

GENEALOGICAL SERVICES OF CANADIAN ARCHIVES

by

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The use of archival facilities by persons doing genealogical research often has been discussed by Canadian archivists. Opinions vary on the merits of such research and the amount of time which archives should be prepared to devote to it. Attitudes range from outspoken antipathy to that of whole hearted co-operation.

Many archivists agree that the unlimited use of their facilities and staff by genealogists could affect the reference services provided to legitimate historians and in the completion of regular archival duties. On the other hand, public institutions recognize a responsibility to provide a service to the public.

Some of the sources used by genealogists are published ones which may be found in public or genealogical libraries. But some repositories are holders of documents which are of definite value to a genealogical researcher. Most significant of these are vital statistic records, census returns, land grants, parish records, passenger lists and immigration records.

The complaint of many archivists is that genealogies require extensive research but produce a finished manuscript which has limited historical value and is of little interest beyond the families involved. How far should an archives go in providing services for such studies?

In an effort to determine the practices and attitudes of Canadian archives, questionnaires were sent to twenty institutions. Of these, replies were received from ten federal, provincial or municipal archives, two from church archives, and two from university or private archives. Replies were received from all provincial archives except British Columbia and Alberta - the latter not being contacted as it has no archives.

The survey showed that most repositories had the matter of genealogical research under control, although some concern was expressed for the future. The use of provincial archives by genealogists ranges from more than 65 per cent of total enquiries in Quebec to negligible use on the prairies.

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A number of important basic points emerged, and most institutions were in agreement on these. First, it was recognized that when an institution accepts papers it also assumes the responsibility to make them available for research. Regardless of the value of the final product, the right of genealogists to access to public repositories was not questioned.

The amount of assistance given to genealogists depends upon the size of staff, accessibility of records and the number of requests received. Those institutions which seldom have such requests can be nonchalant in the attitude that all researchers should be given equal treatment. On the other hand, those institutions which are constantly used by genealogists have found various ways to meet the situation.

The most common method is to limit the amount of time spent by staff members on any written request. In a few institutions there is no distinction between genealogical and historical requests, but in most cases considerably more attention is given to the latter. If requests are too indefinite or too demanding, the writer may be asked to visit the archives personally or to engage a professional genealogist. Some institutions provide a list of professionals available in their area.

Most repositories are willing to provide reference services to persons visiting the archives. The genealogist usually is shown the main body of records and is expected to do his own research. "Nevertheless," observed one archivist, "valuable time is wasted." There are few archives which are willing to devote much time to visiting genealogists by doing research work for them.

Some repositories, such as the United Church Archives, do not have the staff to handle the many requests for genealogical information. They are not in the happy situation of having their congregational records catalogued in any detail, so often the most routine request would require considerable searching. As a result of the heavy demands by genealogists, the Committee on Archives passed a resolution in 1961 restricting the use of the Central Archives to "legitimate forms of research for academic, private and congregational purposes". The definition of "legitimate forms" has been left to the archivist-historian.

The United Church Archives still tries to help genealogists who ask for specific information. But they receive very few such requests, the majority being hazy and indefinite.

At the other extreme is the Archives of Quebec, where

genealogical research is an important service. In 1962 a Genealogical Department was added to the archives and a genealogical consultant appointed to the staff. Records which are used for genealogical study have been thoroughly indexed and the archives has amassed a sizable collection of genealogical records, family papers, and a specialized genealogical library.

A close relationship between professional genealogists and the Quebec archives is maintained. The archives often refers requests to them and attempts to acquire the manuscripts and notes of professional genealogists when they die. There are three genealogical societies in French Canada and the archives is constantly exchanging data and information with them.

In the Ontario Archives, written requests for genealogical information are answered if no extensive research is required. However, if the request entails considerable work, the person is asked to visit the archives or to engage a professional genealogist. No simple solution has been found for the time consuming aspects of genealogical requests. The possibility of charging a fee has been considered but discarded. "Once they pay for such services," says the Archivist of Ontario, "they might well demand and expect extensive research on their behalf, which is of course what we are trying to avoid."

The Maritimes provinces appear to have genealogical research under control. Newfoundland Archives has practically no source records for such research but has a research officer who is one of the most informed persons in the province on genealogical matters. The Public Archives of Prince Edward Island has only recently been established and about 10 per cent of its requests deal with genealogy. There is a possibility of a problem arising in the future.

The Public Archives of Nova Scotia adheres to its policy of providing assistance to all inquirers and time is not stinted in aiding genealogists, particularly those from the province. About 20 per cent of the archives' requests deal with genealogy. Where requests would be too time consuming, the inquirer is provided with the names of two or three professional genealogists or is encouraged to visit the archives.

Requests for genealogical information account for about 51 per cent of the requests received by New Brunswick Museum Archives. All personal visits, genealogical or otherwise, are treated alike, but when dealing with written requests, more attention is devoted to historical enquiries. The archives has a considerable amount of genealogical material and is pleased to have it used.

The prairie provinces appear to have little or no problem

with genealogical researchers, "The relative youth of our records," states the Archivist of Saskatchewan, "the bulk of which are less than 75 years old, coupled with the fact that we do not receive vital statistics records limits the usefulness of our holdings for genealogical research." Similarly, no problem exists among the university, private and Catholic Church archives which replied to the survey. The University of New Brunswick limits service on such requests to 15 minutes while the Archdiocese of Montreal refers letters to a genealogical society unless they deal with a priest or bishop.

The Public Archives of Canada receives many requests for genealogical information - about 40 per cent of its total enquiries. No distinction is made between genealogical and other requests, but the amount of research by a staff member is limited in all cases to 2½ hours or less. The only occasions where more time is given is where a purely historical request is of wide interest or where the information would be useful for the institution's reference files. No limit is placed on genealogists visiting the archives as long as they are willing to do their own searching. Limited census searches are made for Canadians, but genealogists from outside the country are informed that microfilm copies of census returns may be borrowed on interlibrary loan.

The reproduction and copying services provided to genealogists by most Canadian archives is essentially the same as that provided to other researchers. The policy regarding service to local residents also is the same for genealogical and other requests. If provincial preference exists, it usually covers all forms of enquiries.

Professional genealogists seem to be looked upon with favor. Such persons are familiar with the institution's holdings and can carry on their research with little or no help. In some cases, such professionals are given access to stack and storage areas which normally are closed to the public. Also, by providing enquirers with the names of professional genealogists, the archivist can conscientiously turn down requests for extensive research. He is secure in the knowledge that he has not closed the door on the enquirer and has provided a means of obtaining information in a way that does not disrupt the archives' normal operations.

In conclusion, some of the comments and observations of archivists reveal their attitudes towards genealogies.

"Genealogists seem to exist in another world and seem to regard the rest of the world as existing in order to provide

them with information about their ancestors. We have found more arrogance among them than among any other class of people who come into the Archives."

"...this whole procedure will depend on the availability of capable professional genealogists. There are not too many of these in this province, and perhaps archivists should consider some unofficial means of encouraging their activity."

"We reply to all written queries by saying that we have neither the staff nor the resources to undertake genealogical research."

"There is no doubt that in assisting genealogists the staff of a government archives is frequently prevented from concentrating on more important work."

"This subject is very important in French Canada. Our repository is very rich in family papers and genealogical records."