Prairie College, Rapid City, Manitoba: The Failed Dream of John Crawford

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When Robert Alexander Fyfe, principal of the Canadian Literary Institute, attempted to persuade John Crawford to join him in the theological faculty of that Woodstock institution, Crawford was not easy to convince. He relished his role as a Baptist preacher of the gospel and did not wish to exchange the pulpit for the classroom. Crawford only altered his position when Fyfe pointed out to him that, by teaching theology, he would be preaching through every student for the ministry. In 1868 Crawford became part of the faculty of Canadian Literary Institute, where he taught for the next eleven years.

Fyfe was not only a supporter of theological education: he was also a strong advocate of sending Baptist missionaries to the West as it opened up. Crawford was also persuaded by this part of Fyfe's convictions. In 1879, following Fyfe's death, the subscribers of the Canadian Institute voted to move its theological department to Toronto, where two years later it opened as Toronto Baptist College. Crawford, however, did not move with the department. He resigned and quickly began raising support for a school in Manitoba that would educate men for the ministry in the West. Prairie College opened in 1880. It closed only three years later. The school was bankrupt, and no financial support could be found for keeping it open in the face of a movement to centralize all Baptist theological education in Toronto. John Crawford's dream had failed, and the story of Prairie College largely faded from memory. But its story is one part of the history of Baptist education and indeed of higher education in Canada.

John Crawford was born in 1819 near Castledawson, County Londonderry, Ireland. The Crawfords were strict Presbyterians, but John had an independent spirit and, at the age of fourteen or fifteen, he became a Baptist. As a result, his father ordered John out of the house and disinherited him. Through the assistance of Alexander Carson, Baptist pastor and scholar, John was able to prepare himself for the ministry, studying at Edinburgh University and then at Stepney College. After that, according to a family account, he "roamed the earth, building a church in Leeds and a chapel on wheels."[1]

In England, John Crawford met and married Sarah Louise Hackett, who was also originally from Ireland. The couple had two daughters, Emily and Frances. Prospects in England were poor for a Baptist preacher with a family. In 1689, the Toleration Act had allowed freedom of worship to nonconformists who dissented from the Church of England. Nevertheless, Baptists and members of other nonconformist groups found themselves disadvantaged by the numerous restrictions that remained. Many people were emigrating, and John and Sarah decided to go. Selling most of their wedding gifts to finance the journey, the family of four headed for Nova Scotia, probably in 1858. Leaving his wife and daughters with Baptist friends in Halifax, John Crawford left for Toronto and then headed on foot northwest, looking for a settlement that had a group of Baptists with both the desire and the means to support a preacher. That he found in the village of Cheltenham. He returned to Halifax to bring his family to its new home, and it was in Cheltenham that two more children, Hugh and Isabel, were born to the couple.

John Crawford became known as an able and popular preacher, and so he came to the attention of Robert Fyfe. In 1843, Fyfe had become interim principal of Montreal Baptist College, and although he did not feel prepared to accept the offer to remain on a permanent basis, he retained a strong interest in ministerial education. The Montreal school closed in 1849. By 1855, Fyfe was agitating for a school to be founded in Upper Canada. The following year, he and other supporters of the idea set to work raising funds, and the Canadian Literary Institute opened in Woodstock in September of 1860 with Fyfe as principal. It was coeducational and offered a general literary program and also a theological department.

The institute had neither an endowment nor any institutionally-based support. It was financed by subscriptions, and Fyfe spent his summers travelling in order to raise money for the school. In addition to being

principal, he was the sole professor in the theological department, and his teaching schedule was heavy. In an undated letter he wrote,

> I lecture on Theology three times a week; on Church History three times a week. I have a class in Romans twice a week . . . I have a class in Natural Theology three times a week; a class in Mental Philosophy three times a week; a class in Moral Science twice a week; and a Senior Reading Class twice a week . . . I have a Bible class on Sundays, besides preaching as I find opportunity."[2] In 1867, he told the trustees of the institute, "The school has reached a crisis in its history . . . The time has come for reinforcing the teaching in [the Theological] department. At the last meeting of the Trustees a vote was passed authorizing the employment of an additional professor . . . but as no provision was made to raise his salary, such a vote cannot be carried out . . . The Principal *cannot* carry on his work any further in its present shape.[3]

