

Transcript Episode 3 Carol Radford-Grant

Ron Kruzeniski:

Today, I have the pleasure of talking to Carol Radford-Grant, the new Provincial Archivist of Saskatchewan. Welcome, Carol. I know from your history, your trek to get to Saskatchewan has been a long and interesting one, and I'm wondering if you just tell us a bit about your background and how you got so darn lucky to make it to Saskatchewan.

Carol Radford-Grant:

Well, thanks Ron, and thank you for inviting me to be part of your podcast. I'm very, very excited to be here. I started in archives actually in Ottawa. I did the Archives Technician Program at Algonquin College. Since then, I have continued my archival studies in the Masters in information studies at U of T, where I really focused on archives and did a thesis in the development of archival descriptive standards. I was most recently the city archivist for the city of Toronto for nine and a half years. And previously to that I worked with regulatory records for the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Ontario, the Archives of Ontario and the Ontario College of Teachers. So when the opportunity came to be Provincial Archivist in Saskatchewan, I thought this would be a wonderful professional opportunity and also personally to be able to experience living on the prairies and all of the exciting things that go with being on the prairies.

Ron Kruzeniski:

So that background, I think equips you well to answer my next question, and it's kind of a dumb one, but what does an archivist do? And of course, more particularly, what does the provincial archivist do?

Carol Radford-Grant:

The Provincial Archives of Saskatchewan plays an important role in preserving the cultural resources of the province. The Provincial Archives collects public records of historical value as well as records of individuals, organizations, businesses, and associations. The preservation of these records ensures that the documentary evidence is available to researchers today and for years to come. There's also another important role the Provincial Archives plays.

It enables the government of Saskatchewan to fulfil its public trust by establishing records and information management best practices, and by preserving and providing access to public records of historical significance. So archivists, they appraise records to recommend whether or not they should be added to the collection. They arrange and describe the records in a database, a big catalogue so that we can locate the records. They preserve the records in climate controlled conditions so that they will last a long time, and they help public to access these records either in person in our reading room or virtually by phone or by email. Our information management team provides records management services to government and administers disposal process for public records. As provincial archivist, I report to a board of directors and I lead our team in fulfilling this mandate and moving forward on our strategic plan.

Ron Kruzeniski:

So, I know this is a bit early because you've just been in the position a couple of months and it's also a time when someone takes over an organization that they can kind of look at the situation and make decisions. So I'm curious, have you developed or you have any hopes and dreams of the things you'd like to achieve in the provincial archives?

Carol Radford-Grant:

So, there are three main areas I want to focus on. One is on raising the profile of archives. Everyone knows what a library is, they know what a museum is, but few people know about the fantastic resources available in archives. I dream of a time when everyone knows about archives and what we do. Second, I hope we will be able to make strides in increasing our capacity to deliver programs and services, addressing digital and electronic records. Most of the information created today is created digitally. I dream of the time when we can systematically acquire and preserve these records for the future, even more than we do now. Third, I want to focus on my team. The people here are very knowledgeable and skilled. I want to foster a corporate culture that values collaboration, cross-training and continuous learning because I believe teamwork will be the way that we will be able to achieve the dream of every person knowing about archives and making even more records available and accessible to the people in Saskatchewan and beyond.

Ron Kruzeniski:

So, in those hopes and dreams, what do you see as the greatest challenges for record keeping in these days? Especially with the pandemic confronting us and the advances that are just being made in technology? And I guess another way of framing that is I think those same challenges would probably apply to a provincial archive, but what do you see as the main challenges of record keeping?

Carol Radford-Grant:

I think with electronic records being created and the advances in technology, one is simply volume of information that is created. For example, in the past we would take pictures on camera that used film, and before that it was on glass plates. We needed to pay money to have the film processed. So there were a lot of pictures taken, but it was a manageable amount. And now we have cell phones and the volume of photos taken digitally has exploded. The pandemic has accelerated people working remotely, and perhaps the tools and processes have not kept the same pace. I think it has a lot to do with awareness and education, as well as the controls and quality assurance pieces to make sure that we have record keeping in place so that we have good access to a reliable and trustworthy record.

