

RESEARCH LEADERS

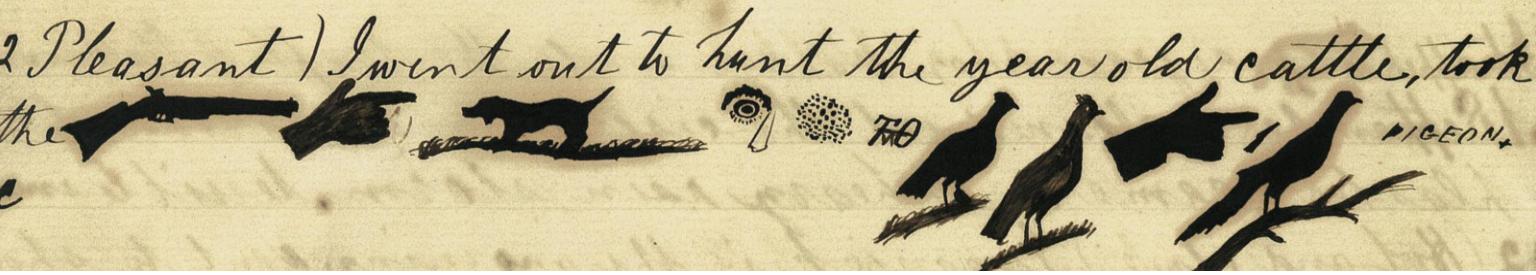
UNIVERSITY of GUELPH

CATHARINE WILSON

Francis and Ruth Redelmeier Professorship of Rural History

GIVING NEW LIFE TO CANADA'S RURAL PAST

Virtual volunteers help preserve history as they transcribe the lives of rural Canadians



The unique picture-sentence diary entry of Carver Simpson from circa 1881 (above) gives insight into rural Canadian history

Volunteers across Canada are “wrapped up” in Rural Diaries Archive project

Researchers and volunteer historians are getting new insights into rural Canada through a project to digitize the diaries of our country’s founders.

History professor Catharine Wilson, who is the Francis and Ruth Redelmeier Professor of Rural History, preserves and shares the engaging stories of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Canadians through the Rural Diaries Archive project. She launched the project in September 2015.

This online database brings together more than 130 diarists who wrote from 1800 to 1960. With the help of volunteer transcribers, thousands of old, faded, handwritten pages are being turned into typescript.

Transcribers go online, choose a diarist to read and use website tools to translate handwritten words on the page into digital text. The database of transcribed stories may be searched by academics, genealogists, local historians and anyone interested in particular topics.

Prof. Catharine Wilson holds the Francis and Ruth Redelmeier Professorship in Rural History at the University of Guelph. She promotes new historical analysis and encourages discussions of rural history among local history groups and international scholars.

“I’m finding there is a group of people, a community of transcribers, who start with a diarist and then get hooked, doing three to four pages every night,” she says. “They’re getting wrapped up in the stories that unfold.”

Diarists typically recorded their day’s work, visits and economic transactions. Wilson says their personal and honest entries make them the best records for understanding daily routines, relationships and emotions.

The stories that volunteers transcribe are those of real people, she says, and their work helps us study the lives of rural families and communities.

Wilson says the diaries help to correct a tendency to either romanticize the rural past or view it as backward.

Inspired by her great-great-grandmother’s diary, she began collecting and analyzing diaries to understand the social relationships underlying the concept of “neighbourhood.” The diaries have allowed Wilson to not only examine multiple examples of labour reciprocity but also share relationships and drama with readers in a very personal way.

“One of the transcribers wrote to me about a man who breaks up with Duckie, his girlfriend. The transcriber writes to me, ‘It’s haunted me for days. Everything I do, I’m wondering if he’s broken-hearted or how he’s coping.’”

The diaries were written by authors of all ages from the teenage romantic Susan Smith to the taxidermist Carver Simpson, who occasionally uses hand-drawn pictures instead of words.

The volunteers range from high school students to retired history enthusiasts around North America.

“One thing I didn’t realize was that today’s generation is having an increasingly difficult time reading handwriting,” says Wilson. “But they’re really handy with a laptop and the digital aspect of the project, while older generations are more familiar with some of the vocabulary and handwriting. So I’m seeing this coming together, this joining of hands, across generations.”

This digital project brings together citizen historians to make these underused sources available to current and future researchers, and helps widen and deepen understanding of Canadian history.

“I think the diaries engage people in history in a way they may never have experienced before,” says Wilson. “It takes them back to very intimate places, to the kitchens and farmyards of real people.”

To learn more about the virtual volunteer community, visit <https://ruraldiaries.lib.uoguelph.ca/>.

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This profile was written by Joanne Pearce, Students Promoting Awareness of Research Knowledge (SPARK)

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