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Probing a Dark Decade¹

Recordkeeping in the Indian Affairs Branch, 1937–1947

BILL RUSSELL

ABSTRACT At the end of the Second World War, the Indian Affairs Branch (IAB) launched a significant administrative renovation. As a result, during the first post-war decade, it introduced a number of notable changes in the manner in which records were managed both at headquarters in Ottawa and in the wide network of field offices. These achievements are documented in the archival record available today at Library and Archives Canada (LAC). What is less well understood is the records management environment out of which these changes emerged. This study describes aspects of the challenges that faced the IAB's records staff during the later years of the Great Depression and those of the Second World War. Its centrepiece is a file that provides a chronicle, in the form of monthly reports, of recordkeeping in the headquarters central registry office of the Indian Affairs Branch during the years 1937–1947. This record shines additional light on the information management activities of the branch during a particularly difficult decade in the administration's history.

¹ I would like to thank the editors and the anonymous peer reviewers for their time and patience in bringing clarity to many parts of the submitted manuscript. Their efforts have (I hope) strengthened the final product.

RÉSUMÉ À la fin de la Deuxième Guerre mondiale, la Division des affaires indiennes (DAI) a effectué des changements administratifs importants. Conséquemment, pendant la décennie suivant la guerre, elle a introduit un certain nombre de modifications notables dans la manière dont les documents étaient administrés, à la fois dans ses quartiers généraux à Ottawa ainsi que dans son vaste réseau de bureaux externes. Ces réalisations ont été documentées dans des archives aujourd’hui disponibles à Bibliothèque et Archives Canada (BAC). Ce qui est moins compris est l’environnement de la gestion documentaire à l’origine de ces changements. Cette étude présente certains aspects des défis auxquels ont fait face les gestionnaires des documents de la DAI pendant les dernières années de la Grande Dépression et la Deuxième Guerre mondiale. La pièce maîtresse est un dossier qui fournit une chronique, sous forme de rapports mensuels, de la gestion documentaire dans le bureau du registre central dans les quartiers généraux de la Division des affaires indiennes, pendant les années 1937-1947. Ce document apporte un éclairage supplémentaire sur les activités de gestion d’information de la Division pendant une période particulièrement difficile de l’histoire de son administration.

Introduction

In the decade following the end of the Second World War, significant changes were introduced within the Indian Affairs Branch (IAB). Although a minor federal agency with limited public profile in the non-Indigenous community, the branch was not immune to the demands for reform that had emerged as Canadian society looked with optimism to its post-war future. As historian John Leslie observed in his study of Canadian Indian policy in the two decades following the Second World War, “In the enlivened atmosphere of social questioning and inquiry associated with plans for post-war reconstruction, the dismal conditions of Canada’s 125,000 Indian people, the viability and legitimacy of the existing Indian policy, and the cost-effectiveness of Indian administration, became an issue for public discourse and parliamentary investigation.”² Branch policy and operations were subjected, first, to the scrutiny of the House of Commons Special Committee on Reconstruction and Re-establishment (1944)³ and, then, to the extensive probing of the Special Joint Committee of the Senate and the House of Commons Appointed to Examine and Consider the *Indian Act* (1946–48), which culminated in the passage of a revised version of that legislation in 1951. This broad reform impulse, coupled with growing pressure on the government from emerging and strengthening First Nations organizations and their non-Indigenous supporters, seemed to hold out the possibility for new policy directions. Yet, throughout this time, the IAB turned much of its attention not to challenging fundamental principles of its mandate – in particular, assimilation (now called integration) – but, rather, to enacting administrative change. In testimony before the special joint committee, senior branch officials repeatedly stressed the need to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of the IAB’s economic and social programs in order to improve the lot of First Nations and accelerate their progress toward full citizenship – an improvement Leslie refers to as “administrative renovation.”⁴ Branch Director Robert Hoey, speaking

2 John Leslie, “Assimilation, Integration or Termination? The Development of Canadian Indian Policy, 1943–1963” (PhD thesis, Carleton University, Ottawa, 1999), 73.

3 For the circumstances leading to the appearance of Indian Affairs Branch officials as witnesses before this house committee; *Minutes of Proceedings and Evidence*, issue 8 (May 18, 1944), and issue 9 (May 24, 1944); and examples of the public response to branch testimony, see Library and Archives Canada (hereafter cited as LAC), Indian and Inuit Affairs Program Sous-Fonds, record group (hereafter RG) 10, volume 8585, file 1/1-2-17.

4 Leslie, “Assimilation, Integration or Termination?,” 14.

before the committee, summarized the mindset bluntly: “The longer I remain in the Indian service the more I am convinced that it [the “Indian problem”] is largely an administrative problem.”⁵

Although the testimony before the special joint committee is silent on issues relating directly to IAB records management, the records program was among those that came under considerable internal scrutiny at this time as part and parcel of the administrative renovation. And as a result, the first post-war decade saw the introduction of a number of notable improvements in the manner in which records were managed both at headquarters in Ottawa and in the wide network of field offices across the country. Not all problems were solved, but important steps were taken. Within a decade, a unified subject-file classification system was installed for current records at headquarters and in the field. Record-keeping tools and processes – some of which had seen little change for decades and had long since gone out of use in other federal government offices – were replaced. Manuals were created, and training programs were provided to guide records staff in their work in Ottawa and in the regions. Records disposition, managed until recently in an ad hoc fashion at headquarters and largely ignored in the field, came to be regularized with a system of procedures and a reporting structure to document records destruction. These significant achievements are described in the archival record available today at Library and Archives Canada (LAC), primarily in the files of the Indian and Inuit Affairs Program Sous-Fonds – commonly referred to as record group (RG) 10 – supplemented and complemented by records in the Public Service Commission Fonds and the National Archives of Canada Fonds.⁶

- 5 Canada, Parliament, Special Joint Committee of the Senate and the House of Commons Appointed to Examine and Consider the *Indian Act, Minutes of Proceedings and Evidence*, 20th Parl., 3rd sess., issue 38 (June 24, 1947). After much initial discussion among committee members on the extent, nature, and mechanics of First Nations participation in the hearings, selected representatives of their communities did make presentations during a number of sessions, mostly in 1947 – a halting step toward consultation with Indigenous leaders. However, as Leslie points out, First Nations and their supporters remained on the periphery of political power as policy takers rather than policy makers. For an overview of First Nations’ national political resurgence and the role played by supporting players from the non-Indigenous community during this period, see Leslie, “Assimilation, Integration or Termination?,” chapters 2 and 3, and secondary sources cited therein.
- 6 The records found in the Management Analysis Division (known at the time as the Organization and Methods (O&M) Division) sub-series within the Civil Service Commission series of the Public Service Commission Fonds (RG 32) are especially useful as they contain organization and efficiency research studies carried out by commission staff for many departments. A source used often by government records archivists in their descriptive work, these O&M files are less well known to the researching public. The IAB made use of the commission service on

What is less well understood is the environment from which these changes emerged, and that is the focus of this article. Using a heretofore largely under-utilized body of documents, it attempts to shine additional light on a difficult period in the history of IAB records management – a dark decade, 1937–1947 – in which the branch, feeling the impact of the shortcomings of its information management policies and procedures, took the first halting steps toward transition to a “modern” records world. In describing aspects of how the branch marshalled its information resources, it proposes records management as yet another lens through which to view the Indian Affairs Branch. The goal of this study in documents is to contribute to an understanding of the branch mindset and, in so doing, to serve as an aid in assessing the success or failure of the IAB in carrying out its mandate.

The centrepiece for this study is a file that has been overlooked – in large measure, one suspects, because of the descriptive cloak thrown around it first by its creators and later in LAC finding aids. The title assigned to the file by the IAB is obscure: “Department of Indian Affairs – Memorandum – Re. Volume of Correspondence & Other Work Carried on in Different Branches of the Department.” The LAC’s online search tool offers up the following vague and unpromising description: “Monthly reports submitted to the department regarding correspondence sent and received.”⁷ Both references mask the true nature of the record. For almost 200 pages, the file (481-1-15)⁸ chronicles recordkeeping in branch headquarters. That alone makes the file stand out; records documenting in such detail the activities of a mid-20th-century federal government records office are not common. The file is not the only source on information management policy and procedures during the inter-war and Second World War period; various headquarters files within the “Methods and Procedures” block of the branch’s subject file classification system have survived, and most include some

a number of occasions during the late 1940s and 1950s, the results being extensive reports on how the branch’s offices were organized and how staff carried out their mandates. The National Archives of Canada Fonds (RG 37) includes files documenting the relationship of the Public Archives of Canada (as it was then known) with the Indian Affairs Branch, in particular as regards the transfer of archival documents from the IAB. The fonds also includes files of the Public Records Committee (RG 35-7) and its important post-war role in promoting good records management practices and ensuring that records of archival value were protected from destruction.

7 Library and Archives Canada, “Monthly Reports Submitted to the Department regarding Correspondence Sent and Received,” Collection Search, accessed June 23, 2023, <http://central.bac-lac.gc.ca/redirect?app=fonandcol&id=2046079&lang=eng>.

8 LAC, RG 10, vol. 6812, file 481-1-15 (hereafter cited as Monthly Reports).

documentation for the years 1937–47. There are unsatisfying gaps in the content of those files, however. The regularity of the monthly compendium found in file 481-1-15 provides a thread that draws together documents found in the related files, which, without this context, are not always clear. Moreover, the reports offer an engaging if sometimes disturbing read, not a characterization normally associated with files on the subject of records. While replete with descriptions of routine activity, they are written in a florid style. Their author, Alphonse E. St. Louis, not content to convey in a sentence what he could say in a paragraph, proved ever eager to expound upon the historical significance of the IAB and the value of his efforts and those of his staff in maintaining its records.

