

Obituary



Alex Robert Ross, 1946–2015



Photograph by April Johnson, taken at the City of Thunder Bay Archives, ca. 2007.

“Integrity” and “generosity” are two of the words colleagues and friends use without fail when remembering Alex Ross. They also refer to his commitment and devotion to his profession, his intelligence and ability, his eagerness to help people, and, universally, his sense of humour.¹ These traits enriched his contributions in the three archival institutions where he worked and in the archival professional organizations he served.

Alex’s career in archives began when he joined the staff of the Government Records Section of the Archives of Ontario in 1971, after obtaining a master’s degree in Canadian history from the University of Guelph (Ontario)

earlier the same year. His primary responsibility was municipal records. He travelled extensively to various communities throughout the province, inspecting and reporting on records in municipal offices, negotiating with municipalities regarding the transfer of records to the Archives, and loading them into a rented truck and transporting them, thus ensuring their preservation. An important component of this work was advising municipalities on archives and records management.

1 Thanks to Bob Tapscott, Judith Hudson Beattie (Judy Valenzuela), Linda Johnson, Anne Morton, and Shirlee Anne Smith for sharing information and memories of Alex; and to Matt Szybalski and other archivists who wrote tributes to Alex on ARCAN-L. Thanks also to Ruth Ross for providing factual information that was necessary to fill in details lost to aging memories.

Alex's years at the Archives of Ontario were a formative time for Canadian archives – a period before university degrees in archival studies had been introduced, when archives staff often considered their work a stepping stone to other employment. Practice tended to be institution-specific – borrowed from one institution and adapted as necessary for application in another. It was the summer course at the Public Archives of Canada, which Alex attended in 1972, that introduced him (as it did so many other archivists) to the theoretical underpinnings of the profession. Alex's intellect and insight, combined with knowledge gained during this course and thanks to the guidance of John Mezaks (who directed the Government Records Section and was himself a graduate of an archival course offered in Washington, D.C.), found an outlet in discussions on new approaches over coffee with other keen colleagues in the Government Records Section at the time – Gordon Dodds, Barbara Craig, and Bob Tapscott. Eventually the ideas took form in revised and new methodologies employed by these archivists, particularly at the Provincial Archives of Manitoba. In spite of the attractions of new ways, Alex remained meticulous and very conscientious about his work with government records at the Archives of Ontario. This was very evident in the care he took to document all the questions pertinent to each and every records schedule he developed. His energy was phenomenal; he was sharply focused on tasks and goals and made sure he finished projects.

At the Archives of Ontario, Alex worked with an assortment of archivists whose eccentricities are legendary among the alumni of that institution. His reaction was cautious at first, but his reserve was overcome by his irrepressible sense of humour, and while remaining serious about wanting real work to be done, he came to enjoy the personalities and exploits that inevitably became fodder for his stories. He had a wonderful and wicked sense of humour, and he shared many tales of archives and people he met throughout his career. He loved to tell stories and was extraordinarily good at it – stories at which he laughed as heartily as his listeners did. A colleague recalls that “Alex would lean back in his chair, eyes afire, and between chortles would rip off a yarn (rarely fictional) which usually had a devastatingly funny punch line.”

While at the Archives of Ontario, Alex also coordinated the national archival survey in Ontario, which, along with the input of other provinces and territories, was critical in substantiating the need for increased funding to support archival work in Canada and in determining how such funding should be delivered. Ultimately, it influenced the design of the first granting programs of the Canadian Council of Archives.

In 1980, Alex moved to Manitoba to join the then Provincial Archives of Manitoba as senior archivist in charge of 20th-century records in the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) Archives. The modern HBC involved itself in a great variety of enterprises, and the records were fascinating. The most notable of these, named the “French Government Records,” concerned the HBC's

activities as a purchasing and shipping agent for the French and other Allied governments during the First World War. Alex saw to it that these modern records were arranged and described according to contemporary archival practices rather than the in-house system the HBC had devised for its older documents. He also organized the records of the HBC Land Department, which played such an important role in the settlement of western Canada.

An important part of his responsibilities as HBC archivist was the establishment of an archival records management program. Alex had the challenging job of persuading the Hudson's Bay Company to tackle records management and he made a number of trips to Toronto to get it started. The HBC was slow in signing on, a source of considerable frustration for Alex, but it eventually acted by appointing a records manager.

Between 1983 and 1984, Alex was seconded to the Government Records Division of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba as a special assistant to help expedite the preparation of schedules that were the basis for an access guide, a key tool in the application of freedom of information and privacy legislation being introduced in Manitoba. Alex inspected records in government offices and consulted with government officials regarding the use and disposition of records and prepared a number of schedules himself. In 1987, he became the head of the Records Information Services of the Government Records Division, where he supervised the preparation, distribution, and updating of the access guide, which was intended to list and describe all the records of government by series and provide information on their access status and disposition. It was an exemplary piece of work, and archivists and records managers in other jurisdictions marvelled that such a comprehensive guide could be achieved. In this position, he also supervised all aspects of reference services for Government Records, advising members of the public and the civil service on the use of the *Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act* and the access guide. In one final move at the Archives of Manitoba in 1989, Alex became the head of Textual Records and Public Service, which included responsibility for cartographic records.

