

The Wetaskiwin Archives

On September 10, 1976 City council approved the establishment of the City Archives in the vacated RCMP cells downstairs in the City Hall (old Civic Building). In May 1978 an Advisory Board of five citizens was appointed. A budget was approved for \$500.00 for the first year's operation. The Archives accepted for safe storage, minute books, diaries, copies of family histories, snapshots, memoirs, or any paper work pertaining to Wetaskiwin and surrounding areas.

The first full time Archives Clerk was hired in 1985 as a part time City employee, responsible to the City Clerk, who at that time was second only to the City Manager. Training of the Archives Clerk was done by the Archives Society of Alberta. Grants were available from the Canadian Council of Archives up to \$20,000 for Projects of National interest but had to be matched by funding from the City of Wetaskiwin. National project funds were used to arrange, describe, and catalogue, the Walin Collection of negatives numbering approximately 100,000 images. Federal funding was used for the creation of the vault in the old male Police cells. Federal funding was also used to digitize the contents of the earlier images from the Walin collection because of concerns about deterioration of the eighty plus year old negatives and the need to cease using the originals. Funding was available from the Archives Society of Alberta for less ambitious projects of more local concern. Two more Archives Clerks were hired later, making a total of three hired staff during the "peak" time of the City Archives. When the City closed the Archives in November 2020, only one hired staff member was employed.

The City website in 2018 states, "We store records from some of the earliest years of our City's history in our environmentally controlled and fire safe vault. We conserve, preserve, and safeguard the past to make it available now and for the future."

Yet in February 2018 a For Sale sign was erected at the City of Wetaskiwin Old Civic Building. This was a great concern to the Wetaskiwin Branch of the Alberta Genealogical Society (AGS) because of what was in the building. This building housed the City Archives. Here, one could find saved newspaper obituaries for more than 100 years, local history books, civil records, tax records and thousands of photos and films in the climate-controlled vault. Many organizations and individuals donated materials to the archives for safe keeping and easy accessibility to the public.

Initiating awareness of a concern is often attained by writing **letters** to decision makers and the newspapers. Several branch members wrote letters to various persons who were deemed important in protecting the Archives and ensuring that the Archives were accessible to the public.

Here are a few quotes from letters sent.

To City council members: "We hope that even if you don't have a family history in this region, you will acknowledge that those of us who do, feel very passionately that the

Archives must remain a viable entity within the City of Wetaskiwin framework." - Alice Hoyle, President of the Wetaskiwin Branch of the AGS,

Letter to the Editor, Wetaskiwin Times: "No one can really tell us about the future. So what now, we don't want to know about the past either?" - Leroy Koop, County of Wetaskiwin Resident.

To City council members: "We believe that it would be a great disservice to our forefathers, our elders and especially to our future generations if this history was to be abandoned." - Sharon Aney, Past President of the Wetaskiwin Branch of AGS.

Meeting face to face with those that say "yeh" or "ney" with **presentations** arguing the pros and cons of the concern at hand, is often rewarded with a positive.

On June 25, 2018 twelve Wetaskiwin Branch members, along with three other concerned community citizens, attended the City of Wetaskiwin's council meeting.

Two branch members, Alice Hoyle and Sharon Aney stated in their presentations concerns about the future of the City Archives, and to reinforce to the council the importance of keeping this facility open to the public. While the presentations were well prepared and presented, Council accepted the presentations' material as "information only" and did not give any indication that they were committed to making sure the Archives continue to be a viable resource in Wetaskiwin.

Here are some highlights of those presentations.

Alice Hoyle, the President of the Wetaskiwin Branch of the AGS, pointed out to the city councillors at the June 25, 2018 council meeting that the definition of "Archives", according to the Webster's Dictionary, is that it is "a place where public records, documents, are kept: a place where material having documentary interest as private papers, institutional records, memorabilia or photographs, are kept".