File 481-1-15 has limitations. It ends abruptly in June 1947, at a point when the pace of change in the branch records management world was accelerating but transformation was as yet incomplete. And with relatively few similar files from other agencies with which to compare, it is difficult to gauge whether the challenges experienced at the IAB were typical. This study points to evidence that helps in that task, yet the file includes neither responses from the branch director to St. Louis's reports nor observations from staff of the operational areas that the records unit served. A lack of such corroborating internal documents hinders an assessment of St. Louis's impact on IAB records policy and practices. Furthermore, the file largely presents the view of one man only, and the extent to which his ideas offer an accurate reflection of the management cadre mindset must be questioned. By the end of the Second World War, the IAB was entering a period of transition, and some of the personnel augmenting its senior ranks possessed impressive organizational and administrative skills honed during recent military service. Although wedded to the assimilation agenda, they genuinely – if misguidedly, as subsequent history shows – sought to ameliorate conditions for First Nations on their passage to integration and full citizenship.⁹ St. Louis, on the other hand, might best be characterized as part of an old guard – a man whose views, although similar to those probably held by a majority of non-Indigenous Canadians of the day, are at times expressed in a manner jarring to 21st-century sensibilities. He had joined the records staff of what was then the Department of Indian Affairs (DIA) in 1912, at the age of 22. Apart

9 From November 1946 to June 1947, the reports in file 481-1-15 are those of St. Louis's successor, R.L. Grenier, a man whose university education, skills, training, and recent military experience exemplified the concept of new blood. However, Grenier was gone from the branch within a year – hence the focus on St. Louis.

from the evidence that can be teased from his memoranda, which appear in a variety of DIA/IAB files, St Louis's career has not been well documented.¹⁰ His talents took him relatively quickly up the records office ladder to the positions of senior file clerk in 1919, principal clerk in 1923, and head clerk in 1936. In rising through the ranks of the records office, St. Louis worked in the shadow of George M. Matheson, a legendary figure in department lore, whose prodigious output of indexes and guides to the early records of IAB administration remains useful to researchers even today. Matheson was considered an authority on the history of the department and its predecessor agencies and expressed great pride in their place in the nation's development, in their records in his custody, and in his designation as registrar, which he received by order-in-council in 1909 – a recognition that he claimed was unique in the civil service. His successor had large shoes to fill. Although St. Louis did not emulate Matheson by creating finding aids to the records in his charge, his writings show a similarly deep commitment to heralding the DIA's history and the records that documented it. He did not confine his memoranda to descriptions of the work of maintaining the branch's records but instead had much to say about the agency's mandate. On occasion, his turn of phrase in praise of the department's mission takes on an almost religious fervour. It is in this commentary, perhaps, that his reports are most pertinent. His views speak to the idea of branch exceptionalism¹¹ – a blend of chauvinism, paternalism, and practicality that saw the Indian Affairs Branch mandate as unique. The corollary of this belief dictated that the records created in the course of the IAB's work could not be treated like those of other government departments.

10 As St. Louis (born May 24, 1890) did not achieve the level of director, a principal criterion for permanent retention of federal public servant service records, there is no personnel file for him in RG 32 at Library and Archives Canada. His internal DIA/IAB service records (file 406173 and later 110-87) no longer exist. Establishment books – records maintained within the IAB into the 1950s – survive in RG 10 but provide little personal data as their primary purpose was to document career progression and salary levels for superannuation calculation purposes. Entries for St. Louis are found in RG 10, vols. 9179 and 9185.

11 Although the term *exceptionalism* carries connotations of an exaggerated belief in the superiority of one nation state, culture, or way of life, it must be remembered that the mandate of the IAB at this time was unique. The branch represents a primary example of what political scientist J.E. Hodgetts, in his classic study *Pioneer Public Service* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1955), termed the "cliente agency." The *Canadian Constitution Act, 1867* gave the federal government responsibility for "Indians, and Lands reserved for the Indians"; the administration of that mandate came to be centralized within a single agency, directed by various pieces of legislation, the most important of which was the *Indian Act*. By 1937, the IAB played a role in virtually every aspect of First Nations life and exercised degrees of control over most relationships among its "clients," the state, and the wider Canadian citizenry.

Not unexpectedly, little about St. Louis's personal circumstances appears in his official reports. Yet, in an impassioned plea early in 1946 for upward reclassification of his overworked staff, he provides a glimpse into his personal situation after 34 years of service: "The constant strain caused by research work in addition to the supervisor of the Branch [sic], I am finding a much too heavy load to carry with a salary so drastically reduced."¹² Any further reduction, he lamented, would force him to apply for superannuation in order to safeguard his health. Director Hoey took St. Louis's arguments sufficiently to heart to forward his report to his superior, with his own recommendations for action to address "the steadily growing sense of dissatisfaction amongst the members of the Records Service."¹³ After returning from a two-month sick leave in late August, St. Louis was replaced as officer in charge of records in a November 1946 branch reorganization. Reassignment to the newly created position of archivist in 1949 extended St. Louis's career for another seven years. The archives section of the IAB records service was created specifically for him and is described in a Civil Service Commission memorandum as "a special position to use the experience of the previous chief of the division in searching and indexing old documents and records."¹⁴ By 1955, an assistant archivist (Marion Gilchrist) had been added to the archives section, and she took over the role of archivist upon St. Louis's retirement.¹⁵

Before proceeding, a word about what this study does not set out to do is necessary. It makes no attempt to address the impact that the records policies and practices of the IAB had on the First Nations population, useful as such an investigation would be. St. Louis never discussed the challenges he faced in anything but an inward-looking manner. His comments on the consequences of ineffective or inefficient records practices are presented solely in terms of how they impeded the IAB in fulfilling its mission, without reference to the effects

¹² Monthly Reports, April 29, 1946.

¹³ Monthly Reports, memorandum from Robert Hoey to assistant deputy minister, mines and resources, May 6, 1946. See also Monthly Reports, memoranda from Alphonse E. St. Louis, April 29, 1946; June 3, 1946; and September 2, 1946.

¹⁴ LAC, RG 32, vol. 724, file 72-MR-IA, P.F. Weiss to C.J. Lochnan, May 18, 1949.

¹⁵ The IAB continued to maintain what it termed its Archives Unit until 1964, when the office was rebranded as the Documentary Research Unit; the name change was in part a result of what the branch viewed as a misunderstanding about the nature of the unit's work, which appeared in the report of the Royal Commission on Government Organization (Glassco Commission). See LAC RG 10, accession 2003-00021-6, box 7, file 1/1-6-9, part 2, R.F. Battle, director, IAB, to D.R. Yeomans, Privy Council Office, March 19, 1964.

upon the welfare of the client communities. Neither did his reports question the validity of the assimilation agenda. In St. Louis's view, good records management served to protect the interests of the government's "wards" during their journey to integration, while at the same time shielding the administration against the claims and grievances of its client population.

The Records Unit at Work, 1937–47

Indian Affairs, like other federal agencies, suffered retrenchment during the Great Depression. There was little room for a sustained initiative in administrative matters such as records management when funding for core operational programs was being slashed. As if symbolic of the malaise, the Department of Indian Affairs had been reduced in status in 1936 to become a branch within the newly created Department of Mines and Resources. Dr. Harold W. McGill, a Calgary physician and friend of former Prime Minister Bennett, having succeeded Duncan Campbell Scott in the position of deputy superintendent general of Indian Affairs in 1932, was appointed director of the renamed Indian Affairs Branch.¹⁶ By 1937, McGill had already encountered serious information management problems, one of which stands out: the exposure in 1933 by the auditor general of mismanagement of accounts within the DIA's Lands and Trusts Branch and what McGill described as "undesirable practices" in the administration of First Nations lands. "There was a slackness and inertia that might almost be considered culpable,"¹⁷ he admitted to his minister, Thomas Murphy, when reviewing remedial action taken. A proper system of bookkeeping records and accounting was created after treasury officers from the Office of the Comptroller of the Treasury were attached to the IAB.¹⁸ Perhaps his recent experience of such problems sharpened McGill's mind to information management issues, as he

16 See University of Calgary, Glenbow Western Research Collection, Harold and Emma McGill Fonds, which includes extensive records of McGill's career, including his DIA/IAB service.

17 LAC, RG 10, vol. 6813, file 481-1-27, Harold McGill, "Private and Confidential" memorandum to the superintendent general of Indian Affairs [Thomas Murphy], July 8, 1935.

18 LAC, RG 10, vol. 6813, file 481-1-27. See Watson Sellar to McGill, June 26, 1933; McGill's reply, June 28, 1933; and McGill to Thomas Murphy, July 8, 1935. An August 14, 1935, memo speaks further of the "entirely inadequate and obsolete" records system and collection practices prior to the intervention. This file also includes correspondence from March 1936 regarding irregularities in the Timber Division of the Lands and Trusts Branch.

took on his role as director of the IAB in December 1936, and encouraged him to solicit regular reports from the officer in charge of his records office.

That year also saw the retirement of the long-serving George Matheson, to be succeeded by St. Louis. Having assumed supervision of the DIA Records Branch on April 1, 1936, the newly appointed officer in charge of records offered senior management many ambitious plans for changes in office routine and record-keeping tools.¹⁹ The records office of a federal government department in this era was not a glamorous cog in the wheel of bureaucracy. The core daily work began with St. Louis opening the mail and was followed by the registration and immediate dispatch of money and cheques to the chief accountant. The registration clerks spent most of the morning registering, coding, and indexing incoming correspondence; locating relevant files; circulating records to operational officers; and recording the whereabouts of outgoing files in charge books. Where information was required to be placed on multiple files, document extracts were prepared. As files were returned to the central registry, they were checked for completeness of action and physical damage before filing. Second copies of outgoing letters were generated, indexed, and organized for the departmental letter books. Regular tasks to maintain the records and prevent damage included closing thick file volumes and opening new ones, replacing tattered file backings, transferring dormant (noncurrent) records to storage, and rearranging shelving in both the main records office and the storage facility to accommodate these movements. As the senior and most experienced staff member, St. Louis was frequently required to undertake historical research among noncurrent records still in branch custody in dormant storage as well as documents already transferred to the Public Archives of Canada (PAC). Although the statistics provided in the monthly reports are blunt instruments for measuring the office's workload, they demonstrate that, while the volume of the core daily work at headquarters was considerably greater in 1947 than it had been a decade before,

