A View from the South

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As the South Park movie so aptly sang, "Blame Canada, blame Canada." We blame Canada for a wonderful trip to Kingston. My husband Joe and I have visited London, Windsor, Saskatoon, and Montréal for archival and historical conferences, but never had the pleasure of seeing Kingston. Oh what a pleasure it was.

I often look for speaking engagements at conferences where a topic I’m interested in meshes with the theme of the meeting, and someplace we’ve never been. When I saw the call for papers for the Archives Association of Ontario conference on the theme of access versus privacy, I knew I found a home for my research on rejected manuscripts in publishers’ archives. To my delight, the program committee saw the fit as well and invited me to present at the conference.

As we drove across the Thousand Islands Bridge and saw the humungous line of cars, and mostly tractor trailer trucks, queued up waiting to return to the States, I vowed that we wouldn’t sit in that traffic line on the way home; there had to be a better route. Driving into Kingston from the 401, we didn’t really get to see anything of the city before we arrived on the Queen’s University campus. Running late because of the rainy weather, inevitable road construction, and our usual late start, we missed the opening reception speaker but got to enjoy the delicious spread. Looking around the room, I realized I knew no one. Nobody spoke to us and I began to feel a bit out of place among a roomful of old friends catching up with a year’s worth of news.

When we went back to the residence to finish unpacking the car, we found the conference registration room still open and talked with the first two people who made us feel welcome—Marianne and Paul. I scanned the membership list and found the name of one person I knew—but she was not coming to the conference. By the next morning’s breakfast I started meeting people and chatting and found I was not the sole southerner, although the only one who currently still lives south of the border. Canadians are so much friendlier than New Yorkers, for example, that I relaxed and mingled at meals, getting to know colleagues from a diverse group of repositories. I feel fortunate that my paper was scheduled for the last day because by then I was speaking to a roomful of friends no longer strangers.

I find it instructive and enlightening to hear from other archivists about their concerns, practices, and procedures. It’s helpful to me as a manuscripts cataloger and creator of Encoded Archival Description finding aids to learn about what’s going on outside my own little world. We share many common archival concerns and I like to incorporate the Canadian and other non-U.S. perspectives when thinking about how to present my work for global viewing. Participating in international conferences keeps me in touch. And, as a program committee co-chair for an upcoming regional archival conference, I can appreciate all the hard work that went into organizing this one in Kingston.
The banquet at Fort Henry was really cool. Not only did I use my eBay skills in swooping in at the last minute to place the winning bids on two silent auction items that I really wanted—the beautiful handmade afghan and a book on the architectural history of Kingston—but after talking to one of the "dinner theater" actors while waiting for dinner to be ready, he selected me to be one of the "judges" in their mock trial. What great fun! And the food was simply delicious. Banished from all thought is the typical chicken cordon bleu and mixed vegetables with lumpy mashed potatoes entree. We ate a veritable feast. Settling up the auction payment amounts—half in Canadian and half in U.S.—proved a bit of a challenge. Somehow on this trip I didn't feel the need to exchange a lot of money and simply used my debit/credit card for other purchases. Joe was anxious to get a loonie; he lost the one he'd saved from our last visit to Montréal.

I usually carry my umbrella with me everywhere (having lived in Florida where it rains a bit almost every day during the rainy season) but I didn't think I'd need it at the banquet. Who knew the washrooms were reachable only by walking outside down the line of unsheltered barracks? And who expected rain? I missed getting wet but Joe didn't fare as well. He made one more trek to the washroom before we got back on the bus and I thought I'd lost him to a Fort Henry ghost when everyone was on the buses but him. He finally sauntered up nonchalantly assuming he'd told me where he was off to, while I frantically searched both buses thinking he'd gotten on the other one without me, or he'd be left behind.

We were staying over until Thursday and I finally got to see Kingston on Wednesday evening. After the last session, we walked into downtown along the river walk, took lots of photos, read every historic marker, and ate a tasty dinner in a restaurant that has blues music on a night when we weren't there. Oh well. We wandered around town gawking at the beautiful houses until the clouds started dripping. This time I had my umbrella ready! But it didn't last long and we returned to the residence, packed up, and went down the hall to watch some TV (South Park, of course). Then I found the refrigerator that I could have used for my sodas and road food instead of trudging up the hill to the ice machine in Victoria Hall. Good exercise after the huge meals.

My most memorable thoughts about Kingston were, "I could live here." I love the waterfront, having grown up on the New Jersey shore within a half hour of the Atlantic Ocean. So, remembering the hours-long line of traffic we saw on the way in, I chose to take the ferry from Kingston to Wolfe Island and then the private small ferry to the States. I figured correctly that we wouldn't be sitting on a long line with tractor trailers. What a beautiful ride across the St. Lawrence River—twice. I bought donuts, orange juice, a coffee, and the biggest can of Tim Horton's coffee for Joe before boarding the ferry. (He is still parceling the coffee out by spoonfuls to make it last longer.) As we motored off across the water, we took one last photograph of the Kingston skyline and vowed to come back again. Thanks for a wonderful time. See y'all.

AAO 2004 CONFERENCE SILENT AUCTION

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