As a result of his plea, Fyfe was given permission to seek out the assistance of John Crawford.[4] His assertion that, by joining the faculty, Crawford would be preaching through every student in the ministry was consistent with Fyfe's own views of education at the Institute. According to his biographer, Theo T. Gibson, Fyfe "regularly re-interpreted the word 'theological' for this part of his institute: his word was 'ministerial.'" The education that the school provided "was capable of giving the churches leadership most relevant to their needs in the shortest reasonable time, without breaking home ties, and enriched by irreplaceable experience in the very province of their intended labours."[5]Convinced by the appeal, Crawford joined the faculty.[66] The family moved to Woodstock, and Crawford lectured in Biblical interpretation and church history at a salary of $600 a year.[7]

While the addition of Crawford to the faculty eased Fyfe's teaching burden, Fyfe's duties as fund-raiser continued to be onerous. In the winter of 1874-5, an outbreak of scarlet fever scattered the students and, even after it was over, many did not return.[8] The need for Fyfe to raise funds was greater than ever, but the Long Depression followed the Panic of 1873, and money was hard to raise. While the literary department of the institute was self-sustaining, theological students were not charged tuition, and this drained the finances of the institute.[9]

There was another possibility for the theological department, but Fyfe resisted it. William McMaster, loyal Baptist and wealthy business-

man, had assisted Fyfe early in the history of the Canadian Literary Institute, but the senator and his pastor, John Harvard Castle, now had a broader vision: the transfer of theological education to Toronto.[10] When Castle made the suggestion to Fyfe, the latter begged him "to leave in abeyance till he, Dr. F., should be 'under the sod.'"[11] He was aware that such an arrangement would increase the school's already onerous financial burden. Soon after Fyfe's death, in September 1878, the matter came up again, and now it became widely though unofficially known that McMaster was willing to give generous support to the move.

The governance of the Institute was in the hands of its subscribers, and on 17 July 1879, a meeting of subscribers was held in Guelph, Ontario, to consider the report of the Investigating Committee appointed by the trustees. At this Educational Conference, as it was called, John Castle skillfully presented the cultural advantages of a move to Toronto and alluded to the promised financial support without mentioning the name of the potential benefactor. With the further assurance that the Woodstock institution would be maintained and even expanded, the subscribers approved the removal of the Theological Department to Toronto. Soon after this, McMaster's name and gift were made known, and the Toronto Baptist College opened in October 1881.[12]

On 28 July 1879, eleven days after the meeting, John Crawford submitted his resignation. He wrote:

> According to the resolution passed at the meeting lately held in Guelph, it will be necessary for one of the present staff of professors in the theological department to retire, in order to make room for the forthcoming president.
>
> After mature & prayerful deliberation, it is my desire to vacate the position I have occupied for the last twelve years. I beg, therefore, to be released from the duties of my office at the close of the first quarter in the coming collegiate year. If, however it may be thought necessary to make such arrangements as will supply my place from the commencement of the year, I will, nevertheless, expect to receive one quarter's salary. This latter arrangement would, of course, suit me best, as I could, under such circumstances, proceed at once to seek other employment.[13]

Crawford did not, however, "seek" employment. Very quickly he made his own employment, for Crawford had a vision.

Soon after Crawford began teaching at the Canadian Literary

Institute, Robert Fyfe had shown interest in the western parts of Canada that were opening up for settlement. In 1869, he suggested that the Ontario Baptists send a delegation to survey conditions there. The two ministers who made the trip came back convinced that "God was calling their churches to reach into the future Province" of Manitoba.[14] Then, in 1871, Fyfe recommended that the Convention send a missionary as soon as enough money was pledged to cover his salary for three years. Fyfe worked efficiently on the project and, in May 1873, Alexander McDonald left Ontario to do pioneering work, opening churches in Winnipeg and elsewhere.

