

Hundreds hard at work helping Museum transcribe historic letters, documents

Grace might have been rather sentimental.

As the decades passed, she kept just about every letter written to her when she and her boyfriend were apart, and she continued to do so well after her boyfriend became her husband.

Carefully stored and packed away more than a century on, these letters are now being seen through fresh eyes, providing new insight on the everyday ? and sometimes extraordinary ? lives of Aurora residents in the first half of the 20th century.

Grace's letters are just one bundle of documents, all written out in cursive hand, that are now being transcribed by the Aurora Museum & Archives and more than 200 community volunteers who responded to the Museum's call just a few short weeks ago during this time of physical and social distancing.

?Every time we open one of our hundreds of archival boxes, we find documents written in cursive,? says Michelle Johnson of the Aurora Museum & Archives. ?We're very lucky as everyone at the Museum can read cursive, but we understand that is becoming a harder skill to find. It is not being taught anymore in public schools and the reality is that before we can get our collection online, documents need to be transcribed.

?We see these documents all the time and we had an idea to put a call out because we could use a lot of help transcribing. It is an incredible amount of work and we know there are people who have quite a bit of downtime right now and were looking for something to do to take their kind off our current situation and just keep busy.?

To say that the community answered the call might be something of an understatement. By the end of last week, the Aurora Museum & Archives had amassed 215 volunteers who were actively engaging with documents sent to them digitally by the Museum with a further 110 patientvolunteers on a waiting list.

?People have been able to get involved as much as they like,? says Ms. Johnson. ?Some people had a lot of experience doing genealogical research, so along with the transcription, they would send back really detailed, incredible notes about the writer, about the person it was written to, things they could find through different websites doing historical background research on the personalities in the letter, and sometimes on the content.?

Grace's eventual husband, for instance, was a student at Queen's University and one of the transcribers who received a portion of Grace's correspondence shared an alma-mater with the letter-writer. Another

volunteer who was assigned letters received by former mayor J.M. Walton from an acquaintance in Pennsylvania found they grew up just a stone's throw from where the letters were originally sent.

My favourite items in the archives are the letters and correspondence, says Ms. Johnson. It harkens back to a time when receiving a letter through the mail meant a lot more than it does now. People are used to getting emails; I don't know how many people still receive hand-written letters anymore, and it was a way to stay connected. I think the parallels of using letter-writing to stay connected throughout history and trying to find an activity to connect people today really spoke for themselves. The correspondence, the different letters in the archives, are what we call our 'rabbit holes' in that whenever we open up a box and begin to look through it, it is hard to stop yourself from reading the letters in their entirety. You get lost in it and it is really quite compelling to sit and read some of them.

Although the current quota of letters is currently spoken for, if you would like to sit down with a letter and read some of them for yourself, you are invited to join the Aurora Museum & Archives' waiting list for documents to transcribe once they are digitized.

We are incredibly grateful and very fortunate to have this many people who wanted to donate their time to a project like this, says Ms. Johnson. This is really a large part of the back-of-house work that goes into getting a collection online and making archives accessible. To have a large team like this is absolutely incredible and while we're out of our space at 22 Church Street for Library Square construction, we will be turning our focus to this kind of work.

While we have temporarily depleted our digitized documents, once we are back up and running, that whole scanning process will resume, we'll be able to replenish our stock and get letters out to the community to continue transcribing. Additionally, if you speak a language other than English, you are more than welcome to translate the contents of the letter into another language. For us, that is a really incredible aspect as it makes the material accessible in terms of language diversity. Once our archive goes online, it can be searched by anybody anywhere.

For more information, contact Michelle Johnson of the Aurora Museum & Archives at mjohnson@aurora.ca.

By Brock Weir