

Digitization Efforts in the Saskatchewan Archival Community

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Introduction

I have been asked to speak today about digitization efforts in our provincial archival community.

Before I launch into those efforts, I'd like to begin by speaking to the purposes of digitization in archives. Simply put, the purpose is to enhance access. While digitization can be a tool of preservation - chiefly by reducing researcher use of fragile original documents - this has not tended to be the focus in the archival world. Nor have digital records been created in efforts to reformat information from more bulky storage mediums. The very thought of this, would send most archivists into fits - digitization in the archival world has been undertaken to enhance access to archival materials and, by extension, to build a presence for archives in the virtual world.

Nearly a decade ago, in his inaugural address, Nicholas Burckel - the then president of the Society of American Archivists, painted a vision of a future in which access and the researcher were king. "The ideal in this information-intensive environment" he said, "is that relevant information is available to users when and where they need it". He prophesied that the delivery of services would be fundamentally changed as the computer reduced the "physical constraints of time and place" [1].

Digitization and on-line access to archival records promise the fulfilment of this vision. To date efforts can be grouped into three relatively distinct, yet

overlapping, phases - first, on-line descriptions, second, virtual exhibitions, and third, full digitization projects.

Efforts at On-Line Description

The first area of digitization activity is on-line description.

Beginning in the 1990s several provincial associations and various institutions began to create the equivalent of on-line union catalogues for their archival records. These catalogues made available collection-level descriptions that provided researchers with general information on the content of records. This was linked with contact information for the repositories where these resources were to be found.

Provincial catalogues soon covered most institutions in their provinces and these were networked into a national portal, first known as the Canadian Archival Information Network, or CAIN, and later renamed Archives Canada. It became possible to do one search and receive hits on resources across the country. These systems allowed researchers to easily ascertain where collections of records could be found. A researcher, studying the Hudson's Bay Company for example, would generally be aware of the records held by the HBC Archives in Winnipeg, but not aware of small collections that might exist elsewhere. CAIN could pinpoint all these locations and thus greatly increased the scope of initial research enquires.

In order to be effective, entries in CAIN and Archives Canada needed to be consistently presented. For most of the decade from about 1985 to 1995 descriptive standards were developed, debated, adopted, and implemented. The Rules for Archival Description, or RAD, were the Canadian standard. These aimed to formalize the format of finding aids and were broadly accepted and implemented, at the collection-level at least, when adoption of the standard became a pre-requisite for grant funding from the Canadian Council of Archives, the CCA.

By 2000 the archival community convinced the federal government to establish a distinct funding stream to aid in the development of CAIN. In Saskatchewan these funds were initially used: to increase the participation of institutions - particularly the smaller archives scattered across the province; to build descriptions to include not simply the collection-level but also series; and to develop a provincial database of photographs.

Our provincial archival council, the Saskatchewan Council for Archives and Archivists, or SCAA, accomplished these tasks by employing an Outreach Archivist and a Photodatabase Archivist.

The photodatabase developed from a three-month pilot project that SCAA undertook in late 2001. The Diefenbaker Centre, the University of Saskatchewan Archives, the City of Saskatoon Archives, and the Local History Room of the Saskatoon Public Library were selected to participate in the pilot phase of the project. These institutions were chosen as each had an operational in-house database, was located within a limited geographic area, and provided a sample of 100 descriptions from their collections [2].

During 2002 all descriptions of the Diefenbaker Centre's photograph collection, some 5,600 images, were edited and added as well as approximately 8,500 descriptions from part of the University of Saskatchewan photograph collection. The City of Saskatoon was also able to provide its full collection of descriptions to be uploaded to the database. In 2003 the Saskatchewan Archives Board added their collection of photograph and negative descriptions for the Saskatoon Star Phoenix. This consisted of over 23,900 descriptions [3].

The Rosetown and District Archives contributed descriptions to the database as did the Melfort and District Museum, Athol Murray College of Notre Dame, and the Saskatchewan Teachers Federation [4]. To date nine of the forty-odd archives in the province have contributed to the project. The photodatabase holds descriptions of over 51,100 images. 5,300 of which have digitized images associated with them.

Other typical on-line description efforts include guides to holdings. Typical of these descriptive efforts is the University of Regina Archives and Special Collections. Our website

<http://www.uregina.ca/library/research/archives/index.shtml>

lists 58 of our private collections in the visual arts, Saskatchewan literature, and journalism which link to full finding aids for 18 collections. Researchers are encouraged to utilize these finding aids to conduct their preliminary research before visiting the archives. Researchers may then either visit or obtain photocopies of requested files.