Though Crawford had initially been reluctant to exchange the pulpit for the classroom, he had not only come to see the importance of training men to become ministers: he had recognized the value of Fyfe's vision of "ministerial" education that was provided in the area from which many of the students came and in which they would serve. Now he combined that interest with the concern Fyfe had shown for the West, and, soon after his resignation, Crawford embarked on a journey of about three thousand miles to gather information. After he arrived in Manitoba, Alexander McDonald spent almost two weeks driving him to different parts of Manitoba and the surrounding Northwest Territories.[15] By the time Crawford returned to Woodstock and wrote a letter that was published in the *Canadian Baptist* of 9 October 1879, he had a plan.[16]

The settlers whom Crawford visited wanted pastors, but they could not give them full support. They needed pastors who could support themselves by farming; then, gradually, the church members could take on the responsibility. Furthermore, many prospective pastors would be unable to pay much, if anything, for their education. They needed a training school that had a farm and thus could become self-sufficient. It should be near land on which the students could establish their own farms to further their support. The students themselves would erect the college buildings designed by Crawford. He assured his readers that his earlier experience qualified him for both overseeing the farm and constructing the buildings.

Crawford believed he found the ideal location in Rapid City and its immediate surroundings: "It is a dry and healthy locality. The land is rolling and picturesque, with an excellent soil, a dark sandy loam upon a clay bottom . . . This locality is well watered, and the water of excellent quality. There is also lime at hand, and abundance of fuel to burn it; also clay for brick, and stones for the foundation." Crawford and the current residents of Rapid City believed that it had another strong advantage: they

anticipated that the transcontinental line of the Canadian Pacific Railway would pass through Rapid City, which might become the first divisional point west of Winnipeg. The city would boom in population and land values would increase.

Crawford presented his plan at the Baptist Convention of Ontario and Quebec held in October 1879. The Convention could not officially take on work outside its boundaries, but all "seemed very favourably impressed with the necessity of such a work, and an influential committee was appointed to confer with Dr. Crawford, and to aid him in bringing his scheme into practical operation."[17] Crawford enlisted the help of George B. Davis, who had been a student at Woodstock before going to Chicago to complete his theological studies. Both Crawford and Davis visited churches throughout Ontario to raise money for the new Prairie College. The canvass was thorough: the pastor of the Kemptville and South Gower church later wrote that when Crawford came to the area, "I drove him from farm to farm . . . He gratefully received a dollar, a five or double that."[18]

With such small contributions and without the major donations for which Crawford had hoped, growth of the college fund was slow, but this did not deter him. Sometime in the past he and his father had become reconciled, and Crawford had received an inheritance that enabled him to buy a house in Woodstock. Now he sold the house. With that $4000, an investment by Davis, and the gifts and pledges of those who had responded to the solicitation, it was time to begin. Early in the spring of 1880, Davis traveled to Rapid City with the first party of students. They secured land and went to work, starting to farm and also to build. A second group of students arrived in July. According to George Davis's brother John, "as two of the students had been masons, and another was a first-class carpenter, under their instructions twelve of us built the walls and put up a three-storey building 28 by 34 feet." On the first of October, the building was closed in.[19]

John Crawford's son, Hugh, was among those breaking land and constructing the building. Then shortly after the building was ready for occupancy, John Crawford brought his daughter Emily and two other women, one a student and the other a cook, to take up residence there. Emily had graduated from the Canadian Literary Institute with honours, and when classes began at Prairie College that winter, she and George Davis taught "without salary, to give the institution a start."[20] John Crawford did not stay long, however; he returned home to continue his quest for money to support the fledgling institution.

The following February, Emily Crawford wrote a report that was printed in the *Canadian Baptist*. She first described the setting. The college was

> a substantial stone building, quite common-place looking, three storeys high, 28 by 34. It stands upon a hill that slopes down to the Saskatchewan, and commands a fine view of Rapid City. This embryo metropolis contains 75 houses, 500 inhabitants, and 8 stores. Most of the latter are General Stores – that is, they keep everything, except just what you want . . .
>
> By the time you arrive at Prairie College, you have learned to look upon a log house, with one room, a garret, and a fire, as the height of luxury; so that a stone edifice of three storeys strikes you as imposing. The idea of complaining because the dining room has mother earth for a carpet, because the table is made by driving stakes into the ground and nailing boards to them, because the walls are stone-gemmed sometimes with sparkling frost diamonds – to complain of these trifles never for a moment enters your mind.[21]

