

Oral History and Folklore Resources at the Public Archives of Nova Scotia

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In this paper, I would like to introduce the Film and Sound Division of the Public Archives of Nova Scotia, its role within the institution, and its role vis-à-vis oral history and folklore. I will then highlight some examples from the Division's holdings which may be of interest to the reader.

When the Public Archives of Nova Scotia moved to its new facility in 1980, it not only expanded and improved its physical environment, but also broadened its traditional archival scope to encompass documents which "move and speak." One hundred and twenty-three years after its founding, P.A.N.S., as we affectionately refer to it, recognized the need to preserve sound and moving image documents created by, about and for Nova Scotians.

The Division's 1,700 square-foot vault holds nearly 6,000 cans of black-and-white and colour film, 750 videotapes, over 10,000 sound tapes, and in excess of 1,000 sound discs. Two full-time employees are responsible for the archival, technical, public service and clerical functions.

The Film and Sound collection contains material from a variety of sources. It includes television and radio broadcast materials, productions of government agencies, proceedings of inquiries and conferences, independent productions, home movies, amateur productions, and oral history and folklore recordings.

Sound and moving image materials are created for a myriad of reasons by institutions, organizations and individuals. The production of these materials is in response to a perceived need on the part of the producing agency—a video clip for the nightly news, verbatim recordings of Royal Commissions for periodic review, tape-recorded interviews which provide background for a research project, or a film simply documenting the growth of a family.

Usually, these productions are kept for a period of

time by the producers/creators for their own reference. At some point, however, during the life of these documents, the producers, acutely aware of their value, realize that others may benefit from consulting these recorded sounds and moving images. A natural corollary to this emerging consciousness is the recognition of the need for preservation. A logical progression of thought finds the producers/creators seeking a repository for their material which will not only preserve their valued documents, but make them accessible for consultation by others:

"All archival material shares this dual function; they are an essential resource to their creators and provide evidence of their important work over time to a wider community."

(Pederson 6).

Archivists acquire non-current material for research purposes in order that the original evidential value may be preserved and exploited. However, just as our prospective donor suspected, there are characteristics outside the original scope of the material which imbue the records with additional value, and researchers derive secondary meaning from the evidence contained therein.

All archives must be selective in their acquisition of material, both to establish and to maintain a collection which is cohesive, compact, and worthy of the resources required for its support. Our institutional mandate provides guidance in this area. The legislated objective of P.A.N.S. is to acquire the records of the Government of Nova Scotia, as well as the private collections of institutions, organizations, societies and individuals which are of interest to Nova Scotians and of lasting historical value.

Once material has been acquired, having met criteria within the collections policy, the process of documentation begins. The archivist must ensure the donor's original order and intent is kept intact, thus providing the original contextual factors necessary for accurate interpretation. Interpretation is only reliable if the researcher understands the rationale for the creation

of the archival material. Thorough documentation enables the researcher to consult material in its original context, and subsequently to proceed with the development of historical and informational analysis.

Having outlined the theoretical rationale for the accumulation and documentation of archival material, I shall now examine practical applications with regard to oral history and folklore at the P.A.N.S. The tripartite responsibilities of an archivist provide the basis of my examination: the selection, preservation and accessibility of material in our custody.

When material is being appraised for inclusion in the Division's holdings, a number of questions must be asked. Does the collection fall within the institutional acquisitions mandate? What is the evidential value of the material? Does it provide new information? Is this material duplicated elsewhere, or maintained in another form? Does it relate to other material already in our custody. Is the material complete? Does support documentation exist? What provisions have been made for public access? What is the technical condition?

If the preceding questions are answered to the archivist's satisfaction, the material is accepted for donation. Attention will now turn to preservation and public access.

The fundamental reason for maintaining archival collections is to enable them to be used. Herein lies the rub, the archival paradox. As keepers of the records, archivists cater to the demands of research, while simultaneously attempting to ensure the documents' physical protection.

