THE DEVELOPMENT AND TRANSFORMATION OF CANADIAN GENEALOGY

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INTRODUCTION

Long before the arrival of explorers and settlers from Europe, genealogy[1] in Canada was the oral history of Indigenous communities.

On arrival of white settlers, notably the French colonial regime, the church recorded baptisms, marriages and burials. At the end of the 18th century, civil authorities started recording land transactions and probate, while military authorities kept muster lists. None of these were for genealogy; except for information passed through the family, genealogists have always relied on records kept for other purposes.

Governments in Canada started taking routine censuses in the 1840s, and later registered births, marriages and deaths.[2]

Canadian genealogy developed in Acadian, French Canadian, Irish, Loyalist and Scots organizations and similar Friendly Societies. Serious genealogists joined societies outside of Canada, where their ancestors originated. The first was the New England

1 Genealogy is defined in the Oxford English Dictionary as "An account of one's descent from an ancestor or ancestors, by enumeration of the intermediate persons; a pedigree. Family History is defined as "The history of a family; a narrative about this. In later use also: the study of the history of a family or families; genealogy as an area of research."

2 The first census was of New France taken during the winter of 1666-67 under the direction of Jean Talon, the Intendant of justice, police and finance.

Historic Genealogical Society, established in 1845.

Ordinary Canadians had neither time nor facilities to pursue their family history.

TWENTIETH CENTURY

The frequency with which the word "genealogy" occurs across five Canadian newspapers shows how interest expanded.

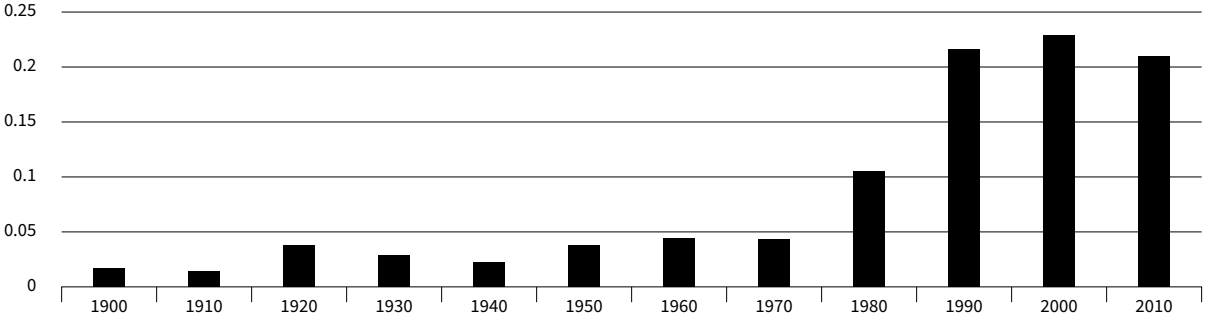
Limited interest during the first two-thirds of the century, depressed during the two world wars, was accompanied by documentary and physical infrastructure improvements. Thanks to grants from U.S. industrialist-philanthropist Andrew Carnegie, many communities built public libraries during the first two decades of the century and collected published transcripts of selected records.

The Public Archives of Canada was established in 1912 to preserve and provide access to a wide variety of documents. In 1953, along with the establishment of The National Library of Canada came a system for legal deposit of Canadian publications and the collection of family histories.

Microfilming of records, starting in the 1930s, opened up the possibility of accessing images of records previously available, if at all, only to those who could travel to view the original. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS), under the name of the Genealogical Society of Utah, founded in 1894, started a U.S. microfilming program in the late 1930s. It expanded in Europe after the Second World War; those microfilms were a boon for those with American and European immigrant ancestors. Many Canadian newspapers were also microfilmed at that time.

Genealogy was a budding appendage to historical societies. In 1949, the Ontario Historical Society announced a dedicated genealogy section in its quarterly publication.[3] By 1961, a separate Ontario

CHART 1. NORMALIZED MEDIAN DECADAL OCCURRENCE OF THE WORD GENEALOGY PER PUBLISHED PAGE ACROSS THE *VANCOUVER PROVINCE*, *CALGARY HERALD*, *GLOBE AND MAIL*, *OTTAWA CITIZEN* AND *MONTREAL GAZETTE* SINCE 1900



Genealogical Society formed in Waterloo. Ten founding members had ballooned to 5,000 by 1990.

The centennial of Canadian Confederation in 1967 saw a push to record local history, with information on local families, which was especially strong on the Prairies. It also brought a new impetus to Women's Institutes' compiling of local Tweedsmuir histories.[4] Genealogical societies were formed in Saskatchewan (1969), British Columbia (1971), Alberta (1972), Prince Edward Island and Manitoba (1976). These predate the 1976 publication of the novel *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* by Alex Haley, and the 1977 television adaptation, which gave genealogy across North America a major boost. Angus Baxter published the first of a series of books for Canadians interested in exploring their genealogy in 1977.[5] Societies in Quebec (1977, anglophone), New Brunswick (1978), and Nova Scotia (1982) followed.

The census is a fundamental resource for genealogy as it links family members across generations. For preservation and to make them available on loan to local libraries, the Public Archives of Canada microfilmed the census of 1851 in 1954; 1861 in 1955; 1871 by 1961; 1881 by 1979; and 1891 in 1986.

