

## Presentation to Wetaskiwin City Council June 25, 2018

Good afternoon Your Worship, and City Councillors

Thank you for allowing us to speak to you this afternoon on this very important topic: the preservation of the Archives and the continuation of public access to the records held within the Archives, either by visiting the Archives personally or by contacting the Archivist with a research question.

What is the definition of “Archives”? According to the Webster’s Dictionary, 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”.

I note that the dictionary does not say that the items are kept until someone decides they aren’t worth keeping!

Why am I so passionate about preserving the Archives? Well, first of all I was born in Wetaskiwin; both of my parents were born in the County of Wetaskiwin; my ancestors came here between the 1890’s and 1904. Along with so many other early settlers in the Wetaskiwin region, their history is recorded in local history books, the old issues of the Wetaskiwin Times, in the church records that are housed in the Archives. But I am not the only one – there are thousands of people who can say the same thing about their ancestors.

It was people who were passionate about preserving the history of this region who made sure they kept records of what happened; who saved newspapers and photos; who collected them in their homes and businesses. THEN, in 1976 a group of forward-thinking individuals convinced the City Council to establish a City Archives – a place where all this material that had been collecting in people’s homes, in boxes and basements throughout the City and County – could finally be placed in one safe, secure location. In May of 1978, an Advisory Board was appointed by the City Council, and the rest is history.

It seems sadly ironic, that 40 years after the Archives Advisory Board was appointed, here we are, advocating for the continued existence of the Archives, when 40 years ago the City Council and the citizens of this community recognized the importance of the Archives as a way to preserve the history of this region.

Oh yes, where did I get this information? From the June 18<sup>th</sup>, 1984 issue of the Wetaskiwin Times – housed, of course, in the Archives.

Siding 16, Volume 1, the history of Wetaskiwin – at the front of the book, on the “Acknowledgements” page, I note the following “Deserving special mention are Mrs. Daisy Lucas and Bidy Odell who had the foresight to preserve the material from which this book was written”. And yes, that material is now part of the collection housed in the Archives!

As genealogists, our Genealogical Society members know how important it is to preserve the original records of our ancestors: we trust that someone in the community where our ancestors were born will have the wisdom to keep records secure in order that we may access these records when conducting our research.

People whose ancestors either lived in this region, or who emigrated from other countries to this region also count on there being records here that they can access – a way to find out what happened to that long-lost relative who sailed across the ocean and was never heard from again.

Last year when the Co-op was celebrating their 100<sup>th</sup> Birthday, someone contacted me to find out if our Genealogical Society had information on the Co-op’s early years – I naturally referred them to the Archives, and sure enough.....they got the information they needed from the City’s Archivist.

Who creates the displays for the Legion to honour the veterans on November 11<sup>th</sup>? – Yes, the Archivist! When a City department wants to know some historical information about what happened in the City 30 years ago, who do they contact? My guess would be the Archivist.

### **GOING FORWARD:**

- We have heard a suggestion that digitizing the collection and “putting it online” is the answer – as Sharon mentioned, data collection, storage and retrieval systems change rapidly. The cost of digitizing the Archives collection would be massive: while speaking to officials at the Archives Society of Alberta, I was advised that in 2016, as part of their ongoing plan to preserve information, they arranged for a contract Archivist to come to the Wetaskiwin Archives. She worked for 3 months, scanning negatives from the Wetaskiwin Times and creating a finding aid so that the contents were searchable

by key words. These negatives are now housed in freezers to prevent them from deteriorating. The \$25,000 expense for this project was provided by The Archives Society of Alberta. This 3-month digitizing project resulted in only 3 linear feet of photos being scanned. Based on 3 linear feet at a cost of \$25,000; and the Wetaskiwin Archives has 960 linear feet in the vault – let’s see... that would be \$8 MILLION dollars. Hardly a savings!!! AND in addition to that: according to the Archives Society of Alberta – the cost of scanning and digitizing large items such as the map collection, the original Wetaskiwin Times newspapers, anything oversized – would be extra because special equipment would have to be brought in and some large items would have to be sent out of province to be scanned and digitized.

- FOIP and the legality of digitizing “the whole collection and putting it online” – I would suggest that some of the records entrusted to the Archives are rather current and the donors may not be willing to have those records put online. Legal issues may arise, especially surrounding Vital Records of individuals recorded in their Church’s ledger books.
- Rumour heard by our Genealogy Society members: “hardly anyone has an Archives” – wouldn’t this be a reason to KEEP the Archives? I note on their website, the Archives Society of Alberta lists 45 Archives who are members of their organization.
- **CONTINUITY AND STABILITY** – It is unfair to the staff and volunteers at the Archives, as well as the people, churches, organizations, etc. who have entrusted their history to the Archives, that the future of the Archives and the collections housed within seems to be periodically at the mercy of City Council members. The importance of protecting the history of this region should be a ‘given’ – not something to be debated.
- Many municipal facilities, by nature, are not money makers: recreation centres, parks, arenas, libraries and Archives are services that are provided to enhance the quality of life for those who live in the area. They can also be a drawing card for businesses and individuals who are considering relocating here.
- **THE FUTURE** – where will the City’s historical records be safely kept, if not in the Archives? Where is the history of this community kept and recorded if not in the Archives? Do we revert to individual people recording what happened, with each historian knowing a bit of information, and no one place where all this history can be preserved and accessed by the public? In the opinion of the Wetaskiwin Genealogical society, what a backward step that would be.

- We feel that shifting responsibility for the continuation of the Archives to ‘the new owners of the building’ doesn’t ensure the stability of the Archives. It is our opinion that the City should provide a ‘stand alone’ facility for the Archives – a place that will be a secure home for the history of this region: now and in the future.
- The members of the Wetaskiwin Genealogical Society were very pleased to read in the June 7<sup>th</sup> issue of the Pipestone Flyer that Mr. Cloutier, Manager of Legislative Services, has gone on record as saying “the future of the Archives is secure”. **We are counting on it!**

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 Alberta Genealogical society 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 that 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.

THANK YOU.