

# MESSAGE FROM THE PRESIDENT

## *Preserving Canada's Forest History*

STEVEN ANDERSON

One of the founding purposes of the Forest History Society was to identify, collect, and preserve forest history. It remains so today. We have accomplished that by accessioning collections into the Alvin J. Huss Archives located at the FHS headquarters. But equally important have been the Society's efforts behind the scenes to help valuable collections reach hundreds of other repositories around North America.

To that end, the Society has just completed a joint effort aimed at preserving Canada's forest history, working in collaboration with the Canadian Forest Service, the Network in Canadian History and Environment (NiCHE), and others. The two-year effort included (1) a bilingual survey (in English and French) of repositories throughout Canada to assess the interest, willingness, and ability of each to accept forest history-related collections into their archives, and (2) identifying valuable collections and helping them safely reach an official archive for preservation. David Brownstein of the University of British Columbia (UBC) was hired to lead the project under the guidance of FHS member Graeme Wynn, a historical geographer at UBC, and myself.

The timing of the project was profound. With an aging population and industry consolidation, Canada's need to attend to saving its forestry records was vital. But even as the project was getting started, policy changes and staff reductions at Library and Archives Canada (LAC) spurred LAC's decision to suspend accepting any new donations of nongovernmental records. This increased the preservation burden on local and regional archival centers. Compounding the problem was the discontinuation of the federally funded National Archival Development Program that had previously helped smaller repositories to secure matching grants to meet staffing needs.

Still, the libraries, archives, museums, and historical societies contacted were very interested in collecting and preserving more forest history materials. Two-hundred eight of the 573 repositories identified (36 percent) responded, and of this group 169, or over 80 percent, were enthusiastic about the prospects for forest history collections. Yet challenges and barriers abounded. Not all of the existing collections were housed in climate-controlled conditions; facilities contended with significant existing backlogs of collections awaiting proper processing; and many finding aids had not been digitized, thereby making access to the information in the collections more difficult. Less than half of the repositories had any mandate to collect forest history.



The reasons given as barriers to accepting additional forest history-related collections are well known and not unique to Canada. According to our survey results, space, staff, and funding limitations are major impediments to acquisition. Of the 208 respondents, 186 (89%) considered lack of space to be a concern, 191 (92%) believed themselves to be understaffed, and 178 (86%) reported being underfunded. Although additional use of the existing collections and advocacy of the discipline of forest history would tend to improve prospects for collecting more materials, there is, of course, a catch-22 at play: if the existing collections are not processed and their finding aids posted online, then the likelihood of researchers even

knowing about the collections diminishes significantly.

The survey results were extremely valuable, and David Brownstein was also active in locating new collections to be preserved. As a result of the project, for instance, he facilitated donation of two British Columbia forest inventory maps from 1941, owned by Don McLaurin of Whistler, to the Chilliwack Museum and Archives. The unique maps show a compilation of information from forest survey examination strips, air photos, and private cruise information. Mr. McLaurin had saved the maps many years ago while working for the BC Forest Service. Also, the papers of Richard M. Herring, a logger, axeman, river driver, canoeman, and consultant in several locations in the United States and Canada, were shepherded to the UBC special collections. They include a large library of maps, correspondence, reports, and a fantastically broad range of visual records. The latter include glass-lantern slides and more conventional 35 mm slides, negatives, and movies in various film formats, all of which depict forest activities such as logging operations, mills, and hunting scenes.

This is an excellent example of what can happen when adequate funding, energy, facilities, and space come together for a larger purpose. Having now built a network of supportive archival contacts, we hope to continue the momentum to safeguard Canada's forest history. To see a copy of the full report and a brochure about the project, go to: [www.foresthistory.org/Research/Can\\_Archives\\_Proj.html](http://www.foresthistory.org/Research/Can_Archives_Proj.html). The Forest History Society will continue to advocate for such efforts, connect with our colleagues near and far, and serve as a hub of forest history information—remaining a resource for people throughout North America who want to learn about archiving their family, organizational, or company records. □