Ron Kruzeniski:

So, the biggest challenge is just plain old volume?

Carol Radford-Grant:

I think so. I think if you think about the more stuff you have, the harder it is to find, right? I know that sounds pretty simple, but if you think about your house and all the stuff you have in your house, the more stuff you have, the harder it is to find that one gadget you need to do the job.

Ron Kruzeniski:

So, with that in mind, are record keeping practices improving with all of these advances in technology, or are the advances in technology actually causing the problem?

Carol Radford-Grant:

That's a tricky question, Ron. I think technology provides us with tools that we didn't have before and they might be a solution to the problem. So we know that we're not going back to the days where every single piece of correspondence, every message would be typed, classified, and stored. We have a

computer on every desk and each person is sending and receiving hundreds of messages a day over email. The answer to improving record keeping is in advances with technology, whether this might be auto classification or systematic controls running in the background. That's part of what I think we need. Are we there yet? Well, probably not, but different organizations are at different stages in this process, and I think there's a lot of hope. There's a lot of possibilities and a lot more that can be done.

Ron Kruzeniski:

So, you sort of touched on this, the pandemic, but it strikes me the pandemic has resulted in creating a lot more electronic information. Maybe it's created less paper information, but a lot more data because of the way we're operating. I think I know the answer to this question, but I'll let you answer it. Does that have any implications for your office? Do you need to double your staff or will you find those electronic tools that help you sort out and classify that data?

Carol Radford-Grant:

Yes, we are working on the tools, Ron. And my team is working on getting the software and the systems we need up and running to preserve records electronically. And we already do. We already acquire digital records that are never printed on paper and make them available. But there's also something else challenging. Paper is a great medium. It's simple to preserve. We put it in a box in the dark in a climate-controlled room, and we will be able to read it in 500 years. With data stored electronically, we need to consider the software, the operating system, and the hardware to access it in the future. And over the years, this is not a new challenge. Archives have been collecting many DVDs floppy discs, tapes, hard drives, software systems, USB keys. It makes me wonder sometimes, Ron, will we be able to read the email correspondence and electronic records created today a hundred years from now or even 50 years from now? I'm not too sure we will.

Ron Kruzeniski:

So, do you have microfiche in your collection?

Carol Radford-Grant:

Oh, yes. We have definitely lots of microfiche. We have film. We have glass. I think some archives even have records on Vellum. And nowadays, archives are actively working on digitizing this material to make it available over the internet and more widely accessible.

Ron Kruzeniski:

With the microfiche or microfilm, and you would have the readers that allow someone to come in or allow your staff to read it?

Carol Radford-Grant:

Yes. Microfilm and microfiche is a very stable media. It was the preservation medium that was primarily used in the past. So they would create a silver master and then a duplication copy and a user copy. And you could probably still borrow it on interlibrary loan every once in a while. But on the whole, people prefer if we actually... We have machines that we can make a digital copy off of microfilm and provide it via email for people.

Ron Kruzeniski:

But do those machines, are they becoming scarce and if they break down, are they expensive to repair? Where would you get the parts?

Carol Radford-Grant:

Actually, there's a whole new set of machines being created so that researchers can come in with their USB keys and create electronic copies right off the microphone. It's far from going the way of the floppy disc. We can still access these records. And in fact, I think we'll always be able to, all you need is a light source and a magnifying glass, and you can read microfilm. It's with the electronic records you need the operating system, the software and the hardware. It's a much more complex medium, if that makes sense.

Ron Kruzeniski:

So as an information and privacy Commissioner, I have an interest in people's privacy, and I know you get a lot of documents that would have personal information or personal health information. So one thing I've always believed in, if I can encourage public bodies to destroy records, of course, within the law and according to The Archives Act, does that sort of position concern you or do you see a conflict there in me promoting that position or not?

