

# The History of Records Management in Canada, 1867 - 1967

By Uta Fox

This paper surveys the development of records management in Canada. It focuses primarily on the federal government as well as a number of provinces. In implementing records management into the Canadian government a unique approach was developed. Ian Wilson, Librarian and Archivist of Canada<sup>1</sup>, commented that government (federal, provincial, and municipal) archives "... preserve not just the official administrative records but also acquire private materials in all documentary media bearing on history ... and combine the traditional role of a record office with that of an active cultural agency..." (p.16). In other words, Canadian governments have adopted an integrated archival records management approach to the management of government archives and records.

According to Mark Langemo, records management originated in the US Federal government during the late 1940s, evolving from the U.S. archival profession. The US National Archives was established in 1934 to handle the past accumulation of federal documentation and the increasing volumes of records generated by the US federal government. In response to this growth President Harry S. Truman established the Commission on the Organization of the Executive Branch of the Government, which became known as the Hoover Commission in the late 1940s. A Task Force on Paperwork Management was established and Emmett J. Leachy was selected as chairman. The Hoover Commission defined the term "records management" in the late 1940s (Langemo, p.2-3). It is important to note that this is the first time this term was used, prior to this what we know to be records management, was referred to as "paperwork."

---

<sup>1</sup> Ian E. Wilson, Librarian and Archivist of Canada, was, in March 2008, elected as the President of the International Council of Archives, a position he will assume in July 2008.

In Canada the federal government's records management programmes also derived from archives. To understand the origins and development of records management requires an understanding of the development of the Canadian archival tradition. And in Canada the responsibility for collecting its historical records, both public and private, fell to the government. (Wilson, p.15) In other words, collecting Canadian history and the records that documented that history was viewed as a public responsibility.

The first efforts to acquire historical or archival records originated from the Literary and Historical Society of Quebec, established in 1824. Following Confederation a more formal arrangement for Canadian historical records was desired and Cabinet, in 1872, created an "Archives Branch" in the Department of Agriculture, which was the department responsible for arts and statistics (Wilson, p.22). Journalist Douglas Brymner was appointed the first archivist and given a budget of \$4000, three empty rooms, and very vague instructions (Atherton, p.86). Emphasizing collecting and copying<sup>2</sup> Brymner focused on acquired pre-Confederation records. He was not concerned with the preservation of current government records (Millar, p.108).

According to Jay Atherton, the Post Office, in 1889, became the first department to experience a "records management" problem. The Postmaster General requested from Cabinet a standard five-year retention period for routine financial records. Looking to Britain for advice for "the weeding of public documents" resulted in the Post Office's schedule being amended so that more valuable documents were retained longer than those with less value. As well, Cabinet authorized the destruction of records mentioned in the amended schedule after their specified retention was achieved. As Atherton notes, Cabinet had approved the first records schedule in the Canadian government (Atherton, p.87). And while other departments destroyed records irregularly after consulting with the Treasury Board, the practice was neither consistent nor systematic.

---

<sup>2</sup> Laura Millar notes that the decision to copy records emerged from concern for the preservation of those records central to Canada's history of exploration and settlement, records not necessarily found in Canada (p.106) and copying records from Britain, France, the former colonies, etc., in no way diminished their value as a copied record was equal to that of an original record.

Interestingly, as the Archives Branch was created by Cabinet, the Department of the Secretary of State, which was responsible for “keeping all State records and papers not specially transferred to other Departments,” created the Records Branch of the Department of Secretary of State. The Records Branch was concerned with the government’s administrative records and “The safe keeping and classification of the archives” (Wilson, p.22). Henry J. Morgan became Keeper of the Public Records which resulted in two agencies responsible for collecting historical public records. Yet, little effort was expended on the current government records. Government departments showed little enthusiasm in transferring records either to the Keeper or the Archives Branch and the majority of government records still lay in attics or basements of government buildings on and around Parliament Hill (Atherton p.87).

