

MARION PHELPS: A GUARDIAN OF TOWNSHIPS HISTORY

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Tomifobia, Quebec

Saturday, February 8, 1908
Very cold & stormy. Did not have much to do ... did some mending.... Maud[e] sick [in labour]. Baby girl born 10 after 12, we was there all night.

From 1876 until 1939, Marion Martha (“Minnie”) Phelps kept a detailed account of the weather and day-to-day activities at and around Orchardside, the farm where she and her husband, Hiram, lived in South Stukely. Her granddaughter Marion Louise Phelps, whose birth kept the family up that blustery evening in 1908, eventually inherited those diaries. Today they are carefully stored in the Archives of the Brome County Historical Society in Knowlton, where Marion — or Miss Phelps, as she is formally addressed — is the long-time volunteer archivist.

“My grandmother wasn’t especially educated,” Marion told me one day as we sat in the Archives reading room. “She wasn’t a historian; she was just interested in what was going on and she was very methodical in recording it. If you want local facts



Marion Phelps at the Brome County Historical Society Archives, Knowlton. Photo by Louise Abbott.



Marion Martha ("Minnie") Phelps, Marion Phelps' grandmother (far right), Walter Phelps, Marion's father (back), Rupert Phelps, Marion's brother (front), and Patience Crowhurst, Marion's great-grandmother (far left). Photo courtesy of Marion Phelps.

— when a minister came to the area and when he left; when the teachers changed; when somebody's barn or house burned; what expenses the farm had; how much they sold their products for — you can pretty well go by her diaries."

Marion inherited more from her grandmother than her first name and her diaries. She also inherited her passion for historical knowledge and accuracy. When Marion was a child, she loved to ask questions about the past, and her grandmother was always willing to take the time to give her the answers. "If you were talking about something from the past, she wanted to make sure you got it right."

For nearly thirty years, Marion, too, has tried to make sure that researchers like me get it right. At the age of ninety-two, she still works most weekdays from ten until four at the building that once served as the County Courthouse and Registry Office and now serves as quarters for the Brome County Historical Society Archives. "The girls," as she refers to staff members Arlene Royea and Shirley Williams, give her a hand with typing and other administrative tasks. But they work elsewhere on the Society grounds; in the Archives, Marion reigns supreme.

I had heard of Marion's legendary expertise before I ever met her in person. A descendant of the deeply rooted Fosters in Knowlton had told me: "Miss Phelps knows more about the history of my family than I do!" I had also seen Marion's byline in publications of the

Brome County Historical Society and noticed her name in the acknowledgements of books of Townships history. I realized that she had helped to tell the story of countless other people; however, apart from brief items in the local press, no one had ever told her story. That was what I wanted to hear. I paid several visits to the Archives, housed in a Greek Revival building on St. Paul Street that is austere outside, but much warmer within, partly because of Marion's presence.

Sometimes I'd find her at a Victorian mahogany desk writing a note in response to a research query. More often she'd be sitting at one of the reading tables, a tidily dressed, white-haired woman dwarfed by the bookcases around her; she'd be absorbed in studying a document or book, sometimes with the aid of the magnifying glass she keeps on a necklace. She'd look up, get to her feet with more alacrity than I expected from someone her age, lean against the wooden counter that runs along most of the room, and greet me with a smile, her dark eyes alert and inquisitive behind her glasses.

Marion prefers researchers to make appointments, but many arrive unannounced, particularly during the summer months. When I was visiting one hot August afternoon, a young francophone from the *Cinéma-thèque Québécoise*, a film institute in Montreal, came in to inquire about silent film screenings by itinerant projectionists in the region in the 1920s. Marion answered some of his questions, mostly in English, because her French is limited, and then got on the phone.

"Hello, Catherine, there's a gentleman here who's doing a project on cinema. Now you remember in one of our books [*Yesterdays of Brome County*, collected essays which the Society publishes biannually], I think it's book six, we have an article that mentioned that movies in Knowlton were first held upstairs in your father's store. Now there are quite a few things I can't tell him about that, and I know I interviewed you at the time. He's interested in who ran the projector and what it cost and all that kind of thing." The conversation continued for a few minutes and then ended. "You've told me a lot. Great. Thank you so much. All right. Bye, bye."

Once she had relayed the information to the film historian, she turned to a local elderly anglophone who was doing research at the microfilm reader. "How are you getting along?" "Miserably well," the man replied. They both laughed. "It's my bifocals, really, they're the problem." Marion proffered her magnifying glass. "Sometimes this helps." "Thank you, dear."

