



Photograph by Mike Deal, Winnipeg Free Press, 2009.

Elizabeth Blight

1944– 2019¹

Elizabeth Blight, who developed the still image, documentary art, and cartographic holdings of the Archives of Manitoba over a career that spanned 41 years, died of cancer on 11 April 2019 at St. Andrews, Manitoba. She was 75. Rarely referred to as “Elizabeth,” she was known as Betts to family and as Betty to friends. She is remembered as being “the heart and soul of archives in Manitoba.”

Betty was born in Toronto, where her father was training bomber pilots during the Second World War. After the war, the family settled in Regina. She attended Herchmer and Benson schools and, from a young age, was involved in the arts, taking ballet lessons and following in her mother’s footsteps as a meticulous craftswoman. Throughout her high school and university days, she directed plays and took a leadership role in campus activities.

Betty received her undergraduate degree as part of the first class to graduate at the University of Regina campus where her father was Registrar. Following graduation, her sense of adventure took her to England, where she spent a year working for the Bank of Montreal in London and exploring all that the country had to offer. She returned to Regina to complete an honours degree and then moved to Manitoba, where her brother Bill and his family had settled. Family was of prime importance in Betty’s life, and she became a second mother to her nephews David and Stephen.

1 This article was developed with input from Betty’s friends: Jody Baltessan, Carole Boily, Gilbert Comeault, Barry Hyman, Catherine Macdonald, Anne Morton, Ken Reddig, Shelley Sweeney, and Judith Hudson Beattie Valenzuela.

Betty joined the staff at what was then the Provincial Archives of Manitoba on Friday 1 December 1967. Barry Hyman remembers the date well. He assumed that his new colleague would wait until the following Monday to begin work and went to the cafeteria to get coffee for himself and two colleagues. When he returned, there was a fourth person in the room: “a young lady in a green dress with long red hair.” They would work together for 39 years and become life-long friends.

Provincial Archivist John Bovey asked his two colleagues to consider what media each would prefer to be responsible for. It was quickly determined that Barry would manage textual and government records and Betty would take the rest: photographs, paintings, maps, and drawings. She also would continue to index the correspondence of former premier Thomas Greenway – the project for which she had initially been hired.

Betty had remarkable organizational and planning abilities, which enabled her to manage an extensive and complex workload. In this early period, she had limited staff assistance. In 1968, she began development of a photographic history of Manitoba in anticipation of the province’s upcoming centennial in 1970. She also assisted the Winnipeg Art Gallery in developing the exhibit *150 Years of Manitoba Art* and created displays for loan to school and religious groups during Centennial celebrations.

That same year, she attended the conference of the Association of Canadian Map Libraries and Archives, held in Edmonton, as a prelude to bringing some semblance of order to the Archives of Manitoba’s cartographic holdings. In addition, she was responsible for the Historical Survey of Manitoba Architecture, which added significantly to the photographic holdings.

For many years the Archives held, on deposit, the Lewis B. Foote collection of approximately 2,000 glass-plate negatives covering most aspects of the social history of Winnipeg for the years 1903–49. When the Archives purchased this collection from the family in 1971, Betty began the enormous task of separating the prints from the negatives, re-housing the negatives in acid-free envelopes, and preparing safety negatives after removing the originals from use.

Her workload was further increased when the Archives entered into an agreement with the *Winnipeg Free Press* for the safe-keeping of its photographic negatives. Thousands were added over many years, which significantly increased user demand and the need for additional storage and conservation treatment. As if this was not enough, Betty acted as a consultant to the Royal Winnipeg Ballet when it undertook the organization of its archival holdings.

At the time Betty joined the staff, the Archives of Manitoba was housed in cramped quarters in the Manitoba Legislative Building. In 1975, the collections of both the Archives and the provincial library were moved to the historic Winnipeg Auditorium, which had been renovated to meet the specific needs of both holdings and renamed the Manitoba Archives Building.

With the arrival of new staff, Betty was able to devote increased attention to the still image holdings. In 1973, Gilbert Comeault was appointed Moving Images and Sound Archivist. A cartographic archivist was employed in the early 1980s, and in 1983, Betty was appointed Head, Still Images Division, with two staff to assist her.

When she was hired, the still image holdings were housed in two four-drawer filing cabinets. During her career, the holdings would grow to more than 1,000,000 images housed in an environmentally controlled vault. While her famously cluttered desk seemed to belie her organizational skill, she could find anything she needed within seconds. She had a phenomenal recall for the histories of the photographers represented and for individual items within each fonds. She also had the ability to imagine how material might be used by future researchers and acquired new collections accordingly. As an example, the fact that she accepted rare editions of cookbooks was seen as dubious by some. However, in time, these became an important resource for nutritionists and social historians as well as modern cookbook authors.

