

## *Communications*

### *Working Cooperatively for a Sustainable Future: Total Archives in Nanaimo*

by JANE TURNER\*

The Fathers of Confederation conceived of Canada as a strong federal state, with a central government charged with matters of common interest to the whole country. In a past and simpler age, these “common interests” have included a strong governmental role to protect the public interest by safe-guarding the public good and strengthening national cultural values. Within this deeply rooted Canadian tradition has evolved the concept of total archives, in which national and provincial government archival institutions have accepted a responsibility to preserve the archival heritage of Canada by acquiring and preserving both public records and significant private records within their jurisdictions.

There are several factors that have undermined the concept of total archives as it has been traditionally implemented in Canada. The first is the decision of government to divert increasingly scarce funding from acquiring records that document the broad functions of society to caring for its own institutional records management needs. In effect, the government has been retreating into a cocoon that focuses narrowly and excessively on documenting its own juridical functions—in metre after kilometre, and megabyte after gigabyte of documentation—at the expense of the archival needs of the broader community.

During the last twenty years, the archival profession has gracefully danced the two-step away from total archives, in symmetry with national and provincial governments.<sup>1</sup> The Association of Canadian Archivists’s response to the Symons Report<sup>2</sup> argued that the movement away from total archives resulted in the establishment of records management programmes and the preservation of large volumes of government records. The trend was welcomed as a sign of growing professionalism that had the result of transforming what were essentially cultural agencies into functional archives.<sup>3</sup>

The movement from cultural to functional archives traces the narrowing of the meaning of accountability from a broad understanding of moral accountability to the public, to a narrow understanding of functional accountability of bureaucrats to

the administration of the sponsoring agency.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, and perhaps as a result, the public has become increasingly sceptical about the government's ability to act in the public interest, dubious about the government's interest in preserving our national identity, and suspicious about its willingness to protect our archival heritage. In response, members of the public have become increasingly insistent in their demands for more openness and accountability from public officials.

In light of this reality, the archival community has much to learn from the Nanaimo Community Archives Society, which developed during the 1980s from a strong sense of community and a concomitant commitment to total archives.<sup>5</sup> The Archives Society began with a bold and passionate vision: to preserve the documentary heritage of the Central Vancouver Island community, and to build a strong, viable centre of archival expertise that could serve, advise, and educate sponsoring agencies, community organizations, and regional archives and archivists.

This vision reflected a community with a vibrant and densely interlocking network of values and people. The network not only consisted of officially sanctioned functional relationships between jurisdictions and organisations, but also included the complexity of informal human relations that are naturally forged between families, friends, and acquaintances. This intricate network connected and inter-connected the institutions and the people in every imaginable way. Naturally, the complexity of jurisdictions and the competition for overlapping responsibilities and resources combined with the normal gamut of human frailties to ensure that the culture of community never suffered for too long from monotony.

The network included a wide range of institutions that related to one another in complex and various ways: government jurisdictions such as the City of Nanaimo, the Nanaimo Regional District, the Pacific Biological Station, the Nanaimo Harbour Commission, and the Vancouver Island Regional Library; educational institutions such as Malaspina University College and School District 69 (Nanaimo); and cultural institutions such as the Nanaimo District Museum and the Nanaimo Historical Society.

The network pushed beyond functional relationships into the realm of the personal. The Treasurer of the Historical Society was a retired principal in the School District, who had taught the City Administrator in public school. A retired administrator from the Biological Station was the President of the City's Heritage Advisory Committee. A retired scientist from the Biological Station was the President of the Museum Board. The wife of an instructor at the College was a School Trustee. A City Councillor had a close friendship with the Chair of the Harbour Commission and Museum Board Director; they all played golf together and were Masonic brothers.

Understanding these close connections between people and institutions exposes the intricate heart of the cultural context of the community. Through community leadership, community cooperation, and community participation, the Archives Society reflected the dynamics of local culture in a manner that promoted, unbeknownst to them, a revitalized understanding of total archives.

Community leadership was central to the development of the total archives concept in Nanaimo. The heart and mind of that community leadership was found in

one mighty woman, Daphne Paterson, who developed her political skill through her long years of work with the Elizabeth Fry Society of British Columbia. Through the auspices of the Nanaimo Historical Society, Paterson spearheaded and articulated the growing community concern for the rescue and preservation of archival records; educated herself and others about archival practices; identified all the key institutions and individuals in the community with common interests in preserving archival records, in spite of the fact that most of them did not realize they had this common interest; promoted the idea, lobbied tirelessly, persistently, and some would add, unmercifully; and galvanized and delivered widespread community support to the project.

As the project took shape, Paterson identified five requirements for its success. The first four were already in rudimentary form when the Nanaimo Community Archives Society was incorporated on 21 January 1991:

1. Commitment by the stakeholders to the project;
2. Authority and structure that would ensure each stakeholder could contribute equally to decision making;
3. Community support to maintain pressure on the stakeholders to continue their commitment;
4. A qualified archivist to direct the project and provide leadership; and
5. Secure funding.

