

Trends in Digitization on the Canadian Prairies: The Saskatchewan Experience

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Introduction – Welcome to Saskatchewan

Good evening. It is a pleasure to speak to you tonight. I will be focussing my comments on recent trends in archival digitization in Canada: Specifically digitization in my home province of Saskatchewan which lies at the heart of the Canadian prairies.

First, I'd like to give you a bit of a background about Saskatchewan. It is one of the ten provinces and three territories into which Canada is divided. It lies directly east of Alberta, an oil-rich ranching province famous for the Calgary Stampede, the West Edmonton Mall, and Banff in the Rocky Mountains. Saskatchewan lies west of Manitoba, another prairie province that borders on Hudson's Bay. Unlike Alberta and Manitoba, Saskatchewan has no natural boundaries. It forms almost a perfect rectangle on the map. As it says on the tourist T-shirts, one of which I should have brought with me: "Saskatchewan – Hard to spell, Easy to draw".

The southern part of the province is grassland long since converted to grain farming and a small amount of ranching. The middle is part of the great northern boreal forest that stretches across the continent. The north of Saskatchewan touches the Canadian shield, a vast expanse of mineral-rich rock that arcs around Hudson's Bay. With a population of about one-million, Saskatchewan has a strong agricultural sector. Like, Western Australia, it has a booming mining sector, focussing on oil, natural gas, uranium, and potash. Saskatchewan also has an ever-expanding services sector of which communication technology stands at the lead.

About 40 archival institutions exist in Saskatchewan, ranging from the provincial archives, which employs about 70 staff, to small volunteer run institutions preserving the records of rural municipalities, churches, and other local organizations. The two largest universities in the province have archives as does the province's largest city. Many of these archives are members of the Saskatchewan Council for Archives and Archivists, or SCAA, a provincial archival council akin to the Western Australia branch of the Australian Society of Archivists.

What is Digitization?

Before I launch into a discussion of digitization, I'd like to begin by speaking to the purposes of digitization by archives in Saskatchewan. Simply put, the purpose is to

enhance access. While digitization can be a tool of preservation – chiefly by reducing researcher use of fragile original documents – this has not tended to be the focus in our archives. Nor have digital records been created in efforts to reformat information from more bulky storage mediums. The very thought of this, would send most Canadian archivists into fits – digitization in the archival world has been undertaken to enhance access to archival materials and, by extension, to build a presence for archives in the virtual world.

To date these efforts can be grouped into three relatively distinct, yet overlapping, phases – first, on-line descriptions, second, virtual exhibitions, and third, full digitization projects.

The Groundwork: Efforts at On-Line Description

Beginning in the 1990s several provincial councils and various institutions began to create the equivalent of on-line union catalogues for their archival records. These catalogues made available collection-level descriptions that provided researchers with general information on the content of records. These were linked with contact information for the various repositories where catalogued resources were to be found.

Provincial catalogues soon covered most institutions in their provinces and these were networked into a national portal, first known as the Canadian Archival Information Network, or CAIN, and later renamed Archives Canada. It became possible to do one search and receive hits on resources across the country. These systems allowed researchers to easily ascertain where relevant collections of records could be found.

In order to be effective, entries in Archives Canada needed to be consistently presented. For most of the decade from about 1985 to 1995 descriptive standards were developed, debated, adopted, and implemented. The *Rules for Archival Description* were developed as the Canadian standard. These aimed to formalize the format of finding aids and were broadly accepted and implemented at the collection-level when adoption of the standard became a pre-requisite for grant funding from the Canadian Council of Archives. This national agency is primarily responsible for distributing federal government funds earmarked for development of Canadian archival capacity.

By 2000 the archival community convinced the federal government to establish a distinct funding stream to aid in the development of CAIN. In Saskatchewan these funds were initially used to increase the participation of institutions, particularly the smaller archives scattered across the province, in the CAIN database. The initial effort was to build descriptions to include not simply the collection-level but also series information. Later funds were used to develop a provincial database of photographs.

This photo database evolved from a three-month pilot project. Four institutions in one city were selected to participate in the pilot. These institutions were chosen for three reasons: first, all had an operational in-house photo database to draw records from; second, all were located within a limited geographic area making face to face meetings possible; and third, all agreed to provide a sample of 100 descriptions from their collections [1].