Demand for genealogical resources increased. In responding to criticism in the pages of the *Ottawa Journal* in 1980, Patricia Kennedy, Chief of Pre-Confederation Archives Manuscripts at the Public Archives of Canada, gave the following perspective[6]:

> "Interlibrary loan of microfilm has been offered for two decades, and circulation now approaches 1,500 reels per month across Canada and abroad (a service offered by only one provincial archives);
>
> access to the Reading Rooms for the Manuscript and Federal Archives Division is possible 24 hours a day, 365 days a year;
>
> indexes for the Upper and Lower Canada Land Petitions, designed almost exclusively to serve genealogists, were prepared at a cost of nearly 20 man-years of work; a genealogical consultant has been available in the Reference Room of the Manuscript Division for almost a decade".

The first genealogy Internet services, through forums on Compuserve, started in the U.S. around 1988. They gave way to free Rootsweb mailing lists, which continued growing into the 21st century.

Burgeoning activity in the second half of the 1990s had Toronto-based *Moorshead* Magazines begin publishing *Family Chronicle* for the North American newsstand genealogy market in 1996. *Ancestry*, originally a U.S. genealogical publisher, opened ancestry.com in that year, just as the notion that "if

3 Genealogy in francophone Quebec, starting from 1943 and the founding of the *Société Généalogique Canadienne-Française* is beyond the scope of this article.

4 Federated Women's Institutes of Ontario. https://fwio.on.ca/tweedsmuir-history-books. Accessed 2 January 2020.

5 Baxter, A. (1977). *In Search of Your Roots: A guide for Canadians Seeking Their Ancestor*s, Toronto: Macmillan of Canada

6 Kennedy, P.(1980), Letter to the Editor, Ottawa Journal 8 August.

you're not online, you don't exist" became a reality. By October 1999, Internet speeds were just sufficient enough to support launching the online, Toronto-based National Institute for Genealogical Studies in collaboration with the University of Toronto. It expanded internationally in 2000 after a mention in a major U.S. genealogy newsletter.

TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

Newspaper birth, marriage and death notices, obituaries, social notes and community happenings have long served to fill out a family history. A Winnipeg newspaper reported my great uncle, blinded while serving in the Great War, had returned to farm near Tisdale, Saskatchewan. Searching newspaper pages trapped in tiny microfilm frames is laborious, so finds like mine were elusive.

In 1999 Ottawa-based Cold North Wind started digitizing and making word-searchable the complete text of Canadian newspapers online[7]. *The Globe and Mail* archive became available in 2002, but for want of leadership of the type exhibited by the British Library and the Library of Congress, digitization lagged in Canada. There were geographically-focused initiatives, especially in Western Canada. Ancestry affiliate newspapers.com has now digitized long runs of several major Postmedia newspapers, including the *Ottawa Citizen*, *Montreal Gazette*, *Edmonton Journal* and *Vancouver Sun*.

The year 2000 saw the first sequencing of the human genome announced, and the first consumer genetic genealogy testing in the U.K. and U.S. Development was slow until technology drove a major cost reduction. Canadians took advantage, including those curious about their ethnicity attracted by a TV ad showing a man swapping his lederhosen for a kilt after he received his AncestryDNA test results. Credibility built through news items such as identification of the Golden Gate Killer using a genetic genealogy database, the remains of Richard III found buried under a carpark in Leicester, long lost close family members and the bodies of First World War soldiers. While many were happy with just ethnicity results, company databases also identify genetic cousins by DNA matching. Some avoided that for privacy reasons. Often the relationship is ambiguous, requiring expert genealogical research skills to identify where the match fits in a family tree. Educational initiatives helped develop such expertise.

Not to be overlooked is the influence of entertainment genealogy. From the U.K., the TV program *Who Do You Think You Are?*, first broadcast in 2004, spread internationally. Two years later, Toronto-based Primitive Entertainment produced *Ancestors in the Attic*. U.S. shows available on cable TV, on-demand media such as blogs,YouTube and webinars also became influential. Facebook, which opened to all in 2006, now has more than 1,000 Canadian genealogy groups and pages.[8]

The decrease in newspaper coverage of genealogy from the 2000s to 2010s is consistent with a reduced number of books catalogued with key-

7 Paper of Record. https://paperofrecord.hypernet.ca/. Accessed 2 Jan 2020

8 Dever, G. "Facebook for Canadian Genealogy." *Genealogy à la carte*, https://genealogyalacarte.ca/?page_id=10169. Accessed 2 January 2020.

word genealogy in Library and Archives Canada's Aurora database, and declining membership in some genealogical societies. That is an international trend as genealogical activity gravitates online.

CONCLUSION

The confluence of transformative factors in the past quarter-century, enabled by the tool of the Internet, means researching their ancestry is something everyone can do at a reasonable cost. With huge free websites such as familysearch.org from the LDS, and the Genealogy and Family History Resources from Library and Archives Canada at www.bac-lac.gc.ca, anyone with an Internet connection can research 24/7. A library edition of ancestry.com with billions of international historical records and millions of user-submitted family trees is available free at branches of many public libraries.

For the future, as much as genealogists might yearn for them, tools to travel through time or reliably communicate with dead ancestors will remain fantasy. The most promising development is automated transcription of handwritten documents into searchable text. With so much to be found in computer-compatible form, digitized records and DNA test results, are we getting closer to the day when AI will compile your family tree for you?