It fell to Joseph Pope, former secretary to Sir John A. Macdonald and Under Secretary of State in the Laurier government to bring attention to the duplication, confusion and expense of two rival agencies as well as the predicament of the historical public records. He proposed to consolidate the Archives and Records branches into a public record office (Wilson, p.23). Ironically, a short time later, a fire in the West Block in 1897 destroyed an entire floor and its contents, emphasizing Pope’s concerns which lead Cabinet to appoint a Commission to study the “periodical destruction of such papers and vouchers as may be deemed useless and which are merely encumbering the vaults...” (Atherton, p.88). Following an inspection of the records in all the departments the Commission made a number of recommendations, one of which was the amalgamation of the Archives and Records Branches. Additionally, it suggested that:

- The government build a fire-proof building known as the Records Office which would function as a repository for the archives
- A standard ten year retention period be adopted for routine financial documents
- The departments review filing systems to determine records of no value which the Commission felt was the majority of the documentation

- The departments should be allowed space in the Records Office to keep their “more recent records” and retrieve them when needed.

Clearly we are beginning to see an awareness of some of the components of a records management programme. As Atherton notes, had the government implemented the Commission’s recommendations the government would have established “rudimentary form of central control over records disposition” as well as a single Public Record office for storage of both current and historical records (Atherton, p.91). However, even though the Commission’s findings were not enacted upon, it did articulate and identify components of a records management programme and provide a reference document for future Commissions’ perusal.

While the pace towards a records management programme was slow developments continued. An Order in Council, in 1903, amalgamated the positions of Dominion Archivist and Keeper of the Record, an Archives building was promised, all historical files (except the Privy Council Office) designated by the commission were ordered transferred to the Archives “...for greater safety in their preservation...” and Arthur G. Doughty was appointed Dominion Archivist and Keeper of the Public Records (Wilson, p.24). As Jay Atherton notes, the government approved the transfer of department records to the Archives to be preserved, arranged and made accessible for historians, thus in effect recognizing the historical and research value of these records.

For the government departments though, transferring records to the Archives was voluntary. Furthermore, other records management principles not addressed were – a mechanism for the immediate destruction and disposal of useless documents, a standard retention period for routine financial records, a review of filing systems in department and a fixed age for transfer of records to the Archives. Records continued to accumulate at the Archives but it was through the Archives’ collection policies, not the transfer of government records, that the holdings grew.

In 1912, the Public Archives Act created the Archives as separate department under the Secretary of State and Douglas Doughty became the Dominion

Archivist. Cabinet was now authorized to remove public records and historical material from the custody of the various government departments to the Archives building that was completed in 1906. However, in terms of records management criteria, the act “did not explicitly ensure the preservation of public records in offices of origin, nor did it provide for their orderly disposal under the supervision of Archives staff” (Atherton, p.92)

While the Archives continued collecting both public and private records, a policy for transferring records from the various government departments to the Archives did not exist. Nor was there a system to manage the current government records. At Doughty’s urging, another Royal Commission was established in 1912 to study and explore the “state of the department records” and while it too recommended establishing a public records office comparable to a records centre as part of the Archives, the First World War deferred this development (Wilson, p.32). An active Public Records programme eluded Doughty throughout his tenure as Dominion Archivist.

Records volumes increased dramatically during and following the Second World War. Additionally, huge growth in records activity coupled with the ability to create records more rapidly through such technologies as the typewriter and microfilm greatly expanded the governments’ holdings. The Royal commission on the National Development in the Arts, Letters and Sciences, 1949-1951, known as Massey Commission, had, according to Laura Millar, a “strongly nationalistic imperative” in that it wanted to change Canada’s cultural environment (p.114). The Commission also addressed the state of federal records. It did applaud the government’s establishing a Public Records Committee in 1945. This committee, under the auspices of the Secretary of State, had the Dominion archivist as Vice Chairman. The purpose of the committee was to reduce the “vast paper burden” within government, where “decades of old files were “moldering in damp cellars” and identify and transfer those government records having historical value to the Archives (Cook, p. 206).

But, in addressing the Public Archives, the Commission discussed the Public Records problems at length. Referring to past Royal Commissions (1897, 1912) that studied the Public Records the Commission noted that these past Commissions “labored almost if not altogether in vain” (Massey, p. 113) since the majority of their recommendations were not enacted upon by the government. It criticized the government, the civil service, and the Archives for the fact that the government records were “in a state of chaos” as records were scattered around Ottawa in inactive or dead files (Cook, p.207). Furthermore, the Commission addressed the lack of economy in recordkeeping, pointing to the cost of \$175,000 spent annually to store records which “can probably be classified as dead, in that they have no further administrative or historical usefulness” (Massey, p.114).

