

## *An Administrative History for Indian Affairs in Ontario*

by MICHAEL GOURLIE

The expansion of academic interest in aboriginal studies and the increasing number of land claims by native peoples have resulted in a growing demand at the National Archives of Canada for use of Record Group (RG) 10, Records Relating to Indian Affairs. Of all the enquiries referred to the Social Affairs and Natural Resources Records Section, which is responsible for the fonds of one-half of all federal government departments and agencies including Indian Affairs and Northern Development, 62 per cent of oral and 55 per cent of written enquiries pertain to aboriginal issues. Given this high volume of reference, one of the custodial priorities for RG 10 is the production of finding aids and guides designed to answer basic, often repetitive questions about Indian affairs. In this vein, a substantial amount of work was completed during the summer of 1991 on a guide to the administrative history of the Ontario regional offices of the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development.

When first attempting to undertake research in RG 10, most researchers start with the records produced by headquarters in Ottawa. These central records are extremely valuable for documenting department-wide policies and providing a national perspective on of Indian affairs. As a result of their obvious importance, the National Archives has focused on maintaining intellectual control of these records and making them accessible through computer-generated keyword indexes and large microfilming projects.

While the importance of headquarters records is unquestioned, there is another dimension to the management of Indian affairs in Canada. While the central records of the department contain a large amount of information about local affairs, records produced by the department's field offices, such as agencies and districts, often contain unique information about regional events and provide a different perspective on the administration of the department's programmes. Despite the importance of better custodial control of this material, regional records of the department have been relatively neglected by the National Archives in favour of headquarters records. One reason for this has been the lack of time to do the research necessary in order to understand the context of the regional records, which ultimately results in inadequate description of the material.

Even for those local records which have been fully arranged and described, the pressing problem for researchers is the flux introduced by administrative change, especially

the instability of the regional bureaucracy itself. Agency and district names change as a result of amalgamations or abolitions. Bands change their names and are transferred among different local units. These changes can baffle researchers who must attempt to identify several different bureaucratic units in order to locate all records pertaining to a particular band, whose name may have changed. In addition, archivists may be puzzled by an accession unit consisting of the records of seemingly unrelated agencies and districts. Given the demands placed upon archivists in the normal course of acquisition, processing and reference service, there is no time to produce an integrated guide combining regional administrative history and the intricacies of corporate name changes.

Despite its inherent complexities, such an endeavour proved to be a fascinating aspect of a Master of Archival Studies summer practicum. An integral part of the University of British Columbia SLAIS programme, the practicum is intended to build upon the appraisal, acquisition, accessioning, arrangement, description and reference functions taught during the first year of the degree course. In addition to performing the regular duties of an archivist, the student is required to work on a large, comprehensive project. Rather than focus yet again on headquarters records, the practicum project chosen in this case was the production of a guide linking the convoluted administrative structure in Ontario with the bands administered by it.

The first step was to determine what format the guide should take. The British Columbia Regional Office of Indian and Northern Affairs had previously produced an administrative history for the British Columbia region, which proved valuable as a starting-point.<sup>1</sup> The approach adopted in British Columbia focused on the administrative history of the agency, its successors and predecessors, as well as the appointment dates of agents. While some of these elements were incorporated into the Ontario project, the ultimate format for the Ontario guide included the bands administered by the agency; this was considered a more useful access point for researchers than the names of the agents. Once the format had been decided upon, research began.

The primary source for this study was the records in RG 10 itself, which contains numerous files pertaining to personnel and changes in the structure of the department. The most useful—yet frustrating—source in RG 10 was G.M. Matheson's "Historical Directory of Indian Agents and Agencies in Canada,"<sup>2</sup> a list of agents produced approximately fifty years ago by a former head of the Indian Affairs Records Branch, and last updated in the 1950s. While Matheson lists agencies as well as the names and dates of the appointment of the agents, he does not always indicate the source of information or fully explain the information presented. The directory also tends to focus more on the agents than on the actual bureaucratic structure or the bands within it. For example, the directory occasionally lists personnel as working in a particular agency before an agency of that name formally existed. While this directory was the only available guide to local administrative history until the summer of 1991, it was not entirely accurate.

Another source of information was the Orders in Council produced by the Privy Council, located in RG 2. When individuals were appointed as Indian agents, an Order in Council was usually necessary to approve this action. The Orders usually contain such mundane information as the agent's salary, but may also indicate the reason why the agency in question was established or altered. This source often provides information concerning the bureaucratic structure which Matheson did not include in his directory.

In addition, file-codes and cross-references on the Orders occasionally led to obscure RG 10 files that contain further information.