The school was there to provide education, and Emily Crawford's father patterned it after the Canadian Literary Institute. Emily provided a vivid description: "'Did the bell ring?' 'Hic! haec! hoc!' 'Study Hours!' There was something refreshing in that familiar call – It brought up memories of C.L.R. days. Indeed Prairie College in many respects, is a 'little faithful copy of its sire.' 'They do so at Woodstock.' 'When I was a member of the Adelphian, we did so.' are final: that settles the question. Prairie College has its Literary Society, its paper, its choir, its debates, its meetings every Friday evening, and last Friday it had an oyster supper."[22]

The basic purpose of the college was to prepare ministers, and the letter went on to describe the spiritual activity of the students. On weekends, they went to nearby settlements to preach, some walking "five, seven, or ten miles to fill their appointments." They met with people who gathered together in log houses. When the students returned, they held a prayer meeting, reporting their activity and asking for "Divine blessing on the day's work." During the summer, some of the students did pastoral work, and altogether five churches were organized by the Prairie College students.[23]

While Emily Crawford and George Davis taught in Manitoba, John Crawford again toured Ontario, attempting to raise funds. His wife and Isabel, his youngest daughter, remained in Woodstock so that Isabel could

continue her education there. Finally, in the fall of 1881, Crawford brought his wife and daughter to the college. When he arrived, he discovered that Davis had decided to resign. Crawford already knew of the possibility, but he hoped the difficulty could be settled. It was not, however, and that winter Davis set up his own school in Prairie City. Financial matters were at the heart of this bitter dispute.[24] Without Davis to share responsibilities, Crawford was overcome with work. The labor was not all academic, for the college had its own farm, and there was much agricultural work to do before the opening of the school term.

Crawford intended that the College would be as near self-supporting as possible, and it depended on the work of all available hands. The students farmed their own nearby allotments and also contributed their labor to the college farm. And Crawford himself worked in ways he might never have expected. Learning that fish were plentiful in Oak Lake, about sixty-five miles away, he took his son, Hugh, with him on a fishing trip. The trip was successful: they returned with over one hundred dollars worth of fish. However, the trip was hazardous, for it was winter. Crawford reported, "One night we could find neither wood nor water, although we drove on until midnight. We had ultimately to abandon our search and set up our tent on the bare prairie, with the thermometer twenty degrees below zero . . . While we were erecting our tent, I had two of my fingers frozen. The ends of them were as hard as a rock, but the frost had not penetrated very far."[25]

Manitoba winters also penetrated the eighteen-inch-thick stone walls of Prairie College, and the "sparkling frost diamonds" described by Emily could not be ignored indefinitely. Eventually the walls were plastered. The Crawfords' apartment was on the second floor, along with three classrooms, while the top story was divided into twelve small rooms, each housing two or three students. The bottom story housed the dining room and kitchen, which had a dirt floor. Isabel wrote that the area "was always damp & disagreeable until we had it plastered & floored. Often we caught frogs & lizzards [*sic*] wiggling about the corners, & one night we went to church forgetting to close the windows & on our return found the whole floor alive. The students got a boiler & sticks & gathered 53 frogs & 300 lizzards [*sic*] off that floor!"[26]

The students had a strong role model in their zealous mentor. John Crawford once walked forty-nine miles to dedicate a church. "This done he walked on preaching 4 more times in churches & school houses. When the last service was over & he was going to start for home, a man & a

horse went with him father and the man taking turns riding the horse. At Minnedosa man & horse were sent back & father walked the 18 miles to the college, arriving in time for breakfast & taught his classes as usual Monday morning."[27]

John Crawford was not the only member of the family to work hard. When his wife and Isabel arrived, they found Emily "in a dirty old dress & a scrubbing pail & mop in her hands." Years later Isabel wrote, "Ma & I were perfectly shocked & started to cry for we had no idea that she had to do hard work. She went out to teach. It was the first time in my life I had seen her dirty & to think of one of us having to scrub fairly sickened me."[28]

John Crawford's wife, Sarah, had grown up in a comfortable home in Ireland and was educated well by private tutors. Now she was put on the college prospectus as teaching "French Reading and English Authors, &c" while her daughter Emily offered "Latin, Modern Languages, Music, Painting and Drawing, &c."[29] Two years later, Sarah was listed as offering "Modern Languages and History," while Emily would teach "Music, Painting, Drawing and English."[30] For that year, the Crawford's youngest daughter, Isabel, was added to the roster. Like its larger model, the Canadian Literary Institute, Prairie College would also accept "literary" as well as theological students, and Isabel Crawford was to teach "Junior English and Reading."[31]

