



FIGURE 1 *Hudson's Bay Company Archives, Archives of Manitoba. Shirlee Anne Smith packing up the HBC Archives in London for the transfer to Winnipeg, July 1974, HBCA 1974/2/36.*

Shirlee Anne Smith

Shirlee Anne Smith, first Canadian Keeper of the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) Archives, died in Winnipeg, Manitoba, April 17, 2020. It should be noted that she did not "pass away" and that she wrote her own obituary in advance. This tells you two things about Shirlee Anne: one that she was forthright and plain-spoken, and two, that she was organized and did not wish to burden others with the task.

Born in the small community of River John, in Pictou County, Nova Scotia, Shirlee Anne was daughter of the late Wilson and Myrtle (Dwyer) Langille and a member of a large family of 12 children. She moved to Winnipeg and later graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in history from the University of Winnipeg in 1977.

Shirlee Anne Smith was, and will be, best known for her work in coordinating the transfer of the Hudson's Bay Company records, so critical to the study of the fur trade and early Western Canada, to Winnipeg. For those who are not familiar with the Hudson's Bay Company, it is one of the oldest continuously operating commercial enterprises in the English-speaking world. The company was granted a royal charter by King Charles II in 1670 and given a monopoly to trade in furs across vast swaths of what is now Western Canada. The records compiled by factors and others connected to the trade covered observations about everything from local Indigenous peoples to the weather, the animals, the flora, and the geography of the area. These records have now been added to UNESCO's Memory of the World register.

In 1957, Shirlee Anne was hired by the Hudson's Bay Company as librarian for Hudson's Bay House in Winnipeg, and she later worked in the HBC's public relations department. In 1970, the company moved its head office to Winnipeg from London, England, and the question of what to do with the company's archival holdings arose. The company considered depositing the records with the Public Archives of Canada (now Library and Archives Canada), the obvious choice as recipient since these records were of national importance. However, the secretary of HBC's Canadian Committee, Rolph Huband, ultimately determined that the Provincial Archives of Manitoba (now Archives of Manitoba) in Winnipeg would receive the records on loan. The records were eventually donated to the Province of Manitoba in 1994, and Shirlee Anne coordinated the enormous task of appraising the holdings.

From 1960 to 1973, Shirlee Anne acted as historian for the corporate head office at Hudson's Bay House in Winnipeg. She was responsible for "all programs relating to history, including exhibits, research, writing, publications, lectures, corporate library, still images, rare books."¹ She also planned, researched, and implemented national programs for the company's 300th anniversary in 1970. This included purchasing objets d'art for the corporate collection.

Shirlee Anne travelled to London, England, in 1973 to oversee the packing and transfer of an astonishing seven 20-ton containers of records dating back three centuries. She said she had "mixed feelings" about the daunting nature of the task. And indeed, it was not without its challenges, which went beyond getting such a vast amount of records ready for travel. At one point during the energy crisis, Beaver House, where staff were working, had heat for only four hours a day. Shirlee Anne said that she worked in winter boots and dressed in "layers of woollen clothes. We lost no staff time. We simply regarded the situation as normal." The records arrived in Canada in October and November of 1974. The unpacking and shelving of this massive collection was a monumental undertaking. Staff remember untying the red tape and unwrapping the brown-paper wrappers around ledgers and binders so heavy they were warping the shelves. They had to shelve the materials from the bottom up to ensure that the shelves would not tip over. By April 1975, the records were already available to the public, which surely must have been a monumental task!

1 Shirlee Anne Smith, "[Curriculum Vitae]," n.d., received by author from executor Robert Oleson.

As keeper of the records, Shirlee Anne regularly interviewed researchers as they arrived. One researcher remembers that Shirlee Anne kept a very strict shop. Researchers were not to take their shoes off in the reading room, and they had to sit up straight. Staff would bring researchers the originals to view, and Shirlee Anne would review everything that researchers cited. She was very protective of the collection and the company and took her stewardship role seriously. She was said to have had an “encyclopedic knowledge of fur-trade-era history,”² and used that knowledge to counsel researchers. Jody Decker, retired professor of geography and environmental studies at Wilfrid Laurier University in Waterloo, said, “Her level of knowledge of the archives was nothing short of astounding. . . . She was highly gifted in her knowledge of the HBC archives, history in general, and in her command of the English language.” Researcher David Malaher said, “I was overawed by her enthusiasm, support, and knowledge of the archives.” Shirlee Anne’s work with researchers led to a number of life-long friendships.