The new Ontario guide should alleviate many of the problems previously associated with using regional Indian Affairs and Northern Development records in Ontario. The structure of the guide provides several access points to the regional bureaucracy. The table of contents serves as a list of agencies in existence in Ontario since approximately 1845. It is followed by a brief overview of the development of the regional bureaucracy, explaining the evolution of the superintendencies, agencies and districts which administered Indian affairs in the province. This overview leads into the individual entries for each superintendency, agency or district. Each entry records the agency name, the date of establishment, the date of dissolution, the bands administered by the agency, any notes regarding the administrative history of the agency, and the predecessors and successors of the agency. On the entry sheets are references to the sources that contain the information about the agency and its structure. Finally, an index at the end of the agency entry sheets links each band to all the agencies which administered it. By using this index, researchers can determine which bureaucratic units have administered a band over time and examine the records of those units. While Matheson's list of agents works in tandem with the guide to complete the picture of the agency, the contrast between Matheson's directory and the new guide, in terms of the volume of information and its presentation, is striking (*see Figures 1 and 2*).

Several weeks' of work has produced a worthwhile product. Despite missing pieces of information concerning certain bands and agencies, notably in the pre-Confederation period, the guide should prove helpful to more than just the researching public. As regional records reach the National Archives, archivists will now be able to determine with certainty how and why records of defunct agencies have ended up in modern districts, and predict which records should arrive from these districts. As the National Archives begins to acquire records through its planned acquisition strategy, the guide may help archivists to fill in or explain gaps and suggest reasons why certain agencies are not represented in the RG 10 holdings. The Access Section of the Government Archives Division, which deals with RG 10-related privacy issues, should also find the guide useful. Researchers possessing a band council resolution are permitted access to otherwise restricted records pertaining to that band. Using the guide, the Access Section can accurately determine where such records may be located and which of the local office's records the researcher may see without violating the privacy of other bands.

At present, only the Ontario region has been the subject of a guide which combines bands and agencies. Now that an acceptable format has been found, the production of further guides for the rest of Canada will make regional aboriginal records more understandable and useful to researchers and archivists alike.

*Agency Name Register*

**Agency Name:** Couchiching Agency

**Date of Establishment:** 16 March 1871 (c/c 407) \*\*\*

**Date of Dissolution:** 20 July 1903 (Matheson, p. 211) \*\*

**Bands Administered:**

Hungry Hall 1 (1871-1903)

Hungry Hall 2 (1871-1903)

Long Sault 1 (1871-1903)

Long Sault 2 (1871-1903)

Manitou Rapids 1 (1871-1903)

Manitou Rapids 2 (1871-1903)

Little Forks (1871-1903)

Couchiching (1871-1903)

Stangecoming (1871-1903)

Naicatchewenin (1871-1903)

Seine River (1871-1903)

Lac La Croix (1871-1903)

Sturgeon Lake (1871-1903)

**Administrative History**

In 1871, R.J.N. Pither was given a one-year contract to act as agent to the Indians near the Fort Francis area. According to an 1887 memorandum to the Privy Council (3777:38168)\*, Pither continued to act as agent, apparently without a renewal of his contract, until his position was confirmed by the Privy Council on 12 April 1887 (c/c 723). The spelling of the name has varied over time ('Coucheeching', 'Coutcheeching'), but this form of the name seems to have been the most consistently used.

Matheson (p. 211) incorrectly states that this agency was closed on 1 August 1897 and placed under the Rat Portage Inspectorate. There is no mention of the closure of the Couchiching Agency in the memorandum proposing the creation of the inspectorate (3877:91839-1), and the Order-in-Council appointing Agent J.P. Wright in 1900 (c/c 1763-17) indicates that he was only replacing Magnus Begg, the previous agent who had been appointed in 1896.

**Predecessor Agency/Agencies:** none

**Successor Agency/Agencies:** Fort Frances Agency

\*\*\* Order-in-Council 407 of 1871

\*\* Matheson's Directory (see Note 2)

\* RG 10 reference code: file where supporting documents were located

**Figure 1:** Page for Couchiching Agency, G.M. Matheson's "Directory"

(Coucheeching)		
		(Manitoba)
Name changed to Fort Frances 20 July 1903 (245540)		
Buffalo Pointe #36 - transferred from Kenora Apr. 8, 1940 - Big Grassy Reservation #59 - transferred from Kenora - May 1, 1954		
Pither, R.J.N.	Apptd. - for this agency	- 1879
McCracken, Jas.	“	- 9th Jan. 1888
Cornish, F.C.	“	- Mch. 1891
Begg, M.	“	- 30th Dec. 1896
Agency closed & placed under the Rat Portage Inspectorate 1st Aug. 1897		
Wright, J.P.	apptd.	13 July 1900
Wright, J.P.	reinstated	
Spencer, Alonzo		Nov. 1st, 1924
“	died	May 30, 1939
Lockhart, J.F.	(Clerk in Charge)	May 30, 1939
“	apptd. Indian Agent	April 1, 1941
“	Supt.	Dec. 8, 1947
“	transferred - Adm. 0. Grade 4 North Bay	Dec. 31, 1953
O'Neill, J.T.	Supt.	Jan. 1, 1954
“	transferred to Sault Ste. Marie	March 15, 1956
Cooper, R.G.	Supt.	March 15, 1956

**Figure 2:** Page for Couchiching Agency, *New Ontario Regional History*

### Notes

- 1 Mary Ann Pylypchuk, "Organizational History of Indian Affairs in British Columbia" (draft report, Litigation Support Directorate, British Columbia Region, Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, October 1990).
- 2 RG 10, volume 11,190, NA.