

# Discovering the raw materials of history



**NORTHERN  
INSIGHTS**

by Larry Sanders



My wife and I spent the last week in Fort Frances, Emo and Mine Centre, working on the archive inventory project for the Centre for Northern Studies of Lakehead University. We have received several promising leads and supportive letters from people with interesting tidbits of history to share—documents, clipping files, scrapbooks and records that should be included in the inventory.

This project will take us, as it did last week, to dingy basements and vaults—places that at first seem inhospitable until you open up treasure chests of history teachers' attendance books for schools long since closed, congregational minute books from the turn of the century, and rural histories kept by Women's Institutes.

Records like this are the raw material of history—the written record of generations of achievements, tragedies, and celebrations.

Too often old records are thrown out or destroyed by some accident or carelessness. Others are kept in places where mould and dampness take a high toll.

Discoveries like that make us sad and somewhat angry—knowing that future historians will not be able to piece the fragments together and write the history of this part of the nation called Canada.

There are centralized collection points for this kind of material, and we spent a lot of time in those in the past week—places like the Fort Frances Museum and Cultural Centre, the women's Institute Museum in Emo, the Fort Frances Public Library, the basement of Knox United Church in Fort Frances, and the public school board offices in Fort Frances and Mine Centre.

We made several discoveries worth sharing—some disconcerting, some humorous. One surprise for us was that no one has yet written a definitive community history of Fort Frances.

## Community history

There are community histories for Rainy River, Emo and Rainy River, but none for the largest community in the district. There is lots of raw material, but no "community history"—tying the loose ends together into one published work. The curator of the Fort Frances museum, Darryl Allan, is undoubtedly the best qualified individual to write such a history. His passion for detail and love of history, we hope, will some day help him find the time and financing to write such a book.

Other fragments from my notebook:

- the first minister at Knox Presbyterian (now United) Church in Fort Frances in the late 1880's was named W.R. Rae. Could that be a great-grandfather of our current Premier, Bob Rae?

- the best kept secret in the Rainy River District is the Women's Institute Museum in Emo. Women's Institutes were the backbone of rural pioneer life, making the scrapbooks and records in the metal cupboard at the Museum in Emo a treasure chest of country history.

The Emo Museum is trying to collect records and scrapbooks kept by all Women's Institutes in the District before they're lost. If you know of any, get in touch with the Emo Museum. If you want to spend a pleasant afternoon reading about life in a quieter, gentler era, make a trip to the museum. The coffee pot is always on.

- the consolidation of school boards and rural schools brought about by Bill Davis's decree in the 1960s that led to the formation of the Fort Frances-Rainy River Board of Education on January 1, 1969 obviously didn't happen without a lot of rancour and bitterness.

## Looking for old records

In the basement of the school board there are old minute books and school attendance records for many of the 32 smaller boards that were consolidated, but not for all of them.

Some old school districts eventually turned in their old records, while others, perhaps in an honest desire to hang on to important pieces of community history, did not.

If anyone has knowledge of the whereabouts of the records for these defunct school districts, please get in touch with us. We won't force you to turn your records in, but they should be catalogued in our inventory. Write to us at NORTHERN INSIGHTS 72 Jean Street, Thunder Bay, P7A 5E9.

I'll leave you with one other fragment of history, discovered in the mammoth, well-catalogued files of the Fort Frances Museum: questions from standardized exams given in 1925 to all students in the Kenora and Rainy River Districts wanting "promotion to Junior Fourth", which I am told is our modern equivalent of wanting to graduate from Grade 8:

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# Letters to the editor: woman says she was unfairly let go by "Belligerent" Construction

I was going to write this anonymously, but for most of my life, I've kept my mouth shut and refused to speak up. But I cannot remain silent, especially when lives could be at stake.

On Tuesday, July 14, 1992, at 11:55 am, I was fired from my flagging job at Belanger Construction. It came as a total surprise. My supervisor had just told me I was doing well—one week before he quit for greener and more peaceful pastures. He also told me to watch myself because I could lose my job if I wasn't careful. In other words, the boss didn't like me, and my supervisor was the buffer zone.

I was fired because my boss didn't obey my stop sign. There was no close call, the margin for safety was large—there was no problem except for the boss. He was in a hurry to go nowhere and he was, as usual, agitated and hostile. He waved me over, told me to throw the "f\*\*\*\*\* sign" in the truck, called me a "f\*\*\*\*\* a\*\*hole", and told me I was finished.

He swears all the time at me and everyone else, but it hurt to be unfairly discharged, especially in such a manner—and the fact it was my birthday didn't help either. So I responded in kind. I said "Jim (Lacharity), you're the f\*\*\*\*\* a\*\*hole here, why don't you get a f\*\*\*\*\* life?"

I went home, and I didn't let him see me cry, because I really enjoyed my work, and I liked the people I worked with.

After I calmed down, I telephoned the Ministry of Labour and told them what happened. They were helpful, but said they couldn't help me because I didn't have 90 days on the job. They suggested a lawyer, but I said it wasn't worth the trouble and expense.

I then telephoned Belanger's head office in Sudbury to speak to the owner (Ron Belanger). The owner was out of town, so I told his son the same story I told the Ministry of Labour. I also told him that I had talked to the Ministry. He said he would have personnel call me, but I waited for two hours, and the call didn't—and still hasn't—come in. So I faxed a letter to the owner—somehow it ended up at the office in Jackfish.

So I gave up, handed in my time sheets with a letter of apology for my name-calling of Jim, and that's that. If they gave me back my job, I wouldn't go back—it's time to move on to better things.

My being fired is not the point of this—I'm not out for revenge or a personal vendetta. I'm concerned about what happens there.

When I was hired, I was told "safety first", and that was my priority. The lives of my coworkers and people travelling through became my responsibility. But the only training I received for that amount of responsibility was "be careful, and watch your ass." Not one flag person gets any formal training. We are given a sign and assigned a position. We have no radios or communication devices.

I learned fast because I had to—every time I made a mistake I was yelled at and verbally abused by the boss—but not my supervisor. Whenever he had time, he tried to show me how to do my job more efficiently and, more importantly, more safely.

Flagging was the best job I ever had, and the worst job I ever had. It was the worst money I ever made, and the conditions were deplorable. No washroom facilities at all except for the bush, and half of the time, I couldn't get anyone to hold my sign . . .

I do a lot of writing, and I coined the name "Belligerent Construction" for Belanger Construction, because it's a belligerent, bellicose business. The man in charge has only one interest, and it's not human interest—it's the job. He's pushing men and machines to the limit to finish the job this year and win plaudits from the BOSS, and make more money for the BOSS. Never in my life have I witnessed such abuse of people. The equipment ranks more than the employees. It's pathetic and I'm glad I'm done with it. It hurts to see people I care for becoming discouraged, hurt, resentful and belligerent—all becoming clones of Jim . . . People there work like dogs and do good work, but there's never a word of praise—not one shred of human decency is shown for these hardworking people who are hundreds of miles from their families. They are chained to this below union scale job because of the current economic situation.

I have heard that (Belanger Owner) Ron Belanger is an intelligent man. I guess he is, but he must be ignorant of what's going on down here. In any business, people are the most valuable asset. But in this business, profit seems to be the only concern, and the equipment is treated better than their operators.

So I end this essay, crusade or whatever. And for the sake of my friends still working out there, obey their signs—what's the big rush anyway?

So, as they used to say on Hill Street Blues, "Be careful out there."

Lorraine Payette,  
Jackfish

Mail your letters to The News, Box 579, Terrace Bay, Ont., P0T 2W0