Some of the Commission’s recommendations included a review and clarification of the current regulations governing the disposal of public documents; implementing provisions for systematic and continuous transfer of inactive records to the Archives; delegating records destruction authorization to the Public Records Committee; and hiring and training properly qualified records officers.

Fortunately, at this same time W. Kaye Lamb became the fourth Dominion archivist of Canada (1948-1969). Under his tutelage records management became firmly entrenched in his efforts to modernize the Public Archives. He firmly favoured the American practice of a records centre “as a half-way house, or cooling-off place” for those records between active use in departments and their final disposition of destruction or archival transfer. In 1956 the Public Archives Records Centre (PARC) opened at Tunney’s Pasture, crown-owned land two miles west of Parliament Hill and adjacent to the Ottawa River. Departments began to transfer their records and an efficient system established for accessioning, listing and storing inactive records, accurate statistics were kept and a reference service established which prided itself “... on delivering any file to the department requesting it within three hours of the receipt of the request” (Ormsby, p.40) However, the years of records neglect proved to be challenging. Some of the documents were in such bad shape that they literally were handled with shovels, while others were infested with silverfish (Cook, p.210). PARC soon had rooms for

receiving, cleaning and sorting records, a fumigation chamber, offices, reference rooms and a research room (Ormsby, p.40)

In addition to providing valuable records storage, the PARC was a control mechanism that ensured only scheduled records were transferred and it functioned to identify those records whose value had ceased as well as those with historical value. The Glassco Commission, or the Royal Commission on Government Organization, 1960-63, also endorsed the Records Centre concept urging it to be the focus of any records management programme. It suggested establishing regional Records Centres in areas where it was cost effective. Both Toronto and Montreal soon had federal Records Centres.

Soon after PARC opened the Central Microfilm Unit was moved to the Public Archives; a Records Management Survey Committee conducted a survey of records management in the federal departments; in 1961 the first month-long records management course was held and in 1966, the Public Records Order abolished the Public Records Committee and gave the Dominion Archivist sole authority over disposal of federal public records and the responsibility for coordinating the government records management programme (Atherton, p.105)

Lamb saw to it that microfilm, with its many advantages, became part of the archival records management programme. Regional government offices opened across the country and microfilm provided efficient access to duplicate copies of government records. Security was another feature particularly in the 1950s with the threat of nuclear war. In fact, in 1959, the Public Archives was “assigned core responsibility to operate a new “essential records” program across the entire government” (Cook, p212). Once processed, microfilm was stored in secret sites but available if “a major disaster, either natural or nuclear occurred” (Cook, p. 212) and a Vital Records programme was in effect.

On the provincial scene, the development of records management in Ontario’s provincial government paralleled the federal government in that the records management impetus came from the Archives. Following World War II, the provincial records situation was uncoordinated, decentralized, and unmanaged.

With individual provincial departments controlling their recordkeeping, increasing volumes in inactive and dead records adversely affecting retrieval, and a microfilm programme lacking cohesion, the Ontario government failed to view record and recordkeeping as an important element in government operations . Threatened with closure shortly after the Second World War, the Ontario Archives, under the direction of George Spragge, Archivist of Ontario (1950-1963), embarked on an “archival records management” strategy (Craig, p.10). However, Spragge drafted retention schedules, lobbied for uniform procedures for systematic records disposal, and suggested the concept of a Public Records Centre but it was not until 1965, with the publication of the *Moore Report* that an archival records management programme was established in that province.

While requests for records disposal were subject to the Archives Act, the Archives themselves wielded little authority. One of the problems in Ontario was the lack of influence of the Archives. While the Archives Act of 1923 gave the Archivist of Ontario status as a deputy head of department, the Archives themselves were viewed “...peripheral to government, an antiquarian organization dealing with the past as a service to small groups of scholars (Craig, p.4-5). Indeed the Treasury Board’s Secretariat was pivotal to the government’s administration.

