

DAVE HAD A PASSION FOR CANADIANA

Friend dedicates Ottawa archive library to his memory

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By James Elliott

It's been five years since Dave Brown died, depriving Hamilton of one of its all-time original eccentrics. A passionate naturalist who hated vegetables and cut down trees in his spare time. A fierce preservationist who rescued thousands of Hamilton artefacts yet helped demolition contractors tear the building down. The founder of science fairs in Hamilton, he was a technophobe.

And then there were the books.

When he died at 63, the longtime literary pack rat had amassed a book collection larger than many municipal libraries. Among the 60,000 books that filled almost every square inch of his Westdale bungalow, he had a particular interest in local histories – the more obscure the better.

On his death he bequeathed all 5,600 volumes to Grimsby native Fred Hosking and through him, the quirky, distinctive spirit of Brown lives on.

A recent Waterloo history graduate, Hosking had just parlayed his history degree and a facility with computers into a business venture – one that married the digital revolution with historical research. Public History, with offices in Ottawa and Winnipeg and more than 50 researchers, is now one of the busiest land claim and litigation research firms in the country with a client list that includes numerous federal and provincial ministries including Indian Affairs and the Attorney General and several First Nation bands.

Hosking, however, hasn't forgotten his Hamilton "uncle" and his passionate love of history and history books.

When Hosking was growing up in Grimsby, Brown was a regular visitor to the family home and he always came with a box of newly-acquired old books, each of which he would promote enthusiastically. Homage to that formative

mentoring, denoted by a brass plaque, occupies a corner of Public History's office in downtown Ottawa.

The plaque announces the Dave Brown Memorial Library, a unique repository of Canadians, small run local histories, rare tomes of natural history, mining journals and geology texts that is finding new life as an archival resource.

What's in the collection?

"His local history is huge," Hosking says. "There's some very small run material that wouldn't have been out in general circulation and even the National Library wouldn't have a copy."

Volumes such as The New Testament in Moose Cree, originally published by the British and Foreign Bible Society in 1856; a local history of Meadow Lake, Saskatchewan; a 1917 report to the International Joint Commission on water levels in Lake of the Woods, Ont. and a large collection of late-19th century Canadian atlases.

"Those are always interesting, especially when we're working on land claims. On the prairies, there are a number of towns that no longer exist, you can't find them on contemporary maps, you have to go back to these 1880-1890 atlases."

The Dave Brown Memorial Library, Hosking says, is the first line of reference for his researchers.

"Every new project we start, the first place we go is our library. Do we have anything relevant? Our staff use it regularly, both professionally and just because there's neat stuff they want to read."

It is also finding favour with Ottawa academics and government researchers who know of nowhere else to find complete engineering plans for the St. Lawrence Seaway or the annual reports from the Department of Agriculture from 1880-1900 or the history of some particularly remote residential school.

And the entire catalogue is indexed on a database so topics are easy to look up. These are not museum pieces and there is no white-glove rule for their use. "He didn't buy books for their appearance, he was buying for content. We use them as opposed to having them sit on a shelf where no one ever touches them. He wasn't a gloves kind of guy."

Evaluation of the collection has just been completed for insurance and Brown's contribution, culled from second-hand book stores, junk shops and garage sales all over North America, has been put at a cool \$125,000.

But the real value of the library is something much more than monetary.

Just before he died, Brown had given his blessing to the library.

"He thought that would be a really good idea because if all the books went to auction, then there's nothing left," Hosking says. "This way, there is a piece of Dave Brown around.

"I think he'd be happy because people are using it. We've taken all the work he did in building the collection and now it's available and being used on a regular basis."

By the end of the year, the index to the Dave Brown Memorial Library will be online at www.publichistory.ca"