

Preserving the Records of Parks Canada: A Centennial Celebration for 1985

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The acquisition mandate of the Federal Archives Division of the Public Archives of Canada is clear: to preserve permanently those textual records of the federal government which have long-term value. This task, however, is not as straightforward as the mandate may make it seem. Even though the Dominion Archivist is the legal custodian of the historical records of the federal government, he does not have control over all such records. There are certain administrative activities requiring frequent consultation of old and even very old files, which consequently make their transfer to the Archives more complicated than in normal circumstances. For example, the records of some hearings, such as those conducted by the National Energy Board, retain their active record status because the agency is recognized as a "court of records." Certain legal files documenting consultations between government lawyers and their client departments involve solicitor-client confidences which, in the view of some, can never be divulged. In these and other situations, the creating agency has a legitimate claim over its historical records; it may even be argued that these records should never leave the institution.

Archivists who are responsible for acquiring records that have permanent historical *and* administrative value must be realistic in applying the acquisition policy of the PAC, or indeed of any other archives in a similar position. While they are right in claiming that transfer to the archives will prevent severe deterioration of the files, either through misuse or poor storage conditions, as well as protecting them from unauthorized destruction, they must also consider the needs of the donor departments. They too have valid arguments for wanting to keep the records. Archivists must therefore be flexible, resourceful, and even imaginative in adapting the acquisition policy and procedures to the donor's particular concerns.

An acquisition project recently completed by the Federal Archives Division required four years of continuous negotiations and is a useful example of how an archival repository can change its priorities and reallocate its resources in order to obtain an important collection. On 15 November 1983, at a special ceremony commemorating the event, more than three hundred metres (over 1200 boxes) of Parks Canada records were transferred to the control of the Public Archives of Canada. This accession was a welcome addition to the fewer than three hundred volumes (sixty metres) of central registry files previously retained in the Parks Canada record group. This five-fold increase also contained the oldest and generally most valuable records ever created by Parks Canada and its numerous predecessors, as these were the ones which the agency tended to retain for the longest time. In making the event possible, the archivists involved had to overcome many problems, ranging from user resistance to the operation of a faulty records management system. The completion of the project testifies to the archivists' patience and perseverance, as well as to their resourcefulness in taking advantage of an important anniversary to achieve their own acquisition goal.

* The views expressed here are those of the author and not necessarily those of the Public Archives of Canada.

The national and historic parks administration of the Government of Canada differs considerably from other government functions — and therefore other agencies' attitudes towards records and records keeping. Parks Canada is primarily concerned with the development and operation of scenic or historic land reserves and waterways in order to provide opportunities for Canadians to learn about their natural and historical heritage and enjoy outdoor activities as well as to develop tourism and protect the existing ecosystems. Because this work is exacting in detail and heavily reliant on past events and precedents, park employees make frequent use of older files and as a consequence always carefully document their activities for the benefit of their successors. The files they create, or have created, are regularly required when historic sites are restored, when additions are made to a park, when a property or boundary dispute arises, when any one of hundreds of regulations have to be updated or modified, or even when a certain policy decision has to be confirmed.

The Federal Archives Division's concern about the state of the Parks Canada records stemmed from its researchers' increasing interest in the development of natural resources in western Canada and the role played by the federal government. The establishment of a national and historic parks system was one example of the government's land and resource policies in the West. The park concept, while at first applied to land reserves in the Rocky Mountains, eventually evolved into a nation-wide programme of national and historic heritage conservation. In dealing with escalating numbers of inquiries relating to it, archivists responsible for the Parks Canada Program discovered that most older Parks records were stored in the Ottawa Federal Records Centre where they remained under the control of the department. Frequent recalls by Parks employees all across the country added to the rapid physical deterioration of the files and occasionally to their misplacement.

Access to the records was further complicated by the scheduling and storing methods used. The accessions placed in the Records Centre contained material from as long ago as the early 1800s and as recent as the late 1970s. Because a thirty-year active/dormant retention period was employed, the material was not scheduled for review, let alone transfer to the Federal Archives Division, until after the year 2000. In one case, an accession covered the years 1876 to 1973, consequently not making it available for review until the year 2004. The few recent files dictated the fate of the vast majority, which predated the 1960s at the latest.

In October 1979, the first formal attempt was made to correct the situation. A formal letter of acquisition was sent to Parks Canada. This effort, undertaken through the office of the departmental records manager, aroused the protest of Parks historians, land researchers, and other employees who needed frequent and quick access to the dormant files. To them the transfer of the records entailed more problems than advantages: employees would have to conduct their research at the PAC where they would have to conform to another institution's time-consuming procedures. Photocopying rights was probably the most contentious issue raised. Fearing loss of control over their own records, they complained to the records manager about the proposed transfer, often by claiming that certain inadequacies existed in the PAC's own policies and procedures. For the two years that followed the first acquisition letter, the Public Archives could only bring up the matter tactfully during other dealings with the department.