During 2002 all descriptions of the Diefenbaker Centre's photograph collection, some 5,600 images, were edited and added to the provincial photo database. The Diefenbaker Centre is akin to the John Curtin Prime Ministerial Library. John Diefenbaker was a Saskatchewan lawyer who was Prime Minister of Canada from 1957 to 1963. The Diefenbaker Canada Centre comprises a museum, archives and research centre established from a bequest of John Diefenbaker to the University of Saskatchewan. In addition to the Diefenbaker photographs, approximately 8,500 descriptions from part of the University of Saskatchewan photograph collection were also added to the photo database. The City of Saskatoon was also able to provide its full collection of descriptions to be uploaded to the database. In 2003 the provincial archives added its collection of photograph and negative descriptions for the *Saskatoon Star Phoenix*, one of the main daily newspapers in Saskatchewan. This consisted of over 23,900 descriptions [2].

Another example of descriptive efforts is the Saskatchewan Homestead Index created by the provincial archives and the Saskatchewan Genealogical Society. This is a file locator database to the homestead records held by the provincial archives. It allows researchers to identify the archival file number of homestead records. Once the file reference number is determined the proper documents may be retrieved. The index allows researchers to conduct their preliminary work on-line, they then may either visit the provincial archives to view the material, or order a photocopy of the contents.

The homestead records are a vital source of information on the early settlement of the province. They contain information on the settlement of crown land in what was to become Saskatchewan from about 1870 to 1930. The files contain information about settlers such as nationality, place of origin, and family makeup. They may also contain various sworn statements and information about the homestead itself including required agricultural improvements on the land before ownership was granted [3].

While the index originally existed in paper form, over a period of about three years some 330,000 card entries were entered into a fully searchable database which was launched on the internet in October 2005 [4]. As resources become available, it is planned that the entire contents of the homestead files will be digitized and made available on the internet as well [5].

Many small archives have worked to digitize their finding aids, indexes, and other control tools. The archivist of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Prince Albert, for example, has entered their sacramental registers into the computer and has

transferred these to a proprietary software system specifically designed for religious records.

Virtual Exhibits

A second area of digitization activity has been virtual exhibits. The CAIN grant program changed emphasis a number of years ago – reflecting a growing desire in the federal government to increase Canadian content on the web. Funding for descriptive work was superseded by funding to digitize materials from archival collections. These projects initially took the form of virtual exhibits.

SCAA launched its first multi-institutional digitization projects in 2001. That year *Saskatchewan and the Visual Arts* and *Saskatchewan in Two World Wars* went live on the web. *Mainstreet, Saskatchewan* and *Saskatchewan Presents: An Exhibition of Theatre and Drama* were completed the following year. These projects and others in following years were undertaken by SCAA and its members. The majority of these projects were cooperative undertakings between SCAA and its institutional members, or were simply inter-institutional without council participation. The projects varied in size from about 100 images and a dozen pages of storyline, to over 500 images and utilized flash animation and video and audio attractions [6]. Funding for the exhibits continued to come from the CCA. In 2003-04, one of the most active project years, the total budget for fourteen Council exhibitions was in the neighbourhood of \$122,000 [7].

These exhibits are accessible through the national portal, Archives Canada at <http://www.archivescanada.ca/>, which provides access to over 800 archives, special libraries, and other research institutions, or on the SCAA website at <http://scaa.usask.ca>.

The SCAA website links to at least 35 other institutional exhibits. Some institutions undertake these with internal funds, others with grant money.

Saskatchewan Digital Alliance

In addition SCAA and its members, other agencies in the province have taken an interest in archival digitization. The Saskatchewan Multitype Library Board, a provincial government advisory body, has established a role for itself in provincial digitization efforts.

In 2001 the provincial library, which acts as a secretariat to the Board, produced its initial report on key issues concerning digitization and libraries [8]. A succeeding report, written jointly with representatives from the largest libraries and archives in the province, set the blueprint for further provincial library and Multitype Board thinking on digitization. Entitled *Fostering Digitization*, this report proposed that Saskatchewan institutions develop strategic alliances with one another to enhance

their digital content capacity. The report proposed that interested institutions form an alliance to:

- Share information;
- Discuss issues;
- Develop a body of expertise and best practices;
- Investigate joint licensing of digitization software or hardware;
- Establish a funding pool; and
- Represent the digitization interests of participants to vendors, potential funding sources, and government. [9]

In late 2006 the Multitype Library Board set up the Saskatchewan Digital Alliance to advise the Board on how best to coordinate the construction of a core Saskatchewan collection of digital materials. In accordance with the *Fostering Digitization* report the Alliance has served as a forum to share information and discuss issues. For 2006-07 initial funding of \$20,000 was provided by provincial library to two institutional digitization projects. These funds were distributed through the Board. The Digital Alliance is in the process of establishing its own web presence and has offered its first educational and training forum as well. It has been a busy inaugural year for the Alliance.