Ancestors' history is recorded in local history books, the old issues of the Wetaskiwin Times, in the church records that are housed in the Archives. In 1976 a group of forward-thinking individuals convinced the City Council to establish a City Archives, a safe and secure location to house these historical documents.

As genealogists, we understand and appreciate the records of our ancestors that have been created in the past, records that we are able to research and view. We hope that family history researchers in future would have the same opportunity. This is why the members of our branch of the AGS are committed to doing everything we can to ensure the history of the people who settled this area, both rural and urban residents, is preserved for future generations.

We would like future researchers to have the same thrill we have had in seeing a grandparent or great-grandparent's written words on a document, or discovering photos, family history stories, or even cemetery records of those ancestors we never knew.

Many of you may be familiar with a poem, quite often read at funerals and memorial services, *The Dash*, written by Linda Ellis. In her poem, she says what matters is the dash between the year you were born and the year you died. That dash represents all the time you spent on earth. The last two verses of the poem say "So, when your eulogy is being read, With your life's actions to rehash, Would you be proud of the things they say, About how you spent your dash?"

I hope the "dash" of the City council members will indicate they did everything possible to make sure the history of this region is preserved and accessible at the City Archives.

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Sharon Aney, Past President of the Wetaskiwin Branch of AGS and although not a native to Wetaskiwin, stated that she had been interested in the history of the City and community for many years.

When the "For Sale" sign was noticed in front of the Old City Hall, it caused great consternation in the ranks of those of us who value archives, who use these archives, as well as those who have deposited personal, community, church and other historical documents for safekeeping and for posterity to see and use.

The City's stated objective of having a new owner of the building retain the City Archives strikes us as precarious. Will the City be able to maintain the Archives as a city department in a building that it does not own or fully lease? If the building is sold again, who protects the Archives? Will it be the City? Will it depend upon the good will of the seller, or the purchaser? Or will the community and Council be faced with this same dilemma again a few years down the road?

Should the building be sold, we urge the City to commit to us and to our community that you have a plan to re-create and maintain a safe haven for the irreplaceable documents that have been entrusted to your care over the past 40 years. There is a lot of irreplaceable history!

Today the internet is full of digitized records... a real boon to people of many interests in many occupations. BUT.... Digitization is about access...not preservation.

Once a person passes away, so goes their memory of people and events...But the basis of these memories are preserved in Archives.

History is ours, part of our families, part of our area, part of our province and part of our country. The City Archives contains the Times newspaper from 1901 onward on microfilm and paper including obituaries, marriage accounts, civic, social & business stories. The Carl Walin photographic collection of thousands of photos from the years 1919 to 1956 are kept safe in a climate-controlled space.

Our city is based upon people's lives, dreams and actions. If we do not honour our past, what meaning does our future have? What importance does our City have?

It is our request that City Council make a commitment to retaining Wetaskiwin City Archives in a dedicated location; to continue to receive historical materials; to preserve them in an environmentally safe surrounding; and to keep them accessible to researchers.

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The upper floor of the Old Civic Building was used as a homeless shelter during the winter of 2019-2020. The Archives was officially closed on November 27, 2020. The Hub, a home for the homeless with lodging, food and medical help, took over the Old Civic Building in December 2020, all except for the storage space for archival materials.

Several branch members wrote letters or emails to decision makers during the time that the Archives was closed on November 27, 2020 until the Old Civic Building was sold in November 2022.

From December 10, 2020 to December 22, 2021 four branch members participated in nine ZOOM meetings with other concerned citizen groups and the City's General Manager of Community and Protective Services and/or MNP, the consulting firm hired by the City to determine the viability of the Archives.

On June 13, 2022 eight branch members attended the City council meeting in which Alice Hoyle and Sharon Aney once again discussed the latest developments in the Archives story.

Here, in part, is what **Alice Hoyle** had to say.

Volunteer researchers for our Society assist people from all over the world. They contact us, wanting to know about family members from this region. The information stored in the Archives has helped with those requests.

