

PRESERVING YOUR COLLECTIVE MEMORY - PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

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For Miriam McTiernan

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An excerpt

Thank you and good morning all. I'm very glad to be here today. As citizens of Belleville, you have the privilege of living in a very old and historically interesting part of Ontario. My job is to manage the physical records of the past. And that makes Belleville a very interesting place for me to visit.

Gathering here today in this very modern school, it may be hard for us to imagine what it was like here in the distant past. If we had come here 220 years ago, we would have found ourselves in the middle of a dense wilderness forest. The trees were huge in those days. There were white pines more two metres thick and 40 metres tall – that's about the height of a 12-storey office tower. Two grown men, if they extended their arms around a tree of that size, would have been only just able to link hands.

When I turned off the highway on my way to this school, I was delighted to find myself on Canifton Road, which leads north to the village of Canifton. I'm not sure if you know that road and village are named for the family of one of Eastern Ontario's most important historians. Dr. William Canniff died almost 100 years ago, but in 1862, when he was just 32 years old, he wrote the history of Upper Canada and the Bay of Quinte. This was five years before Confederation, but already Dr. Caniff was intent on preserving Canadian history. A doctor by profession, he realized that many of his older patients were Loyalists who had settled in the area as early as the 1780s. As he treated them, he asked them to reminisce, and he wrote down their stories. Years later, he donated his papers to the Archives of Ontario.

As an historian, I share Dr. Caniff's passion for capturing old memories. I love to discover the stories behind the places I visit. I love to imagine what these places were like long ago. In fact, that's my job. As provincial archivist, I head up the organization that collects and preserves the documents that tell those stories. You might say that I manage the collective memory of the province of Ontario. By "collective memory," I mean not just the personal recollections of any one person, but rather the sum total of all various records that combine to tell the story of us all as a people in Ontario.

Another way to look at my job is to imagine that I have the key to all the "cold cases" in the province. Every historian and researcher in Ontario s looking to uncover the past – whether it's an old crime or a love story or a family genealogy – comes to the Archives of Ontario. And we help them turn their "cold cases" into real life stories. We've been doing it ever since 1903 when the province appointed its first archivist and gave him a fireproof vault in the legislative building to store old records.

I am always astonished when people tell me they're not interested in history. What, I ask myself, is more fascinating than the lives of other people? How can you fail to be inspired – for example – by the adventures of our ancestors when they came to Canada and settled in the Quinte region. Imagine the difficulties they faced. It took years to clear the fields that we see from our car windows when we drive out of town. Imagine the labour. They didn't have chain saws to bring those trees down. They didn't have tractors, though a few lucky farmers did have oxen. It was a hard life.

Most of the people who lived through those pioneer days are forgotten now. Of course, their grandchildren remembered them for a while. Their great-grandchildren might have known their names. For years, there might have been a framed photograph in the parlour. Many of those photographs are in the attic now, with nobody remembering the identity of the person in the picture. In fact, most of our ancestors have long since faded into oblivion. There are antique shops in Toronto filled with beautiful old photographs of people that no-one now remembers.

But not all of them are forgotten, thank goodness. Some are remembered because they kept records. They wrote things down. They corresponded with friends and family and business associates. They recorded births and deaths in the back of family Bibles. They kept account books, listing their possessions and their expenditures and their debts. Some of them wrote diaries, often scribbling away by the light of a candle and sitting close to the fire so the ink wouldn't freeze. Some of them, like Susannah Moodie, wrote books and magazine articles to tell people in England what it was like to live in Canada in the 1830s. You probably know about her and that, after some brutal years of trying to farm in the wilderness, she and her husband settled – to their immense relief – in a little town called Belleville.

In many families, the old letters and diaries and account books were thrown away. In others, they were stored in drawers and boxes. Much later, when descendants discovered those old papers in the attic, they might have donated them to the Archives of Ontario. In doing so, they created a legacy not just for one family but for us all. At the Archives, we collect and preserve the physical records of the past and we share them as the “collective memory” of Ontario...

... Some of my favourite material is contained in our photography and film archives. Occasionally people even donate their old home movies to us, and we have huge collections of pictures from amateur and professional photographers alike. One photograph of Belleville in our collection shows hundreds of soldiers marching down Dundas Street in 1945, at the end of the Second World War, with thousands of cheering people lining the sidewalk. We know what Belleville used to look like in the past, thanks to the photos and to some of our non-documentary holdings – for example, an 1830 painting of the old mill on the Moira River and an 1890 photograph of Belleville's first high school.

This is the sort of material that writers – and not only historians – draw on when researching a book. A novelist will study old photographs to understand the look of a town or a street or clothing in the past. A few years ago, an Ottawa writer called Frances

Itani made Belleville and Deseronto famous when she set her first novel in Belleville. The book is called *Deafening*, and it tells the story of a young deaf girl who's sent to school in Belleville to learn lip-reading and sign language. By carefully reading school documents and letters and newspaper articles, Frances Itani was able to re-create life at the School for the Deaf at the turn of the 20th century. The records helped her to turn into a kind of time traveller and, amazingly, to take her readers with her. That story about this girl in Belleville became an international bestseller. It was published in 20 countries and earned the author a million dollars. Of course, the Archives of Ontario can't guarantee you a million dollars, but – if you have a story you want to research – it *can* help you write convincing fictional or factual history. [*Continues...*]