So What – Joel Sherlock

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Announcer 2: Okay, let's get on it.

Alex Mayhew: Hello. I'm Alex Mayhew from the Faculty of Information and Media Studies here at Western Ontario. Today, I'm with Joel Sherlock. Joel, tell us a bit about yourself and what you do.

Joel Sherlock: I am the manager of Genealogical and Archival Research at Indigenous Services, Canada, in Gatineau, Quebec. I'm in charge of coordinating First Nations genealogical research projects and I coordinate these projects and supervise a small team.

Alex: Now, you were mentioning earlier to me that it's not a conventional archive. Can you tell me a little bit more about how that works?

Joel: Yeah. So we're not a public archive that is open to anyone to do anything. We're a government archive with a very narrow mandate to assist First Nations individuals in understanding their family history, and the projects that we do have a specific purpose in helping them. We also support the Indian Registration Program at Indigenous Services Canada, which is responsible for registering individuals and issuing secure certificates of Indian status, otherwise known as Indian Status Cards.

Alex: Actually, I want to get back to the question of First Nations research in a bit. But, more generally, what sort of research is done at your archives?

Joel: So, we have on microfiche and on paper archival records, such as treaty pay lists, the original Indian register that was created in 1951 and was used until the early 1990's, as well as the digital Indian Register that's used, today. And we essentially try to confirm the research that members of the public have already done and see if we can elevate the research they've done in our records and maybe add a little bit more.

And some of this research is for the purpose of just knowing their family history. Others are for a specific purpose, such an immigration to the United States, and in order to get to other birth registers.

Alex: Can you tell me exactly what a register is?

Joel: So, the Indian Register, back in 1949, the federal government had a difficult time determining which indigenous people were entitled to treaty benefits, and the government benefits and who were not. So they requested every band on the country to submit a list of their members. And these lists were posted in the various band offices and members of each band were able to scrutinize these lists, add people that maybe were missed, subtract people that maybe passed away. And these lists were brought together and were the basis for the first Indian Registration system, which was then created in 1951.

And that system was used so that the government could be certain who was entitled to the government benefits as a result of treaties and who was not.

Alex: I have to ask, what did they do beforehand? I mean, you mentioned it was a very good system. But I have to imagine they had something.

Joel: Well, it's a bit difficult. Every band in Canada has signed some sort of treaty but they would only keep track of – keep good track, I should say – of the people to whom were due an annual treaty payment every year. So not every treaty that was signed across Canada necessarily yielded an annual payment to each individual band member. So generally, the treaties that did yield money are located in Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, and some parts of Ontario. So those, although I don't think they were intended, necessarily, to be members lists, they came to be somewhat co-opted for that purpose. But they were initially just meant to track who got paid treaty that year and who didn't.

In other provinces, such as British Columbia and in the Six Nations Reserve, near Brantford, Ontario, there were Indian agents that kept a census list, which was obvious for the population and demographic purposes. So those were kept. But there were places like in Quebec and the Maritimes and the Northern Territories here in Canada no lists were really kept until 1951. And, of course, there are also bands that maybe were recognized in the 19th or early 20th century who have since signed treaties, since 1951, and so we won't have information for their band, until they sign the treaty.

Alex: I want to dive in a bit more to the research that's being done at your archival institution. What do you call it? Would you just call them archives, or?

Joel: We're a government program. Archive I guess would be the closest to it.

Alex: What satisfy qualities does your archive have and the records that you have that impacts to research people do. Or what qualities does it lack?

Joel: Sure. A huge source, like I said, of our research are treaty pay lists. The challenge of the treaty pay lists are, again, it's an accounting record. And so some of the limitations of treaty pay lists are that in each entry, on each line of the pay list, it only names the head of the household. And in the next columns it says this is how many men live in the household, this is how many women live in the household. This is how many boys and girls live in the household. So the name usually refers to the husband, who was usually the head of the household in that time period.