With such broad archival experience under his belt, Alex left for Thunder Bay, Ontario, in 1990 to become that city's first archivist. He gained the confidence of long-time city clerk Harry Kirk, and had his support in establishing the archives, with a foremost component being the management of corporate records. Alex is credited with moving the City of Thunder Bay's records management into the realm of modern professional standards. As the Corporate Records Manager and City Archivist, he inventoried all corporate records and established records schedules, and he oversaw the creation of the records centre. In addition, he identified the historic records of Thunder Bay and its predecessors – Port Arthur and Fort William – and made those records more accessible to the public than they had ever been before. He worked closely with many community groups and was successful in developing

awareness of the archives program. He was effective in building and using public support and then translating it into action with the city administration. The Archives of Thunder Bay continues to be a central and appreciated research resource of the northern region of the province.

Alex was a long-time member of the Archives Association of Ontario (AAO) and served as a board member and dedicated volunteer on many AAO committees over his long career. He is remembered as an insightful, intelligent, and caring individual who brought tremendous warmth and experience to the board. Particular interests were archival education and outreach. In the 1970s, he worked with a committee of the AAO's Toronto Area Archivists' Group (TAAG) on the Ontario Heritage Guides project, bringing to the task the vast knowledge he had gained from his work with municipal records at the Archives of Ontario. Alex also served as chair of the Local Archives Committee of the Association of Canadian Archivists from 1976 to 1980, and was a member of its Privacy and Access Committee. He was also a member of the Society of American Archivists' State and Local Archives Committee from 1976 to 1980.

Alex had book reviews published in *Quill & Quire* and in *Archivaria*, and contributed articles to the latter and to *Business Archives*. He made many presentations during his career to such diverse audiences as TAAG and Association for Manitoba Archives (AMA) workshop attendees, historical geography students at the University of Western Ontario (London), participants in an agricultural history symposium in Guelph, the ARMA Ottawa chapter, the Ontario Museum Association, the Ontario and Canadian Library Associations, the Eastern Ontario Archivists Association, and the Association of Municipal Clerks and Treasurers of Ontario. He taught the records management course at Lakehead University (Thunder Bay) as part of its Library and Information Studies offerings. As important as these formal educational opportunities were, the major educational impact he may have had was as a mentor during all his positions in archives – both officially to staff assigned to him and unofficially to interns and new staff. He was clear about what he wanted, fair and kindly when critiquing work, and patient with questions, instilling the theories of archival practice he followed, including his belief that the archivist should not intrude between the records and the researcher but should strive instead to be unobtrusively helpful. Even new staff not working directly for him were encouraged by his warmth, humour, and unfailing kindness.

Alex had a rich personal life. In 1973, he and Ruth Wagler were married. Both Presbyterians, their faith was an important part of their lives, lived as well as believed. After completing their own family, Alex and Ruth took in and cared for 12 foster babies in the years they were in Thunder Bay. A colleague from Archives of Ontario days, recounting one of her favourite memories of Alex, recalls "hearing him describe with delight the day when he and his wife adopted their sons, Rob and Hugh. I just remember how excited

he was to become a dad, how the love and pride blossomed in him through the years as they grew up.” He took equal delight in his grandchildren, Sofia Ross and Koren Ross.

Upon his retirement in 2007, Alex moved to London, Ontario, where he dedicated himself to serving his community through several volunteer positions. He continued to take an interest in archival matters after his retirement. Ever hospitable and generous, he stayed in touch with colleagues and continued to offer encouragement. Even during his illness, he enjoyed the visits of friends and colleagues and would urge them to stop by again. His generosity included the donation of his body to medical research upon his death.

Alex was a principled person, but he had an even temperament and was accepting and respectful of others. He was always eager to help, be it lending a hand to a newly arrived colleague getting settled in Winnipeg or assisting a researcher with a vexing question that took him beyond what could normally be expected of an archivist. Other words colleagues and friends have used when remembering Alex are “thoroughly good,” “timelessly a gentleman,” “always a gentle soul,” and “a gentle giant in the Ontario archival community.” I welcomed every opportunity to cross paths with Alex, whether for a long conversation on professional matters or a short catch-up on our families and personal lives. Such meetings always left me feeling how lucky I was to know such a good person. Alex made many solid contributions to the archives he worked in, to the professional development of archivists, and to the clients who have benefited from his work.

Marion Beyea