In February 1883, the *Canadian Baptist* published a letter from "A Farmer." Its writer lamented how the Crawford family had "made slaves of themselves to do a work on behalf of the denomination." He went on, "It is a most humiliating fact that the doctor and his family have had to toil and work, and deny themselves of much that we enjoy, because they are endeavoring to meet a want of, and plant a cause for the denomination."[32] Years later, John Crawford's youngest daughter used similar language when she wrote, "The work at P.C. was simply tremendous & when I look back now I pause & ask myself 'How did you do it – The washings were awful & the simple making of the bread & butter for that family was one person's work. I baked every alternate day & washed the days intervening. No galley slave ever worked harder than I did rendering lard, corning *whole cows*, making soap, scrubbing melting snow keeping my eye on a hundred & one things."[33]

Despite the Crawfords' diligent work, the college was struggling. Although Crawford knew of four schools in the United States that were run on a plan of self-support,[34] he did not recognize the greater difficulty

of farming this part of the Canadian West. The weather was an unpredictable factor in all farming. Early in January 1881, George Davis wrote to the *Canadian Baptist*, "Sixty acres of grain promised us plenty for feed and seed all last summer until on the night of September the 12th – just as most of the grain put in late and on sod, was in the milk – there came a nipping frost and one half of our crop was gone."[35] But, in addition, Crawford had misread the climate. When he had visited in 1879, the area was enjoying a wet cycle that continued for the next years. Then the much more common dry cycle returned.[36]

Furthermore the newly-developing area had very limited access to markets. The selection of Rapid City as a location was based on the assumption that the main line of the Canadian Pacific Railway west of Winnipeg would go through the town. Instead, however, the railway officials decided on a more southerly route, through Brandon. The area around Rapid City developed more slowly than anticipated, and the price of supplies and of shipping donated stock and machinery was much higher than expected. Thus the farm did not provide the hoped-for support for the school and its students.

By the time of the Baptist Missionary Convention of Manitoba and the Northwest in June 1883, the situation was critical. Crawford was making plans to go to England to solicit funds, but suddenly there was a new factor: Malcolm MacVicar of Toronto Baptist College had come to the meeting. He was a man with a mission. He arrived at Portage la Prairie with the intention of persuading the Manitoba Baptists that all theological education should be centralized at Toronto Baptist College. After discussing the matter, the Convention decided to close Prairie College; John Crawford's dream had come to an end. All that was left for him to do was to close Prairie College and search for a new situation.

Closing the school was a challenge. During its time of optimism, Rapid City had experienced a real estate boom, but that had ended dramatically, and land prices were low. The farm that once seemed to offer secure equity could not be sold. Crawford had poured all his assets into the venture, and now all was lost. Conscientiously he attempted to repay his debts, and in the process he even lost possession of his personal library.

Pioneering missionary Alexander McDonald had moved from Winnipeg across the border to the Dakota Territory. He invited John Crawford to visit him and to preach in the Baptist church in St. Thomas, in the northeast corner of the territory, and there Crawford received a unanimous call to become the pastor. The American Baptist Home

Mission Society underwrote the salaries of ministers in this frontier area, so he would receive fifty dollars a month from the society; out of that he would pay rent for his family's accommodation.[37] So, in the fall of 1883, he left to take up his new pastorate, leaving his wife, his youngest daughter, and some remaining students to wind up affairs in Rapid City.

During its short lifespan, Prairie College made its contribution to the Baptist church. John Crawford and his students converted settlers and founded congregations, and several of the men continued their ministry in the West for years after their student days had ended. But for John Crawford, this was a bittersweet legacy. He had invested his energy, as well as his assets, in this dream of a college that would give practical, local training for the ministry. That dream had failed. He spent seven years in his pastorate in North Dakota. Then, in 1890, wishing to be buried "under the old flag," he accepted a call to a church in Wingham and returned to Canada. John Crawford died on 2 June 1892.

Endnotes

1. Isabel Crawford, Notebook untitled [Miscellaneous 1950-1953], Crawford to Taylor, 16 February 1950. Isabel Crawford Collection, American Baptist Archives, Atlanta, Georgia (hereafter ABA).

