

## Archie Tolmie: “I’m just a research fool”

*Kathy Woodcock,  
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“What would I call myself?” asks Archie Tolmie laughing. “Well there’s no fancy name for it. I’m just a research fool.”

Archie Tolmie collects fact. Local history facts mainly. He has an immense amount of data. It covers the first area settlers, early railroads, Indians, education, religion, colonization roads, politics, as well as home remedies and recipes. Archie knows who were the first doctors, lawyers and teachers in the community. He can tell you the names of the inn keepers, the number of beds they offered and how many horses they could stable. The names and background of tanners, cabinet makers, millers, blacksmiths, and postmasters are all recorded somewhere in Archie’s files.

Trouble is, there are too many facts. “Life’s grand if a little broad,” Archie claims. “You can’t go into a subject like mine properly in just ten years.

“They say retirement’s a headache but not for me,” he declared stoutly. It is for some because they don’t do anything but sit in front of a television the day long! I wish I had more retirement time, I really do. Retirement’s an opportunity to do all the things you ever wanted to do. I always wanted to go into research, so I came back to Peterborough to study the area, when I retired in 1964.”

Before his retirement Archie was employed for 24 years as a works manager at a Canadian Industries Limited (CIL) plant in Halifax. He is familiar with this area because he was born and raised in Victoria county.

A majority of Archie’s facts concern Victoria county. “I’ve got a lot of material to that end.” He said, “Of course I was born there.” Cattle King Burns was a Victoria County boy too.

“Victoria County has a lot to answer for. Did you know we’re partly responsible for the extinction of the passenger pigeons? Millions of them were shot in Victoria County. They were sold commercially. Sent down to New York by the car load and made into pigeon pie.”

In the latter part of the summer, Archie hopes to publish a history of Fenelon Falls and the upper Kawarthas. He declines to discuss the government’s refusal to provide a grant to assist in publishing the book. Archie defends his stance claiming he isn’t political, but later he admits, “If I’d stayed in Ontario I probably would have taken a shot at politics. United Farmers you know.”

Archie has collected his vast amount of data from various sources. Mainly the archives in

Toronto and Ottawa, museums, and Trent University.

He has a fine collection of early Canadiana writings in his private library. "Real gems," he describes them. "Some can't be got for love nor money."

One particularly arduous task he undertook in his quest for information was to sift through every copy of local weekly papers. Some were dated as far back as 1875, and he researched them up to 1925 editions. "Fifty years of papers, but the cause is worth it," exclaims Archie.

Precisely what is the cause? "Preservation of the local history of course." His look implies this was a decidedly stupid question. Archie continued, "If people don't take an interest now, many valuable facts are going to be lost. Information is being destroyed right and left."

Why bother about our local history? Is it even interesting? Archie Tolmie is astounded. "Well I should hope so," he exclaims. "Isn't our philosophy and general outlook on life based on our history and past? Part of the problem with the world today is that people don't know their history. They have no roots, no sense of belonging. Take those students on TV quiz shows. They can tell you names of famous singers and movie stars but nothing about home. There's a lot schools should be teaching about local history that they aren't. It's terrible."

But what does the local past have to do with the present? Where is the relation? Archie Tolmie viewed such ignorance with pity. "I'll give you an example of how relevant history is. Take the first bylaw of the United Counties of Peterborough and Victoria. This bylaw was passed to ensure the preservation of public morals. That's where the old people put their priorities – with morals. Anyway, the very first statute of that bylaw reads – 'Be it enacted by the municipal counties that it will be unlawful in the counties to sell or expose for sale, or to purchase, wares, or personal property, chattels, or any real estate on a Sunday.' They're still scrapping about Sundays!" Archie exclaimed triumphantly.

According to Archie, one of the most important roles local history can play is to bring an individual closer to home by developing his sense of community.

Archie likes to tell a story about Sir Sandford Fleming. Apparently Sir Sandford was on his way to Peterborough one winter evening. He had been working on the railroad lines not far from Mariposa. At any rate, the horses drawing the carriage in which he was riding broke away. They ran into a tree stump and Fleming was badly injured. A young woman who had been travelling in that same carriage nursed him back to health. Fleming later married her and they honeymooned in Lindsay. The tale reveals that Fleming went back to the scene of the accident, cut out the tree stump and took it home. He later carved a cradle out of it, for their first born child.

*[Editor's note: Archie Tolmie's library and collection of documents and research notes are in the Trent Valley Archives. Fairly detailed finding aids have been prepared. His history of Fenelon Falls remains unpublished, but the Trent Valley Archives hopes it and other publications will eventually emerge.]*