¹⁹ For outlines of his initial plans for the office, see LAC, RG 10, vol. 8586, file 1/1-6-4 (hereafter cited as *Methods and Procedures – Memoranda and Instructions*), including St. Louis's memoranda to McGill, April 20, 1936, and to T.R.L. MacInnes, June 8, 1936. Two years before, when still working under Matheson's direction, St. Louis had attempted to address shortcomings of the DIA recordkeeping service. He investigated the records classification systems and recordkeeping tools of five departments and prepared a lengthy report. His "Precis on Filing and Charge-Out Systems," also prepared in 1934, which recommended adoption of the bring forward (BF) system found in use in the offices visited, met with Matheson's discouraging advice to McGill: "I doubt if any further improvement can be made in our system, with the staff we now have." *Methods and Procedures – Memoranda and Instructions*, George Matheson, memorandum, February 10, 1934.

the most significant increases did not occur until 1946–47. Prior to that, numbers reported for such metrics as incoming letters, vouchers, returns, and telegrams; outgoing letters, memoranda, and telegrams; extracts created from incoming documents; and opened subject files fluctuated greatly but did not show a continuous annual rise. St. Louis explained that the flow of paper through the records office was seasonal, with volume increasing at the close of each fiscal year and in the months of greatest agricultural activity.²⁰

Canada's declaration of war in September 1939 increased the challenges through the imposition of stringent wartime regulations and economies on all departments, even those such as the IAB, which were not directly involved in the war effort. Staffing levels, pared during Depression years, came under even greater strain. Early in 1940, R.L. Grenier,²¹ a man upon whom St. Louis pinned great hopes, joined the records staff. By May of that year, however, four records employees had left for military service or to higher-grade jobs offered by departments engaged in prosecuting the war. Others were to follow these routes, Grenier included. The abnormal circumstances, St. Louis noted, necessitated the employment of "young girls and boys for office work which would not in normal times be considered possible,"²² and these employees could not be expected to perform the tasks of more mature staff. Colleagues in operational areas did not always appreciate the roles played by those in the central registry. In one blunt memorandum, St. Louis lamented,

20 Monthly Reports, 1937–1947. The workload increase evident in 1946–47 (the ill effects of which upon the work environment St. Louis decried dramatically in his reports) is attributable to the extension of the Family Allowance to First Nations families and to the application of the provisions of the *Veterans' Land Act (VLA)* to returning First Nations service personnel. St. Louis stated that those programs, along with the "rapid expansion of the Indian Medical Services," had brought increased duties to the records staff such that "it is only with the utmost difficulty that research and other special work among our old records can now be performed with any degree of satisfaction" (Monthly Reports, April 1, 1946).

21 Grenier entered the service at the senior position of clerk grade 4. St. Louis lauded his academic qualifications and "new attitude which cannot otherwise but be of much benefit to the administration" (Monthly Reports, March 1, 1940).

22 Monthly Reports, October 2, 1942.

The Records used to be a training ground for future executives as it was rightly considered the most propitious place to learn the functions of the Department, and how its policies evolved and the numerous everyday problems of the administration are being solved. This is no longer so, the Records is looked down upon as the “black hole” of the Branch where there exists no hope for advancement.²³

Despite this comment, St. Louis was always ready to promote the efforts of his staff. Frequently, he reminded the IAB director of the extent to which the effectiveness and efficiency of the work of the branch’s “officers” was dependent upon the contributions of records office clerks. Reflecting in March 1945 on the level of responsibility, judgment, and knowledge of his staff, he declared, “I doubt if any clerks of the same grades are ever called upon in other Records Divisions of the Service to perform similar duties.”²⁴

Addressing Recordkeeping Challenges in the Indian Affairs Branch

The following sections of this study discuss four aspects of recordkeeping in the IAB: shortcomings of the subject-file classification system, challenges raised by off-site storage and records disposition, field office records management, and efforts to improve headquarters recordkeeping processes and tools.

Subject-File Classification Systems

The branch’s fragmented subject-file classification systems²⁵ presented problems – not the least of which was that they were used only in Ottawa. Although the DIA had introduced significant changes in its headquarters filing systems over

²³ Monthly Reports, April 29, 1946. See also Monthly Reports, June 3, 1946. St. Louis chastised the Civil Service Commission for repeated denials of upward revision of IAB records staff salary levels. The argument of IAB exceptionalism fell on deaf ears, and St. Louis complained that “the more I explained and stressed the importance, not only of our work but of the Branch as a whole, the more I am convinced, they thought I was trying ‘to put it over them’” (April 29, 1946).

²⁴ Monthly Reports, March 31, 1945.

²⁵ For a discussion of DIA filing systems during this period, see Sean Darcy, “The Evolution of the Department of Indian Affairs’ Central Registry Record-Keeping Systems: 1872–1984,” *Archivaria* 58 (Fall 2004): 161–71.

the preceding decades, these remained cumbersome. Major modifications made in 1923 through the creation of subject-block series did not fully resolve the issue, and some correspondence continued to be placed in the predecessor Red Series and Black Series files for over two decades. In addition, records relating to education, and to the systems of both residential schools and day schools, had been consigned years earlier to a separate registry. Seeing the completion of the conversion to a subject-block system as his top priority, St. Louis began the task in the autumn of 1936 under the tutelage of A.E. Têtu,²⁶ a man he described as an “outstanding authority” on filing and business organization. A preliminary report from St. Louis’s guru, setting out the 21 primary subjects that he and St. Louis believed would encapsulate the branch’s work and form the basis of a unified subject-block classification system, was delivered in mid-February 1937.²⁷ An abrupt comment in the following month’s report stated that, with illness having reduced staff from nine to four, the organizational work under Têtu’s supervision had had to be discontinued for the time being. Reports for the following months make few references either to its resumption or to Têtu. It is possible that senior management, or the operational areas that would have been disrupted in the initial stages of a major transformation of the filing system, had not embraced the project with St. Louis’s enthusiasm. However, no evidence was found to support such an explanation. Rather, other more pressing work – the move of dormant branch records to new off-site storage and the destruction of obsolete records, discussed below – intervened.

St. Louis never abandoned the project, and over the following decade, his reports return periodically to the subject. One, written in 1939, noted optimistically that the file classification system redesign could now be resumed. Writing in 1943, he encouraged McGill to make the installation of a modern filing system one of the first priorities for post-war work.²⁸ In January 1946, St. Louis brought

26 St. Louis, in his 1934 report on his investigation of departmental systems, refers to a “Mr. Fetu” as an official of the Department of National Defence who, in a 22-year career, had specialized in modern filing methods. The glowing descriptions of Têtu’s qualifications found in St. Louis’s 1936–37 reports to McGill point to him being the officer referred to three years earlier. Some of the planning work that St. Louis and Têtu did during 1936 was carried out at the offices of the National Research Council, suggesting a possible Têtu connection with that agency.

27 Methods and Procedures – Memoranda and Instructions, “Outline of Proposed Index System for Records, Indian Affairs.”

28 His March 1, 1939, report, missing from the Monthly Reports file, is located in Methods and Procedures – Memoranda and Instructions. For the reference to the post-war revival of the project, see Monthly Reports, December 1, 1943.]

the issue to the attention of the new director of the IAB, Robert A. Hoey, pointing out that the achievement of a uniform and up-to-date system, long under consideration, had been held back only by staff shortages.²⁹ The wheels of bureaucracy turned slowly, however – not surprising, given that the branch’s attention was focused now on the special joint committee on the *Indian Act*, the hearings for which were to begin in May 1946.³⁰ When R.L. Grenier returned to the branch from military service and, soon thereafter, took over St. Louis’s post as officer in charge of records in a November 1946 reorganization, the complete reclassification of the file system along modern business administration lines figured prominently in his proposed program for the service. However, Grenier left the IAB the following year, and his replacement, H.T. Vergette, undertook his own survey of the methods and systems employed in the headquarters records office immediately after his appointment in November 1947 and drew up new plans for reorganization. Reporting to Branch Executive Assistant Colonel Eric Acland in June 1948, Vergette explained that, while he agreed that the projects should be carried out simultaneously in Ottawa and in the field, he opposed Grenier’s idea of a complete changeover at headquarters and recommended instead that three of the file classification series currently in use be retained with modifications. Writing in early March 1949, Vergette reported that the plan for reorganizing the headquarters system had been approved by the Civil Service Commission.³¹ The project that St. Louis had championed a decade before had finally taken shape.

29 LAC, RG 10, vol. 8586, file 1/1-6-2, memorandum to the director, January 22, 1946. First appointed as IAB superintendent of welfare and training in December 1936, Hoey replaced McGill as director in March 1945.

30 The special joint committee hearings were held over three sessions of the 20th Parliament. Apart from Director Hoey’s brief references, made during his first appearance as a witness in 1946, to the “Records Office” at branch headquarters (in which he emphasized the great historical value of both the documents in branch custody and those already transferred to the keeping of the Public Archives of Canada [PAC] but said nothing to suggest that the office faced any challenges), scant attention was paid in any testimony to the specific manner in which the branch managed its information resources. The silence accorded the IAB’s records activities by the committee is also at odds with the concern for records management that had, at this time, begun to take on a new imperative within the wider federal government. Indeed, before the committee’s deliberations began, significant steps had already been taken, through the creation of the Public Records Committee (PRC), to increase the focus of government agencies on the care of their records.

31 Vergette’s undated survey report is attached to an April 14, 1948, memorandum from P.F. Weiss to his Civil Service Commission colleague, H.V. Orr, in LAC, RG 32, vol. 724, file 72-MR-IA. His June 28, 1948, and March 5, 1949, memoranda are found in LAC, RG 10, vol. 8586, file 1/1-6-2.

