

OTTAWA'S PUBLIC HISTORY MAKES HISTORY – A GREAT CAREER!

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by Michelle French

As an unbiased research business, Public History has been putting reports together for clients for several years, filling an unprecedented demand for historical research into land claims.

Sitting in his fifth-floor office in an Ottawa low-rise, Fred Hosking doesn't quite look the quintessential historian. He's a little too young, his office a little too tidy – and there's not a dusty old leatherbound manuscript in sight. But the president of Public History Inc. is no stranger to the wiles of historical research – it's still a tricky business. It's just that being a detective of history is more likely to land the intrepid historian in the ever-expanding online universe of Web portals and Geographical Information System (GIS) mapping technology than the card catalogue files of a library. For Hosking, technology's time has come, and not a moment too soon.

In the early 1990s, Hosking was an intern and later a contract employee for the federal Department of Indian and Northern Affairs. There he met two of his later business partners – Gerard Hartley and Eric Angel – and began formulating a plan to turn historical research into a technology-friendly business. "While we were working at Indian Affairs, we recognized that as independent contractors, as long as we were producing high-quality work, we could continue doing this type of research for years to come," he said.

While some contracted historians were still producing typewritten reports as late as the mid-1990s, Hosking and others saw an opportunity to create a business that could afford to close the technology gap. "We recognized that advances in technology and the expanding complexity of historical research provided opportunities for a more comprehensive and professional approach for historians, not just in the field of Aboriginal issues but in a wide variety of other areas," he said, adding that investment in technology such

as networked computers, databases and laser printers, as well as cutting-edge GIS mapping technology – for its time – was a “real step forward.”

On January 1, 1996 – just three years later – Hosking, Hartley, Angel and sociology major Shelley Garr opened for business at 331 Cooper Street in downtown Ottawa. The first month was a bit lean – not a single historian-for-hire. But over the last eight years, Public History’s customer base has expanded, with the federal government representing 70% of the historical research firm’s clientele; provincial governments, 20%; and law firms, First Nations and private companies, 10%.

In a climate of expanding litigation surrounding land claims in the early 1990s, it seemed that everyone wanted historical researchers, and the firm soon ballooned from just four historians and one office to 70 staff and two offices in Ottawa and Winnipeg. Six other employees now operate out of home offices in Vancouver, Edmonton, Hamilton, Montreal and Toronto.

Back on Cooper Street, the firm’s resource library is growing. Physically, it shows in the office library, stacked with over 6,000 books and journal articles. The firm’s technological edge may be less apparent, but with the addition of databases, electronic reports and Internet-accessible legal decisions, employees can find relevant information with the click of a mouse.

The staff of 60 is organized into “suites” of researchers working on similar issues. This is important, as Public History’s clients are often on opposite sides of legal battles – particularly when it comes to land claims, which is a major part of the firm’s work in addition to policy and social research, document management, GIS mapping, litigation support and general historical research.

As an unbiased research business, Public History has been putting reports together for clients for several years, filling a demand for historical research into land claims unparalleled in years past. According to Hosking,

this is due to several factors. For one, land claims became more complex in the early 1990s as claims expanded to include pre-Confederation agreements following a British Columbia decision in the late 1980s. "It broadened the scope of what gets included as a land claim," Hosking said. As well, advances in Internet technology have caused a spectacular growth in the number of documents historians must research - from 200 to as many as 300,000 per case. Add to this cutbacks in federal departments in the mid-1990s - of which staff historians were handed a disproportionate number of pink slips - and Hosking says the capacity of departments to handle land claims internally has largely been lost.

As an innovator, Public History lacks any real competition in its niche of expertise. With only one business specializing in land claims and women's issues and a score of independent contractors working on short-term projects, Public History is in a class unto itself. "We want to be growth-oriented and not just work in the narrow land claims area," Hosking says. While independent contractors often work for short periods when not looking for more permanent work, Public History has set down roots in the field - hiring long-term workers and putting money into training and resource-building. "The biggest difference for us in a sense is that we're in it for the long haul," Hosking explains.

If the firm's project base is any indication, that commitment is starting to rub off. Public History now fields up to 35 projects at one time and its annual operating revenue has grown to almost \$4 million - up from \$125,000 in 1996.

Leaning forward in his office chair, Hosking admits that the biggest challenge hasn't been finding work for his firm - it's been convincing the public that a history degree is a stepping-stone to a great career. "I've heard all the McDonald's jokes," he says dismissively. With gray office walls and rows of neatly ordered research materials lining the firm's resource library, Public History is more in the business of serving up research reports than providing service with a smile.