The woman was usually just one, the spouse. And the boys and girls usually refer to the children of that couple. But those individuals, unless the head of house, are often not named in the records. So sometimes, if a child passes away before they reach adulthood, sometimes we don't know their names. And that's a little bit sad. As well, there is also the sexism is manifest in that often women are not named in these treaty pay lists, either. And so even if their husband passes away, sometimes it'll just say John Smith, in brackets, widow. And so there wasn't even impetus to change the name on the entrée of the pay list to reflect the female having assumed the head of the household. So that's – those are limitations that we see very often.

It's also challenging sometimes to track people because there's a pay list for every year in which treaty is paid. So children will only get their own entry on the pay list when they turn 18 years old. A boy or a girl could receive their own entry when they're 18 years old. However, when women get married they assume the entry of their husband. So if a women has – if the turn 18 but they don't move away from home, or they just get married and move out of home right into their married home, sometimes we never know that woman's name, unless they live until 1951, in which case we will then see what their name is because the department took a better records and took notice of names.

Alex: You also mentioned that other things like terminology used in the records can be important?

Joel: Yeah, the terminology can be challenging, as well. Sometimes, there will be a notation in the treaty pay list that says: Woman married to non-treaty man. And so it's tempting to make the assumption that that's an individual that does not have indigenous heritage, does not have First Nation heritage, from outside of the community. But that's not always true. The history of the administration is such that if you are a boy or girl and you're the child of a First Nation women, but a non-First Nation man, you were not entitled to status. And so it's very possibly that that man that that woman is marrying could be the child of that situation. So that's not always clear.

Also, you see this old terminology such as "half-breed," which is very problematic. I don't think I need to go into why that's problematic but that's often interpreted as an AT individual. But back in the early 20th Century, I don't think there was a consensus as to what half-breed meant. Sometimes half-breed could be applied to a First Nation individual that's from a mixed household. So sometimes we have to kind of put our assumptions aside and dig a little bit deeper to figure out where these individuals actually came from. Because in today's terminology maybe they would not be considered an AT, or maybe they would not be considered a non-status individual.

Alex: I can see how that would be complicating factor for research.

Joel: Yes.

Alex: You also mentioned issues with geographic coverage and other places.

Joel: As I've mentioned, before, the unfortunate part of my reality is that we don't have equal coverage for every band across Canada that sat before some – the treaties that were signed that yielded a payment to First Nation individuals. You can go a lot farther back in history for them than those that didn't. So, unfortunately, for some bands, we can only go back to 1951, when Indian status was generalized across the country, and sometimes we can't go back farther than that. If I have a client that's looking for an ancestor that passed away before 1951 or before the time in which they signed a treaty, I can't help them, unfortunately. And that's most common for the regions of Quebec and the Maritimes and parts of the Northwest Territories and the Yukon.

Alex: I want to ask a little bit about some of the records, themselves in the archives. Particularly you mentioned that you use microfiche.

Joel: Yes.

Alex: That's not the newest technology. Does that provide any special issues?

Alex: Yeah, the microfiche if problematic. They're of course copies of the original archival records. Although I'm grateful for the microfiche because that makes the shelf space required a lot smaller and makes it a lot more manageable. But, you know, when you take an image of a record, there's always a little bit of degradation. Even when you digitize them an image, it's never better than the original image. And so sometimes the microfiche are very thin so very difficult to read. And most the process of digitizing these records, as well, and even my digitized images aren't as good as the microfiche, sometimes. Sometimes the images are very faint and combined with some Indian nations have terrible penmanship. They're very difficult to read. Also, some individuals identify themselves with their First Nation names. And sometimes those names are just spelled phonetically and that phonetic spelling can vary from year to year. And so those are some of the

challenges that we have with the microfiche and in dealing with old records.

Alex: We talked about some of the limitations and maybe some qualities missing from the archive that one could hope were there. What about some successes? Tell me what things people come and look for that they have.

