be required for administrative purposes by the provinces and were retained by Ottawa where they were available if required for legal or historical purposes. Eventually many of these records were transferred to the provinces. The Saskatchewan records were transferred directly to the Saskatchewan Archives in 1956. The story of the transfer of these records to Saskatchewan and to the other provinces indicates some interesting things about archives.

The question of the disposition of the land records of the Department of the Interior first surfaces in the files of the Saskatchewan Archives Office in 1943. As the Saskatchewan Archives Act was not passed until 1945, the correspondence was with its predecessor, the Public Records Office. In 1936 Dr. A.S. Morton, Head of the Department of History at the University of Saskatchewan, initiated steps to preserve historical records in the province. As a result of his efforts the university offered certain archival facilities to the government. This offer was accepted and the Minister of Education established an informal Committee on Public Records.³ The university also established a Public Records Office and appointed Dr. A.S. Morton "Adviser and Keeper for the preservation of such Public Records as the Government may approve."⁴ The space allocated and available to the archives in 1943 was one room twenty-five feet by twenty-five feet in the School for the Deaf which was near the university campus.⁵

Initially Dr. Morton conducted some record surveys in Regina and began the task of reconstructing the lost correspondence files of the North West Territories government. To do this he obtained access to the old Department of the Interior records which were then under the control of the Department of Mines and Resources and stored in the Vimy Building in Ottawa. He even managed to borrow 375 files from Ottawa to use in

Saskatoon where typescripts were made of the important material.⁶ In 1942 the Department of Mines and Resources received authority to offer the old records of the Department of the Interior relating to lands to the provinces and, if they did not want them, to destroy those of no value, microfilm those which seemed to warrant preservation on film, and turn over the remainder to the Dominion Archivist.⁷ The provinces, with the exception of Manitoba, did not appear to want the records and the destruction of the bulk of the records appeared imminent.

Dr. Gustave Lanctot, the Dominion Archivist, asked Dr. Morton for his opinion on the disposition of the Dominion Lands files. In doing so he said that "under war exigencies" consideration was being given to destroying the records and that he was advised that the provinces had been offered the records but were not interested.⁸ In his reply Morton pointed out that the provinces would not be interested in the records as the "inactive" files would not be of any use to the provincial departments responsible for administering natural resources. He went on to give his evaluation,

A very considerable proportion would be pure routine and would have little or no historical value save as indicating the party or parties who took the land. But a smaller proportion would involve correspondence such as I saw with people who, from some trouble or another had not been able to make good the terms of their contracts. This correspondence would, in many cases, give an insight into questions of economics, ... agricultural conditions and history.... As it would be very difficult to separate the valuable items from those exemplifying mere routine without much study, it would appear to be wise to save them all — to keep the chaff for the sake of the wheat.⁹

Morton went on to speak of the value of the correspondence between the Department of the Interior and the Territorial government of which he had gained considerable knowledge during his earlier work on the reconstruction of the lost correspondence files of the North West Territories government. He ended by suggesting that his office was the only institution in western Canada that would be interested in the records and if the records were transferred to him he would be willing to make copies of the finding aids available to the other provinces.¹⁰

Quite clearly Morton's primary interest was in the policy files. While Lanctot agreed with Morton that there was a great deal of information contained in the files "that could be combined into a synthesis of historical and sociological interest and documentation," he concluded that the files should be stored in Ottawa for the duration of the war.¹¹ Morton, however, continued to pursue the negotiations for Saskatchewan. He advised Lanctot that he was looking for storage space and that he expected Ottawa to pay the cost of packing and shipping.¹² Morton wanted, and expected to get, all the files and was convinced that while Lanctot spoke of Dominion Lands files, "his letters imply he means everything not just the files of the Patents."¹³ Professor Morton succeeded in locating possible storage space and felt the next step would be to get a formal agreement for transfer of the records between the federal and provincial governments, after which the records could be shipped.¹⁴ The acquisition of the records, he believed, would "go a long distance towards making the University [of Saskatchewan] the centre for the study of the history of the Prairie Provinces."¹⁵ Alas, the dream was not to be realized.

