

Museums rescue Sun archives

» MOVING HISTORY

BY COLIN SLARK

By the time the former Brandon Sun building at 501 Rosser Ave. had sold in October of this year, most of the company's core operations and belongings had long moved to its new home at The Town Centre mall.

One notable exception was a collection of irreplaceable items: the Sun's print archives dating back to the year of Brandon's founding.

With the change in building ownership rapidly approaching in September, a group of Sun employees, representatives from local museums and concerned citizens came together to find a new home for 140 years of newspapers.

Their efforts saved the chronicles of the Wheat City's history and found them temporary refuge at the Commonwealth Air Training Plan Museum, but the parties involved are still searching for a forever home.

On Sept. 22, Sun warehouse worker Miguel Hernandez sent a message to local history buff Aly Wowchuk warning her that a dumpster was being dropped off at the old building in preparation for the sale and they had plans to purge everything over the upcoming weekend.

Hernandez said when he was asked to prepare to clean out the old building, he inquired if there were other copies of the materials in the archives. When he was told that there wasn't, he said he was ready to move them into his own home.

"In my country, we say if people forgot your history, you have the tendency to repeat it," the immigrant from Colombia said. "If, for example, you forget all that happened with residential schools, you will repeat it."

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Brandon General Museum and Archives administrator Keith Waterfield (left), Commonwealth Air Training Plan Museum executive director Stephen Hayter and local history buff Aly Wowchuk show off Brandon Sun archives at their temporary home in the air museum's historic hangar. Before the old Sun building sold in October, the three of them and other volunteers worked together to rescue the archives before they were taken to the landfill. (Colin Slark/The Brandon Sun)

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Moving the archives took just over 4 hours

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Since coming to Brandon, he said he has learned to speak English and has purchased a house. Knowing that Wowchuk has been involved with local museums, he said he reached out to her to see if he could repay what has become his home by helping save a record of its history and make it publicly accessible.

Once Wowchuk was notified, she reached out to Keith Waterfield, administrator of the Brandon General Museum and Archives, and Commonwealth Air Training Plan Museum executive director Stephen Hayter, who then marshalled their museums' volunteers to put a plan into action in co-ordination with the Sun's warehouse staff.

Thankfully, they were able to delay the archives getting purged while a plan of action was developed — although, Waterfield mused that if they had been thrown into the landfill, they probably would have headed out to dig them up.

“It just kind of evolved because at first we’re like ‘oh, well, we could take World War II-vintage books that would be appropriate for our archives,’” Hayter said. “But then the idea that the rest of it wouldn’t be saved didn’t make a whole lot of sense.”

Then the air museum figured it could save the years covering 1900 through 1950, but again, Hayter and the others figured it didn’t make sense to leave any of the archives to be destroyed.

“It’s a documentation of the history of the city,” Wowchuk said. “You have our sports, our politics, any big local events, photographers throughout the years documenting all of these very big moments of the city. But reading the papers, too, it’s also the evolution of language and how things were recorded back in the day.

“It’s really good that a lot of them have been digitized, but not all of them.”

“That was a huge thing that kept coming up,” Waterfield said. “People kept saying ‘well, the Brandon Sun archives are digitized’ and I can tell you that 1993 doesn’t exist, because I keep looking for things. It’s obviously important to preserve these materials and you can’t just trust that the digital archives are going to last as well.”

When you touch and read a 100-yearold newspaper, Hayter said, you’re seeing a piece of history that made its way into the hands of people across the city that day.

On Oct. 10, Wowchuk, Hayter, Waterfield, volunteers from the museums, Brandon University students and some retired Brandon Sun journalists took the books containing the archives through a side exit to cars waiting on Fifth Street and loaded them up.

Those vehicles drove up to the air museum, deposited their loads into a side room in the historic Second World War-era hangar and then came back for more, repeating the process until everything had been moved.

With all the people who came out to help, it took just over four hours to complete. Later on, Brandon University history students from one of Rhonda Hinters’ classes helped assemble the shelving units that the archives are now resting on.

Because of ongoing structural issues in the hangar still awaiting a permanent fix, the museum is officially closed for the winter. It’s a safety precaution in case a heavy snowfall builds up on the structure and increases the chance that part of the roof caves in.

However, that means the archives aren’t in anyone’s way for the moment as the stakeholders involved decide where they’ll be kept longterm and under what conditions they’ll be accessible to the public.

“Will it end up in the Legislative Archives? Will there be new space developed for it? Who knows,” Hayter said. “It’s dry, but it’s cold. It’s not climate- controlled and that’s a bit of an issue going forward, but it’s saved.”

Among the possible homes that have been discussed are Brandon University — which took in much of the Sun’s photographic archives — the University of Manitoba, Library and Archives Canada and the Manitoba legislature, though no firm plans are in place yet.

There’s also the question of who will own the archives and determine the terms under which they are accessed, whether it’s the Sun, the institution housing them or a shared agreement between parties.

Hayter and the air museum are hoping to scour the pages for relevant information while they’re in-house. In the past, volunteers have gone through historic volumes of other papers like the Winnipeg Free Press and scanned everything that had to do with the flight schools that trained Commonwealth pilots in the 1940s.

“We have a database with hundreds of articles that we’ve scanned,” Hayter said. “We’d like to do the same with these and then that way, no matter what happens to the collection going forward, we’ll have captured at least details on our story.”

Should someone be interested in looking through the archives during their stay at the air museum, Hayter said people can reach out to arrange for volumes to be temporarily moved to their archive building for research. Though, he does warn that it will be a chilly experience until the end of winter.

Whatever happens, the museums involved are hopeful that they will remain accessible to the public.

“I hate to say it, but local papers are kind of a dying breed,” Wowchuk said. “It’s really important that people support them. If they want to see it preserved, they have to support (their) local paper, support (their) local museums and help preserve that history going forward.

“Or else it ends up in a landfill.” “We’ve already lost our TV station,” said BGMA board chair Brent Chamberlain, referring to the demise of CKX in 2009. “That was a big hit.”

“We as a community already regret certain buildings being demolished,” Hayter said. “We’re losing history that was important to Brandon, and that’s why we have to ensure that history isn’t lost.”

If an institution or organization is interested in a discussion about finding a new home for the Brandon Sun’s archives, Waterfield encourages them to email him at bgmainfo@wcgwave.ca.

Waterfield and Hayter would like to thank volunteers Alexandra Doherty, Donna Hogeland, Judith Grierson, Art Brown, Doug Samson, John McNarry, Brad Wells, Mike Nantais and anyone else who might have helped move the archives. » cslark@brandonsun.com » X: @ColinSlark



Keith Waterfield (left) and Aly Wowchuk (right) pore through an old edition of the Brandon Sun in the newspaper archives’ new temporary home at the Commonwealth Air Training Plan Museum. (Colin Slark/The Brandon Sun)