Carol Radford-Grant:

Archivists take privacy very seriously and we apply privacy principles, Ron, to records from the private sector that even though the act may not apply to them, right? Because we really think that these principles are important to uphold. My perspective is that archives are for people today. And so we need to protect people's privacy. And that does mean destroying the records as soon as the business and legal requirements for collecting the information are complete.

And most routine transactional records, I'm thinking things like accounts payable and receivable, things like fitness and swimming lesson registrations, it's best practice to destroy them systematically. For public bodies, this means that the records must be disposed of in accordance with The Archives and Public Records Management Act, following disposal processes administered by the archives. The archives identifies and will acquire public records of historical significance through this process. So since I believe archives are essentially about people, Ron, if we try and take out and destroy all the information about people in records, which I know isn't what you're suggesting, you're not suggesting everything gets destroyed.

But if we did that, we wouldn't have a sufficient historical record to support future generations. So what is an example of important records that archives keep that have personal information? An example I want to share with you actually comes from Ian Wilson. He was a previous Provincial Archivist of Saskatchewan and a previous national librarian archivist of Canada. And he's written about the role of archives in accountability in good government. Some examples of high profile cases he mentions where preservation of personal information and archives are key include human rights cases such as Japanese Canadians who were interred during World War II. They had property taken away from them, and archival records were heavily relied on for compensation. There was an inquiry into the provincial trustee for use of funds from the Dionne Quintuplets. They appeared in advertisements and films in the thirties and forties. They relied on records held in archives in Ontario and resulted in compensation and an apology.

And more recently, and this is an area I think everyone in archives and people are concerned about, are the challenges that indigenous people in Canada are facing. I'm concerned about preserving records of

residential school survivors and making them available in line with reconciliation principles. Many archives and archivists are concerned and working to respond to the calls to action from the Truth and Reconciliation Report. The Provincial Archives is working with the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation to make these records available. So if we destroy everything that has personal information in it, that's not the answer. And I recognize this isn't what you're suggesting, but it's about being thoughtful and purposeful about what we keep. We need to keep the essential record to be able to tell stories about our province and the people who lived here as well as the ability to protect human rights in the future. And we balance this carefully with making sure we have personal information protected and securely stored in the archives.

Ron Kruzeniski:

So, I'm curious about your last point about indigenous peoples, and you mentioned the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation. I would've thought they had those files of people that gave information or testified or reached settlements, but it sounds like you have some of those files.

Carol Radford-Grant:

So many, many archives over many, many years have acquired records from private individuals, organizations, and businesses. So although the federal government and the churches are the main source of records having to do with residential schools that were in Canada, there are many other archives who've acquired records over the years where there are records that would be helpful for people doing this research. So, we systematically went through our collections, digitized and made copies, and those are all available now through the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation because I believe that it is everyone's responsibility to work towards and do the work for reconciliation.

Ron Kruzeniski:

So, one last question because you mentioned the number of things that the archives has digitized. And as you digitize more and more, and I think you mentioned that people could get access by email or phone. Will there be more and more on the Provincial Archives website that I can just go in and do searches? Or is your collection so massive that it wouldn't be practical to have people search through the website?

Carol Radford-Grant:

We are working hard on making more and more records available online for people to search. We have definitely at the Provincial Archives focused on weekly newspapers. They're very rich in information and local history, as well as photographs. You know the saying that a picture is worth a thousand words, it certainly is true. And so that's an area of focus.

Ron Kruzeniski:

Well, I have probably taken too much of your time because I'm holding you back from implementing those hopes and dreams but thank you very much for doing this. And I'm going to say introducing yourself, but introducing the Provincial Archives of Saskatchewan and hopefully the people that listen to this will know a bit more about it. So thank you, Carol.

Carol Radford-Grant:

Thank you, Ron. I've really enjoyed our conversation.