Marion returned to the table where I was waiting. We resumed our conversation, taking occasional sips from the glasses of ice-cold

ginger ale that she had set out on individual trays. I had discovered by now that I had to speak more loudly than usual; Marion is hard of hearing and we had had at least one puzzling exchange in which I had inquired about a colourful historical figure in Knowlton who was reputed to have owned many, many *cats* and Marion had spoken about the woman's apparently impressive collection of *hats*.

I asked her about the kind of people who visit the Archives or correspond with her. She told me that they range from local children doing school assignments to adult researchers from as far afield as California. Of all the inquiries she receives, she added, a note of exasperation creeping into her voice, she finds requests for genealogical data the most tedious. But there is a remarkable surge of interest in ancestry, so she graciously directs genealogy buffs to the books and other records that might help them complete another branch of the family tree. What really stimulates her, though, is assisting professional scholars, such as her former pupil Jimmy Manson, who has done much of his doctoral research at the Archives, or pre-eminent Townships historian Jack Little, a native of Megantic County and professor at Simon Fraser University in British Columbia, who sometimes drops in on the Archives during his pilgrimage to the Townships nearly every spring or summer. "Now *that*," she said, "is interesting."

Marion's personal research passion lies in the early settlement of Brome County and adjoining Missisquoi and Shefford Counties and in the United Empire Loyalists who were the pioneers. "I come from those American Loyalists that don't make it into the history books. They're the ones who cleared the land. Most everybody that writes about the American Loyalists calls them swindlers and counterfeiters and smugglers. But there were a lot of wonderful people, like Captain John Savage and Samuel Willard and Gilbert Hyatt." And her own ancestors.

"My mother was of Scotch descent, a McDougall. They were Loyalists from New York State. My Phelps ancestors were four brothers from Connecticut, which was a pretty hot place to be during the American Revolutionary War if you had British leanings, and I think they did. They crossed the line down around Stanbridge and Bedford in 1800. Three of the four brothers stayed down that way. But my ancestor moved up into Bolton. I'm probably the seventh or eighth generation Phelps here."

Marion grew up on Stone Lodge Farm, just a couple of miles from Orchardside and her beloved grandmother Minnie. Her father, Walter Phelps, bought Stone Lodge in 1902 from his uncle Edwin Phelps and was the third generation of the family to farm this land on the



Stone Lodge farmhouse, Marion Phelps' childhood home in South Stukely.

Photo courtesy of Marion Phelps.

first range road of Stukely Township. Although he sold the property in 1944, the 1840s fieldstone home still stands, looking much the same as in Marion's youth, except for the absence of the wisteria that once crept up the facade. Marion remembers her life as a farmer's daughter fondly. "It was wonderful ... because you weren't confined; you could roam the fields."

She attended the one-room Blake Schoolhouse, located within walking distance, until grade four and then transferred to a larger school in Waterloo, four miles away, for grades five through eleven. She and her two brothers took turns driving their horse-drawn rig or sleigh, staying overnight with nearby relatives when the weather turned foul. "We had a horse that always took advantage of me. He knew that I wouldn't use the whip on him, so when I was driving, he took his time. I remember once I was late for school because of that and the teacher gave me a long multiplication example to do and made me promise I'd never be late again."

The curriculum that Marion followed was a traditional English-Canadian one; what she missed was learning about the history of her own region and people. "When I went to school, we saluted the Union Jack and had mostly British history. I got a little bit of Canadian history in grade six. But I never heard about the Loyalists.... I didn't know they even existed, and yet they were the men who were the most influential in setting up the Townships."

Because of her personal interest in local history, Marion kept notes of things that her grandmother told her, along with other



Marion Phelps (far left) with her father, Walter; mother, Maude; and brothers, Gardner (in her mother's lap) and Rupert. Photo courtesy of Marion Phelps.

memorabilia. Nonetheless, she had no exposure to historical societies or museums or even the concept of such institutions until she was twelve; her great-aunt, a Knowlton resident, came to visit one day and announced that she had given a treasured custard cup to the Brome County Historical Society Museum. Marion wanted to go and see it on display; she finally got her wish on a school outing. "You know, that was what attracted people to museums like this for years, seeing things, relics, that had once belonged to some member of their family."

After graduating from high school, Marion went to Macdonald College in Ste. Anne de Bellevue for a one-year program in education. "At the time, it was either become a teacher or a nurse or get married right away." An avid reader, she happened upon Catherine Day's 1869 *History of the Eastern Townships* at the college library. "I nearly fainted away. I went through school not knowing the history of the Townships, and here was someone who had written a book about it and even talked about South Stukely."