Another example of descriptive efforts is a project of the Saskatchewan Archives Board to make available the Archives' index to homestead records. This index currently exists in paper form. It is a card catalogue that allows researchers to identify the archival file number of homestead files. Once the file number is determined the proper documents may be retrieved. As with the University of Regina, an on-line index will allow researchers to conduct their preliminary work on-line, then visiting to view the material, or ordering a photocopy of the contents. The index, both actual and virtual, will be searchable by either the name of the homesteader, or by the parcel of land. The project, begun in 2002, is planned for completion in spring 2005. It is being undertaken jointly with the Saskatchewan Genealogical Society.

Many archives have worked to digitize their finding aids, indexes, and other control tools. The archivist of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Prince Albert, for example, has entered their sacramental registers into the computer and is in the process of transferring these to a proprietary software specifically designed for religious records.

Virtual Exhibits

A second area of digitization activity has been virtual exhibits. The CAIN grant program changed emphasis a number of years ago - reflecting a

growing desire in the federal government to increase Canadian content on the web. Funding for descriptive work was superceded by funding to digitize materials from archival collections. These projects initially took the form of virtual exhibits.

SCAA has been undertaking multi-institutional digitization projects since 2001, starting with Saskatchewan and the Visual Arts and Saskatchewan in Two World Wars. Mainstreet, Saskatchewan and Saskatchewan Presents: An Exhibition of Theatre and Drama were completed the following year. During 2003-04, a record number of virtual exhibits were undertaken by SCAA and its members. The majority were either cooperative projects between SCAA and its institutional members, or were simply inter-institutional. They varied in size from about 100 images and a dozen pages of storyline, to over 500 images with various uses of flash animation and other eye and ear-catching video and audio attractions [5]. Funding for the exhibits came from the CCA and while individual exhibit budgets ran from roughly \$1,000 to \$17,000, the total budget for all fourteen exhibitions was in the neighbourhood of \$122,000 [6].

The following are the titles of the various exhibits:

- All Frocked Up: Glimpses of Drag in Saskatchewan;
- Canada Quiz;
- Combined Virtues: Saskatchewan's Ukrainian Experience;
- A Doukhobor Song of Days;
- Medicare: A People's Issue;
- Saskatchewan's 1944 CCF Election;
- The Saskatchewan Landscape;
- Saskatchewan Quiz;
- Saskatchewan Wheat Pool;
- Saskatoon: The Early Years;
- Regina: The Early Years;
- The Avro Arrow;
- Images of a Country: Canada's Flag Debate, and

- Participation

These exhibits are accessible through the national portal, Archives Canada (<http://www.archivescanada.ca/>), which provides access to over 800 archives, special libraries, and other research institutions, or on the SCAA website (<http://scaa.usask.ca>).

Kathy Szalasznyj, the SCAA Outreach Archivist, who coordinated many of the projects, described the experience "like winning a giant lottery, with funding for these exhibits coming all at once" [7]. With major funding from one agency, CCA, the same deadline applied to completion of all the exhibits. The year became a giant "harvest-time" as SCAA resources and staff were devoted to completing all the exhibits by the end of June 2004. While Kathy coordinated the project, each exhibit had its own curator or a team of curators. The selection of materials took a great deal of time as did the coordination of scanning. Graphics work was farmed out to design companies and, in the case of the Partipation exhibit, was actually done out of province as its presentation was quite advanced. A number of presentations had educational packets attached that were developed for use in schools. In recent months the exhibits have had between 3,000 and 5,000 hits a month. No archives in the province could imagine that many visitors coming through their doors.

The SCAA website links to at least 35 other institutional exhibits. Some institutions undertake these with internal funds, others with grant money.

An example of such a project is the Saskatchewan Archives Board centennial project. It involves the creation of a virtual display that will show people what life was like in Saskatchewan 100 years ago. Funded by the Canadian Memory Fund, the project will see over 1,200 items digitized and presented. An introduction to the exhibit will be written by historian Bill Waiser. Selection of materials for this project was undertaken by archives staff.

Recently more comprehensive digitization projects have been launched.

Rather than presenting a small sampling of records, as the virtual exhibits do, more substantial projects, that aim to digitize the majority of records in a given collection, have been launched. This is the third, and final, area of digitization activity I wish to touch on today.

