Remembering Ken Homer

FRIENDS AND COLLEAGUES who knew Ken Homer at CBC Halifax in the 1950s remembered him as the consummate professional broadcaster—and the man almost certain to be tapped as the next director of the corporation’s Maritime Region.

It might have happened, except that Ken chose to interrupt this promising career trajectory, quit the CBC, and, with his wife Dees, move to Woodstock, N.B. The CBC’s loss was New Brunswick’s gain, although Ken certainly did not vanish entirely from the airwaves in the years after relocating in Woodstock, he continued broadcast work for the CBC, now as a freelancer. And his ruminations about life, nature, and history, recorded in warm and precise tones at “the old farmhouse on the St. John River,” made lasting impressions on his enthralled listeners.

But, as David Myles, his friend of 40 years, eulogized after Ken died in November, 2003, it was impossible to cast him in a single role. He was a broadcaster, but also a writer, anthropologist, actor, scholar, teacher, storyteller, historian, and naturalist. All of these talents he applied to New Brunswick, and his legacy today quietly enriches more aspects of life here than most people know.

Before moving permanently to the province, Ken, still a young man, had already become something of a broadcasting legend. He was the only broadcaster on the scene at Springhill, Nova Scotia, when a faint tapping was heard from coal-miners trapped far underground following a 1958 cave-in. Hope had all but been abandoned for the miners, most reporters had gone home. Only Ken and a wire service man remained, and years later Ken delightfully told a visitor that he could still hear the footfall of the wire man as he raced up the steps to their room near the pithead to tell him about the tapping. Shortly after, Ken went on the air with the news, broadcast all over the continent, that a miracle might be unfolding in Springhill. (And it was: presently, 19 miners, haggard but still alive, were rescued from the deep.)

Ken—his full name was Kenneth Churchill Homer—was born in Nova Scotia, in the seacoast town of Yarmouth, and went to Mount Allison University, where he met his future wife, Dees Clarke, daughter of the Woodstock author, Dr. George Frederick Clarke.

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Broadcast records preserved in digital form

THE PROVINCIAL ARCHIVES of New Brunswick holds many of Ken Homer’s fondly remembered commentaries on CBC Radio. These came to the Archives from the Homer family in the months following his death.

In line with contemporary archival practice, the analogue tapes will be transferred to digital format, although the original recordings will continue to be preserved, as well.

The digital format offers several advantages. In addition to retaining the fidelity of the original broadcasts longer, the technology also offers a more efficient way of arranging and accessing recordings, or portions of recordings.

The Associates of the Provincial Archives provided money for purchase of the new conversion equipment, and we are pleased that one of its first uses will be for Ken Homer’s treasured broadcasts.

Denis Noel, the archivist responsible for sound and moving image preservation at the Provincial Archives, is working on the conversion to digital of the Ken Homer broadcasts.

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After graduation, he worked briefly in London, Ontario, before moving to Montreal, for a teaching job at Lower Canada College. Later, he joined the CBC in Montreal, and moved to Halifax when an announcing position opened up.

Over the years, Ken did many a distinguished turn with the CBC, on documentaries, especially, which he handled with great intelligence and sensitivity. But perhaps the recording he cherished most was one he happened to get one day as his young son Stephen bounded into the farmhouse to tell his dad about an empty snail shell he’d found and to ask where the snail itself had gone. The explanation—that the snail had died and turned to dust, which is the way of all things—seemed rendered so flawlessly, so beautifully, that the whole thing might have been scripted, which it wasn’t.

He was a broadcaster possessed of both dulcetness and clariion. Both seemed to come naturally to him. His interest in literature was spawned at a young age (see box), and it never left him. Years later his listeners, not to mention his acquaintances, were regularly dazzled by the breadth of his reading, and by his ability to summon just the right piece of poetry to fit the moment—and to recite it, of course, in cadences equally memorable.