Alberta objected to the proposal to transfer some of its records to Saskatchewan; as well, the amount of money required to ship the records, estimated at \$9,000, was not

available.¹⁶ Lanctot advised Morton that they had “weathered the storm” and the records would not be destroyed. He also said that Manitoba wanted its files.¹⁷ In a final gesture Lanctot suggested that, since Alberta was not ready to accept its files, the province of Manitoba should receive its land files and the remainder be sent to Saskatchewan. He recognized the difficulty of segregating the records and of dealing with Alberta’s objections, and suggested Morton undertake to correspond with Alberta.¹⁸

Any idea Morton had that the Dominion Archivist intended to turn over all the records to Saskatchewan must have been dispelled by this recommendation. Morton subsequently went to Ottawa at the request of the Department of Mines and Resources to examine the records in more detail and make recommendations regarding their historical value. At the request of the department, he also consulted with officials in Manitoba, Alberta, and British Columbia regarding possible arrangements to accept the land records.¹⁹ No further action appears to have been taken at that time. Morton died in January 1945 and it was not until 1956 that land records, and only the land records, of the old Department of the Interior were transferred to the provinces. Before they were sent most of the files were stripped to reduce their bulk and only what was considered important was retained.²⁰

Both Morton and Lanctot responded to the need to ensure that the old Department of the Interior records were not destroyed because of lack of storage space, and their intervention was successful. The proposal to disperse the records could have been defended archivally as official custody would have been retained, but no one seems to have been concerned about the effect of dispersal on research.²¹

The Saskatchewan Archives was pleased in 1956 to get the land records and regarded them as “one of the most significant collections in the Archives.”²² The acquisition involved a very heavy commitment in staff time, space, and filing equipment. It soon became apparent that a name index was required if the records were to be opened to research and that involved a further heavy commitment of resources. Initially the records were used infrequently by researchers and then mainly to establish proof of age or citizenship. In recent years, with the growth of interest in genealogy and local history, the files have been heavily used.

Homestead or land files are a form of case file. Each file is concerned with the patenting of a particular piece of land, usually, but not always, the basic unit being a quarter section. The files were created and maintained to ensure that the requirements of the law were met before title to the land was transferred from the Crown to the applicant. During the life of the file a considerable amount of information about the applicant was gathered. Much of this information, as is typical with case files, was incidental to the main reason for creation of the file but it is this information that has proven of interest to researchers today, especially local historians and genealogists. Current local histories have taken as their focus the histories of families who founded and lived in the communities. Without the resource of the homestead files there would be many gaps in these histories as there are often no other records of the pioneers who died or whose families left the community.

The homestead files have also proven to be a useful source for other studies. They have been used for research on ethnic and group settlements and on the history of the settlement of a particular area.²³ Some limited use of the files has been made by geographers to study settlement patterns or to analyze changes that man has made to his environment. The files contain a great deal of information which, as Lanctot wrote, “could be combined into a synthesis of historical and sociological interest.”²⁴ The advent of computers has facilitated

studies which depend on the analysis of information from a great number of files. These studies will undoubtedly come and they will add much to our understanding of this important period of western Canadian history.

Finally, a brief consideration of the Department of the Interior records that were transferred to Saskatchewan when control of natural resources was transferred to the provinces should be made. As has already been noted these files were required by the province to administer its natural resources and the transfer of the files was a necessary part of the change in responsibilities. The records transferred covered all aspects of the natural resources programme. These records are, by their nature, very similar to the homestead files in that they are basically case files and not policy files. They contain specific and detailed information about individual mines, timber berths, pieces of land, or about the administration of the game acts.

The file for gold dredging lease number 233 will serve to illustrate the possible usefulness of these files.²⁵ The file is for a gold dredging lease on the North Saskatchewan River near Prince Albert that was active from about 1905 to 1909. The existence of this dredging lease is fairly well-known and in fact there is a provincial historic site marker near the original location of the mining operation. Newspapers of the period reported on the operation of the dredge and a small tour operation developed which took visitors up river to see the dredge in operation. At first visitors were allowed on board the dredge but this was stopped after some of them criticized its operation, presumably because of its adverse effect on the environment.²⁶ During the course of its operational life the file accumulated considerable information about the dredging lease, and provided some useful insights into the problems encountered by the lease holders in trying to develop the mining operation in a pioneer community. The mining operation failed because it proved impossible to separate the gold from the river sands. Whether there would have been enough gold recovered to make the mining venture viable was never established.

This dredging file is but one example. Many of the other Department of the Interior files provide equally interesting information about early mining, forestry, and land development in Saskatchewan. In some cases the files were continued by the provincial department while in other cases new files were started. When the information from the Department of the Interior files is combined with that of the provincial department a fairly complete documentation can be established for individual leases or industries and the development of natural resources in the province. In many cases these records are the only ones available to the historian as individual company records have not survived, or are inaccessible. As a result these files are a vital source of information for the researcher interested in the history of a particular company or industry, or in how the natural resources of the province have been used or developed. While the mining and forestry files have not yet attracted the extensive use that the homestead files have, they remain a rich source of material for future historical research.