South Stukely. Most of the settlers of this section [of Stukely Township, Shefford County] being of English origin, the majority of its inhabitants are English-speaking Protestants. The interests of the people are essentially agricultural, the raising of horses, cattle, and sheep, being their principal sources of income. The surface of the land is very uneven, yet the only mountainous elevations are a part of the Orford range in the

south-east. ... There is no large stream of water in South Stukely, the most considerable being formed by small rivulets coming from swamps, or such as are the outlets of small ponds. ... The assessable property in South Stukely amounts to \$132,093. There are 142 legal voters. In the year 1866, the total amount levied for educational purposes was \$463,60; the government grant for the same year being \$80,94.

History of the Eastern Townships
Mrs. C.M. Day

Ironically, Marion's mother was a close friend of Mary Knowlton, the author's granddaughter. The next time Marion went home, she expressed her indignation. "I scolded them both. I said, 'How did you let me go off to college without knowing about Mrs. Day's history?' Mary was mortified."

Later, as an elementary school teacher and girl guide leader in Cowansville, Marion ushered groups of children to the Brome County Historical Society Museum to ensure that they would not be as ignorant of Townships history as she had once been. She joined the Society in the 1940s, but it was only in the late 1950s that she became active in Society affairs. After her retirement as a teacher a decade later, she continued her volunteer work full time. "You might say I've had two careers: a teaching career and then a career in the museum." (Like other elderly English Townshippers of my acquaintance, Marion puts the emphasis on the first syllable of museum.)

As she became increasingly involved with the Society, she gained two mentors and collaborators: Homer Mitchell and Harry Shufelt, both members of the executive and both dedicated amateur historians. She helped them catalogue archival material, carry out research, and write articles and books. Shufelt made a particularly lasting impression on her; indeed, his name frequently pops up in her conversations. "Mr. Shufelt was a Brome man and published books, like *Along the Old Roads*. He was the one who started us on our *Yesterdays* series. In the late 1960s, he was getting blind, so I would sit with him, he would dictate, and I would do the writing." Along with another volunteer named Clifford Smith, Marion helped Shufelt finish his last book, *Nicholas Austin: The Quaker and the Township of Bolton*, which was published in 1971. "Now Mr. Shufelt, he was the one who made life interesting. He died in 1973."

In the intervening years, Marion has produced numerous articles of her own for Society publications and in 1988, fittingly enough, she published a biography of Catherine Day. She also arranged a reprint of the latter's now-classic *History of the Eastern Townships*. Through her writing and through her service as assistant

curator, curator, and archivist over the years, Marion has kept faith not only with Homer Mitchell and Harry Shufelt, but also with those sober-looking men and women in stiff Victorian clothing whose portraits hang on the walls of the Archives and Museum — local citizens who felt that it was vital to conserve the history of the settlers and their descendants in the five townships of Brome County.

Marion described how the decision to establish a historical society was made in 1897. A picnic was scheduled that year to celebrate the one hundredth anniversary of Brome Township; every family in the township was invited to attend. A local band performed and various dignitaries gave speeches. Before the picnic hampers were all packed up, a local Methodist minister and school inspector, Ernest Taylor, remarked to a local judge, Warren Lynch, that Brome County needed a historical society. Lynch agreed, but begged off from taking the initiative because of his already onerous schedule. Taylor persisted, however, and said that he was prepared to act as secretary-treasurer and do all the work if Lynch would take on the presidency. Lynch consented and Taylor kept his promise. In 1898 the Brome County Historical Society held its first official meeting in Pettes Memorial Hall in Knowlton. Not long after, an unused storey of the new Knowlton Academy was obtained for temporary use, the Society noted, as a “museum of relics of early times” in the area.

“You know,” Marion continued, “there were other local historical societies formed around the same time. Missisquoi was formed in 1897 and Shefford was formed in 1897, too, although it didn’t last long. I think that after a hundred years, the community had matured enough and was prosperous enough to consider something like a historical society.”

In 1903 the Brome County Historical Society acquired the old Knowlton Academy for its museum. “We’ve never closed our doors since, at least not in the summer.” The Society eventually acquired four other buildings, including a one-room stone schoolhouse on Tibbits Hill, west of Knowlton. It also constructed two buildings, one of them originally known as the Village Street Museum and now known as the Marion L. Phelps Building. These buildings house thousands of artifacts, ranging from a seventeenth-century Tip-Top table (an ingenious piece of furniture which converts into a chair), to a series of hand-tinted colour postcards by a local photographer, Sally Wood, who died in the late 1920s. “Our emphasis is on the pioneer and Victorian periods,” Marion pointed out.