Off-Site Storage and Records Disposition

Records storage was a perennial worry with closed headquarters files consigned to unsuitable off-site premises. The IAB had long campaigned for improved storage facilities. By 1937 its hopes were pinned on the construction of a new building for departments' storage of semi-active records, which the Department of Public Works (DPW) had undertaken to erect on the site of the Central Experimental Farm on the southwestern side of the city.³² Preparations for the relocation of noncurrent IAB records figured large in the decision early in 1937 to suspend further work on the redesign of the subject-file classification system. Just as progress on that project seemed promising, the DPW put new demands on the branch with respect to the move, stipulating that the transfer of additional material to storage would have to be offset by the destruction of an equal quantity of obsolete papers. This put immediate pressure upon the records staff to undertake the file segregation necessary to dispose of such records. Although St. Louis recognized that the existence of an ever-increasing quantity of records was problematic, he shared a view, common within the branch management cadre, of the uniqueness of the Indian Affairs mandate and its records. His report of work carried out in February 1937 includes an early salvo in defence of IAB exceptionalism, arguing that "as most of the Indian correspondence from the earliest times refers to lands and reserves, as well as miscellaneous claims, it has been found impossible to destroy any of the correspondence," but adding that "obsolete papers, returns and vouchers with exception of those involving trust funds, might with advantage be disposed of together with other papers, after careful selection and the retention of any material which may be required for future reference or for transfer to the Archives."³³ St. Louis's reference to the potential for destruction of "obsolete" records reflects his appreciation of the impact of a significant change in federal government records management policy, which had come about the previous year. Although he had initially been reluctant to see records disposition as an immediate priority, DPW had now

32 In his April 20, 1936, report to McGill, St. Louis refers to the "ramshackle building on Wellington Street" then in use as "more of the nature of a fire trap than that of providing a safe place for the keeping of our old documents" (Methods and Procedures – Memoranda and Instructions, St. Louis, memorandum to McGill, April 20, 1936). The origins of the Central Experimental Farm records storage building project are discussed in Jay Atherton, "The Origins of the Public Archives Records Centre, 1897–1956," *Archivaria* 8 (Summer 1979): 35–59. See also LAC, National Archives of Canada Fonds, RG 37, vol. 303, file "PAC History," parts 3 and 5.

33 Monthly Reports, March 1, 1937.

forced that upon him, and the enactment of Treasury Board minute T.160481B, of June 2, 1936, put a tool into his hands for the purpose.

Dissatisfaction with the existing ad hoc approach to dealing with growing quantities of obsolete or routine administrative records in departments had prompted the Treasury Board's decision in 1932 to provide a directive that permitted departments to undertake regularized destructions, obviating the need for repeated applications to the board for authority.³⁴ The DIA identified various subject classes within its file systems from which records might be destroyed following five- and ten-year retention periods. However, in doing so, it cautioned that "the correspondence in the Department of Indian Affairs differs materially from that of most other departments of the service and no hard and fast rules, set by time alone, can be fixed for the destruction of its records."³⁵ The 1936 Treasury Board minute and its attached schedules set out the conditions under which records *could* be destroyed after five and ten years, using the instrument as a continuing authority, and identified the specific subject classes relevant to the IAB.³⁶ Emphasis on the word *could* is important; the authority was permissive, not mandatory. As evidence cited below will show, St. Louis and his staff did not interpret the minute as licence to destroy without careful review. The destruction of even routine documents plagued the IAB in large measure because of the manner in which its records were organized. In 1936, the branch file systems were not yet sufficiently robust as to completely segregate housekeeping/administrative and operational records into separate files. Documents that legitimately fell within the categories for which destruction was now permitted were often scattered throughout files that included material of longer-term departmental or even historical value. Experienced staff had to carry out laborious file stripping to remove the chaff from the wheat. The additional restriction within the minute that required vouchers and documents pertaining to Indian trust funds

34 Heretofore, departments had been expected to seek Treasury Board approval for destruction on a case-by-case basis. The DIA prided itself on adherence to this directive, as evidenced in a number of cases described in LAC, RG 10, vol. 8586, file 1/1-6-3 (hereafter cited as *Methods and Procedures – Destruction*). For a discussion of the cautious approach taken with regard to records destruction by the Department of Indian Affairs up to 1914, see Bill Russell, "The White Man's Paper Burden: Aspects of Records Keeping in the Department of Indian Affairs, 1860–1914," *Archivaria* 19 (Winter 1984–85): 50–72.

35 *Methods and Procedures – Destruction*, T.R.L. MacInnes, letter to W.C. Ronson, Treasury Board, April 13, 1933. See also St. Louis, memorandum, February 11, 1933, upon which MacInnes's letter was based.

36 *Methods and Procedures – Destruction*, "Extract from the minutes of a meeting of the Treasury Board, held at Ottawa, on the second day of June, 1936."

to be retained indefinitely “unless some authentic record is maintained”³⁷ had particular relevance for the branch. The determination of what constituted an “authentic record” would vex IAB officials for more than a decade and would result in the continued accumulation of quantities of certain types of vouchers and cheques.³⁸ Even seemingly routine documents, such as old vouchers for payments and cancelled cheques returned from the office of the auditor general after auditing, were treated in a manner different from that employed by other departments in order to satisfy the stipulation in the Treasury Board minute concerning trust fund monies. The *modus operandi* adopted within the IAB was to destroy only those obsolete vouchers related to the expenditure of funds obtained through Parliamentary appropriation and to retain those for which the monies spent derived from First Nations trust funds. Of note in the Treasury Board minute as well, given the IAB view on the value of its records, was the provision for retention of historically important documents beyond their period of operational use: “Documents of general historical value *shall* be retained indefinitely.”³⁹ Although the determination of such value was left to departments, the minute required departments to consult with the dominion archivist in cases where destruction of certain classes of documents was planned and set out a dispute resolution methodology that would refer disagreements between a department and the dominion archivist to the Treasury Board.⁴⁰

St. Louis and his staff set about identifying and segregating those records for which destruction was now authorized. This project grew in scope from one of identifying dormant records suitable for destruction into a major exercise of not only selecting records for disposal but also integrating some of the surviving valuable Red Series and Black Series records into related current files. Further

37 Methods and Procedures – Destruction, Extract from minutes of June 2, 1936.

38 See Methods and Procedures – Destruction for correspondence from February to July 1937 and October 1938 regarding the efforts of the auditor general to destroy accumulations of cancelled cheques in its custody and the IAB’s refusal to accept the proposed arrangement.

39 Methods and Procedures – Destruction, Extract from minutes of June 2, 1936 (emphasis added).

40 In 1913–14, the Department of Indian Affairs had made major records transfers to the Public Archives of Canada that purported, erroneously, to include “all” records of historical value dated prior to 1872. Between 1914 and 1937, the DIA continued to transfer, on an ad hoc basis and on its own initiative, small quantities of documents into PAC custody. These periodic transfers are documented at LAC both in the records of what was then known as the Public Archives of Canada (see, for example, LAC, RG 37, vol. 36, file 60-3-IA) and in RG 10 (see RG 10, accession 2003-00021-6, box 7, file 1/1-6-10, part 1).

complications arose in April 1937, when the DPW announced the imminent teardown of the building the branch was using for storage. The IAB was left with no alternative but to accept an interim move of its dormant records to temporary quarters at the Central Experimental Farm, pending the opening, still two years away, of the purpose-built facility. Records staff spent the summer and autumn in the “colossal” combined tasks of examining and selecting for destruction or removal to the temporary building “over 100,000 files,” a figure increased in later reports first to 200,000 and then to 300,000, “and thousands of loose papers.”⁴¹ Those files identified for possible destruction in an initial sortation were subjected to the “minute scrutiny” of a second revision and selection, yet St. Louis assured McGill that this careful re-examination was justified by the quantity of documents “reclaimed” in the process.⁴² He reported the daily unearthing of many important documents, the existence of which had been forgotten for years. Taking this opportunity to underline the branch’s need for a unified subject-block file classification system of the type he had already promoted, he advised McGill that the finding of such records “in their present state of classification, is one in which guess work has to play a large part.”⁴³ St. Louis took special care to impress upon branch management the gravity of the selection work and the necessity of exercising the discretionary power provided in the Treasury Board authority, assuring McGill in an August 1937 report that “many of the papers listed for destruction under authority . . . are being retained indefinitely for administrative or historical purposes.”⁴⁴ This memorandum also presented a glorification of the IAB mandate and justification for the long-term retention of branch records, which must be seen, with the benefit of 21st-century hindsight (and a degree of irony, given the later history of Indian residential schools research), as one of the more striking of his expressions of IAB “exceptionalism”:

I wish to emphasize the fact that none of our papers can be classified as Indian legends or myths, but all of them bear the characteristics of

⁴¹ Monthly Reports, August 4, 1937.

⁴² Monthly Reports, September 7, 1937; Monthly Reports, October 1, 1937.

⁴³ Monthly Reports, October 1, 1937.

⁴⁴ Methods and Procedures – Memoranda and Instructions, part 1, memorandum, “Destruction of Old Records,” August 3, 1937.

historical monuments. . . . These characteristics are essential to all historical truths and are to be found in our old papers. They contain an almost continuous record of our Indian wards progress . . . , all this related chronologically by our Superintendents, Inspectors, Agents, Farmers and lastly by those worthy representatives of the Church, the humble missionaries of the Gospel among our wards. The unwritten concordate [sic] between Church and the State so well exemplified in the whole history of the Department by the constant and unselfish devotion of its Ministers, Priests and Congregations towards the Indian race is also a matter of record among our official papers. I feel that it is incumbent on the Department to preserve from decay the remembrance of what these men have done for its wards and these records should be kept intact for historical purposes as an example to future generations. These reports are being retained indefinitely for these reasons.⁴⁵

Once the transferred records were installed in the temporary storage space, staff found it impossible to continue the examination and segregation tasks in the damp and unheated building during the winter, and this work was suspended until June 1938. St. Louis's report for the following month heralded the completion of the project of selecting records for destruction and the disposal, through the office of the superintendent of printing, of approximately eight to nine tons (some 75,000 files) of "valueless papers."⁴⁶ The task now turned to packing the surviving noncurrent records for eventual transfer to the new permanent storage building.⁴⁷ That move – the "fulfillment of a long-standing want, the housing of all our archives material in fireproof buildings" – took place in February 1939.⁴⁸ Unfortunately, the new records centre proved to be less of a boon than hoped. In July 1938, the Treasury Board had changed the arrangements by which records, once stored in the permanent building, were to be controlled. Whereas custody

45 Methods and Procedures – Memoranda and Instructions, part 1, memorandum, "Destruction of Old Records," August 3, 1937.

46 Monthly Reports, August 2, 1938.

47 The figure of eight to nine tons of paper destroyed does not square with St. Louis's January 1944 memorandum, cited later, in which he reported that the 1937–38 exercise generated approximately 15 tons of wastepaper. However, no detailed lists of files destroyed have been located.

48 Monthly Reports, January 2, 1939.

of the documents was to have been managed by DPW staff, each department was advised that it would now be responsible for its material, without the transfer of additional personnel or any provision for delivery of records from the facility to offices.⁴⁹ Arrangements for file retrieval quickly proved unsatisfactory, and St. Louis's reports note that one of his clerks had to make many trips to the facility, using his own car. Moreover, with no permanent DPW staff dedicated to work in the building, tasks such as the rearrangement of files on the shelves each time new noncurrent material was consigned there only added to the work of the IAB clerks making the deliveries.