Betty enjoyed working with researchers and assisting in the development of their research strategies. An eminent historian once commented that she was “the helpful archivist.” She often noted that archival material was preserved to be used in the present, not in some far-away future.

Not surprisingly, Betty was the Archives’s “official” social convener. She established the Fruit and Flower Fund, to which staff contributed each payday to ensure that funds would be available for special life-cycle events. She instituted the Friday tradition of lemon meringue tarts from Eaton’s and organized special events such as a photograph display of staff members’ younger days. A skilled seamstress, Betty made four ties from fabric commemorating Louis Riel and presented them to her male colleagues – John Bovey, Gilbert Comeault, Barry Hyman, and Ken Reddig – during the Manitoba Centennial celebrations in 1970. One of the Christmas get-togethers she organized is legendary. With oven space at capacity, she cooked Conservator Charles Brandt’s contribution of a salmon in the dishwasher. This was a staff that enjoyed being together. One of this writer’s

favourite photos is of a very young staff group sporting matching T-shirts bearing the cheeky slogan “Archivists Make It Last Longer.”

Betty’s colleagues from the Archives of Manitoba, who shared recollections for this article, recall that she inspired a sense of community and welcomed newcomers; that she had a rare gift for relating to other people and was supportive of their work; and that, in meetings, she was perceptive, fair minded, unafraid to speak her mind, and never took things personally.

Betty played a lead role in the development of the larger archival community. The 1970 Manitoba Centennial celebrations contributed to a renaissance of interest in archival management by religious orders and denominations, museums, and local governments, among others. By the early mid-1970s, a significant number of archivists – both paid and volunteer – were working in the field. Betty had enormous respect in this community. She did not judge an archives on the size of its holdings, but rather on the mission of the sponsoring body and the quality of its work.

Catherine Macdonald, who was appointed United Church Archivist at the University of Winnipeg in 1975, recalls how she and other “lone arrangers” in the province relied on Betty and other Archives of Manitoba staff for advice. Having started her MA in 1978, she was regularly in the reading room chatting and occasionally lunching with Betty. They decided that a formal association was needed to share ideas, create learning opportunities, and inform the public about the role of archives. Meetings were organized, and the Association of Manitoba Archivists was founded in 1980. Betty chose not to serve on the first executive, as she believed that the Archives of Manitoba should not be perceived as dominating the association. Though in the background, she remained the steady hand at the tiller.

The Manitoba Council of Archives was founded in 1986 in response to the development of the Canadian Archival System. Betty served as the first president and was a driving force in its work. Under her guidance, the council undertook a major needs assessment and planning study for archives in Manitoba. The results were published as *The Past is Present* in 1988, and a formal plan of action was in place by 1991. In 1992, the Association of Manitoba Archivists and the council merged as the Association for Manitoba Archives. Betty was made an honorary member of the association at the annual meeting in 2010.

Betty retired in 2009. She enjoyed summers at the cottage she shared with her brother Bill, at Falcon Lake; travel to and with friends; and the enjoyment

of sleeping in. However, she did remain involved in the archival community. She served from 2009 to 2014 as a member of the City of Winnipeg Records Committee, an advisory body to City Council. She took great delight in serving as advisor to Catherine Macdonald as she developed the character Rosetta Cliffe in her novel *Put on the Armour of Light*. Cliffe was modelled on Rosetta Carr, the only woman to run her own photography studio in early Winnipeg. Her career was one of Betty's private research interests.

After being diagnosed with cancer in January, Betty lived with her nephew Stephen and his family at St. Andrews, near Selkirk. She spent a lengthy periods in hospital, returning home on 4 April. Throughout her illness, her focus was always on those around her, never on her own challenges.

Betty was predeceased by her parents, William Clifford Blight and Elizabeth (Burt) Agnes Blight; her sister-in-law Donna Margaret Louis Blight; nephew David Clifford Blight; and niece-in-law Lori May Blight.

She is survived by her brother Bill Blight, nephew Stephen and his family (Donna, Jordan, Jared, Brea, and Riley), and nephew David's family (Marzena, Henryk, and William).

Betty had a passion for collecting ornamental pigs. At her funeral service, those in attendance were invited to select one in remembrance of her. Everyone did. Following the grave-side service and interment at Oakville Cemetery, family tucked a small favourite pig against her gravestone. Betty would have approved.

DIANE HAGLUND