Fearing that the initiative would fade, the archivists searched for a new argument on which to base their case. This time, they used the upcoming Parks centenary celebrations

in 1985 as a motive for the transfer. For some years Parks officials had been planning the hundredth anniversary celebrations of the reservation of the Banff Hot Springs and consequently the beginning of the national and historic parks system. In anticipation of 1985, as well as throughout and after that year, a surge of research on the national parks was expected. But with the present state of the records, little would be accomplished. At this point, the Public Archives proposed to observe the centenary by undertaking numerous projects to describe and promote the Parks documentary heritage at the very time that senior Parks officials wanted greater visibility for their programme among all Canadians. Indeed, by happy coincidence, Parks Canada at that same time wrote the Public Archives, as it did the Mint, Post Office, and numerous other agencies, requesting formal contributions to a collective centennial celebration in 1985.

In reply in February 1983, the Public Archives offered, if Parks Canada would agree to transfer its records, to complete the following projects for the centenary: arrange the physical transfer of the records to the custody of the Federal Archives Division, select, arrange, box, and list them to archival standards, repair damaged records, undertake a microfilming programme, produce suitable finding aids (some of them on computer), research and publish the complete inventory of Parks Canada, add publicity through various articles and exhibitions by PAC staff, and, finally, provide the necessary reference service. This proposal offered solutions to all of the Program's problems with its own records and made concessions to the records' internal users. Because of its expertise in the area, the Public Archives could provide a records custodial service superior to the one available in the department. It would be easier for employees to locate and consult the original records at the Archives, where proper indexes and finding aids would be available, than in their own institution; the microfilming project would make the series available to the regional offices of Parks Canada, thus reducing travelling and researching costs; and Parks employees received the assurances that the Public Archives would do its best to meet their photocopying requirements. In addition to these practical considerations, by making the records available to a broad spectrum of Canadians and thus eventually resulting in increased research, writing, knowledge, and publicity about the national parks, the offer added a welcome dimension to the anniversary celebrations. These arguments carried weight and were agreed to by the Senior Assistant Deputy Minister for the Parks Canada Program. By the fall of 1983, all the necessary paperwork had been completed.

The records accessioned from Parks Canada document all aspects of parks development from the discovery of the Banff Hot Mineral Springs to the establishment of the most recent national parks and historic parks and sites. They also open out onto several newer areas of study such as conservation, wildlife, recreation, the social life of park communities, and local interest in the acknowledgement of historical figures and events. The research value of the collection is also considerably increased by the fact that the information provided is complete and varied. There are textual records, photographs, and maps; each medium is rich in content and worthy of inclusion in an exhibition. Researchers who have already consulted the records have praised the thoroughness of park employees and their concern for the preservation of the parks' history.

Linking the transfer of the Parks records to the centenary celebrations was an acquisition coup for the PAC. In one stroke, it obtained thousands of files it had coveted for many years and at the same time received media attention for doing so. Furthermore, this transfer of records has been included in the official Parks Canada centenary publicity.

As a participant in the event, however, the Public Archives is expected to play a role in the festivities. Apart from providing researchers with information, it must be willing to publicize the Parks records. This is done by providing facsimile copies of documents for exhibitions in the parks, writing articles using the records, and preparing small exhibitions for the launching of the festivities or related conferences. While this is sometimes done on a short notice, thus exerting some pressure on the institution, it also provides the PAC with an occasion to show the merits of its service and the collections in its care. The enthusiasm and goodwill demonstrated also have attracted the recognition of officials who might not otherwise be concerned with the ordinary aspects of the complete records management process. Archivists hope that by the end of the year they will see more transfers of records to the Federal Archives Division, especially from the regional offices and the individual parks.

The Parks Canada project is an ambitious one considering the limited time within which it will be accomplished. However, nothing that has or will be undertaken is incongruous with the normal curatorial services provided by the Federal Archives Division. The only difference is that the complete custodial process will be done at one time rather than piecemeal over a long period of years as is normally the case. The archivists will proceed from the accession level to a fully processed and documented collection in which future accessions can be easily integrated. The emphasis placed on one record group is justified by the importance of the acquisition, the public interest it will attract, and the positive reaction to the transfer coming from the Program's administrators, records managers, and researchers. Furthermore, the preparation of the complete inventory will provide a unique opportunity for the archivist presently responsible for the Parks holdings to familiarize herself with the history of the agency and the records it has created.

This acquisition and custodial project serves as a good example of how archives and donors can work together to ensure the proper conservation of records. While at first both institutions may have thought that their interests were very different, they soon realized that they shared the same concerns about the records they were discussing; both wanted the records preserved, retrievable, and accessible. It was consequently up to the Public Archives to convince Parks Canada that this goal could only be met within an archival institution. The PAC proved this point by demonstrating its expertise in the area. It then took advantage of the forthcoming Parks centenary to rearrange its custodial work and internal priorities in order to make the transfer a part of the celebrations.