Conducting Historical Research

Gathering facts about an individual, group, event, locality or organization—*researching*—is a vital step in any attempt to interpret the history of social, cultural, economic and political developments of earlier generations.

Pertinent historical data is occasionally at hand, perhaps in an attic trunk, in the form of letters, photographs, contracts or receipts. Frequently, however, this kind of knowledge is held in the memories of individuals or is submerged in old documents housed in institutional repositories. Getting at these riches can sometimes be a daunting prospect. It requires a basic knowledge of the materials needed in historical research, as well as a familiarity with the places that house them.

This brief guide provides novice researchers with the names of typical sources of historical information, as well as a sense of the range of information that can be available from those sources. A list of major repositories of historical information is included at the end of the guide, along with a modest introduction: "How to Write a Historical Research Report."

Historical Themes

Any historical research project is generated by a question, or even a set of questions. Certain questions are easy to tackle, with answers directly at hand. Others are more difficult or complex, and may take days, weeks or months to investigate and resolve.

It can be helpful to define and organize historical subjects, and projects, through various thematic devices, with one of the most useful involving the following three primary themes:

- Economic history concerns past human efforts to satisfy material needs and to produce and to distribute goods, services, and wealth.
- Political history embraces government, political systems and institutions and public affairs.
- Social and cultural history involves past non-economic and non-political human interactions, and the beliefs, ideas, skills, habits, arts, and institutions associated with or resulting from those interactions.

Placing your project within one of these themes can help situate it within a wider context, and make it more interesting and useful. Comparing a subject with other linked subjects can also help provide even greater context. Following are some traditional historical subjects, grouped by the three themes noted above:

Economic History
- hunting and trapping
- fishing
- farming (cereal grain, animal, dairy, and special product)
- fish processing
- milling, brewing, and distilling
- meat processing and packing
- making dairy products
- processing special agricultural products
- construction, development of transportation, communication, and energy systems
- light and heavy product manufacturing
- professional and business services like banking, financial services, etc.

Political History
- political parties and groups
- elections, candidates, and elected officials
- government policies, activities, and decisions
- government administration
- legal systems and personnel
- participation in the military

Social and Cultural History
- early Aboriginal communities
- First Nations and Métis communities
- group immigration and settlement
- pioneer life
- volunteer community organizations
- religious life and institutions
- teaching and learning, educational life and institutions
- domestic life
- cultural expression
- recreation and sport
- science and exploration

Filing and Storing Information

Besides searching, research also involves recording. As you work your way through a source, you will need to write down facts, or photocopy, microprint or scan pages. While the actual physical recording, organization and maintenance of the information is up to the individual, the methods should be straight-forward. Many researchers use cards for recording the data they have collected. These cards are easily transported and are often stored in small plastic recipe boxes. Other researchers prefer to record data in school exercise books or on sheets of ruled paper that are stored in three-ring binders. It is now also common to save information on computers, particularly laptops because of their compact size, weight and adaptability in a library or archives setting. If you choose the latter, be sure you make more

than one electronic version and save a printed copy as well.

Large materials, like copies of maps, have to be stored in a different way—perhaps in poster tubes—but their existence and location should be noted in your primary recording medium. All this evidence must be secured. If your project is a community effort, you ought to preserve it in an accessible location, such as a museum, archive, municipal office or local library.

In order to quickly retrace your steps, you need to cite your sources. Citations are references made on your research notes and should include the name of the repository (if applicable), the name of the source (*The Scratching River Post* newspaper, for example), the name of the author(s) of a book or article, and the date, location and publisher of the publication, as well as any identifying code numbers that narrow the search (typically these are volume numbers). You should also include page numbers wherever possible. If the repository uses reference code numbers, those should be noted as well.

As a researcher it is helpful to know a few common definitions for this kind of work:

Source: Any person, group, organization, book, article, document, photograph, map, or audio or visual recording and the Internet, from which information or evidence is obtained. In historical research, a source may be primary or secondary.

Primary Source: An original document which was created, a book or article which was written, a photograph that was taken, during the time under study, an autobiography published at the time or subsequently, and an audio or visual recording of an individual, group, or event made at the time, or if a participant in the event, subsequently. The document may be a diary, written transcription of a speech, manuscript, letter, interview, news film footage, auto-biography, or official record. The Internet may contain primary or secondary source material.

Secondary Source: A source removed from the time frame or event under examination which analyzes and interprets a primary source. Among secondary sources are history books, most non-contemporary articles, and encyclopedia entries.

