

Beginnings: The LMHS Collection in the Moore Gallery of the London Regional Art & Historical Museums (LRAHM). 18 August - 27 October 1996.

Many archivists have had the experience of trying to make a silk purse out of a sow's ear, of striving to create a sophisticated and alluring product from mundane, ill-shaped relics of a once pulsating past. Curators Mike Baker and John Mombourquette succeeded in this in their exhibit: *Beginnings: The LMHS Collection*. *Beginnings* focused on the history of the founding collection of about four hundred artifacts given to the first London historical museum in 1958 by the London and Middlesex Historical Society' (LMHS). Formed in 1901, LMHS has been dedicated to the preservation of the history of London and Middlesex County through an active programme of meetings, lectures, publications, and, for six decades, the collection of material culture. Through photographs and panels of explanatory text, *Beginnings* traced the Society's collecting efforts and its struggle to found a public institution in London. Artifacts from the LMHS collection, from the London Regional Art and Historical Museums' (LRAHM) broader collections assembled after 1958, and photographs and historical publications from other London repositories are skilfully juxtaposed to present a history of collection management.

The history of LMHS, its collection's growth, and the critical contribution of some prominent London citizens were presented in two places in the gallery: to the right of the entrance, by a wall display of photos chiefly from the *London Free Press Collection of Photographic Negatives* housed at the University of Western Ontario; and to the left, in a den-like arrangement of LMHS publications, brochures, and supplemental information about the exhibit.

The wall display highlighted the collecting activities of the society through images of its officers handling artifacts: Dr. Edwin Seaborn is seen examining Mahlon Burwell's sextant; W.G. Trestain examines a plaque commemorating the sinking of the steamboat *Victoria*; and LMHS President, Derek Newton and Historical Museum Curator, Gordon McLauchlan, inspect gifts resulting from an appeal to Londoners in 1967 for items of historical interest during the city's clean-up campaign. The donations shown here either appeared in *Beginnings*, or were represented by clusters of artifacts thematically tied to these photos. Thus Burwell's parallel rule and inkwell, donated in 1938, were part of a display on the settlement of southwestern Upper Canada in the 1820s, which included historical maps, portraits of John Graves Simcoe and Thomas Talbot, and some tools relating to settlement life. The *Victoria* disaster on the Thames River in 1881, when close to 180 people perished, was represented through paintings and wooden models of the steamer, surviving wreckage (clock, deck post section, and canvas desk chair), and by illustrations from the *Canadian Illustrated News*. The 1967 appeal was remembered by a Great Western Railway lantern dated ca. 1850.

Text and photographs also commemorated the major collectors and collecting periods of the LMHS, providing context and a rationale for the selection of the particular artifacts exhibited. The first collecting period occurred between 1901 and 1921 under "curator" Solon Woolverton, a dentist, who amassed a number of small objects described in the local media as "a rare collection of relics of early Canadian history" (*London Free Press*, 18 December 1901). A leather bucket, ca. 1840, served to represent this collection. Following a quiescent period from 1921 to 1936, Dr. Seaborn,

physician and lecturer at the University of Western Ontario Medical School, and history professor Fred Landon, led a revival of the society and re-established a strong interest among members in the collecting of oral and material history from the community. Some of the three hundred artifacts collected under Seaborn's presidency from 1936-1938 appeared in *Beginnings* and illustrated two of his many interests. A medicine case, a microscope, a cork crusher, and a mortar and pestle are physical representations of his research on the early practitioners of medicine in the London district. His interest in the Seventh Fusiliers, a London militia infantry regiment sent to Clark's Corner, NWT, during the second Riel Rebellion, is represented by a carved walking stick from 1885, one of the cigars presented by a London hosteller to the triumphant homecoming troops, and by Seaborn's own compilation of the transcribed diaries and reminiscences of survivors of the expedition.

