

The Access Issue

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Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today about my experience of researching archival collections and my hopes and fears in relation to the record collection of the ACT government. My name is Drew McLean and I am the Secretary of the Fire Brigade Historical Society of the ACT. Our Society, which was established over 26 years ago and is staffed on the whole by a bunch of enthusiastic ex-firemen and passionate volunteers. The Society manages the Canberra Fire and Emergency Services Museum, which is located in Canberra's first permanent fire station in Forrest. The Museum's collection includes vehicles, uniforms, records and associated equipment. Over the last six years we have opened up our collection to the public.

Up to five or six years ago we were hunters and gatherers. Hoarding any bit of "gear" we could lay our hands on. We are now more discriminating in our collecting policy and are starting to research and document our collection and the history of the fire service and emergency services in Canberra. We have come a long way but our journey is still in its infancy and very much depends on access to records in government archives collections.

We, like other small museums, battle with lack of funding and expertise. The journey of achieving best practice in managing our collection is one that we can only achieve in small planned steps

We have had some help, including a Community Heritage Grant and an ACT Government Heritage Grant. We have entered into a number of partnerships to improve our collection standards, policy and preservation processes. For example, the CIT Museum Practice certificate IV students provide a valuable resource to us as we step beyond the “big boys toys” world of red fire trucks. Their input provides our members insight into research techniques, preservation practice and establishing a collection policy and disaster management planning.

Recently we have started to research the history of the fire and emergency service’ in Canberra with a goal of producing a comprehensive, authentic and accurate record of the Fire and Emergency services that have served the ACT and region in the twentieth century. We aim to complete this project in 2014 to coincide with the centenary of fire services in Canberra. I’d like to share some of our experiences of undertaking research with you and raise some of my concerns about accessing records of the ACT government.

The records collections available in Canberra are a potential gold mine for our project. The information revolution and access through the internet provides us with the capacity to save vast amounts of time in preliminary investigations. Information can be just a mouse click away.

Last week what is apparently the original fire bell that was used to muster men at the fire station in the event of an outbreak of fire was donated to the Fire Brigade Historical Society by a former Department of Works’ officer, now aged in his nineties. The bell

was apparently “salvaged” from the Department of Works store some 60 years ago. The bell bears markings that indicates that it was made by John Danks and Sons, a Sydney based hardware manufacturer.

Our quest to find out more about this bell began with a quick search on the National Archives website. I struck gold when I discovered a digitised file which revealed the original instructions for the use of the bell written by the then Chairman of the Canberra Fire Board, Mr Rowland addressed to the Administrator of the Federal Territory on the 17th of December 1915. He outlined a "Scheme for dealing with an outbreak of fire at Canberra."

The document details how the Fire Bell was to be used to notify fire-fighters of an outbreak or fire. He wrote:

....."The Volunteer members of the Brigade then aroused are directed to the scene of the outbreak by means of a large bell suspended outside the station.

The following code has been adopted for the purpose of directing the Brigade:-

To muster at the Station:- a continued series of single gongs.

To proceed north of the station:- a short continuous ring followed by a series of two gongs.

To proceed south of the Station:- a short continuous ring followed by a series of three gongs"

This was a wonderful find but could I be sure that the bell that had been donated to us was the original bell.

Another quick search on the Register of Australian Archives and Manuscripts through the National Library website reveals another positive lead. The records of John Danks and Sons, are held at The Noel Butlin Archives Centre at the Australian National University. A visit to the Noel Butlin Centre is planned in the hope that it will shed some light on the provenance of the bell.

Unfortunately there is no use looking on the ACT Governments website at the moment for information about its records. I know that there will be nothing there, and, until the inception of the access provisions of the *Territory Records Act* I am forced to rely on contacts within agencies for information on records of interest.

Most national and state archives are committed to enhancing the accessibility of their collections. My hope is that, with the introduction of the access provisions of the *Territory Records Act* in July this year we will enter a new world that will provide better access to information about and to the files held by the ACT Government.