Each pass a magnetic recording makes through the heads of playback equipment contributes to the deterioration of the recorded message as well as providing an opportunity for breakage. Our response to this dilemma is to produce listening copies of donated materials from the master recording. The latter will then be stored unused.

In an effort to provide optimum storage conditions for all sound and moving image media entrusted to our care, we monitor the temperature and relative humidity of our vault on a daily basis. On average, for the past five years the temperature has been 69° Fahrenheit, and the relative humidity 49 percent.

Regular inspection and maintenance of both the collection and our equipment is a crucial preservation factor. We have a regular program of rewinding (or "spooling") our 1/4-inch audio collection. This has the threefold benefit of providing the opportunity for physical inspection, ensuring a firm, even tape wind, and reducing the possibility of "print-thru" (an audible echo on magnetic tape which is caused by a tight wind, which transfers the magnetic message on to successive layers). Our equipment is cleaned regularly, and sent out for routine maintenance.

In the past one hundred years, starting with Edison's cylinders in the 1880s, sound recordings have been created using one technical innovation after another. I'm sure the future holds many wonderful developments yet undiscovered. Those of us in the archival world view this scene with mixed emotions. We welcome the future, hoping for the development of stable recording media, economy of size, and the panacea of digital recordings. But we look at the contents of our repositories and see the inherent instability of the media, the equipment graveyards we must maintain, as well as diminishing resources, and wonder what the best course is. Our answer at the P.A.N.S. is a conservative course, and ultimately the preservation of the message.

The goal of an archive is to provide resource material for research purposes. The achievement of this goal is possible only after legal, ethical and descriptive factors have been employed to provide public access. Oral history and folklore collections are made available subject to the expressed wishes of the donors and informants. These wishes are manifest in tape release forms and donor agreements. The latter, which are standard practice in our Division, are signed by the donor and the Archives. They govern access to the entire collection by including specific, mutually agreed upon clauses covering public access and use. Regardless of whether a collection is to be "closed" or "restricted," these directions must be time-based, requiring termination of the restraints after a given period of time. Access to "restricted" collections is granted only with the written permission of the donor/creator during the time-limited period. This serves to eliminate dependence on the "discretion of the archivist"—an onerous duty at the best of times. After the acquisition and implementation of these forms, the Archives has an obligation to make material available only within the constraints of the access policy and privacy requirements.

Finally, how material is arranged and described plays a critical role in the eventual accessibility of the archival holdings.

Our objective in the Film and Sound Division is to provide multi-level descriptions for all our collections. What this means for oral history and folklore holdings is a collection level description with an attached inventory, and item (or tape) level descriptions. The collection level description is the key to providing a general overview of the material with its attendant contextual information.

We find consultation with the donors/creators at this point to be of critical importance. Their expertise is essential to the accurate documentation of the materials.

I would like to conclude this portion of my discussion with extracts from a paper by Ray Edmondson, Deputy Director of the Australian National Film and Sound

Archives:

The 1900's are the first hundred years of history which future generations can relive aurally and visually...it is a heritage of modern media which have forever changed the way people communicate, persuade and express themselves; that makes this century different from all others that have gone before. Will we take into the 21st century the effective heritage of the 20th—the first in human history to leave a legacy of sounds and moving images? Or will we just take a shadow of what might have been?

(Edmondson 11)

Let us all, creators, donors and archivists, work towards the preservation of a representative legacy.

What follows will be a very brief description of oral history and folklore resources to be found at the Public Archives of Nova Scotia.

Helen Creighton Collection

In 1986 the P.A.N.S. received funding from the Council of Canadian Archives, the Council of Nova Scotia Archives, and the Province of Nova Scotia to arrange and describe the enormous Creighton Collection. The musician and folklorist Clary Croft was hired for eighteen months, and during that period he prepared inventories of library, manuscript, photographic, and moving image and sound materials. In addition, he completed content reports on the tape collection, and conducted two tape-recorded interviews with Dr. Creighton. Croft worked very closely with Dr. Creighton during the entire process, and her contribution to the project proved invaluable.