Joel: I think what I'm really proud of and what I'm really proud of what we do is that we try to help individuals with practical problems that will have a positive impact on their lives. So are you familiar with the Jay Treaty, at all?

Alex: I am not. Tell me about that.

Joel: There's a treaty signed, called the Jay Treaty, J-A-Y, signed between the United States and the British Crown way back in 1793. [Editor's note, the Jay Treaty was signed in 1794, not 1793] And the Jay Treaty treated a wide range of diplomatic issues in North America between – I'll call them Canadians for the simplicity – the Canadians and the Americans. And one of the issues that this treaty covered was the issue of First Nation migration. And whether First Nations should be restricted in crossing the U.S.-Canada border.

And it was determined in this treaty, which is kind of progressive for the time, that First Nations and the Inuit, should have no restriction in crossing the border, which is very interesting. And the United States, today, interprets this treaty in their immigration legislation, that Canadian born First Nations who have 50 percent Indian blood, I'm quoting that, should not only have uninhibited access to the United States, but they can work in the United States without a visa, and even obtain a Green Card for free.

So one thing that we do in order to help the genealogy, the heritage side of our client's applications and provide a letter that briefly outlines their indigenous history. Their First Nation's history. And they can take our letter and take that to the border and use that as proof of their heritage. If the immigration officer is satisfied that they meet the blood quantum, as they call it, of 50 percent Indian blood, they can get those benefits. It's been able to help a lot of people cross the border, get better jobs. It even helped one person successful do a transfer within her company to a better position without having to go through a difficulty that immigration can sometimes be. So that's what I'm most proud of and I think that's probably the most important services that we offer.

Alex: That's fantastic. I want to talk again a little bit more about what do you think the best practices are for managing an archive. Specifically related to supporting research.

Joel: In my case, my first – this is going to sound totally opposite of what you just asked. My first responsibility is to protect the information in the archives. Because we have a lot of personal information of people that are

still living and a lot of sensitive information, as well. So the first thing I need to do is protect the archives. So I can only allow authorized people to come in, here. But there are a lot of third-party researchers that obtain authorization to come in, too. So I just try to accommodate them as best I can and ensure that they have space to do their research, that I can accommodate the time which they come and direct them properly to records that they need. I think in terms of managing archives, it's very important to – it's so cliché – you got to know your collection. And that's for several reasons. One, you can direct people but you can also have confidence in that when a project is finished that's it's actually finished.

Sometimes, I'll have a novice – I'll be training a novice to do the research that we do and they'll come to me with a report and it won't quite be complete. And I'll have to ask them, "Did you consult this resource?" and direct them properly to where they need to be. But, again, a big part of the job is being confident at the results that we have are the correct results and that we haven't missed anything.

And that's very important to me because there is a distrust that the First Nations in Canada – indigenous people as a whole -- have toward the federal government. And so we need to be confident that we're not cutting corners and inhibiting our progress in that relationship. I'm not upset that they don't trust the government. I think they've earned that distrust. And so we need to work hard as a federal government to kind of renew that relationship and do our work in good faith.

Alex: That make sense to me.

Joel: We support other research, as well. Some third parties that come in are research firms that have been hired by First Nations because they want to do some research on land claims. So we support that research. Although my team doesn't really do that, itself. We do that land claim research and some other Inuit research that we do is that. So there are some – this mostly applies to elderly people, today. But there are individuals in Canada who were born in very remote areas that never had their birth registered for their province. And some other service that we offer is we will dig into our records that treaty pay lists, the Indian registration system, and we'll write in a letter every instance, and outline every instance, in which an individual's age or birth appears in our records and they can take our letter to a provincial vital statistics office and they can obtain a delayed birth registration. And that enables people of retirement age to obtain old age security benefits. That's another thing that I'm very pleased that I'm able to be a part of.

Alex: Sounds utterly fantastic. Joe Sherlock. Thank you very much.

Joel: Thank you very much.

Alex: We hope to have you again sometime.

Joel: Absolutely.

Alex: Thank you.

Joel: Thanks.

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