2. James Edward Wells, *Life and Labors of Robert Alex. Fyfe, D.D.* (Toronto: W.J. Gage & Company [n.d.]), 343.

3. Theo T. Gibson, *Robert Alexander Fyfe: His Contemporaries and His Influence* (Burlington, ON: Welch Publishing Company Inc., 1988), 299.

4. Trustees minutes, annual meeting, 9 July 1867, Minute book 1858-1889, File 11 Board of Trustees, Canadian Literary Institute Fonds, Canadian Baptist Archives, Hamilton, Ontario (hereafter CBA). According to these minutes, Crawford was to be offered a salary of $650 a year.

5. Gibson, *Robert Alexander Fyfe*, 266.

6. A sketch of John Crawford in the *Canadian Baptist*, 20 May 1937, states, "in 1858 he came to Ontario, meeting Dr. Fyfe, then in Bond Street Church, Toronto, at once; it was a life-long friendship of closest intimacy." I have not found any other reference to their previous acquaintance.

7. David W. Remus, "John Crawford" in Baptist Biographies, *Canadian Baptist,* 1 August 1967, also quoted by Gibson, 275, from the 1894 "Memorial Address" for John Crawford given by his son-in-law, William Henry Cline. An account written by John Crawford's granddaughter Doris Cline Ward

states that the salary was "$500.00 a year plus free education for the family" (Sarah Hackett Crawford file, Grimsby Historical Society Archives, Grimsby, Ontario). Neither figure agrees with the salary suggested in the trustees minutes noted above.

8. Wells, *Life and Labors of Robert Alex. Fyfe,* 351.

9. Wells, *Life and Labors of Robert Alex. Fyfe,* 361.

10. Charles M. Johnston, "John Harvard Castle," *Dictionary of Canadian Biography Online*, www.biographi.ca.

11. Wells, *Life and Labors of Robert Alex. Fyfe,* 358.

12. Gibson, *Robert Alexander Fyfe*, 324.

13. Crawford to Board of Trustees, 28 July 1879, File 9, Series 1: Correspondence, Box 701, Canadian Literary Institute Fonds, CBA.

14. Gibson, *Robert Alexander Fyfe*, 316.

15. When Manitoba became a province in 1870, it was about one-eighteenth of its present size. The Northwest Territories formed the eastern, northern, and western boundaries of the original small province.

16. Letter by John Crawford, *Canadian Baptist*, 9 October 1879, 1.

17. *Canadian Baptist*, 23 October 1879, 5.

18. C.C. McLaurin, *Pioneering in Western Canada* (Calgary: published by the author, 1939), 289.

19. John Edwin Davis, *The Life Story of a Leper* (Toronto: Toronto Canadian Baptist Foreign Mission Board, [1918]), 27.

20. Report by John Crawford, *Canadian Baptist*, 20 January 1881, 4.

21. Letter by Emily Crawford, *Canadian Baptist*, 17 March 1881, 5.

22. *Canadian Baptist*, 17 May 1881, 5.

23. McLaurin, *Pioneering in Western Canada*, 291.

24. A good summary of the complex situation is given by David W. Remus in a biography of John Crawford printed in the *Canadian Baptist*, 1 August 1967.

25. McLaurin, *Pioneering in Western Canada*, 291.

26. Isabel Crawford, Life Story, Box 10, 5, ABA.

27. Journal 1941-1942, 18 September 1941, 54.

28. Crawford, Life Story, 3.

29. Prairie College Prospectus, 1881, 102, CBA.

30. Prairie College Prospectus, 1883, 94, CBA.

31. In her later autobiographical writings, she gave no indication that she was ever called upon to teach, though she wrote of her physical labour and of teaching a Sunday school class. An earlier prospectus listed only two literary students, the Crawfords' son and an Anne Phillimore.

32. *Canadian Baptist*, 15 February 1883, 4.

33. Crawford, Life Story, 30.

34. Margaret E. Thompson, *The Baptist Story in Western Canada* (Calgary: The Baptist Union of Western Canada [1974]), 407.

35. *Canadian Baptist*, 27 January 1881, letter by G.B. Davis, 4.

36. Pierre Berton, *The Last Spike* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1974), 22.

37. Doris Cline Ward, John Crawford section, Ancestry of Emily (Crawford) Cline, Grimsby Historical Society Archives, Grimsby, Ontario.