The Treasury Board decision not to provide staff and a retrieval service at the new building was a major flaw in the plan for the records storage building at the experimental farm, one that discouraged a number of other departments from moving any material to the building. However, it was the requirement for storage space to accommodate the extensive records generated by other departments in the war effort that brought the IAB's use of the new facility to an end. In March 1941, dormant branch records were disrupted by their third move in four years, which saw the files and storage equipment relocated to the Barnard Paper warehouse on Slater Street. While the move was completed quickly and brought the IAB records close to branch offices in central Ottawa, St. Louis was resigned to the fact that the "sorting of thousands of letter books, patents and letter registers which, in the rush were thrown on the floor, will take some time to place in order."⁵⁰ A fire in the Slater Street facility in October 1941, from which the IAB records escaped damage, alarmed the minister sufficiently to prompt an investigation into relocating the most valuable records elsewhere. In his memorandum addressing this instruction, St. Louis explained how difficult it would be to separate important from unimportant papers stored in the building in order to have the former moved to a fireproof facility, adding that it was necessary to have the dormant records readily available, even if they were less frequently used than active records.⁵¹ Following this episode, St. Louis's reports indicate

49 LAC, RG 37, vol. 303, file "PAC History – Records Centre," part 5. See J.P. Hunter, deputy minister, DPW, to Acting Dominion Archivist J.F. Kenney, April 7, 1937; and Hunter to Dominion Archivist Gustave Lanctôt, July 11, 1938.

50 Monthly Reports, April 1941.

51 Monthly Reports, October and November 1941. See also LAC, RG 10, accession 2003-00021-6, box 7, file 1/1-6-10, part 1, C.W. Jackson, chief executive assistant to the minister of mines and resources, to McGill, November 1, 1941; and McGill's reply, enclosing St. Louis's views, November 4, 1941.

no further trouble with storage at the Barnard building. Indeed, in July 1945, he boasted that the IAB's noncurrent records were "never kept in a better orderly management with every file and document easy of accessibility" and that the premises were as clean as the records office itself.⁵²

St Louis's staff did achieve some further success with records disposition at headquarters. Writing in January 1944, he explained that "on several occasions" subsequent to the 1937–38 destruction exercise, documents belonging to the same classes had been disposed of – the most recent action being the consignment of some 1,770 pounds of salvage paper to the war effort in December 1942.⁵³ Yet these projects were not straightforward. The task was much easier in other departments, he explained, where destruction of valueless material could be done en bloc at regular intervals. The interfiling of valuable correspondence and routine documents made this impossible for IAB records. "We have found from experience," St. Louis advised McGill that "there is very little among our correspondence which can be described as valueless and obsolete" – significantly distinguishing *correspondence* from forms, requisitions, vouchers, and similar routine documents – and added that only certain types of accounts documents and their related correspondence, as well as "a certain class of diaries and returns may be safely destroyed."⁵⁴ St. Louis applied a cautious interpretation of the destruction authority throughout. A November 1940 memorandum explained that, to ensure a wider margin of safety than was provided in the Treasury Board minute, the IAB had extended the five- and ten-year retention periods in most cases to ten and fifteen years, referring by way of justification to the unique nature of the IAB mandate and its records. A succinct summary of branch policy and practice on destruction is found in the statement that St. Louis prepared in the context of discussions late in 1945 surrounding the establishment of the Public Records Committee. His response to two questionnaires – one regarding

52 Monthly Reports, June 1945. This description is in marked contrast to one provided four years later by H.T. Vergette in a May 19, 1949, memorandum to Colonel Acland: "The Barnard Building is a most unsuitable place for these valuable documents. In addition to congestion, there is no working space, reorganization can be carried out only during the summer months. . . . The dampness of th[e] cellar is causing a marked deterioration of these papers. Lastly, and this is most important, the building is a veritable firetrap" (Methods and Procedures – Destruction).

53 Monthly Reports, November 1, 1940, November 4, 1940, December 2, 1940, March 1, 1941, November 3, 1941, and November 2, 1942; Methods and Procedures – Destruction, St. Louis, memorandum to McGill, January 19, 1944.

54 Monthly Reports, November 3, 1941.

destruction of headquarters records and one for those in field offices – elicited the now-familiar argument as regards records maintained in Ottawa:

The correspondence of the Indian Affairs Branch differs materially from that of most of the other departments of the service and no hard and fast rules, set by time alone, could be fixed for the destruction of its records. It is understood, for the same reason that authority to destroy Indian correspondence and documents is permissive and not mandatory, and that, at our discretion, we may retain any papers, which, in our opinion, might be of administration or of historical value.⁵⁵

As the war progressed, the government-wide demand for salvaged paper and metal from records storage cabinets grew. In January 1944, the minister of national war services intensified the appeal while the Treasury Board, to reduce retention periods, instructed departments to re-examine the 1936 records schedules. St. Louis reported that, while the existing five- and ten-year periods could not be reduced without impairing branch operations, they could be applied to a wider range of documents than stipulated in the 1936 authority. In addition to a list of those subjects for which records must remain subject to the indefinite retention rubric, he submitted a schedule of the additional classes of records that could now be destroyed after five- and ten-year retention periods, and this was included in the schedules that accompanied the revised destruction authority, Treasury Board minute T260350B, issued March 16, 1944. With the impetus of the national paper drive and a new tool to facilitate further selection and destruction, St. Louis reported at the end of the summer of 1944 that a total of five tons of paper had been salvaged since the outbreak of war. As pressure for additional paper continued, three tons were sent to salvage in March 1945. In the summer, a further five tons were consigned to recycling, and St. Louis reported that there were no further records available for disposal.⁵⁶

- 55 Methods and Procedures – Destruction, St. Louis, memorandum to the deputy minister's secretary, n.d., submitted in response to questionnaire A in W.C. Ronson to deputy minister, mines and resources, November 7, 1945. The response to questionnaire B, which relates to field office records, is discussed below.
- 56 Monthly Reports. For the September 1944 total, see the branch's response to a records questionnaire sent to all government agencies by the Privy Council Office on behalf of the Public Records Committee, in Methods and Procedures – Destruction, September 19, 1944, and September 22, 1944. The March 1945 figure is found in the Monthly Reports file, and the last figure is in Methods and Procedures – Destruction, St. Louis, memorandum to Mrs. Young, November 1, 1945.

Carefully managed destruction was undeniably both an important element of efficient and effective records practice within the IAB and a means to channel much-needed salvage material to the war effort. The other aspect of branch records disposition policy – the identification, retention, and care of records of historical value – also deserves comment. As noted earlier, the 1936 Treasury Board minute outlined a procedure to be followed in cases in which a departmental proposal for destruction was at odds with the view of the dominion archivist on the value of the records. St. Louis's reports make no mention of any consultations with the PAC during the destruction exercises. Apparently, all selection decisions were made within the branch, without recourse to the dispute resolution mechanism. However, the branch's decisions to protect records deemed to have historical value rarely resulted in their deposit with the PAC. The branch files that document transfers of records to the PAC, as well as the corresponding PAC acquisition files, show little activity throughout the period under discussion. Moreover, the few transfers that did take place involved documents best described as historical curiosities rather than records drawn from the operational filing system. This is explained in large measure by the fact that the Public Archives of Canada, its own operations severely curtailed during both the Depression and the war years, lacked resources to process and space to accommodate extensive transfers. However, IAB views on the exceptional nature of the branch mandate and records cannot be overlooked as a factor. St. Louis's repeated references to "our archives" as encompassing not only records retained in the branch but also those already transferred to the PAC suggest a proprietorial view of the documents regardless of their physical location. His reports show that, despite the sometimes-onerous nature of the research demands placed upon him, St. Louis relished his role as keeper of the historically valuable documents still in branch custody. It was to him, St. Louis claimed, that PAC staff turned for information on the history not only of the DIA/IAB but also of First Nations. Reports frequently highlight his research work and make special reference to those cases in which he was called upon to prepare documents for presentation before the courts or commissions of inquiry to explain the significance of branch records. Those instances in which DIA/IAB documents were found to be valuable in areas of research beyond the IAB's mandate – evidence of the national importance of the branch's records – were

sources of particular pride.⁵⁷ St. Louis also acted as a point of contact for those researchers who succeeded in gaining access to the IAB archives and made sure that they received what he termed the “right information” on branch activities. Given the nature and limited extent of primary source research into First Nations history at this time, as well as the branch’s practices to control access to its records, his clients were almost invariably non-Indigenous academics and representatives of the museum community.⁵⁸

When the opportunity arose, St. Louis undertook to extend “our archives” beyond the realm of records generated by the IAB in the course of government business. In 1940–42, for example, he negotiated the deposit within the branch of manuscripts (which he termed “official papers which rightfully belong in our archives”) and a “priceless collection of medals and curios” held by Johnson Paudash.⁵⁹ Understanding the role of the PAC, St. Louis explained to McGill that he had advised the donor that that institution was “the designated and proper custodian of all our valuable and historical Indian documents.”⁶⁰ However, finding Paudash adamant that the material was under no circumstances to be sent to the PAC, and taking into consideration the belief that the records were sought by the Archives of Ontario and American libraries, St. Louis acquired them for the IAB.⁶¹

57 An extensive statement of St. Louis’s role in identifying documents of great importance, including those presented before the courts, is found in *Methods and Procedures – Destruction*, St. Louis, memorandum to McGill, February 1, 1944. In this memo, he lists not only cases for which he prepared submissions but also his own appearances in court to vouch for the authenticity of branch records.

58 See numerous monthly reports throughout the period, including that of December 1, 1941, with its disturbing characterization of First Nations people and views on their supposed inability to be educated. One can only imagine the reaction of John B. Tootoosis, President of the Saskatchewan League of Indians, to whom St. Louis delivered “an insight of the history of the Indian Administration and the policies evolved towards the rehabilitation of his people” during a September 1945 visit to the records office. *Monthly Reports*, October 1, 1945.

59 *Monthly Reports*, November 4, 1940; *Monthly Reports*, November 3, 1941.