The *Moore Report* of 1965 recommended that “Records Management must be “treated as an integral and essential part of efficient administration and not as an end in itself” (Craig, p.17). It reiterated previous records management requests one of which was the Records Centre. But in fulfilling that service the government had to resort to outsourcing. Lacking qualified staff an agreement was made with Harold Moulds of H.M. Record Services who, in addition to providing the Records Centre and Records Centre services, also assisted in developing classifications for department records, trained staff, and developed standard procedures and retention scheduling. The first records retention schedule was developed in 1965 and departments began shipping inactive records to the Records Centre (Craig, p.20). Ontario had embraced the archival records management concept.



The movement towards records management in New Brunswick took a different course. As Marion Beyea notes, while "... [records management] was born ... during the buoyant Sixties, [it was] late enough to benefit from the experience of the federal government and several provinces..." and it was not hampered by the archival perspective because at that time, New Brunswick did not have a provincial archives (p.61). New Brunswick's *Public Records Act* of 1929 defined records and gave the province responsibility for their preservation but not in terms of a records management programme. In 1963 the province passed the *Public Documents Disposal Act* which established a Documents Committee. It was this Committee that requested a Provincial Archives and a records management programme.

Interestingly, Harold Moulds (of H.M Records Services Ltd) was called on to assist with the development of a records management programme and he recommended the immediate hiring of a director of records. Fernando LeBlanc was hired to identify active and inactive records, transfer inactive records to a records centre, and destroy records not required (Beyea, p.63). Dominion Archivist W. Kaye Lamb was also consulted and he suggested a moratorium on records destruction until such time as these records were appraised by a professional archivist. Lamb made additional recommendations and Beyea credits these as laying the foundation for a Provincial Archives and a records management programme. For example, Lamb suggested that archives and records management should be "...jointly developed, that records are handled economically, and that items of long-term value are identified, segregated and preserved" (Beyea, p. 66). He also advised the integration of archives and records management programmes which occurred in 1967 (Beyea, p.68).

However, the government did not adopt Lamb's recommendation of building a Records Centre near the Bonar Law-Bennett building. Instead it kept the Records Centre in the Department of Public Works' Records building and the Douglas warehouse which it quickly outgrew. When moved to temporary quarters on McLeod Avenue while the supplementary storage space in Douglas was moved to another warehouse, the Neil building in downtown Fredericton in 1971. Neither

location promoted confidence with staff to use the Records Centre. Lacking space, fire safety, and the floods in 1972 and 1973, hampered the development of the records programme (Beyea, p.71). Eventually, in the late 1970s, a Records Centre was provided just outside of Fredericton which encouraged the “quality and quantity of the records programme” to expand (Beyea, p.72).

By 1967 the federal government had made considerable advances to its records management programme. In 1966 a new Public Records Order assigned control over records destruction to include all media; scheduling was made mandatory; departments required the Dominion Archivist’s authorization to destroy or remove records and the Dominion Archivist’s advice was required for any microfilming projects. Archives had complete authority over scheduling and records disposal. 1966 also saw the Public Archives Records Centre (PARC) become the Records Management Branch responsible for the following areas: accessioning and reference services for inactive records; managing the regional Records Centres, and providing advisory services including scheduling and disposal, vital records, inventorying, training and publications.

## Sources

Jay Atherton, "The Origins of the Public Archives Records Centre, 1897-1956," *Archivaria*,

Marian Beyea, "Records Management: The New Brunswick Case," *Archivaria*,

Terry Cook, "An Archival Revolution: W. Kaye Lamb and the Transformation of the Archival Profession" *Archivaria*,

Barbara Craig, "Records Management and the Ontario Archives, 1950-1976," *Archivaria*,

Dr. Mark Langemo, *Winning Strategies for Successful Records Management Programmes* (Information Requirements Clearinghouse: Denver, 2002) .

Laura Millar, "Discharging our Debt: The Evolution of the Total Archives Concept in English Canada," *Archivaria*

Ian E. Wilson, "'The Noble Dream': The Origins of the Public Archives of Canada," *Archivaria*,

<http://collectionsCanada.gc.ca/massey/h5-417-e.html> accessed on May 3, 2008