

Invaluable record is compiled by selfless volunteer

Combs newspaper archives to catalogue community life

By **KAREN SMITH**
The Champion

It's a genealogist's dream come true. People tracing their family history don't have to dig as deep thanks to 77-year-old Marshall Neilson.

The life-long Hornby resident has spent at least 12 hours a week over the last 10 years researching and recording births, marriages and deaths in north Halton.

And the fruits of his labour are as close as picking up a book or pressing a computer key at the Milton Public Library.

The library volunteer's work recently produced *The Canadian Champion Index to Births, Marriages and Deaths Volume 2: 1926 - 1970* — the second of a planned three-volume set.

The latest volume alone includes more than 33,000 references from *The Canadian Champion*'s weekly editions.

"He sits there and hammers through day-to-day making entries," said Geoffrey Cannon of the Halton Hills Public Library in Georgetown, where Mr. Neilson — a two-finger typist — works on a computer.

"These indexes reduce the time people have to spend scouring the years and years of papers and finding nothing."

The new system is already proving to benefit genealogists as well as library staff, said Jane MacDonald of the Milton Public

Library.

She openly admitted that it's "embarrassing" to tell someone calling from outside Canada or across the country that they have to come to the library and research the information themselves.

Now library workers can obtain the information quickly so they're able to respond to requests over the phone.

"This has really solved a lot of problems for us," Ms MacDonald said.

Prior to the indexes, local researchers were sent to a Milton library card file listing births, marriages and deaths. But the file only boasts records from 1862 to 1930 after funding cuts curtailed its continuation, she said.

Researchers who failed to get what they wanted from the card system were required to search copies of *The Champion* recorded on microfiche — a time-consuming task as Mr. Neilson has learned through experience.

The cheery gentleman has collected most of the index information through reel after reel of microfiche on which issues of two of Metroland's community newspapers, *The Champion* and the *Acton Free Press*, are copied.

To date he has completed an index of births, marriages and deaths published in the *Acton Free Press* in three volumes from 1875 to 1991.

He also compiled a *Georgetown Herald* index in two volumes from 1862 to 1970. Information obtained from the independently-operated *Herald* was limited after a 1918 fire destroyed the building, along with historic copies of the newspaper.

In total, Mr. Neilson has recorded about 200,000 references, Mr. Cannon estimated.

All the publications are available in book format and on computer at both the Milton and Halton Hills public libraries, as well as on the Internet.

Mr. Neilson, who still lives at the Trafalgar Road dairy farm his family has owned for 116 years, said he finds his work rewarding and has become quite a news hound.

"I'm just fascinated by what I'm going to see on the next page. It's like re-living local history," he said.

He volunteered for the Halton Hills Public Library-based project after using the facility to research his own family history, which he has traced back to the late 1600s in Scotland.

Mr. Neilson is currently recording data for the final *Champion* volume and will be ready to take on related library research projects after that, he said.

He may be asked to compile similar birth, marriage and death indexes in south Halton, Mr. Cannon said.

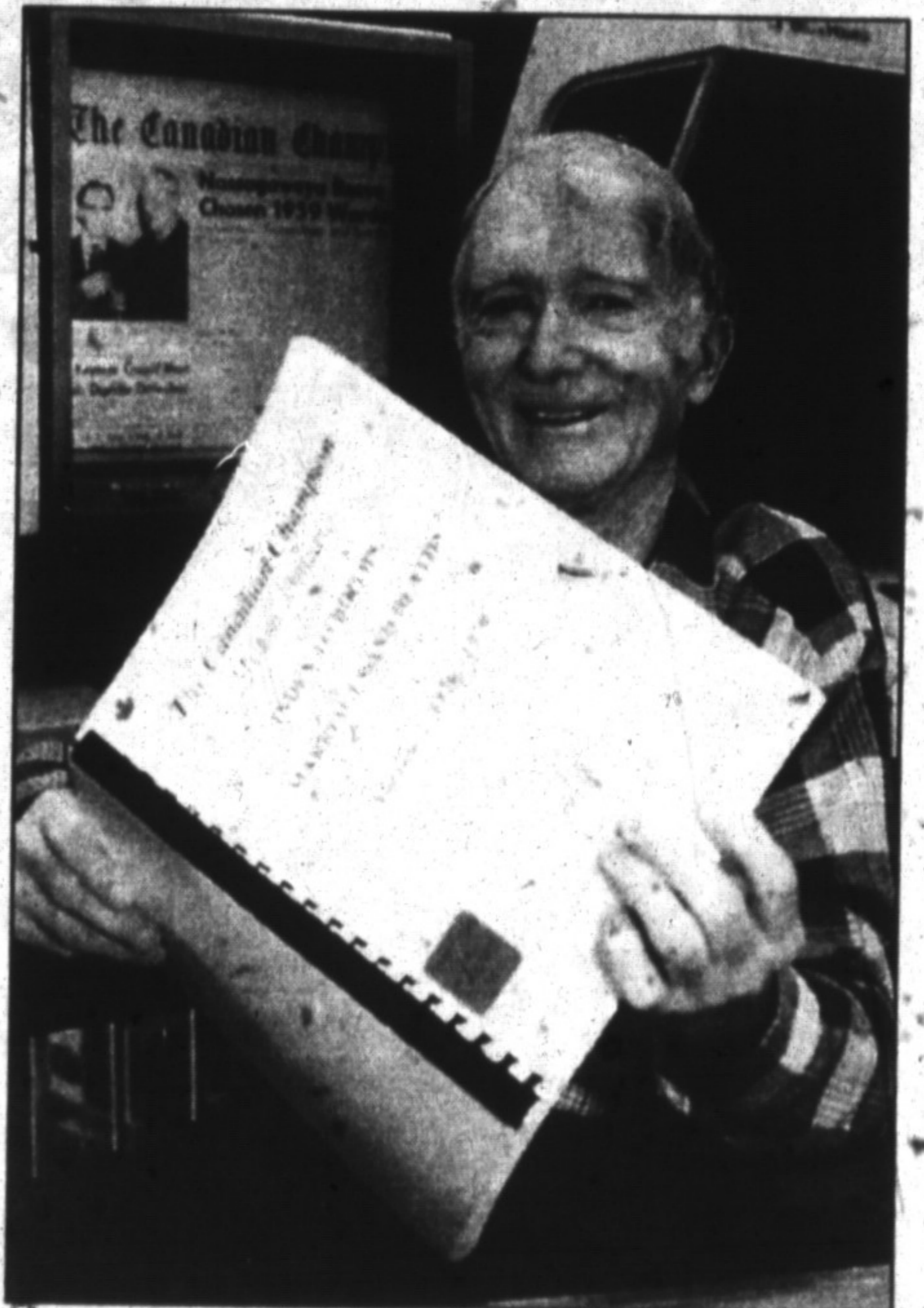


Photo by GRAHAM PAINE

Marshall Neilson, 77, of Hornby is helping keep important genealogy records in a volunteer project.

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