“We’ve never bought anything. We have what people have given us.” Among the donations that Marion herself has made is her



Marion Phelps (left) with her brother Gardner. Photo courtesy of Marion Phelps.

caramel-coloured childhood teddy bear. “He’s an original Teddy Roosevelt bear; my father won him at a [local] fair.” He continues to charm children, appearing in different roles in the annually changing exhibitions that the Society mounts in an unpretentious, old-fashioned, style. Most recently, he was an endearing patient in a display about country medicine. Tucked under a quilt on a sofa next to a child mannequin, he had a poultice on his fuzzy forehead.

Like the Museum, the Archives have grown steadily. Originally they consisted of a handful of books in a glassed-in cabinet. Today rows and rows of shelves, numerous filing cabinets, and a vault are used to store the hundreds of precious records that have been donated — everything from the original papers of Loyalist Samuel Willard to copies of a now-defunct English newspaper published in Granby. There are several special collections, such as a library of old schoolbooks. Marion showed me, for instance, an arithmetic text which belonged to Nick Austin, the son of late eighteenth-century Townships pioneer Nicholas Austin.

Sharing the plight of most other historical societies in the Townships, the Brome County Historical Society lives on the edge financially. “The town is supportive,” Marion said. “But in 1988 we lost the \$10,000 grant that we’d had from the provincial government for ten years.” She added with a hint of disgust: “They criticized us for being too diverse.” Now the Society must rely primarily on membership fees, museum admissions, and fund-raising events, such as

an annual auction and raffle, to keep up the seven buildings it owns in and around Knowlton and the four monuments it owns in various parts of the county. "We have to do constant fundraising. Sometimes it seems as if there's no time for history or for conservation."

Financial stability is not the only concern. "We always seem to be worried about who's going to take it over." The number of Society members hovers between five and six hundred, 90 per cent of them English-speaking, the rest, French-speaking. Many are from out of town — people who once lived in the Townships or have ancestors who are buried here. "We have members from all over the continent, because part of their family history is here," Marion explained. "In the middle 1850s and 1860s, for instance, a lot of people from this area moved to the Midwest of the United States."

While out-of-town members contribute to the coffers, they do not participate in day-to-day affairs. In the midst of a relatively affluent community with a strong English minority, the Society is still able to attract a surprising number of anglophone volunteers. Some are native Townshippers who have traditionally participated in the Society. Others are people who have moved from elsewhere and put down roots in the area. Still, Marion worries about the survival of the institution in the absence of new, younger, English-speaking members from the region.

When she was a girl, she could not have imagined that the English population in the Townships would face the threat of extinction that it faces now. She could not have imagined that linguistic and separatist politics would divide the province the way that they divide it now. "It never entered our heads but that this was our country. In the 1960s and 1970s, we began to realize a few things." On the local level, she remembers the day that the last English member stepped down from the municipal council in Cowansville, which for generations had had councillors from both language groups and had alternated English and French mayors.

These days more and more francophones are seeking out the Archives and Marion does her best to serve them, using the French she has at her disposal and then mixing it with English. But even here nationalist politics rears its head on occasion. After she had taken me on a tour of the restored turn-of-the-century courtroom on the second floor of the building, she gestured to a bust of Sir Georges-Étienne Cartier, one of the Fathers of Confederation, tucked away in a corner of what was once the judge's chambers. "We put him in here," she said, "because we didn't want to start a conversation," by which I understood her to mean controversy. Some visitors had complained

at the presence of this nineteenth-century federalist.

Although Marion frets about the long-term future of the Society, in the short term she feels that there are other volunteers who could take her place at the Archives. "I've been grooming *everybody*," she stressed. "I don't keep things to myself. Other people know the routine." For the moment, however, she has no plans to retire. Friends drive her back and forth from her one-storey house in Knowlton. "I used to work at home at night, but now I save my eyes for work at the Archives during the day." She continues to read unfamiliar material in the Archives "little by little," but is not tackling new research or writing projects. "I don't think I'm going to get to write about my American Loyalist heroes."

The steady stream of visitors keeps Marion busy year-round. "It's always fun to work here," she said. "There's something different going on every day. I almost hate to go home at the end of the afternoon. I'm never finished what I'm doing, you know." Nonetheless, she confessed, she sometimes feels lonely in her pursuit. "There are some people from earlier years that I wish were still alive." Tears suddenly welled up in her eyes. I remembered a comment she had made earlier and I wanted to say, "*You* are the one who makes life interesting for so many of us." But I knew it would offer no consolation. The moment passed and Marion regained her usual good cheer. I packed up my tape recorder and said goodbye. As I was leaving, I could hear her chatting with the man at the microfilm reader. "I think I'm barking up the wrong horse," he said and then corrected himself, "I mean barking up the wrong tree." The two of them laughed.