60 *Monthly Reports*, November 3, 1941.

61 *Monthly Reports*, November 4, 1940, November 3, 1941, and December 1, 1941. See also LAC, RG 10, accession 2003-00021-6, box 7, file 1/1-6-10, correspondence, December 1941 and January 1942. From a preservation perspective, St. Louis may be applauded for his action in this case in that he ensured the protection of the records by taking them into IAB custody. At least some of the records were transferred to the PAC in 1957 and now constitute a series within RG 10 (LAC, RG 10, vol. 1011).

Field Office Records Management

Files dating from the late 19th century document both concern for the manner in which field officers marshalled their information assets and proposals by field staff to increase efficiency and effectiveness in local-level records management.⁶² Yet, despite the degree of control Ottawa attempted to exercise over field operations by the 1930s, there were gaps in basic knowledge at headquarters not only about how agency records were maintained in field offices but also about what records could be found in those offices. Some offices had occupied the same premises for decades and now stored significant quantities of noncurrent documents; others had been relocated along with their records following administrative changes. In a few instances, records had already been transferred to Ottawa; notable examples included the dispatch to headquarters of records from the office of the Indian commissioner in Winnipeg, when it closed in 1909, and the corresponding transfer of records from the office of the Indian superintendent in Victoria, when its operation was suspended the following year.⁶³

In 1922, in an attempt to better understand the extent and nature of field holdings, DIA headquarters had canvassed agents in central Canada for information concerning any pre-1883 records still available in their offices. A number of respondents described extensive collections of “old” documents and, as a result, some were sent to Ottawa and, after scrutiny in the department, transferred to the PAC. The replies received from other agencies, however, illustrate the rather vague understanding that certain agents had about their responsibility for records and, in some cases, the tenuous control exercised over those that were no longer of operational use and had been consigned to attics, basements, and farm buildings – out of sight and out of mind.⁶⁴ Indian agents did have the benefit of written guidance in their work, the most recent version of “General Instructions to Indian Agents in Canada” being that issued in 1933. However, this document provided little information on recordkeeping; two clauses stated

62 See, for example, the 1914 comments of Inspector of Indian Agencies for Alberta John Markle on the “careless and unbusiness like [*sic*] methods followed at some of the agencies regarding the keeping of correspondence” and his proposed solution (LAC, RG 10, vol. 3183, file 456000).

63 For correspondence surrounding the 1909 Winnipeg office closure and the transfer of records to Ottawa, see LAC, RG 10, vol. 3877, file 91839-1. On the demise of the Victoria office and the fate of its records – 33 cases were shipped to headquarters, along with an extensive collection of plans and surveyors’ field notes – see LAC, RG 10, vol. 3626, file 5680, and LAC, RG 10, vol. 3902, file 101313.

64 For correspondence regarding the 1922 search for field office records, see LAC, RG 10, accession 2003-00021-6, box 7, file 1/1-6-10.

simply that all records should be filed and indexed for easy access and that it was “desirable” that agents keep a numerical filing system.⁶⁵ To complement these general instructions, the IAB regularly issued departmental orders. A number of these circulars related to aspects of information flow and methods to be used to reduce errors in forwarding information to Ottawa.⁶⁶ However, few offered specific guidance on the manner in which field office records were to be physically or intellectually managed.

As noted earlier, the headquarters subject-file classification systems were not used in the field. The local agency and inspectorate offices had developed their own methodologies to meet the peculiarities of their diverse needs. Shannon files, commonly used for correspondence, were supplemented by a variety of document types: ledgers, account books, registers, letter books, paylists, maps, plans, etc. Storage of accumulated paper was a problem for some, but Ottawa offered little help in this regard. For example, in 1927, when Agent Harris (Fort Simpson, Northwest Territories) asked headquarters how long his copies of official documents should be kept, he was informed that the department had given no authority to agents to destroy records.⁶⁷ In 1936, when National Museum of Canada Anthropologist Diamond Jenness questioned whether DIA field records, which he had found to contain “a great deal of information of interest to anthropologists and historians,” were being preserved, McGill advised Jenness’s superior, Deputy Minister of Mines and Resources Charles Camsell, “I have reason to believe that we have here on our files at Headquarters the originals of almost all these papers, and if it is found that our records are not complete in this regard necessary action will be taken to have the missing papers brought to Ottawa.”⁶⁸ Comments such as this underline the belief among senior managers that field records were not a priority. There was little encouragement

65 “General Instructions to Indian Agents in Canada” (general instruction document issued under cover of a circular memorandum signed by Harold McGill, September 1, 1933), copy in author’s possession.

66 Individual subject-specific circulars issued during the period under discussion are also found in relevant subject files. The collection of departmental orders up to 1938 includes LAC, RG 10, vol. 2277, files 55412-1 and 55412-2; LAC, RG 10, vol. 3086, files 279222-1 and 279222-1A; LAC, RG 10, vol. 3087, files 279222-1B and 279222-1C. No similar compendium has been located for the period 1938–1958. Today, the departmental library at Crown–Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs holds a collection of circulars dating from 1958. See also LAC, RG 10, vol. 2924, file 189778, for additional circulars issued specifically to field offices between 1898 and 1918.

67 For the exchange with Agent Harris in September 1927, see *Methods and Procedures – Destruction*.

68 *Methods and Procedures – Destruction*, Camsell to McGill, August 22, 1936, and the latter’s reply of August 23, 1936.

for forays into matters such as the safe storage of semi-active field records, the weeding of obsolete material, or the identification of documents of possible worth to corporate memory or history.

Records management in the offices outside Ottawa received little attention from St. Louis for most of the period under consideration. In fairness, from his office in the capital, he was not well positioned to investigate. Moreover, the records do not make clear the extent of his responsibilities for records management in the field, especially when measured against those of the regional inspectors of Indian agencies or the chief of the headquarters field administration and inspection section.⁶⁹ With field records accorded little intrinsic value in the centralized world of the IAB, concerns were mostly with correspondence management and the efficiency with which field information required for decision-making flowed to Ottawa. The diverse records classification systems found across the country were seen as a problem primarily in terms of the extent to which their continued use hindered information exchange or caused the field staff to spend inordinate amounts of time on paperwork. St. Louis began his regime on a positive note, meeting in Ottawa with inspectors from the regions in the spring of 1937 to discuss methods of simplifying and expediting the classification of correspondence sent from the agencies; a circular was prepared for the guidance of field office staff. His reports say little about field records in the years immediately following. In December 1940, he was called upon to provide revisions to the *General Instructions to Indian Agents in Canada*. The vague advice found in the 1933 iteration of this document was now reworded with the equally unhelpful directive that agents keep a “modern fying [sic] system containing a copy of each document sent out together with correspondence received, classified in accordance with the subject method.”⁷⁰ No additional guidance on records management principles or the “subject method” of filing recommended was included.

69 By 1950, roles were more clearly stated. See LAC, RG 10, vol. 8586, file 1/1-6-2, H.T. Vergette to J. O'Neill, September 13, 1950.

70 Methods and Procedures – Memoranda and Instructions, St. Louis, memorandum to Mrs. Young, December 8, 1940.

How well he understood the nature and conditions of the records throughout the local network is difficult to gauge. In November 1945, in preparing the branch response to Public Records Committee questionnaires on the state of records in headquarters and field offices, St. Louis remarked openly that, as regards the latter, “I frankly admit my ignorance.”⁷¹ Describing the field office records, he repeated the familiar refrain that they “consist in greater part of triplicate copies of vouchers, school statements and miscellaneous returns, with accompanying correspondence, copies of which are already in the records at headquarters.”⁷² In the event of a field office closure, he added, most would be destroyed, with only correspondence pertaining to land or documents that might prove of historical value retained for transfer to Ottawa.⁷³ No evidence was found to indicate that St. Louis ever travelled to field offices to inspect holdings or methods. He did, however, furnish information to visiting field staff when the opportunity arose. In December 1943, for example, in recording advice provided to Indian Agent Daly (Walpole Island, Ontario) regarding a filing system adapted to his office correspondence and tips on how to file according to the subject method, he informed McGill, “There is no doubt that many of our Agents find themselves in the same predicament as Mr. Daly owing to the lack of a modern filing system adapted to their particular need and the installation of a business-like up to date filing system in every Agency office should be among our first post war work.”⁷⁴

The files do not show what, if any, instruction headquarters provided to field officers on the existence of either the 1936 or the 1944 Treasury Board minutes, let alone on the mechanics of their implementation; however, by the early

71 Methods and Procedures – Destruction, St. Louis, undated covering note to Mrs. Young accompanying his responses to the Public Records Committee (PRC) questionnaires.

72 Methods and Procedures – Destruction, St. Louis, undated memorandum to secretary, written in response to the PRC questionnaire regarding field records.

73 Methods and Procedures – Destruction. See St. Louis’s covering note to Mrs. Young accompanying his responses to the questions, November 1945. The belief that the extensive headquarters holdings rendered field records of little long-term operational value to the administration (and of virtually no historical value) was expressed openly by IAB senior managers in Ottawa into the late 1950s. Indeed, the first IAB effort to obtain a comprehensive picture of the extent and nature of surviving field office accumulations country-wide came only in the early 1960s, when claims research and the prospect of the creation of an Indian Claims Commission forced the branch to reassess its understanding of its field office information resources. The author is currently preparing a study of branch records policy and practices for the period 1948–1966, with an emphasis on the management of field office records, as demonstrated through the circumstances surrounding the acquisition by the Glenbow Foundation of records from Alberta agency offices.