As his adopted home, New Brunswick, particularly, benefited from Ken’s talents. He hosted the Miramichi Folk Song Festival, read scripture at services in Woodstock’s St. Luke’s Anglican Church, and, for 11 years, taught at Woodstock High School. In all venues, he was the same gentle, courtly, accommodating man who never missed an opportunity to talk about history and nature. Invariably, he held people in his thrall.

David Myles recalled that he first met Ken after publishing a letter in the early 1960s questioning the idea of the Mactaquac Dam. The Homers and Dr. Clarke became leaders of a group called the Society for the Preservation and Protection of the St. John River in its Natural State, which launched a full-bore protest against the dam. It was ultimately unsuccessful, of course, but as New Brunswick’s first great environmental battle it did have the effect of sensitizing the province to the concerns about environment that were then arising world-wide.

Umost dedication to a cause was a characteristic common to the Homers, and they gave it, as well, to other activities, like the Carleton County Historical Society and restoration of the Old Courthouse at Upper Woodstock. The latter project, extending over many years and financed, in part, with monies raised by such down-home events as salmon fry and historical pageants (in which Ken served as writer, host, actor and interlocutor), today stands as one of the outstanding examples of historical preservation in Canada.

When Ken Homer died two years ago, his passing was barely noted by the media, an irony since he had once been such a distinguished member of that profession. But, in a sense, it was also enough to champion the things he cared about.

I asked him if he liked Houseman. He said: “Yes, very much.”

I said: “When I was one-and-twenty, I heard a wise man say…”

He said: “Give pounds and crowns and guineas, but not your heart away…”

I went on: “Give pearls away and rubies, and keep your fancy free…”

He concluded: “But I was one-and-twenty, no use to talk to me.”

We went on like this to the end of the poem. He knew the whole thing.
Autumn 2005

SILHOUETTES

ARCHIVES’ DIARIES: J.M. ROBINSON

Pleasant moments and sad on 19th Century sea voyage

O n October 18, 1869, having a fair wind from the northwest, the barque Caledonia, John Dawson, captain, set sail from Saint John for Montevideo, Uruguay. Absent were Mr. and Mrs. William Ezra Vroom of Saint John and their three children. Mr. Vroom was a partner in an insurance business in Montevideo. Sea travel in those days could be pleasant, but it was also fraught with hazards and the potential for tragedy. Another passenger, J.M. Robinson, kept a diary detailing events on this voyage. Excerpts follow:

Quite a number of our friends came down to the ship to see us off, and some of them came in the vessel as far as the jib boom. We went about the Bay of Fundy for two days, endeavouring vainly to get out of the Bay through the Wiz passage between the Islands of Grand Manan and Campobello, on the afternoon of the third day we got rid of the Pilot, he going ashore on Cannon Rock. We continued to our friends in St. John and gave them in charge of the Pilot before leaving.

Sunday 21st October. Wind still continu- ing fresh ahead and very heavy, every body in the cabin. Captain included, getting the blues, & all the passengers becoming seasick again, never having recovered from their first seizure.

Monday 22nd. Came in cloudy and wind very fresh. The vessel continued on her way at the rate of 5½ knots. This day, we experienced a most fearful gale, and now that we have got through it all right, I am glad to have seen one but I do not feel at all anxious for another, the ship acted beautifully and very few was broke over her.

Friday 26th. Wind N.E. ship rolling fear- fully, closely with showers of rain. The cross seas on this day were most horrible, worse even than the Gale of Wednesday.

Saturday 27th. The mate gave me his ideas last night as regards the proper way a passenger should occupy his time on board, and which I have this morning began carrying into effect. In the first place, I row at 5 o’clock and had a cup of coffee and bis- couit, then enjoined a tobacco pipe, after which I staggered off and stood on the main deck close to the quarter deck, while the rest of the crew washed buckets of water over my head, then went to work at the pumps which are always attended to before breakfast, and worked in a prodigious appetite, then dressed for breakfast, which alacrity takes place at 8 o’clock, after which (the day being one of the finest ever seen, thermometer to degrees in the shade) I brought up the bedding and gave it an airing then read and smoked the rest of the day, occasionally amusing or tak- ing down one of the Vroom children, Fanny and John, two of the finest and pleasantest little

Archives’ Diaries: J.M. Robinson

Although archives are not yet open, this J.M. Robinson is thought to be the same who kept the diary on the trip from St. John to Montevideo, Uruguay.