The old Department of the Interior files in the Saskatchewan Archives have been an important and, in many ways, unique source of information for users. It is interesting to speculate how many of these files would have survived had they, in the normal course of affairs, been subjected to archival sampling techniques. What a rich source of material might have been lost to the researcher! It is also interesting that the files that passed through the offices of provincial departments survived without adequate archival legislation in place to protect them.

The transfer of a portion of the Department of the Interior records to the provinces created an archival nightmare when considered in the light of the archival theories of *provenance* and *respect de fonds*. It also created very difficult problems for researchers who must travel between Ottawa and the provinces to see the complete record. This is not a problem for most of the current users of the files. Local historians and genealogists require only the information that, albeit inadvertently, is in the department's operational files. When they have required more information it has been possible to meet most of their needs by reference to statutes, departmental regulations, orders-in-council, sessional papers, and published material. For the researcher whose studies go beyond information contained in the provincial files, better finding aids and possibly the integration of provincial and federal inventories would be of help. New technology may make it possible to reunite the records. The problems are there but they are not insurmountable.

Notes

- 1 See National Archives of Canada, Records of the Department of the Interior, RG 15, vol. 64, file 5601898, Minutes of Meeting of 18 May 1931.
- 2 For a discussion of the problems created by the dispersal of records see Michel Duchéin, "Theoretical Principles and Practical Problems of *Respect des Fonds* in Archival Services," *Archivaria* 16 (Summer 1983), pp. 64-82. See also S. Muller, J.A. Feith, R. Fruin, *Arrangement and Description of Archives* (New York, 1940), p. 23; Hilary Jenkinson, *A Manual of Archives Administration* (London, 1937), pp. 32-37; and Ernest Posner, "Effects of Changes of Sovereignty on Archives," in Ken Munden, ed., *Archives and the Public Interest. Selected Essays by Ernest Posner* (Washington, 1967), p. 177.
- 3 Saskatchewan Archives Board (hereafter SAB), *First Report of the Saskatchewan Archives Board, 1945-46* (Regina, 1946), p. 16.
- 4 SAB, A18. President W. Murray to A.S. Morton, 21 April 1937. Dr. Morton was relieved of some departmental duties and advised that \$50 per month of his salary would be regarded as payment for his new duties and that this amount would continue to be paid to him after his retirement from teaching duties in 1940.
- 5 *Ibid.*, Report of Dr. Morton's Visit to Regina and Ottawa in the Interests of the Public Records of Saskatchewan, September 2nd to October 7th, 1942, n.d.
- 6 See SAB, *First Report of the Saskatchewan Archives Board, 1945-46*, p. 16.
- 7 SAB, A18, Copy of PC 10772, 26 November 1942.
- 8 *Ibid.*, G. Lanctot to A.S. Morton, 5 October 1943.
- 9 *Ibid.*, A.S. Morton to G. Lanctot, 16 October 1943.
- 10 *Ibid.*
- 11 *Ibid.*, G. Lanctot to A.S. Morton, 26 October 1943.
- 12 *Ibid.*, A.S. Morton to G. Lanctot, 4 November 1943.
- 13 *Ibid.*, A.S. Morton to G.W. Simpson, 19 November 1943.
- 14 *Ibid.*, A.S. Morton to G. Lanctot, 19 November 1943.
- 15 *Ibid.*, A.S. Morton memo for file, 21 November 1943.
- 16 SAB, A18, G.E. Britnell to A.S. Morton, 27 November 1943.
- 17 *Ibid.*, G. Lanctot to A.S. Morton, 16 December 1943.
- 18 *Ibid.*, G. Lanctot to A.S. Morton, 14 January 1944. Enclosing Lanctot memo to Dr. Camsell.
- 19 *Ibid.*, Report by A.S. Morton on his visits to Ottawa, Winnipeg and Edmonton *re* the Disposal of the Documents of the Old Department of the Interior, n.d.
- 20 *Ibid.*, C.W. Jackson to Hon. W.S. Lloyd, 19 July 1954; L.H. Thomas to C.W. Jackson, 4 August 1954.
- 21 Jenkinson, *A Manual of Archives Administration*, p. 37.
- 22 SAB, *Eighth Report of the Saskatchewan Archives Board, 1956-58*, p. 15.
- 23 See, for example, Diane Payment, *Batoche 1870-1910* (Winnipeg, 1983); Lyle Dick, *Factors Affecting Prairie Settlement. A Case Study of Abernethy Saskatchewan* (Winnipeg, 1986).
- 24 SAB, A18, G. Lanctot to A.S. Morton, 26 October 1943.
- 25 SAB, Department of Natural Resources, Mines Branch, Lease file 233.
- 26 *The Prince Albert Times*, 6 September 1906, p. 8.