74 Monthly Reports, December 1, 1943.

1940s, agents who took the trouble to ask for advice were told that they did, in fact, have discretionary powers regarding destruction. In an exchange between McGill and Agent C.R. Johnson (Manitowaning, Ontario) in 1943, the director offered the following, without specific reference to the 1936 authority:

It has not been found desirable to lay down any set rule on this subject as the conditions vary considerably at different agencies. Generally speaking, however, it is permissible for an Indian Agent, at his discretion, to destroy old vouchers, requisitions and other routine forms when he is satisfied that there is no purpose to be served in keeping them. Correspondence, however, should not be destroyed without special permission from this office. Particular care should be taken to see that all documents pertaining to surrenders, land sales, leases and other matters affecting land titles are carefully preserved and safe-guarded.⁷⁵

It is not difficult to imagine that such advice might discourage a busy field officer from taking further action “at his discretion.” The first directive clearly identifying the 1936 and 1944 Treasury Board minutes as the authorities for destruction appears in a 1949 circular issued by Director D.M. Mackay. This document provided clarity by linking the types of IAB records described in the two minutes to specific blocks in the new subject-file classification system that was at that time being installed throughout the field office system. While a reporting procedure through which field offices were required to notify Ottawa of all destructions undertaken was developed only later, local staff now had a clearer statement of their responsibilities and the authorities through which they could be exercised.⁷⁶

The evidence presented before the special joint committee on the *Indian Act*, which began its deliberations in May 1946, exposed a number of fault lines in field

75 Methods and Procedures – Destruction, McGill to C.R. Johnson, September 7, 1943.

76 Methods and Procedures – Destruction, circular, November 10, 1949. This linkage of the provisions of the Treasury Board minutes to the new subject-file classification system was critical for the application of the regulations to current records, but it still left unclear how the minutes could be applied to old dormant records not converted to the new system, which, in some field offices, were already consigned to storage in basements, attics, garages, and other unsuitable facilities. Achieving buy-in from field offices was not straightforward, as evidenced in the correspondence found in LAC, RG 10, vol. 8586, file 1/1-6-2, for the years 1951–55. An inspection report, from April 14, 1953, of Western regional and agency offices paints a dark picture of failure to apply destruction policy to the large quantities of “old records” that had not been converted to the system.

administration. While records management in the offices outside Ottawa did not receive direct attention from the committee, it became an element of the broad administrative renovation that the branch subsequently undertook in order to bring greater efficiency and effectiveness to its field operations. When Grenier replaced St. Louis in November 1946 as officer in charge of records, he identified the introduction of “adequate filing systems in field offices”⁷⁷ as the third item in his three-phase program of change for the service. He pushed forward on his plans, presenting ideas before a gathering of Quebec and Maritime agents and advising Hoey of the very positive response.⁷⁸ Despite this, implementation was not immediate; Grenier, as noted earlier, left the branch, and H.T. Vergette was not appointed until November 1947. It was June 1948 before Vergette turned to the field filing system. As he explained to Colonel Acland, “Up till now, agents have experienced great difficulty in setting up their office systems. In some agencies, there is no system whatsoever and I have been informed by inspectors that reorganization is imperative.”⁷⁹ He now proposed that modifications in field offices be introduced in tandem with the changes in Ottawa. The new field office file classification system was finally approved at a regional supervisors’ conference in January 1949, and it was introduced gradually over the following months. A circular to field offices in February 1950 issued a long-awaited guide, “Manual on Office Procedure, Correspondence and Filing,” to accompany the installation of the new system, which was still in progress.⁸⁰

Improving Recordkeeping Tools and Processes

When St. Louis took charge of the records office in 1936, he addressed certain headquarters tools and processes that, in his 1934 visit to other government departments, had been shown to be outdated. The monthly reports document a variety of attempts at innovation that, at first glance, might seem to be small: Useful indexed document compendiums were created both for orders-in-council extending back over half a century and for Department of Justice judgments and rulings relating to Indian affairs, which, until then, had been scattered among

77 Monthly Reports, December 4, 1946.

78 Monthly Reports. For Grenier’s three-phase plan, see his reports between December 4, 1946, and June 30, 1947.

79 LAC, RG 10, vol. 8586, file 1/1-6-2, part 1, Vergette, memorandum to Executive Assistant [Colonel Acland], June 28, 1948.

80 LAC, RG 10, vol. 8586, file 1/1-6-2, circular from Director Mackay, February 6, 1950.

subject files. Paper file jackets, common in other records offices, were introduced on an experimental basis in November 1937 to replace more expensive linen file backs, with a view to providing documents better protection from damage. A special project on a cache of “private and semi-official correspondence” that was previously unregistered and maintained separately from related corporate files was undertaken in 1942.⁸¹ Efforts made over the decade to, in St. Louis’s words, “improve the sanitary conditions” in the cramped workspace were doubtless appreciated by the records office staff, as were his appeals to senior management to upwardly reclassify the clerks to bring their remuneration into line with that of similar staff in other federal records offices.⁸² Small improvements were difficult to implement, however, given the resources available, the weight of daily tasks, and the reluctance within some operational areas to embrace attempted changes.

Other initiatives met with success only after St. Louis was replaced as officer in charge of records. Upon his appointment, one of Grenier’s first moves was to reorganize his staff into sections according to function, with senior clerks appointed to head each “to establish a line of responsibility within Records.”⁸³ Vergette, in charge a year later, pointed to a lack of staff “interchangeability” and the need to institute a system of job training to instruct records employees in all phases of the office’s duties.⁸⁴ These actions and observations suggest that St. Louis was seen to have concentrated too much work under his personal oversight. The idea of producing a staff handbook to draw together memoranda on office procedures – a tool that served as an introduction to IAB work for

⁸¹ Monthly Reports, March 3, 1942.

⁸² Monthly Reports, May 7, 1937. The justice project is documented in reports between March 1, 1938, and June 1, 1942. Work to compile orders-in-council is discussed at regular intervals in reports beginning February 3, 1941. The file rejacketing is highlighted first in December 1937, yet Vergette reported that only about one-quarter of the current files had been converted by early 1948 (see LAC, RG 32, vol. 724, file 72-MR-IA, undated report included in Weiss to Orr, April 14, 1948). The project to integrate private and semi-official correspondence into the system is described in various reports beginning in February 1942. For examples of amelioration of physical conditions in the registry and concerns for proper classification of clerical staff, see reports of May 7, 1937, April 29, 1946, and June 3, 1946. St. Louis’s sometimes vaguely worded reports make it difficult to determine whether an initiative, announced in his typical upbeat style, was successfully implemented. Vergette’s 1948 report to Weiss, cited above, presents a damning description of the inefficient procedures and tools he found in the records office, some of which St. Louis’s reports imply had been addressed.

⁸³ Monthly Reports, January 4, 1947.

⁸⁴ Vergette’s comments are found in LAC, RG 32, vol. 724, file 72-MR-IA, Weiss to Orr, April 14, 1948.

newly appointed clerks and officers alike – first appears in Grenier’s report for March 1947. A false docket system, commonly used in most government departments to permit the initiation of action on an issue while the relevant file was being located, had been rejected out of hand by St. Louis for a number of years and was not instituted until February 1948.⁸⁵ Attempts to introduce a bring forward (BF) system took a decade to bear fruit. Much daily effort went into the records clerks’ searches in operational areas for files that the officers held for long periods, passing them among colleagues without informing the records office. Too often, records were “misplaced.” St. Louis reported that a BF system and a modified charge-out procedure for file circulation were launched in January and March 1937, respectively, yet neither was put fully into use. In one of his earliest reports, Grenier highlighted his planned inauguration of the “long-awaited and much referred to” BF system, which he heralded as “the solution to Records’ most urgent and unsavoury problem” and one that would bring an end to the “appalling” loss of time spent in searching for errant files.⁸⁶ However, the roll-out was postponed until the following March.⁸⁷

One recordkeeping practice, the continued generation and indexing of letter books containing copies of outgoing correspondence, came under scrutiny on more than one occasion yet survived the regimes of both St. Louis and Grenier. The question of why letter books were needed, given that copies of outgoing letters should have been placed in the appropriate subject file, was one that St. Louis had long been disinclined to address. During the 1944 paper salvage campaign, the chief executive assistant to the minister of mines and resources criticized the IAB for its continued use of a tool he believed was unknown in any other department of government. A two-page St. Louis memorandum in defence of the branch’s exceptional use of the volumes marshalled a number of arguments, including the explanation that they could be used to partially reconstruct the content of some 200,000 files that had been destroyed in approved disposition actions since 1936. With McGill supporting his records manager’s

⁸⁵ See LAC, RG 32, vol. 724, file 72-MR-IA, IAB director’s circular number 118, February 23, 1948, outlining the new procedure for false dockets.

⁸⁶ Monthly Reports, June 30, 1947.

⁸⁷ Monthly Reports, February 2, 1937, March 1, 1937, April 1, 1937, July 4, 1939, December 4, 1939, March 1, 1940, November 1, 1946, April 1, 1947, and June 30, 1947. The director’s circular number 118 of February 23, 1948 (LAC, RG 32, vol. 724, file 72-MR-IA) includes notice of the system inauguration effective March 1, 1948.

case, the matter was set aside. It would be another four years before the IAB abandoned the production of letter books.⁸⁸ Despite St. Louis's hyperbole in justifying their continued use – emphasizing both the historical value of these records and their important role in safeguarding the trust responsibility upon which, he argued, First Nations relied – it bears noting that the case he presented in the defence would appeal to today's researchers. The surviving letter books up to 1920 are now at LAC; those generated between 1920 and the 1948 suspension of their creation were destroyed in 1957. Those that have survived can be used today to partially reconstruct the content of files known to have been destroyed or now “missing” and presumed lost, exactly as St. Louis argued in 1944.

Conclusion

The signs that the IAB was moving to address a number of its long-standing information management concerns were evident by 1948. A brief survey, undertaken in early April that year by Civil Service Commission officer P.F. Weiss, presented a positive assessment of the initiatives recently set in motion and those proposed. He observed, “The re-organization plan [developed by St. Louis's successors] is quite comprehensive in its scope and every phase of the operations has been examined. The reallocation of duties have [sic] been well planned and with the changes inaugurated to date has increased the efficiency and time operation considerably.” The following year, when again called upon to review developments, Weiss noted the good progress made in setting up new procedures and the rearrangement of files and indexes.⁸⁹ The belief within the IAB that the goal of integration could be achieved through more efficient and effective program delivery – the “administrative renovation” approach described

⁸⁸ Methods and Procedures – Destruction. See C.W. Jackson, chief executive assistant to the minister of mines and resources, January 17, 1944, and subsequent memoranda. The IAB director's circular of March 27, 1948, announced the discontinuation of the practice “apparently now peculiar to this Branch” and lamented “the apparent carelessness in handling files and the observance of correspondence routine by officials” that had prolonged letter-book use. This pointed suggestion that operational staff were simply lazy in matters of records care and use ended with the admonishment that “our file discipline must be improved” (LAC, RG 32, vol. 724, file 72-MR-IA).