Youth one I ever saw. In the evening after we got the children to bed, Mr. & Mrs. Vroom, captain, the two masts and your humble servant — resolved ourselves into a singing committee on the quarter deck and there exhausted all the songs we knew after which we turned in, the Captain, Vroom and myself having first paraded a raft of lumps of tobacco and smoke. The days pass very slowly, one gets so tired of read-

Wednesday 3rd. November. Captain says we are in the doldrums since Sunday, we have not met an inch on our course, in fact we have drifted a little to the North. Last night it rained in torrents, and poor Mrs. Vroom had to turn out of her berth, the ship poured in so fast as almost to flood the cabin, so when I woke this morning I found Mr. & Mrs. Vroom sleeping on the deck. However, today we tried hard to find out where the leak was & succeeded beyond our most sanguine expectation. One of the stanchions we found to be quite rotten, and a hole about an inch in diameter, running into Mrs. Vroom’s cabin. Fanny and John, two of the finest and pleasantest little

she is good is very good, but when she is bad is particularly so during the sickness and death of the baby, preparing food and advising the best mode of relief, and in asking the part of the husband. The baby’s name was Fanny Vroom and aged about 4 months, it was sewed up in a canvas bag with a large sack of sand at its feet. It was placed on the wire on the ship, with a Union Jack covering it to be consigned to the deep this morning.

The Captain read the service and where they came to “consign the

body….” They read “...consign the ship to the deep.”

Tuesday 7th December. On Saturday night the wind changed from N.E. to S.W. and then blew a heavy gale which lasted all Saturday night and bad the water going back to North gradually and if it only stays there strong for about 48 hours, we will be very near our destination.

A few days after this we arrived in Montevideo, J.M.R.

The New Brunswick Newspaper Directory 1783-1996 is NOW ONLINE!

W ith the creation of a database and its subsequent production into an on-line directory, the New Brunswick Newspaper Directory 1783-1996 is now available on the Provincial Archives website.

The Directory was initially published in paper form in 1989, with a revised and updated second edition published in 1996. Both were the result of decades of gathering data for a directory of New Brunswick newspapers…with countless hours of collaboration and work by members of the library and archives community. The Directory built on the first efforts of J. Russell Harper to compile information on New Brunswick newspapers and periodicals. His work culminated in a 1981 guide that for many years was an essential tool for researchers, archivists and librarians, and provided a bibliographic basis for microfilming projects.

Newspaper hand has always played an important role in the life of New Brunswick. The recording of the important events of the day as well as the recordings of the masses, the actions of the great and the notorious and also of the ordinary individual (if only in birth, marriage, death), makes newspapers a vital source for an understanding of the facts and the feelings of the present and of the past.

But newspapers and periodicals fail the test of time physically, for they deteriorate, and so the drive to compile, preserve and microfilm these invaluable records has been ongoing. With the advent of new technologies it was only a matter of time before an on-line directory of these records would be needed–a project that would not only preserve the records in the newest formats but also provide wider access to researchers and the public.

That time is now here. The New Brunswick Newspaper Directory 1783-1996 is now available in web form. The on-line directory contains 679 newspaper listings. The site is easy to navigate. Forward, Preface and Introduction links provide interesting background about the directory project and its evolution. A Notes link is a handy ‘how to’ and offers explanatory notes on the various features of the site. There is a very interesting Illustration link that allows users to view full size images of newspaper pages or view the newspaper in the directory itself. Finally, there is a valuable Search function that offers the user the opportunity to view the directory index by place, publisher or chronological order. And to round things out a link called Publishing History leads users to a PDF file that shows the publishing history of the newspapers arranged by place.

