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## The Changing Face of Archives: Will You Recognize Us? Part I

By Fred Farrell

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In the past several years the archival community has taken stock of its situation through a number of reviews and data collecting initiatives. The results of those efforts, although alarming, do not come as a surprise to many archivists. Archives are significantly under funded for their mandates and the expectations of both their sponsors and the public. Living hand to mouth on static or reduced budgets from the 1970's and 1980's, archives are dealing with the residue of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and earlier, the growth of record keeping in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the proliferation of documentation since the 1960's, and the avalanche of electronic records of today. To put it succinctly, archives have a massive backlog of unprocessed records that you can't see, and you won't be able to see in the foreseeable future, if in fact they are preserved. Although it does little good to point fingers of blame, since all involved with archives have contributed to this dismal situation, especially archivists, the group that has done the least to address the problem is academic historians. In one way this is understandable, since this group constitutes the smallest user group in archives, and likely has no idea there is a problem. The irony in this situation is that there is no group with greater need or dependency on archives, than academic historians. However, my point is not to dwell on the past but to document the present and speculate on the future.

From the various surveys done in the past 3 years a clear but bleak picture emerges of the current situation. The holdings in archives have grown tremendously in the past few years. We are now almost 50 years from 1960, when the paper explosion in most organizations began in full force, and those records have been filtering or in some instances flooding into archives for the past 20 years. As a result most archives have been acquiring records at record pace with little sign of the demand to place things into archives abating any time soon. Between 1978 and 2003, the holdings in archives have grown 193% for sponsorial records, 717% for non-sponsorial records, and 143% for photographs. With such growth, it shouldn't come as a surprise that over a third (36%) of institutions have more than 41% of their holdings unprocessed, and another 30% of institutions have between 21% and 40% of their holdings unprocessed. What makes this even more alarming is that in 2003 the average institution in this country had slightly more than enough space to accommodate one year's worth of acquisitions. This situation could be remedied with institutions having adequate budgets to meet this avalanche of documentation by processing collections to make them available to you and weeding material not warranting long term retention to free up space. If this were only the case, 57% of institutions have less than \$100,000 for a total budget and 59% have less than 3 staff. It is true that most of these institutions would be small archives likely not on the radar of most academic historians, but they still hold and continue to collect materials that could assist your research

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and that of your students if you only knew they existed and what they had. At the other end of the spectrum there were only 13% of institutions with a budget over \$1m, roughly the budget of one CURA grant. There are some bright spots in this otherwise overcast horizon. At the provincial/territorial level in the past few years, Newfoundland and Labrador, New Brunswick, Ontario, and Alberta have all gotten or are in process of getting new facilities for storage, and in some of those cases, space for the public and staff.

If the picture that I have painted is not gloomy enough, my real purpose here today is to ring the warning bell for the future. There are significant changes underway and on the horizon in archives which do not bode well for the academic historian. I should note that this does not take into account the occurrences of the past few weeks where three archives in Canada have announced significant down grades to the point of closure, in the services they offer. My concerns relate to the evolution that is going to take place in staffing archives and how archives and their sponsors in the coming decade will respond to the backlog scenario described in the start of my presentation. A lot of this has to do with demographics which you are no doubt grappling with in your own environment. However, the demographic picture is mixing with other factors to create a situation that I think most of you will consider untenable. With a few exceptions most archives in this country have done little hiring in nearly 15 years or more, with a particularly acute period between 1985 and 2000. Even the exceptions, which tend to be the largest institutions and those in the west, will be facing a significant if not horrific exodus of staff in the coming decade or before. Nearly a third of institutions reported that in the next decade all of their staff would be over 55 years of age, with another 12% stating over 50% of their staff would be over 55. This would not be a concern if there was some balance in the 30 to 40 age group, the group you would expect to draw from for the managers and directors of archives over the next decade, but this is not the case. As anecdotal confirmation of this, when I first began working in archives any and all job postings, and especially senior positions, would raise speculation on possible candidates across the country. Not only is this no longer the case, but now the question that is routinely asked is; will anyone apply. Just in the past year there have been at least three major archives in Canada looking for directors for which two or even three calls for applications were necessary. This is only going to become more common and the situation more severe, particularly in regions of the country already facing skill shortages. There can only be two outcomes to this situation, disregarding the option that archives will just close, either junior

staff will be thrust into positions of authority, with steep learning curves, or non-archivists will assume key, leadership positions. The latter can happen cleanly with direct appointments or through archives being subsumed by other organizations. In different circumstances neither of these options would necessarily be disastrous but we are in a very unusual point in the evolution of archives. Long overlooked or ignored, the internet and electronic records are shining a light on the unique characteristics of documentary heritage and the potential mileage that can be made from being seen to be in charge of recorded information. I should point out: they want the authority but not the work. Information management, records management, librarians, museums, and even sponsors of archives for the first time have designs on controlling archives, and through their priorities, making archives reflect their visions of what an archives should be and what work constitutes what an archivist should spend their time on. Let me tell you those ideas are the antithesis of what you want or need and such archives will be places very different and very foreign to historians. None of these groups and a good many younger archivists, for that matter, have the same concerns and sympathies as historians and older archivists. The different perspectives of the other disciplines are obvious but the consequences of such groups setting the priorities for archives are less evident. Although I will state them irreverently for effect, that doesn't mean my summation is any less accurate. The IT field sees 5 years as long term planning and preservation, the goal of records managers is to destroy as much as possible, librarians equate putting something on a shelf with access, museums collect very selectively, and sponsors of archives are looking for, at a minimum, someone who doesn't rock the boat or raise expensive questions, and more likely someone who will ensure embarrassing records never see the light of day. None of these groups will have the concerns or interests of historians, front and center. This threat has been obvious to some for awhile, to paraphrase John English "We fear that, if [Archives] are not a gateway, others will strip-mine their rich resources, and the claim they have on their resources will matter little to most Canadians."

*The conclusion of Fred Farrell's article will be published in the next issue of the Bulletin.*