With the passing of Dr. Creighton, the administration of access to the collection has fallen to the Public Archives of Nova Scotia. The collection is open for research purposes on the premises (except for a number of items which are restricted for a ten-year period). Requests for duplication, publication, etc., must be forwarded to Carman Carroll, the Provincial Archivist. It is our intention to develop policies and procedures regarding the use by the public of the Creighton Collection in the very near future. Until that time, we will examine each duplication request on an *ad hoc* basis.

Currently, access to the sound and moving image materials is limited for two reasons: the complicated, laborious search time which results from insufficient reference tools, and the physical condition of the sound collection.

In an effort to address the first limitation, we

undertook a project in early 1990 whereby every item recorded on each tape was tagged with an unique number. Working from the content reports, we then began to load descriptions of each tape entry on to the Division's database. For songs, a genre description is provided as well as the song title and the first line; for narratives, a genre description, topic and ethnic group; for instrumental music, the type (from a controlled descriptive list) and the title. The heading "Other" provides a catch-all category for miscellaneous sounds. Each descriptive record also includes the name of the informant, where and when the material was collected, and the tape locator number.

There are 4,211 unique entries in the tape collection, with only a small amount of duplication. Upon completion, this project will provide users with an extremely flexible means of access to the collection. Sadly, this project has had to be put on hold for an indefinite period of time due to lack of funding. Up to that point, we had input 1,393 records—2,818 remain.

The second limitation, the physical condition of the sound material, is a critical point which must be addressed. There are no in-house duplicates of the sound collection—only Dr. Creighton's 1/4-inch reel-to-reel tapes, of which there are 1,037, and the 12-inch discs, numbering 271. It is essential that listening copies be made of the entire collection. This is an extremely costly undertaking from the perspectives of both finances and personnel. Worth considering also is the fact that the 1/4-inch tapes in the collection are not original recordings. They are reference copies made for Dr. Creighton by her funding institutions, the National Museum and the Library of Congress. The condition of these tapes has been compromised by use and the ravages of time. Ideally, we would like to arrange for duplicates to be made from original material—from the collections of the Canadian Museum of Civilization and the Library of Congress. We have received a negative response to our request from the former. The Library of Congress will provide copies of their material at a prohibitive cost. So, for the time being, until a solution is found, requested material will be copied from the 1/4-inch material to cassette on an as-needed basis, causing delays to the researcher.

Fred Redden Collection

An interesting adjunct to the Creighton Collection is the Fred Redden Collection. Fred Redden proved a reliable informant for Dr. Creighton during the 1950's, providing 20-25 traditional songs for her at a time. During the spring of 1987, a neighbour of Redden's, Katherine Belzer, approached us, eager to have his repertoire recorded. She had heard many of his songs, and intimations of there being "many more where those came from" prompted her to visit the Archives to discuss

possibilities. During the course of our conversation, I discovered that Redden had hinted to her about his "bawdy" song repertoire, which Dr. Creighton had not recorded. The opportunity presented to us was irresistible: to recapture a Creighton informant's folksong repertoire some thirty years later, as well as the possibility of acquiring bawdy songs never recorded by Creighton. Ms. Belzer assured us that she was most interested in seeing this project through to its conclusion, and another neighbour had offered his home studio as a recording site. Funds were needed to purchase tapes.

I contacted the folklorist James Moreira for his opinion, and was gratified to hear that not only did he think the project a good one, but that he'd be willing to become involved. I then submitted a proposal to the provincial Department of Culture, Recreation and Fitness for funds to cover expenses. (This sort of project being outside the mandate of the P.A.N.S., we simply recommended that the Province fund the endeavour in return for the acquisition of master materials.) The application was successful and the project was under way soon after, with myself as supervisor, and James Moreira and Katherine Belzer as coordinators.