Occasionally, Shirlee Anne was called on to share her knowledge of the company in other venues. She provided testimony, for example, for a court claim made by one “Dogteam Bill Smith,” a trapper in the Yukon, who in 1977 claimed that the Canadian federal government had no jurisdiction over the territory. Shirlee Anne was able, through various key documents, to prove that the Hudson’s Bay Company was responsible for what is now the Yukon Territory, having signed a trading treaty with the Russian-American Company.

After a long career with the Hudson’s Bay Company, Shirlee Anne finally retired as keeper of the archives in 1990.

Many archives directly benefited from Shirlee Anne’s work as a member and director of the National Archival Appraisal Board. And she did not let her interest in archives drop after she retired. Margaret Carter, herself a passionate supporter of the history of Manitoba, particularly United Empire Loyalists, remembers driving a number of times to Kenora with Shirlee Anne and dropping her off at the historic Mather-Walls House so that Shirlee Anne could work on the archives held in the attic. Even at a venerable age, she continued to work on the archives of St. George’s Anglican Church, her home place of worship, in River Heights, Winnipeg.

2 “Remembering Shirlee Anne Smith,” April 20, 2020, <https://www.canadashistory.ca/explore/museums-galleries-archives/rememering-shirlee-anne-smith>, accessed July 27, 2020.

Canadian history and the organizations that supported that history were also strong passions of Shirlee Anne's. She was a past president of the Manitoba Historical Society, a founding director of Canada's National History Society, and a member of the advisory editorial board for the Hudson's Bay Company magazine the *Beaver* (now *Canada's History*). She was particularly proud of her work in helping to preserve Dalnavert, the home built in 1895 for Sir Hugh John Macdonald, son of Sir John A. Macdonald, the first prime minister of Canada.

Shirlee Anne wrote a number of articles for journals and magazines and articles for the *Canadian Encyclopedia* on Prince of Wales Fort, Rupert's Land, Sir George Simpson, and the Hudson's Bay Records Society. She co-founded the publishing company Watson and Dwyer, which specialized in Canadian social history, with Helen Burgess, editor of the *Beaver*. The company published such titles as the *Hudson's Bay Company Catalogue Autumn and Winter: 1910–1911* (1977) and *Many Tender Ties: Women in Fur-Trade Society, 1670–1870* (1980) and was eventually acquired by J. Gordon Shillingford Publishing.

Shirlee Anne was duly recognized for her outstanding accomplishments. She received the Order of Canada in 1984 in recognition of her "exceptional contributions to heritage and archives," her advice and support to scholars and students of Canadian fur trade history, and her contributions to academic research and publishing. She was also awarded the Distinguished Service Award from the University of Manitoba (1985), the Prix Manitoba Distinguished Service Vocational Award (1995), the Queen Elizabeth II Golden and Diamond Jubilee medals (2002 and 2012), and an honorary doctorate in canon law from St. John's College, Winnipeg (2015), among others. Upon hearing of her death, the President of the Association of Canadian Archivists, Loryl MacDonald, stated that Shirlee Anne "leaves a remarkable legacy with her foundational work in the Hudson's Bay Company Archives and as a great champion of Manitoban and Canadian history and a wonderful mentor to generations of archivists and historians." Laura Millar, archival consultant, said, "Canada is richer for her dedication and care to the archival record."

