

Going Digital – The City of Regina’s virtual archive is taking history online

By Lindsay Thorimbert

They say old is the new “new,” and with the City of Regina Historical Collection this happens to be the case. They are taking their archival collection online.

As of the end of January 2014, roughly 700 photos had been scanned and posted to the online archive. These include historical photographs of the Saskatchewan Roughriders, materials from the First and Second World War, and shots of prominent Regina architecture.

One series of images already uploaded to the virtual archive shows the construction of the SaskPower building at 2025 Victoria Ave. in Regina. This office building was constructed on the former site of the St. Mary’s Separate School, and is a masterful example of Expressionist architecture. Opened in 1963, the unique Y-shaped design allows for an arcade and drive-through area to serve clients.

It is interesting to note the differences between the drawing of the building, signed and dated in the bottom right corner by architect Joseph Pettick in June 1959, and the final result. Most notably, the embellished entrance design was dropped in favour of a smooth curve.

The virtual archive was launched on November 15, 2013. By the end of January 2014 there had about 13,500 page views. The average visitor viewed approximately 20 pages per visit and stayed on the site almost seven minutes.

To date, only a small fraction of the total archive, which contains roughly 6,000,000 records, has been scanned and uploaded to the virtual archive. The metadata, title and description of thousands of documents, is already available for all archival records on the site.

City of Regina staff continues to move more and more of the collection to the digital format. Photo slides can be scanned more quickly than large prints, and depending on the type of document, staff scan between 40 and 200 documents each day. Researchers are encouraged to return to the site often to see new content, which will be added as scanning is completed.

“Every time we upload an image or a textual record, the virtual archive becomes an even more valuable resource,” said City of Regina Historical Information and Preservation Supervisor Dana Turgeon. She added that work on the virtual archive will not be finished even after all the current records have been uploaded. “If there are pictures taken of an event, even if that event was yesterday, there is an opportunity to include those photos in the virtual archive. There is no minimum age requirement for a record to belong on the archive.”



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Some records will be left out because of copyright restriction, or because they contain personal information. Oversized records, like large plans, require special scanning equipment and will be added to the virtual archive at a later date.

Access to the original, physical documents in the archival collection will continue to be available on request to the Historical Information and Preservation Supervisor, and viewings are available in the reading room at Regina City Hall.

“What’s really exciting about the virtual archive is that it instantly connects students, researchers, everybody with these historical records,” said Turgeon. “It’s a huge piece of local history that’s now available right at peoples’ fingertips.” Online access to the collection reduces handling and helps preserve the physical documents for years to come, Turgeon added.

A high-resolution file is created for long-term preservation and housed with the City of Regina. A lower-resolution version is then uploaded to the virtual archive site to enable fast web viewing on a smartphone or tablet. High resolution versions of archival images will be available to the public, subject to a \$15 administration fee.

The archive is hosted by Eloquent Systems Inc., a leader in online archiving. Their clients include the City of Toronto Archives, the BC Ministry of Community Services and many others. Eloquent’s servers are based in Canada, and they were selected by the City of Regina through a competitive bidding process.