⁸⁹ LAC, RG 32, vol. 724, file 72-MR-IA. See P.F. Weiss to H.V. Orr, Organisation Branch, April 14, 1948; Weiss to C.J. Lochnan, May 18, 1949; Weiss to G.T. Jackson, June 8, 1949.

by Leslie – had permeated not only the branch’s operational programs but also the administrative services that supported them, such as records.

From the evidence presented in the monthly reports and related files, possibly the best characterization of St. Louis’s contribution during his decade in charge of the records office is that he kept the ship afloat. While he had recognized problems inherent in the IAB’s complicated subject-file classification systems and enthusiastically initiated work to rectify the situation, it was his successors who brought the project to fruition. In the area of field office records management, very little changed during St. Louis’s watch. As evidence that came more clearly into focus in the 1950s would demonstrate, “old” (noncurrent) records in the care of the agencies and regional offices remained, in too many cases, stored in inadequate facilities, actively threatened in some instances by the elements or vermin but more often simply neglected. As to the matter of the safe storage of the branch’s noncurrent and historically valuable headquarters records, if one accepts Vergette’s May 1949 description of the Barnard building as a damp, unsuitable fire trap over the much more positive assessment of the space proffered by St. Louis in June 1945, then the considerable time and effort of the records staff in undertaking three moves within four years had come to little. On all these fronts, St. Louis promised a good deal. Troubling for our understanding of the work of St. Louis and his staff, his reports too often leave the impression that more was being accomplished than was actually the case. At times, vague wording in his memoranda makes it difficult to determine whether an initiative, announced in typical positive style, was successfully implemented. Vergette’s 1948 report to Weiss, cited above, presents a damning description of the inefficient procedures and tools he found in the records office – problems that St. Louis’s reports in some cases imply had been addressed.

Such a bleak assessment must be balanced, however, with an appreciation of the difficult conditions under which he and his team operated. Depression retrenchment and war restrictions threw up obstacles that were well outside their control. Few federal agencies included such complex field networks of over 100 offices. Moreover, comments found in the discussion of both the letter books and the introduction of the BF system suggest the negative effects of an entrenched resistance to change and a lack of “file discipline” among staff in some operational areas. To a limited extent, St. Louis helped lay the groundwork for changes that came after 1947, although opportunities to improve the branch’s information management regime were lost during his decade in charge.

He did succeed in directing a major review and eventual destruction – carried out according to approved Government of Canada regulations – of a decades-old accumulation of records deemed to be of no further administrative or historical value, the presence of which was seen as a costly impediment to efficiency and effectiveness. This was a significant achievement, albeit one initially forced upon the branch by the Department of Public Works and then by the wartime paper crisis.

To credit the destruction of records to the positive column, however, presents its own difficulties. This study has avoided the speculative question of how well today's research community has been served by records management decisions taken some 80 years ago. Nevertheless, where the research necessary to redress historic wrongs is hindered today by the results of past records management policies and practices, the issue must be acknowledged. To do otherwise only gives credence to suspicion of government motives, extending in its extremes to conspiracy theories. The debate over the impact of branch recordkeeping practices on research came into focus most clearly from the early 1960s. This period saw movement for the establishment of a claims commission, coupled with a burgeoning of research, as First Nations began to mine federal government documentary sources for evidence of acts of commission or omission. More recently, the destruction of records has been a particular bone of contention in the documentation of the residential schools experience. The simple fact that later-dated volumes of files commonly used in that research (e.g., admissions and discharge files, quarterly returns, or principal's monthly reports) have survived, whereas earlier volumes were destroyed, only adds to the confusion and begs for answers to questions surrounding the timing and circumstances in which the destructions took place.⁹⁰

⁹⁰ For discussion of destructions undertaken as a result of the 1936 and 1944 Treasury Board minutes, see Edward Sadowski, *Preliminary Report on the Investigation into Missing School Files for the Shingwauk Indian Residential School: Shingwauk Project Archive, 04 November 2006* (Sault Ste Marie, ON: Shingwauk Project, Algoma University College, 2006). This study makes no reference to consultation of the monthly reports found in file 481-1-15. As such, the context described in St. Louis's memoranda regarding the discretion exercised in the selection process does not figure in the analysis. There is some evidence that many of the files documenting the earliest attendees were culled in the 1950s, when the separate school files registry was closed and subsequent documentation of education was incorporated within the main subject-file classification system that had been recently introduced. Further research is required to explore that hypothesis. In light of the wartime destruction exercise, it is interesting to note that the first reference found to a First Nations request for documents from the branch – for which the reason given for not producing the records was that they were known to have been destroyed under authority of the March 16, 1944, Treasury Board minute – concerns 1911–13 correspondence

Innuendo relating to questionable motives in records management practice is not a recent phenomenon. At least one archivist/historian charged St. Louis with manipulating IAB records in order to present the work of the branch in its most positive light. In describing his personal research early in 1959 at the IAB headquarters archives (by then under the supervision of St. Louis's successor), Hugh Dempsey made the following assessment of his experience:

There is considerable handicap in that the previous Archivist, who had no [formal archival] training but definite opinions, destroyed a large number of records which he felt were of no historical importance and possibly some of which placed the Indian Affairs Branch in a bad light. He also ignored the original filing arrangement, but reshuffled the documents to suit himself.⁹¹

Participants in the 2017 Association of Canadian Archivists annual conference will recall the presentation by filmmaker Alex Williams of his 2015 documentary film *The Pass System* and his description of the great difficulty he experienced in locating records of both the policy that sustained the practice and the routine paperwork related to its implementation. Evidence in IAB sources is thin despite the fact that the system was in place for over 50 years. Indeed, documents illustrated in the film and, most importantly, a copy of the July 11, 1941, circular issued by Director McGill announcing the formal end of the system and calling upon offices to return pass books to headquarters, were found in Glenbow Archives and Saskatchewan Archives Board holdings. Without lists detailing which records were destroyed during the years 1937–47, we cannot be certain whether the fate of documentary evidence of the pass system was sealed, at branch headquarters at least, in the destruction actions undertaken by St. Louis or at some later date.

regarding construction of the Kootenay Industrial School (see Methods and Procedures – Destruction, memorandum, Philip Phelan to Hoey, May 4, 1946).

⁹¹ Glenbow Archives, Archives Department, c.1956–1959, box 1, file "Archives Travel," Hugh Dempsey to J.D. Herbert, February 16, 1959. This disparaging opinion of St. Louis's work as branch archivist requires its own contextual nuance. No record has been found to indicate that Dempsey had first-hand experience in dealing with St. Louis in the latter's capacity as archivist or as records manager. Neither does Dempsey provide evidence to support a statement that implies that St. Louis was allowed to follow personal views in identifying records for destruction. Other evidence, as presented in this article, points to an adherence to the disposition schedules set out in the Treasury Board minutes of 1936 and 1944 and, where St. Louis thought it necessary, to a cautious approach to their application.

It is not difficult to speculate, however, that the routine administrative records of the system, such as unused pass books, as well as most operational files, would have been seen to fit properly into the category of “obsolete” material related to a program that was now defunct. Until such time as the dearth of surviving policy files is explained, the fact that it remains unexplained only fuels suspicions about motive in destroying records of a system known to have been without legal justification which, given the evidence of St. Louis’s belief in the righteousness of the IAB mission, would not have fit comfortably into his narrative.⁹²

Few would argue today that the long-term value of a given record is absolute. Our concept of the value of that record changes with time and circumstances. The process of determining Historical value, almost exclusively in the hands of branch officials some eighty years ago, and so bearing the weight of their perspectives, is a task now more commonly shared with archivists. Records destruction was no less necessary to good information management practice in St. Louis’s time than it is today. Determining selection criteria has never been a simple task. Additional concerns lie in the *how* of records destruction – the training and skill of those assigned to apply selection criteria that have been determined to be appropriate as well as the circumstances of individual disposition actions. Looking to the 1936 and 1944 Treasury Board minutes, it is instructive to consider not only the classes of records the IAB identified as having no long-term value, for either administrative purposes or posterity, but also those flagged for “indefinite” retention. That latter list favours not only records documenting land, its resources and infrastructure, and subjects such as economic development – all seen to be important to the integrationist agenda – but also those relating to government obligations under the trust-like relationship. Undoubtedly, the IAB was concerned to ensure that it maintained those records it might need in order to protect itself in cases of dispute with First Nations. Yet, its retention policies also emphasized the safeguarding of its “client” communities on their passage to the goal of full participation in Canadian citizenship.

There is ample evidence, most visible in the area of IAB field office records practices, that, into the 1960s, there was neglect (e.g., storage that failed to protect documents from the effects of the elements or from vermin) and ignorance of,

⁹² The history of the pass system is analyzed in, for example, F. Laurie Barron, “The Indian Pass System in the Canadian West, 1882–1935,” *Prairie Forum* 13, no. 1 (1988): 23–42; and Brian Bennett, “Study of Passes for Indians to Leave their Reserves” (n.p.: Treaties and Historical Research Centre, Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, 1974).

or indifference to, approved records policies and procedures, with unauthorized elimination the result. As regards the active destruction exercises under discussion during the period 1937–47, however, field records are not at issue. There is very little evidence of local staff applying the Treasury Board minutes during the years under investigation here, although the practice became common in the 1950s, and the branch introduced reporting procedures to document such work. Records destruction during the years 1937–47 was carried out almost exclusively in Ottawa and among headquarters documents. Despite the evidence presented in this article, which points to a measured approach taken with regard to headquarters records destruction during the St. Louis regime, the fact remains that records were destroyed. To the extent that this study has succeeded in shining additional light on the context in which such records management actions took place, it is hoped that it advances our understanding of IAB policies and practices during a “dark decade.”

BIOGRAPHY A government records, manuscript, and reference archivist with Library and Archives Canada for 26 years, Bill Russell was among those responsible for the records of the Indian and Inuit Affairs Program (RG 10) for much of that period. Immersion in this archival material spawned his interest in the administrative history of the Department of Indian Affairs/Indian Affairs Branch and, in particular, recordkeeping practices within these agencies. Current research projects include developments in records management within the branch, 1945–1966, as well as a case study of the transfer in the 1950s of branch field office records from federal government custody to a regional archival repository.