Document: A piece of paper, letter, or booklet providing information, evidence, or proof, including of an official or legal nature.

Research Sources

The following information offers some guidance as you start exploring the past. There are a number of sources that are commonly used by historical researchers. Most likely, you will not need to look at all of the sources, because some may not be applicable. One source may contain the same information as another. Moreover, some sources contain such small amounts of information that only the most tenacious researcher would invest the time to consult them. A more profitable approach is to focus your efforts on those sources that contain the greatest range of information. The following typical sources are presented on

Knowldegable People / Oral Histories

Chronicles
    Personal Papers
    Directories
    Newspapers
    Manitobia Website
    Periodicals
    Institutional Chronicles
    Local Histories
    Specialized Histories
    Vertical Files and Scrapbooks

Documents
    Parish Files
    Homestead Files

    Genealogical Records
    Annual Reports
    Institutional Documents

Maps and Plans
    Parish Plans
    Township Plans
    Land Titles Plans
    Village, Town and City Plans
    Cummins Maps

Knowledgeable People / Oral Histories
Valuable information for some research projects may be found from talking to knowledgeable people about their recollections of individuals, groups, organization, events and localities. Recorded (most often audio or audio-visual) interviews with individuals including and especially participants in the events themselves, often provide invaluable first-hand information for historical research projects. Written and typed transcripts of interviews with individuals, some of whom may have died since the time that they were interviewed, also should be utilized. Given, though, that memories can fail and that individuals can make factual mistakes in their recollections, whenever possible, information should be cross-referenced with other primary, and secondary, sources.

Both the Archives of Manitoba in Winnipeg and the Oral History Centre, with an affiliation to the Department of History, University of Winnipeg, can provide you with advice and guidelines in preparing for and in conducting oral history interviews. The Archives has two audio-video booths, finding aids, cassette tape summaries, and research cassettes for completed oral history projects (some projects are restricted and permission for access is necessary). Copies of existing oral history tapes can be made. The Oral History Centre, striving to become a national leader and global innovator in developing excellence in oral history, publishes the *Oral History Forum d'histoire orale,* as of 2006 the online publication of the Canadian Oral History Association, which is also based at the University of Winnipeg. The Centre has a recording studio, editing room, offices, library, and work space.

CHRONICLES

Personal Papers
People's written recollections and corres-pondence (such as letters and diaries), can provide unexpected insights into all aspects of history. Such papers (which are found in libraries, public and private archives, family hands and at organization offices). Typical useful information includes:

- interesting quotes
- contemporary observations
- dates of activities
- more

Directories
Commercial reference directories have identified Manitoba businesses, government offices and other organizations by address and residents by name, occupation and address, providing researchers with a wealth of data. The most useful of these are called *Henderson Directories* and their immediate predecessors from the 1870s to 2000. Back issues of Manitoba and city telephone books provide names and addresses, as well as telephone information for individuals, organizations and institutions. Typical useful information includes:

- names of occupants and owners
- peoples' occupations
- addresses
- more?

Newspapers
Old newspapers offer a cornucopia of historical information, and certainly are invaluable sources for community and family histories. The Legislative Library of Manitoba in Winnipeg has the most extensive collection of provincial newspapers. Dating back to 1859, the newspaper holdings are available on microfilm (in the vast majority of instances) for on-site research or for inter-library loan. Other newspaper repositories include public and university libraries, local archives and some newspaper offices. These kinds of sources provide excellent coverage of:

- local political issues
- local events
- local takes on provincial events
- data and information on commercial activity
- data and information on local agricultural activity
- obituaries, usually very detailed
- information on building construction
- social events
- comings and goings of locals and visiting friends and relatives
- illegal activity
- letters to the editor about various local issues
- editor's letters about local issues

Manitobia.ca Website
The Manitobia.ca website is a project of the Manitoba Library Consortium, an incorporated non-profit organization of Manitoba libraries, and its partners, including the Archives of Manitoba, the Department of Canadian Heritage, the Legislative Library of Manitoba, the University of Manitoba Libraries and the University of Winnipeg Library and Information Services. The website provides historical information on Manitoba and its people, and includes newspapers (which can be read by title and issue), biographies, organizations, first-hand accounts from letters, memoirs, and diaries, and drawings, maps, and photographs. Among the historical themes for which information is available (there are accompanying photograph albums and maps) are: Birth of Manitoba, Immigration and Settlement: 1870-1919, Manitoba Schools Question: 1890 to 1897, World War I: The War at Home, Women Win the Vote, and Strike 1919.