During the thirteen sessions held throughout the summer of 1987, forty-three songs were recorded, their lyrics transcribed, and fifteen hours of taped secondary interviews conducted. At the project's conclusion, it was estimated that a further twenty songs remained to be collected. The elusive "bawdy" song evaded capture! Fred Redden, whose name became familiar to Nova Scotians through the work of Dr. Creighton, at the age of 75 became something of a minor celebrity in folk festival circles, appearing publicly in his own community, at the Harbourfolk Society Pub Nights in Halifax, and at the Lunenburg Folk Festival. The material acquired during this project is the property of the P.A.N.S. and is open to the public.

Cape Breton's Magazine

Since 1981, 936 hours of master audiocassette interviews conducted by Ron Caplan, editor and publisher of *Cape Breton's Magazine*, during the years 1972-1987 have been donated to the P.A.N.S. The collection is restricted for a period of twenty-five years. Only those researchers bearing written permission from Caplan will be given access to the collection. The Film and Sound Division has prepared a preliminary inventory of its holdings, providing access to the collection via a computer-generated list sorted by informant name.

It has been a long-term goal of the Division to create a finding aid which would link the print collection (of which our library holds a complete run) to the original tape-recorded interviews. This would only be possible through common subject access points. The publication

of the magazine's Guide in the 50th edition has brought us much closer to the realization of our goal. The Guide provides twelve broad subject categories under which readers will find references to specific articles. Ron Caplan graciously produced for us that same Guide sorted by informant's name, referring to the articles created from the master taped interviews. What remains to be done on our part is a transcription of data from one source to another, and then there would exist a reference tool which could be used by P.A.N.S. workers and the magazine to link print to sound. A dream come true!

Barss Gordon Collection

This collection represents the research of Peter Barss and Joleen Gordon during the preparation of the book, *Older Ways: Traditional Nova Scotia Craftsmen*, published in 1980. There are over twenty-eight hours of interviews, and 94 photographs of thirty practising artisans.

Gamberg Earle Collection

This collection includes twenty-seven hours of interviews conducted during a study by Herb Gamberg entitled "The Left in Nova Scotia (1930-1950)." The interviews were conducted during 1985-1986 by Michael Earle, with individuals who had participated in left-wing politics in Nova Scotia.

Lena Ferguson Collection

This collection holds over 137 hours of interviews by Mrs. Ferguson, conducted between 1975 and 1988, with residents of Nova Scotia's Eastern Shore. Topics include genealogy, traditional customs and practices, music, shipping, etc.

Judith Fingard Collection

There are two series within this collection: "The North End City Mission," four hours of interviews conducted in 1983, and "Dalhousie University," forty hours of interviews recorded during 1984-1985, with individuals who had been employed by Dalhousie University.

Halifax Explosion Memorial Bell Tower Collection

This collection includes over 72 hours of interviews with survivors of the Halifax Explosion, conducted during the summer months of 1985 and 1988. Janet Kitz supervised the project.

Barbara Anne Keddy Collection

There are three series within this collection: "Social History of Nursing in Nova Scotia in the 1930's," 54 hours of interviews conducted between 1982 and 1984; "Working Women in the 1920's and 1930's," 80 hours of interviews recorded between 1986 and 1988; and a new project entitled "Oral Histories of Nurse Leaders Who Have Retired," nine hours recorded during 1989.

Kathy Moggridge Collection

There are six series within this collection representing research projects undertaken by Ms. Moggridge between 1976 and 1981. Fifty-five hours of interviews deal with the topics of midwifery, the socio-economic history of Clam Harbour and Ship Harbour, the Wm. Robertson & Son Hardware Building, Big Tancook Island, the Mabou Highlands Study, fishing in Ship Harbour and Little Harbour, and gold mining and milling in the Sherbrooke gold district.

Royal Canadian Legion Diamond Jubilee Aural History Project

We hold 83 hours of interviews conducted during 1986 with members of Nova Scotia's Provincial and Branch Legions. The interviews concern personal experiences Legion members had during armed conflicts.

Works Cited

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