By 1939, several hundred artifacts had been inventoried by London historian Orlo Miller, research assistant to Seaborn and later the LMHS secretary. The collection was actively used until 1948. The wall display highlighted a 1941 exhibition held in the newly-opened Elsie Perrin Williams Public Library, Art Gallery, and Museum where the LMHS collection, together with many loaned items, occupied the entire second floor. Nearly five thousand visitors attended during a six-week period. A large wall map of the District of London was both in that exhibit and in *Beginnings*. In 1948, the collection was moved from Art Gallery storage to the library's basement and LMHS and its new curator Ben Scott spent ten years patiently lobbying to establish a civic museum. Finally, in 1948, the city opened Victoria House Museum at a temporary location under the auspices of the Historic Sites and Museum Committee. A year later, LMHS presented the museum with "the various historical articles acquired by our society over the years." Members continued to be involved with museum staff in collecting, displaying, and interpreting the artifacts until 1971. In 1963, the Library Board took over the administration of the museum. From this point, the history of the original collection is not clearly presented in *Beginnings*. The focus stays on LMHS, which was given a seat on the board of the newly-created LRAHM in 1989, an institution formed by the amalgamation of the Art Gallery and the Historical Museums.

The subsequent history of the collection may be gathered only from the literature provided to the visitor and it is an archivist's and collection manager's nightmare. At some point, parts of the collection, including items collected by Woolverton, were dispersed. The LMHS archives and some of the artifacts are now housed at the J.J. Talman Regional Collection, University of Western Ontario. The photographs have been divided between two repositories, and the books are in the archives of the London Room of the London Public Library.

This exhibition has a very important role to play, both in its relation to the specific collection it documents and to the larger picture of museums and archives. It has reconstructed the intellectual side of the LMHS collection. Prior to *Beginnings*, only manuscript labels attached to artifacts by Dr. Seaborn, on which he meticulously listed the name and use of the item, its provenance, and the date of donation, were available and many of these labels have been lost. The rest of the information was scattered in newspaper articles about the society's meetings and in LMHS minutes and publications. In preparation for *Beginnings*, all existing references to the original

donations were collated by a volunteer and a student into one unpublished document, creating a virtual collection that replaces the physical.

Within the larger picture of collecting institutions, the exhibition pointed out the importance of both proper record-keeping and the need for clear policies. The dearth of provenance information attached to artifacts was a great handicap to the curators who struggled to identify donors and the significance of artifacts whose use and associations were lost. The loss and scattering of the collection highlighted the need for a clearly articulated acquisition policy to protect collections. Such lessons may be put to good use by curators and archivists as they try to survive in an era of seismic changes. The collection was used in the past as an instrument to lobby for a civic museum and, faced with severe budget cuts, LRAHM is using it again in an attempt to explain “the rationale behind the use of artifacts to keep a community’s past alive and the need for museums to house and interpret them” (*the museum* [Sept.-Dec. 1996, p. 3]). Both the depth of research and the simple presentation make this exhibit a fine educational tool for archivists, curators, and historians.

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Pipe Dreams. METRO ARCHIVES. Toronto, Ontario. Until 1 September 1997.
Toronto Above and Below: Public Works in Toronto 1910-1953. MARKET GALLERY. Toronto, Ontario. 26 October 1996 - 23 February 1997.

Archives are dusty caves ruled by humourless prunes who do not like people, especially any who want to see or, God forbid, touch their things. Public works is the domain of insensitive, spendthrift fiends who lie awake at night planning new ways to bankrupt the public purse while inconveniencing those who fill it. Let’s face it, both fields have image problems. Two recent exhibits, *Toronto Above and Below*, presented by the City of Toronto Archives at the Market Gallery, and *Pipe Dreams*, at the Metro Toronto Archives, may improve those images.

Archives are not about old documents or an escape from the present. They are about information and its uses. As an electronic message at Metro Archives puts it: “The past is a given quantity that nothing can change. Knowledge of the past is a thing in process.” Archives are central to that process.

Since 1979, urban connoisseurs, history enthusiasts, industrial archaeologists, photography fans, street people, shoppers, lost convention goers, and students, as well as those who want another look at the city of their vanished youth, have made their way to the gallery above the St. Lawrence Market on Front Street. It is a Toronto treasure which, dollar for dollar, must be one of the most cost-effective exhibit places in the archival world.

The Market Gallery’s *Toronto Above and Below* (26 October 1996 to 23 February 1997) focuses on two City of Toronto departments—Works and Street Cleaning—from 1910 to 1953. Archivist Elizabeth Cuthbertson has selected about 150 photographs, as well as maps, newspapers, and other printed materials to portray an astonishing range of civic activities, from the large and obvious—water pumps and mains, bridges and roads, street railways, sewers and treatment plants—to the small