The City developed a new promotional tag line, "The City We Share", but what does that mean? Have you shared, by way of an ad in the local papers, the fact that you are considering eliminating non-City archival material from the Archives?

Have you told the stakeholders, those who entrusted their records to your care, that you are considering their history to be expendable?

The agreement signed by City staff when someone donated items to the Archives, clearly states that the City accepts the item "for preservation".

The City's website outlines how important the Archives is, even headlining one of the sections "Ensuring Wetaskiwin's Legacy Lives on".

The MNP report confirms that some of the items date from around 1850's to recent years. These are precious items and need to be cared for properly. The report states that "the private records help tell the story of Wetaskiwin, supplementing the Municipal Records". The City doesn't want to hire an archivist and keep the Archives functional, but it would need to hire more staff for the Records Management/FOIP Department. How is this a saving? If the FOIP method is followed, requests for information must be responded to within 30 days. Will the City be able to handle that?

The Archives provided information for 389 requests in 2019, and the number of requests have more than doubled between 2012 and 2019. According to the Archives Society of Alberta, Wetaskiwin's Archives, prior to closing, was getting 3000 online views per year on the Alberta on Record website.

At the time when people in other parts of the world are fighting and dying to preserve their history and culture, it seems inconceivable that this City would voluntarily dispense with 50% of the items in the Archives.

In the big scheme of things, the cost of keeping the Archives open and available to the public is small compared to other revenue-negative facilities within the City of Wetaskiwin.

Do you, as a City Council, feel comfortable being known as the group of people who cared so little for the historical records of this region that you cast them aside?

Hopefully the municipality in the area you originate from has cared about their historical records. Wouldn't it be sad if your descendants found out your family history was not worthy of being preserved?

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Here is part of **Sharon Aney's** presentation.

For the past 4 years or so we have not heard re-assuring words about the Archives; only the threat of closure in 2018 and then a sudden closure in 2020. We appreciate that the City has engaged MNP to do an analysis and recommendation regarding the re-opening. However, we are concerned that one study has led to another study.

The building that houses the Archives is for sale, and a current condition to purchase contains the requirement of a 4-year lease to the Archives. Could this mean that we will be in this same position 4 years from now, again, if the lease is not renewed?

The City budget for 2022 through 2025 does include expenses of approximately \$84,000 for the Archives. But since none of those amounts appear to be for salaries, our questions as to whether the Archives will be re-opened to the public are still not answered.

The City's own website states that "The City of Wetaskiwin Archives receives many requests for information from all over the globe. Journalists, historians, broadcasters, authors, teachers, and students are only a few of the many groups who have enquired about Wetaskiwin's past".

People have been researching and will continue to search for the information that will fill the gap in whatever historic picture they are creating. Wetaskiwin's portion of the picture **should** fit into the larger jigsaw puzzle of history; the legal history of Alberta, the economic history of Alberta and Canada, immigration, the ethnic and family histories of people who came to settle here and live here and grow our City, over 130 years.

When the pictures of history are made, will Wetaskiwin's place be recognized? Or will we be the missing piece of the puzzle? A hole in the larger picture?

So much of current life is built upon what happened in the past...Our History! We can build upon the positives; learn from the negatives; celebrate accomplishments, events and developments; and recognize the people who made them come to pass.

BUT WE CAN'T DO THAT IF WE DON'T KNOW WHAT AND WHO THEY ARE!

It would be a great disservice to Wetaskiwin and our people, past, present and future, to give our historical documents, photos and newspapers away, to throw them away or to hide them.

If Wetaskiwin's history is important, then the Archives are important!

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In November 2022 the Old Civic Building was sold and will be the home of Elevation Fitness. Some space was leased back to the City for an undetermined length of time for the Archives to be re-established. On December 12, 2022 the City approved a memorandum of understanding with the Wetaskiwin and District Heritage Museum for the management of the City of Wetaskiwin Archives.