When Mr Bill Wood MLA, then Minister for Urban Services presented the Territory Records Bill to the Legislative Assembly in 2002 he said;

“The legislation I am introducing today is designed to give confidence to our community that government records will be created, managed and accessible. This is a key component for open and accountable government”

Mr Stanhope, Chief Minister for the ACT proudly echoed Mr Woods' aspirations and in September 2004 in a keynote address

to the Records Management Association of Australia. He proudly proclaimed that;

“..... By 2007 the majority of records older than 20 years will become freely open for public access. This will be a time when Canberra reaches 95 years of age and what a resource we will have and what a story will be able to be told!”

My hope is that I will, in time, see this vision achieved. I trust that the story that I am able to tell in a year or two will reflect positively on the sentiments expressed by those “founding fathers” of the *Territory Records Act 2002*. I would welcome the introduction of services that make the collection of the ACT government accessible to the community. However, I recognise that this is a huge undertaking and one that is likely to delay our research. My fear is that the virtual service so eagerly anticipated will prove to be virtually none.

How will the Territory Records Office cope with a government culture that has un-catalogued records? Old files live in dusty cupboards and under stairs. The existence of these records is known only to the individual business areas. Independent in-house record and filing systems live beyond the control of the ACT Record Services. A lack of funding ensures that only the bare minimum is done and what is not known, will remain so.

Government Business units struggle to deal with the present let alone the past, especially a distant past. With reduced staffing and funding levels in most ACT Government departments and other competing priorities how will these records be controlled and identified? ‘I don’t have the staff, nor the money!’ is the call

echoing through the corridors of many ACT government public servants offices.

How will access be improved? I am pleased that there will be a research archivist on the payroll of the ACT government, but what can we expect from that person? What will the demand be upon this person? Will a few queries from organisations such as ours tie up too much of that archivists time? The Fire Brigade Historical Society as a self funded volunteer organisation does not have the capacity to engage professional researchers, perhaps this archivist could be a boon for us? I don't think so.

Where will researchers access the records of the ACT government? There is no reading room or any proposal, as far as I know, to provide access to records outside working hours. How will we know what records are held by the ACT government?

People like myself who are "impulse researchers" often cast very broad nets. We all know that record titles may be misleading and not contain information suggested by the title. I recall on one occasion I was excited to find a file titled "Misuse of fire Appliance" held at the National Archives. Images of drunken firemen cavorting on the fire truck immediately jumped to mind. (not such an uncommon event as you may think in the past) What a disappointment when I discovered it was a complaint from the Chief Officer of the time, Mr Percy Douglas, directed at the drivers of steam tractors using fire hoses to fill up their boilers. While this file did not contain what I'd hoped for, I was able to find it easily because it was catalogued. What plans does the ACT government have to catalogue its collection?

Making digital copies of records available online is a wonderful tool for researchers. Disappointed as I was to find the National Archives now CHARGE \$16.50 for the making digital copies of files available on-line, digitisation provides an efficient way for time-poor researchers such as myself to access these files from home. Are there any plans to introduce a digitisation service for the collection of the ACT government?

With no catalogue or central repository or reading room, how quickly will records be recalled (or even found) when researchers like me want to access them. I understand truck loads of files about Canberra previously held by the National Archives were returned to the ACT after the inception of self government. Has this material been catalogued? What undiscovered treasures lie in those Recall boxes?

My search for records of the Canberra Fire Brigade relating to the period 1914 – 1926 is a time consuming and laborious one. I have found some gems but wonder how many more await discovery in the collection of the ACT government.

The Fire Brigade Historical Society welcomes the advent of access arrangements to records of the ACT government. We hold great hopes that it will mean a new era in accessing the history of fire services in Canberra but fear that unless extra funding and staffing can be found our project will be marked by disappointment, red tape and time delays.