

THE CHA AND THE ARCHIVES

Craig Heron, York University



Archives are still crucial institutions for historians. No matter how much material is digitized and installed on websites, we still have to spend hours opening boxes of dusty documents and sifting through old paper. Since the spring, the CHA has become heavily involved in debates about how two major Canadian archives should be run.

United Church of Canada Archives

In May the CHA learned that the Central Archives of the United Church of Canada, located at Victoria University on the University of Toronto campus, would close in the near future. We wrote a strong letter of concern. Through a series of meetings over the summer with a wide range of concerned people (archivists, librarians, historians, unionists, church members, and many others), we became involved in a "Save the Archives Coalition."

The group's goal was to convince the United Church and Victoria University to renew their discussions about keeping the archives open in its current location, so that it could continue to benefit from the expertise of its staff (who have been given notice of the termination of their employment) and the financial support of the university. At the beginning of October the Coalition launched a website with an on-line petition, which has attracted more than 2,300 signatures, and sent delegations to meet with the Church and University.

In mid October the United Church announced that it would re-open its archives in the suburban office building where its central offices are located. The Coalition remained concerned that, without financial support from Victoria and with none of the existing staff making the transition, the quality of service at the archives will inevitably decline. On 31 October it sent another open letter to Ms Sanders and Dr Gooch, re-asserting the public interest in this valuable research centre and urging them to reconsider the possibility of remaining at Victoria with the financial support of a special new fundraising effort. The archives is scheduled to close on 21 December and re-open in early May.

Library and Archives Canada

Meanwhile, in August, the CHA was informed that LAC intended to reduce drastically its hours of service effective 1 September. We sent a polite letter of protest to the Librarian and Archivist of Canada, Ian Wilson, urging these changes be postponed until proper public consultations had taken place. We received no response. We put out a cautious statement on H-Canada urging historians who were concerned to write to the head of client services, as the LAC media release had suggested. Meanwhile, our Graduate Student Committee representative on Council, Heather Steel, launched an on-line petition to protest the new hours, which had more than 350 signatures by early September and eventually more than 500. Letters also rolled in from many people to let us know that they found the new hours of service unacceptable, including one from the Department of History at UNB. A poorly advertised meeting at LAC on 14 September drew 55-60 irate clients, who levied their criticisms at many aspects of service at LAC.

It soon became clear that LAC's responses to all these protests, including Dr Wilson's belated reply to our first letter, were simply form letters arguing that resources had to be shifted to electronic services, and not addressing the serious issues that were being raised about reduced accessibility for many different kinds of researchers. On 26 September I wrote an open letter to Ian Wilson that summarized the concerns that many people had expressed and again requested public consultations. I also requested an immediate meeting to discuss all these issues, and announced my intention of bringing along representatives of any groups who shared our concerns. A week later, under what must have been becoming an avalanche of letters, LAC announced the creation of a new Service Advisory Board. That went part way toward meeting our concerns, but we now wanted to get the new hours rolled back while the new board considered the whole question of hours.

On 23 October a delegation of representatives of ten organizations met with Dr Wilson. Besides the CHA and our Graduate Student Committee, we had drawn in the Algonquin Nation Secretariat, the Association of Canadian Map Libraries and Archives, the British Isles Family History Society of Greater Ottawa, l'Institut d'Histoire de l'Amérique Française, the National Council on Public History, the Ontario Historical Society, the Society for the Study of Architecture in Canada, and the Writers' Union of Canada. We had all agreed before the meeting that we wanted the hours rolled back while the Service Advisory Board considered the question.

Dr Wilson explained the wider mandate that LAC was now saddled with and the importance of reaching a new audience (particularly in schools) through on-line services, which, in the absence of any additional funding, had to be financed by taking resources away from existing programs. We responded that the balance had shifted too severely away from the more traditional clientele of researchers. After a

great deal of discussion, Dr Wilson eventually agreed to reconsider the cuts in hours of service in the very near future.

The ten groups involved in the delegation agreed that this had been a productive meeting. We subsequently assured Dr Wilson that we looked forward to making the new advisory board an effective forum, and that we were prepared to assist in any way we could to help promote the financial stability of LAC. We now await word on the current hours of service and the start-up of the work of the new board in late November.

***Please consult the CHA Website for updates on the issues.
www.cha-shc.ca***