If you are a newspaper enthusiast, this directory will become your indispensable research tool.

http://www.archives.gnb.ca and click on the Newspaper Directory link.
Daniel Johnson body of work at Provincial Archives

Support effort launched by Associates

A new EXCITING NEW PROJECT is underway at the Provincial Archives to preserve and make accessible to the public the impressive body of work by the late Daniel Johnson, a noted New Brunswick genealogist, author and publisher.

To coincide with the launch of this service, the Associates of the Provincial Archives will undertake a fundraising effort to enlist support for the project.

For more than 20 years, Mr. Johnson produced invaluable research called Vital Statistics from New Brunswick Newspapers 1795-1866. These compilations comprise over 100 volumes of published work and provide researchers with surname reference information, indexed and cross-referenced.

This singularly comprehensive research tool is unparalleled in the province, perhaps in the country.

Mr. Johnson’s publications included not only these vital statistics but also a number of other publications of value to genealogists and researchers, such as family histories, ancestral charts, military histories, records of immigration and other works. He was one of the first accredited Certified Genealogists in the Maritimes and was recognized in 1995 for his contributions to genealogy by the American Association for State and Local History.

Now, the Provincial Archives, thanks to the co-operation of the Johnson family, intends to make his vital statistics compilations available to researchers as an on-line, searchable data base.

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The Associates contributed funds to the purchase of the personal records of Lt. Governor Sir Howard Douglas, continued their invaluable fundraising support to the Archives through more financial support for the Josh Beutel Editorial Cartoons acquisition (which is now within $18,000 of its goal), through a successful application to the NB Environmental Trust Fund for a grant to prepare detailed descriptions and a thematic guide of historical records related to environmental topics, and through over $8,000 in sales of Chestnut Canoe memorabilia and publications.

During the year, the Associates continued to make a major effort to “grow” the Elizabeth Diamond Memorial Acquisition Trust Fund that was established in December 2004. Over the next five years efforts will be made to attract financial contributions to this fund to continue to support the purchase of significant New Brunswick records.

Many other activities made the fiscal year a busy one for the Associates, including collaboration with the Conservation Cooperative, production of the Associates’ twice-yearly newsletter Silhouettes, and participation in meetings, special events and activities of the Provincial Archives.

Associates had another successful year

A QUISITION OF IMPORTANT records from a most unlikely source—the internet—was one of the highlights of the 2003-04 fiscal year for The Associates of the Provincial Archives.

The popularity of the World Wide Web and auction services such as eBay has meant more records are being unearthed by individuals and put up for sale, making the support of the Associates in purchasing records that may have lain dormant for years of critical importance.

Thanks to such purchases by the Associates, the Archives can now boast such interesting and important photographic and textual records as a carte-de-visite of Abraham Gesner, panoramic photographs of Saint John firemen in front of a fire station in 1915 and of officers and directors of the Saint John exhibition, ca. 1920, and photographs of Saint John firemen in Nelson Hollow, 1952-1959 and the words to two songs/poems are now available to researchers as an on-line, searchable data base.

The Capital Branch of the New Brunswick Genealogical Society presented the Archives with a cheque for $1500 which Director Marion Beyea said will be used to kick off the campaign to raise more support from the community of genealogists and the general public for the Johnson project.

“We see this as a way of commemorating Mr. Johnson’s monumental work and his contributions to genealogical and historical research,” said Ms. Beyea.

“I hope he knew of the esteem in which he was held by professionals in the field and all who used and appreciated his work.”

Support for the project can be made through the Associates of the Provincial Archives or through PANB itself. The PANB website can be accessed at http://archives.gnb.ca/.
All silhouettes com Free vector. We have about (34,950 files) Free vector in ai, eps, cdr, svg vector illustration graphic art design format. Almost files can be used for commercial. (1/514) pages.