

An Inventory of Archival Resources in Northwestern Ontario

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In most communities across Canada, a wealth of archival resources exists outside the official repositories of federal and provincial government offices. Local historical materials can be found in many places: municipal offices, schools, business offices, service clubs, and churches, for example. While these local records can be of great value to the community and to the region, they are also valuable to researchers who require detailed information and long series of documents or statistics. Local fonds and collections can be particularly useful for research because of the unique personal papers, public and private records, oral tapes, memoirs, and photographs that they contain. Though individual collections might be maintained in an orderly fashion and described according to accepted rules, there usually is no readily available inventory of all the fonds and collections in a community or region.¹ Furthermore, these records are not necessarily seen as important to those with responsibility for their care; without such an inventory, these records might remain unknown to potential users, or might well be lost.

This report describes a recently-completed project that undertook to identify and develop a descriptive inventory of archival resources in northwestern Ontario. The project was funded under the now-defunct Canadian Studies Research Tools Programme of SSHRCC, and by the Lakehead University Centre for Northern Studies.

Archival records in northwestern Ontario date back to the early days of settlement and reflect the diversity of the region's ethnic and economic heritage. The region covered in the inventory includes those communities lying west of Thunder Bay, north of the international boundary, and south of Highway 17 that are accessible by road. (Aboriginal communities and the more remote locations are to be covered in separate volumes.) Most of the communities covered in the inventory are related to the development of resource industries, primarily forestry, pulp and paper, and mining, with others involved in tourism and farming. Communities in northwestern Ontario generally follow two spatial patterns: dispersed communities that lie along the main highways and secondary roads (often forestry or mining towns), and clusters of communities located in farming enclaves or related to

historical tourism centres. These patterns, of course, are relevant for the collection of material for the inventory. In certain stages, long distances were travelled between towns; in others, several communities could be explored during one field trip.

Using ideas and methods developed in a similar project,² a team of researchers based in Thunder Bay made a dozen trips into the region to collect information. Prior to these visits to communities, letters describing the project were sent to municipalities, museums, libraries, and recreation directors, all viewed as the key sources of archival material and of further leads on collections. To generate additional community-level interest, letters were sent to the editors of the local papers describing the project and requesting assistance from residents. Though the response to these initiatives was not overwhelming, they were deemed successful and appropriate public relations gestures. These letters emphasized that this project would not involve removing any material from communities; rather, the goal was to inform potential users about the existence of the material. This is an important issue in most regions where outlying communities view the central or dominating town as acquisitive in many different ways.

The researchers spent between one and ten days collecting information in each community, sometimes using one town as a base for expeditions to surrounding centres. With a general idea of the types of fonds and collections likely to be found in each community based on its size and function, the researchers started their search in the most obvious places: municipal offices, churches, schools, and museums. In the very smallest of communities, only municipal records could be expected; medium-sized towns might contain churches, service clubs, and schools. The larger regional centres could have museums, newspaper offices, libraries, and a greater variety of material. After working through the obvious sources, the researchers moved on to others, sometimes aided by suggestions from local people, and often through the use of a telephone directory.

Much of the work involved creating an inventory of the fonds or collection itself. Some organizations, including several municipalities, museums, churches, and school boards, had completed inventories of their holdings. In these cases, the researchers confirmed the comprehensiveness of the list and the storage and access conditions. However, full inventories had not been undertaken for most of the fonds and collections. The collection of this information extended from May to December of 1992, and required nearly 1,400 person hours to complete. Most of this time was spent in the communities, although some consisted of follow-up letters and phone calls to particular repositories.

The inventory is organized by community and type of repository (e.g., municipal office, service club, church).³ Communities were assigned numbers and each category of repository was assigned a letter. To further identify the fonds and collections in a particular community, a third designation was given to distinguish between various fonds or collections of the same type. This system provides the basis for the inventory's three indexes. The first lists alphabetically each community and the fonds and collections found there, enabling researchers to determine the nature and extent of records found in a particular community. The second index lists the archival resources by type of repository and gives the locations and

specific identifier for all fonds and collections of that type. Examples of the first two indexes appear below. The third index provides a detailed, alphabetical listing of records held within fonds and collections, including, for example, titles of local history publications, special projects, and unusual documents. This third index will be particularly helpful in cases where the records of a community, individual, or organization are now held in another location. In addition to donations of material, this situation most frequently reflects that the number of residents in a community has declined considerably, causing organizations and the municipality to discontinue operations.

The actual listings in the inventory describe the archival resources according to the type of record. Textual materials are described first, usually in the order in which they are catalogued or stored, but also in alphabetical or some other logical order when necessary. It was expected that the search would uncover interesting and useful material related to all aspects of life in northwestern Ontario. Some of the more exciting finds include an original of Treaty No. 3 and an unpublished piece of fiction entitled "The Girl at the Gate" by Lucy Maude Montgomery, both held at the Lake of the Woods Museum. Less spectacular but nonetheless important for researchers are the approximately two hundred oral history tapes of individuals associated with Quetico Park and the one thousand early photographs held at the John B. Ridley Research Library near Atikokan; and the extensive municipal collections, which include such items as election and voters lists, welfare records, vital statistics, town maps and plans, and records of defunct local organizations.

Although gaps do exist in the completeness and detail of the inventory, we believe this project was timely and will prove useful to researchers. Regional inventories are few and far between, but enable users to have a picture of the region's resources, providing a place for researchers to start and a point of comparison. This inventory should be particularly helpful since much material has been gathered by organizations located in the regional centres.

Another important outcome of the project relates to its potential in encouraging more attention to be paid to the condition and use of archival resources. Much of this material is not stored in archives; rather, it is found in boxes or on shelves in rooms, basements, attics, and other spaces that are not currently needed. Without proper maintenance and storage, a considerable volume of material is at risk from humidity, water damage, fire, and inadvertant disposal. It is hoped that, by alerting communities to their archival resources, the project will encourage improved storage and organization of materials where necessary, and greater community interest in these important components of heritage.

Notes

- 1 A number of projects have been implemented, including the Toronto Area Archivists' Group's inventory of archival resources in fourteen regions in Ontario and a four-volume inventory of archival resources in western Manitoba, completed by researchers at Brandon University. Other projects being considered include one in Saskatchewan and one in northeastern Ontario.
- 2 *The Inventory of Archival Resources in Western Manitoba* (4 volumes).
- 3 The inventory was produced in the traditional print format, but a version on computer disk (Word Perfect 5.1) could be made available upon request.

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