Personally, Shirlee Anne was a woman of contradictions. Colleagues and researchers had this to say of her: When it came to the archives, she was a formidable presence, who was all business, at times intimidating, formal, and deliberate. Her conversation was often "succinct and to the point." Harry Duckworth said, "Whenever I mentioned my research into North West Company fur traders, she always commented that this was 'the opposition' –

said with a straight face, so I never could tell whether she was serious or not. Probably a joke, but she said it more than once over the years.” Shirlee Anne was “never loath to give her opinion,” and she had opinions on a great many subjects. More than one person said that she “did not suffer fools gladly.” She was a person of great integrity and always willing to pull her weight. Anne Morton, formerly an archivist at the HBC Archives, once offered to let Shirlee Anne skip her payment to the joint coffee fund when she was going to be away from the office for a month, but Shirlee Anne said, “Anne, the coffee is made whether I am here to drink it or not.”

But she also had “a wicked sense of humour and a deep interest in others.” Researcher Joe Martin, now the Director of Canadian Business History at the University of Toronto, said, “I always enjoyed both her wit and wisdom.” She was called a “true pioneer in every sense,” who was “very supportive.” Many women felt that she was especially supportive of women, yet men said exactly the same thing about her support for them. UBC Emeritus History Professor Skip Ray remembers being impressed that she was very interested in his research and that “she could recall what each researcher was doing and had read their published work.” Shirlee Anne was dumbfounded at their first meeting, when Skip came into her office, pulled up a chair, put his feet up on her desk, and started a long conversation with her “as though we were old pals.” They remained friends for the rest of their lives.

She was known as an intensely private person, yet friendly. One of her close friends, Jim Blanchard, Librarian Emeritus at the University of Manitoba, who had been called to check on her when she was in trouble, arrived at her house to find “this little tiny person in her living room with a whole bunch of great big firemen.” When a firefighter asked her how old she was, she said, “Why would you want to know that?” He replied, “Oh, I was just wondering.” She said, “Well, you are going to have to keep wondering.”

I got to know Shirlee Anne more personally only a brief number of years ago. I knew that as executor, she was responsible for donating an enormous and rich collection of United Empire Loyalist family records from Margaret Pugh to the University of Manitoba Archives and Special Collections. Shirlee Anne also appraised what was probably the Archives’ most famous private collection, the Hamilton Family Fonds of séance materials. Somehow, she had gotten onto our mailing list to receive notices of the Archives’ activities, and even though she was not able to come out to many of them, she made sure to let me know

that she was always happy to hear what was going on. I had spoken to her at some archival event and suggested I come visit her for tea. What followed was a pleasurable time for both of us. Shirlee Anne had a broad interest in life and had strong opinions that were measured and insightful. She had interesting stories to tell, but alas, would not allow herself to be more formally interviewed. She was modest about everything she had accomplished. Robert Oleson, who met Shirlee Anne in 1969 while working on a project on York Factory and who remained close friends with her for the rest of her life, said she was “just a wonderful woman.”

SHELLEY SWEENEY

Retired Head

University of Manitoba Archives and Special Collections

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Deadline: November 16, 2020

The keepers of memory have many homes. Whether your role is as an archivist, community organizer, records manager, researcher, storykeeper, or data curator, we live in many layered places at once. There are the institutional homes where we work as stewards and preservers, where we teach and learn, and where we provide services and consult and collaborate with our communities. We have professional homes embodied by associations, academic programs, collaborative networks, and informal meetups. And this year, much of our work is taking place in our physical homes at kitchen tables, in home offices, and backyards.

Homes require maintenance if they are to last and continue to meet the needs of those who live in them. They need more than a welcome mat if they are to be truly open to new members. And the idea of home itself needs flexibility when home is not a safe or stable place for everyone. Since this year's ACA conference will take place virtually from wherever your home may be in June 2021, we ask you to reflect on the improvements we must make to our many homes.

- How can we build, improve, and maintain our institutional, professional, and personal homes to continue to meet the crucial needs of the present?
- What concepts and practices in memory work need maintenance or renovation?
- What should we tear down to make room for the new, and what should the new look like?
- How can our homes be safer and more accessible, affordable, and welcoming?



Submission types:

- Individual presentation (15 minutes)
- Multi-speaker sessions (45 minutes)
- Posters (with virtual lightning round!)
- Discussion and networking forums
- Book club
- Sprint session
- Storytelling session
- Creativity encouraged!

Questions? Reach out to:

program.team@archivists.ca