The Prairie Populism Project

Recently more comprehensive digitization projects have been launched in Saskatchewan. Rather than presenting a small sampling of records, as the virtual exhibits do, more substantial projects, which aim to digitize the majority of records in a given collection, have been launched. This is the third, and final, area of digitization activity I wish to touch on today.

In July 2004 the Archives Society of Alberta received official notice from Library and Archives Canada that *The Populist Project: A Window on a Nation Building Experience* had been approved for funding. The total cost of this project was budgeted at over \$885,000 with \$362,500 in federal grants and the balance coming from the Society and its partners as cash and in-kind contributions [10]. To date the project has digitized approximately 42,000 pages of archival materials from archival institutions in Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba. In Saskatchewan both the provincial archives and the University of Saskatchewan are participating.

The Prairie Populism Project's general guidelines are typical of those of many archival digitization projects. They demand:

- That scanning must not result in damage to the original records;
- That digitization is not a substitute for original materials. Contributing institutions must maintain all original archival records;
- That each institution must certify that scanned images are in the public

domain or are being reproduced with the permission of the copyright holder;
and

- That all digitized materials must have an active link to a collection-level description. [11]

The Prairie Populism website includes tools for teachers and students and a simulation where users take on the role of an early settler to the Canadian prairies to learn about the pioneer experience [12].

The Northern Research Portal

Another significant digitization project is the Northern Research Portal. This is a collaborative project between the University Archives and Library Special Collections at the University of Saskatchewan and the Diefenbaker Centre. The Northern Research Portal project aims at digitizing significant parts of major collections. Nevertheless there is a portion of the site that includes interpretive exhibits on specific themes. These are directed at various audiences – in fact it is designed to have different parts of the site and different materials accessible to different groups. The groups are school children, the general public and advanced researchers. The website includes course materials for classes offered through the University of the Arctic, a cooperative international network of universities, colleges, and other organizations committed to higher education and research in the North. The site was designed with:

- The ability to browse all materials by subject or by geographical location;
- A section for on-line resources, including both interpretive exhibits and other resource sites (for example, some journals on the north have been put on-line);
- A database of photographs;
- Finding aids to archival collections, linking where appropriate to the digitized resources;
- A bibliography of resources, linking to the digitized resources;
- Overall site search capability;
- A section for teachers; and
- Quick access links for the three identified user groups. [13]

Conclusion

I hope that I have painted a picture of a vibrant effort to advance digitization. In many ways Saskatchewan is leading the western Canadian provinces in these efforts. The Digital Alliance provides a unique model that is both collaborative and crosses the boundaries of differing disciplines. In all three digitization models – descriptive, exhibition, and collection – Saskatchewan is well represented and active.

Endnotes

- 1 Cameron Hart, *SCAA Photodatabase Project* (February 2005), p. 1.
- 2 Ibid., pp. 2-4.
- 3 Saskatchewan Homestead Index at <http://www.saskhomesteads.com>, accessed 8 November 2007.
- 4 Saskatchewan Genealogical Society and Saskatchewan Archives Board, *The Saskatchewan Homestead Index Project* (no date), p. 3. This document is available at http://www.saskgenealogy.com/general/SK_Homestead_Index_Project.htm
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Kathy Szalasznyj, *Report of the Outreach Archivist*, 1 February 2005.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Brett Waytuck, *Issues Concerning Digitization, Methods, Standards, Support Requirements, Copyright, and Digital Rights Management* (2001).
- 9 Digitization Working Group, *Fostering Digitization Initiatives In Saskatchewan: A Discussion Paper* (April 2003), p. 1. This report is available at <http://www.lib.sk.ca/staff/admin/documents/digitizationinitiative.html>
- 10 Archives Society of Alberta, *Prairie Populism Project: Technical and Descriptive Specifications and Guidelines* (September 2004), p. 3.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Prairie Populism Project at <http://www.prairiepopulism.ca>, accessed 8 November 2007.
- 13 Email. Cheryl Avery to Mark Vajcner, 1 February 2005 and Northern Research Portal at <http://scaa.usask.ca/gallery/northern/>, accessed 8 November 2007.