A long-term commitment to the project by the stakeholders, and concomitant secure funding, are the two remaining illusive requirements for success.

One of the triumphs of the educational drive that went into founding the Archives Society was the fact that, in spite of their initial disbelief, prominent members of community organizations and individuals with widely divergent beliefs and values came to the conclusion that their documentary heritage was at risk, the need to preserve it was urgent, and they needed the services of a professional archivist to do the job. Through self-education, they developed an archival creed to preserve, not an abstract concept of the documentary heritage of Canada or British Columbia, but their own particular heritage that was rooted in the vibrant reality of their local community.

Community cooperation was a second factor in the development of total archives in Nanaimo. Cooperative ventures are never easy. By its very nature, consensus contains compromises and mutual concessions in which conflicting opinions are adjusted and modified by each participant for the common good. That is to say, cooperative ventures are, by necessity, pragmatic coalitions that are inevitably characterized by the tension of holding the consensus together.

The coalition behind the Archives Society was no exception, and the tension of values that naturally exist between such diverse institutions was camouflaged beneath the Society's carefully crafted exterior. Holding the compromise together was strenuous, exhausting work on the part of everyone, and included heavy doses of public education and lobbying. In effect, it is the basic struggle, gone wild, in which all institutional archivists engage in order to reconcile the competing interest

of providing for the efficient management of institutional records, and providing archival care to community records with long-term cultural value to the community.

In 1990, in response to extensive lobbying, the City Clerk submitted a report that recommended the City participate in a task force to investigate the feasibility of jointly hiring an archivist with several other community organizations. The report was based on an implicit acceptance of the arguments of the Historical Society:

On the surface there are some obvious benefits to the proposal, most notably the fact that those jurisdictions in the community that currently retain archival/historical records would be able to coordinate their individual efforts in a potentially more cost-effective and professional manner.<sup>6</sup>

The reasonable and informed tone of the City Clerk's report is a credit to those hardy individuals who undertook the task to educate this forceful man, who began the project with suspicion, dragged his heels all the way to the bargaining table, and ended up an able advocate within the City's administrative structure and an influential member of the Archives Board.

City administrators were finally convinced to support the project because of the pragmatic value of records management to aid in administering the complex and pressing day-to-day activities of the municipality. The democratic reality of municipal politics is, however, that the pressing demands are very often defined by the City's constituents, including the vocal members in the historical community. It is perhaps for this reason that the City Clerk stressed in his report to Council the historical value of the project, rather than its administrative value.

The passion of the project came from the historical community, including the Historical Society, the College's History Department, and several individuals from the City's Heritage Advisory Committee. One of those individuals was the late John Thomson, the first Vice-President of the Archives Society. His high standing in the community and his rich experience as an able and humane administrator at the Pacific Biological Station gave added credibility to the project.

The historical community's continuing commitment to the project can be seen in Thomson's successful presentation to the Nanaimo Harbour Commission in 1993 to solicit ongoing economic support for the Archives. Every word in his presentation had been carefully selected for greatest impact. Every board member had been attentively lobbied before the event. And it certainly did not hurt that he had already been to visit them the week before wearing the hat of President of the City's well regarded Heritage Advisory Committee. His argument to convince them to support the Archives blended together the cultural and business values of archives, mirroring the cooperative alliance of the project:

As memories fade, and families move away—only archives remain to tell us not only what we were but who we were. This gives us direction for the future, avoids the repeating of past errors (sometimes) and gives us standards against which we can measure our successes.

Archives are used by people seeking their roots, by scholars seeking a better understanding of our past, by visitors who seek to understand the importance of their destination and by businesses who seek a viable, economic, innovative, entrepreneurial edge.<sup>7</sup>

The formation of the Archives Society displays the political wisdom of consensus in which administrators strive to understand the historical value of archives, and members of the historical community acknowledge the vital role of archives in current business affairs. By recognizing the interests of the others, all are better served in a cost-effective manner.

A high level of community participation was the final element that promoted total archives, reflecting the broad and deeply felt support of the community for the project. The participation came in many shapes and forms, from donating valuable private records to the Archives, to volunteering time to archival work, to engaging in lobbying efforts to maintain and increase support from the stakeholders in order to achieve the goal of stable funding. This community participation was a vital part of the strength and stability of the project. The greater the participation, the stronger the links between the institutional and social networks that continue to be the life-blood of the Archives Society.

One example shows the conviction and commitment of many community members to the preservation of their records. To these individuals, the Archives Society offered a safe haven for valuable records that document their historical experience. Their commitment is not an academic one, but passionate, immediate, and deeply felt. Such a commitment should be instructive to all professional archivists involved in the development of acquisition strategies, to remind us that, above all, we are serving the community in which we live and work by using our knowledge and skill to preserve the records we hold in trust for the people.