The Prairie Populism Project

In July 2004 the Archives Society of Alberta received official notice from Library and Archives Canada that The Populist Project: A Window on a Nation Building Experience had been approved for funding. The total cost of the project is budgeted at over \$885,000 with \$362,500 in federal grants and the balance coming from the Society and its partners as cash and in-kind contributions [8]. The project calls for the digitization of approximately 30,000 pages of archival materials from archival institutions in Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba. In Saskatchewan both the Saskatchewan Archives Board and the University of Saskatchewan are participating.

The Saskatchewan Archives Board has undertaken to digitize the records of the Regina Riot Enquiry Commission. At completion, the Saskatchewan Archives Board will have digitized 10,000 pages of materials relating to the activities and findings of this important historical commission. Project staff have been hired to undertake scanning and archives staff are compiling metadata consistent with the project technical and descriptive specifications. In the end, the entire collection will be available for researchers on-line.

The University of Saskatchewan Archives is coordinating the scanning for materials from itself and the University's Library Special Collections. The University Archives is generally scanning complete files but not complete collections. Their selection criteria are fairly broad, as Tim Hutchinson, University Archivist states, "we tried to identify material falling into the populism theme, of interest to researchers, and usable in electronic form. We sampled very occasionally - for really extensive files where a lot of content is quite similar" [9].

The collections being scanned by the University include the records of various farmer and CCF/labour activists, the Saskatchewan Wheat Pool, the A.S. Morton collection, and the Shortt Library of Canadiana. Currently 11,069 pages representing 550 files from seven collections have been scanned. The material is largely textual [10].

The University is also coordinating the technical side of the project for both Saskatchewan and Manitoba. The images will be hosted on the SCAA server. As with the Saskatchewan Archives Board, the scanning is being done in-house by contract staff.

The Prairie Populism Project's general guidelines are typical of those of many archival digitization projects. They demand:

- that scanning must not result in damage to the original records;
- that digitization is not a substitute for original materials. Contributing institutions must maintain all original archival records;
- that each institution must certify that scanned images are in the public domain or are being reproduced with the permission of the copyright holder; and
- that all digitized materials must have an active link to a collection-level description. [11]

The Northern Portal

Another significant digitization project is the Northern Portal. This is a collaboration between the University Archives and the Library Special Collections at the University of Saskatchewan and the Diefenbaker Centre. The Northern Portal project aims at digitizing significant parts of major collections. Nevertheless there will be a portion of the site that will include interpretive exhibits on specific themes. These will be directed at various audiences - in fact it is intended to have different parts of the site and different materials accessible for different groups. The groups are K-5, the

general public, and academic researchers. The site when completed theoretically will contain:

- the ability to browse all materials by subject or by geographical location;
- a section for on-line resources, including both interpretive exhibits and other resource sites (for example, some journals on the north have been put on-line);
- a database of photographs;
- finding aids to archival collections, linking where appropriate to the digitized resources;
- a bibliography of resources, linking to the digitized resources;
- overall site search capability;
- a section for teachers; and
- quick access links for the three identified user groups. [12]

At present, about 4,200 unique descriptions - for files, books, and photographs - containing 14,690 digitized items - pages and photographs - have been digitized [13].

Conclusion

I hope I have painted a picture of a vibrant digitization program in the Saskatchewan archives community. In many ways our province is leading the country in these efforts. In all three digitization models - descriptive, exhibition, and complete collection - we are well represented and active. We are moving the researcher towards the vision, enunciated by Nicholas Burckel, of an "information-intensive environment" without the physical constraints of time and place.

Endnotes

- 1 Nicholas Burckel, "Archivists Facing the Millennium: Preparing for an Unknown - But Not Unknowable - Future" in *SAA Archival Outlook* (January/February 1997) quoted in Mark Vajcner, *Maintaining Our Documentary Heritage: The Challenge of Electronic Records Archives at the University of Manitoba* (MA Thesis, University of Manitoba, 1997), p. 88.
- 2 Cameron Hart, *SCAA Photodatabase Project* (February 2005), p. 1.
- 3 *Ibid.*, pp. 2-4.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 4.
- 5 Kathy Szalasznyj, *Report of the Outreach Archivist*, 1 February 2005.
- 6 *Ibid.*
- 7 *Ibid.*
- 8 Archives Society of Alberta, *Prairie Populism Project: Technical and Descriptive Specifications and Guidelines* (September 2004), p. 3.
- 9 Email. Tim Hutchinson to Mark Vajcner, 1 February 2005.
- 10 *Ibid.*
- 11 Archives Society of Alberta, p. 3.
- 12 Email. Cheryl Avery to Mark Vajcner, 1 February 2005.
- 13 *Ibid.*