Ron, a young man from Qualicum Beach, was a naturalist and an ardent environmentalist who rescued the archives of an environmental group. For eight years Ron guarded the records, moved them with him from home to home, worried about their deterioration, worried sick about security—but consoled himself with the thought that at least they were still in existence, at least they were not rotting in the dump. On occasion, he would lend files out to reputable individuals after delivering careful instructions about the value of the records and eliciting solemn vows about careful handling and prompt return.

Ron learned about the Archives through his environmental colleague, Hugh Taylor; when he was finally convinced that the Archives Society would provide a safe haven for the records, he willingly donated them. The Archives does not own these records in any moral sense of the word, but rather holds them in trust for the community, to whom it is accountable.

A second example of community participation is the group of dedicated volunteers who give of their time, talent, and energy to provide assistance in caring for and providing public access to the records. They brought with them enthusiasm, a wealth of life experiences and abilities, willing hands and hearts, a capacity for hard work, and a deep commitment to the task at hand.

In a very real way, these volunteers are the soul of the community archives experience. They are the material evidence of the culture of community in action, for they provide a direct link to the complex cultural network of the community. Many of the volunteers are politically experienced, vitally active in and linked to that network. As such, they formed, and continue to form, a strategic part of the grassroots lobbying efforts to keep the community focussed on preserving an historical

record of the community, rather than a bifurcated record of several institutional segments within a particular jurisdiction.

A recent review of the Archives Society, done by a Vancouver consulting firm, confirmed that the strengths of the Society lay in its cooperative administrative structure, and in the development of the volunteer programme. The review recommended forging ahead with the initial intention of bringing in other prominent community institutions as stakeholders such as the School District 68 (Nanaimo), the Nanaimo General Regional Hospital, the Nanaimo Harbour Commission, and the Pacific Biological Station.<sup>8</sup> The years ahead will continue to bring the challenges, stresses, and rewards that come with vision and dynamic growth. While the goal of secure funding remains elusive, given the continued level of community support, it cannot help but come in time.

The vision of the Nanaimo Community Archives Society, conceived of and developed by community members, provides us with a cooperative model that has the potential to revitalize the notion of total archives. The vision and the drive for the project arose from the historical community's concern for the rescue and preservation of the archival heritage of their community. Within the Canadian tradition, they accepted, without question, a broad understanding of the notion of the moral accountability of the City and the College to the public. Using their experience in political persuasion, and their understanding of the direct democratic reality of local politics, they forced these local government bodies to accept responsibility for all archival records of the community, on their behalf.

The cooperative nature of the venture has the potential to force institutions beyond their restricted mandate to preserve their own records to a commitment to preserve all the records of the people, including records created in both private and public spheres of life. In effect, this model revitalizes total archives by altering the focus from a single institutional setting to the community. The cooperative nature of the venture provides a solid basis for the development of a sound and balanced total archives.

Our future is increasingly in doubt from a myriad of social, political, and environmental pressures. Part of our archival creed is to work for the future by preserving a comprehensive record of past actions so that society will be able to ensure juridical and cultural accountability of institutions and individuals. The Nanaimo experience teaches us that, if we are to do our part in developing and implementing comprehensive acquisition strategies, we must move from institutions working in isolation to the strength of working cooperatively for a sustainable future.

### Notes

This paper is dedicated to the members of the first Board of the Nanaimo Community Archives Society: Daphne Paterson, the late John Thomson, Debbie Trueman, Gary Nason, and Patrick Dunae.

- 1 Gary Mitchell, "Keynote Address" presented to AABC Conference in Richmond, BC, 22-23 April 1994.
- 2 T.H.B. Symons, *To Know Ourselves: the Report of the Commission on Canadian Studies* (Ottawa, 1975), 4 vols.
- 3 Association of Canadian Archivists, "The Symons Report and Canadian Archives," *Archivaria* 11 (1980-81), p. 9.

- 4 Jane Parkinson, "Accountability in Archival Science," (MAS Thesis, University of British Columbia, 1993). Trevor Liverton refers to Parkinson's concept of accountability as "a strict sense of accountability," and argues for a broader understanding of moral accountability in "Accountability and Archives," a paper presented to the AABC Conference in Richmond, BC, 22-23 April 1994.
- 5 For an analysis of the historical development of the Society see, Jane Turner and Patrick Dunae, "Nanaimo Community Archives Society: Constructing Consensus, 1988-1992," *ACA Bulletin* 17, no. 4 (March 1993), pp. 13-16.
- 6 Gary Nason, "Report to G.D. Berry, City Administrator Re: Community Archivist Task Force," City of Nanaimo, 2 April 1990, p. 1562.
- 7 J. Arthur Thomson, Presentation to Nanaimo Harbour Commission, February 1993.
- 8 Harris Hudema Consulting Group, "Nanaimo Community Society: Strategic Directions," (November 1993).