

Library acquires tornado file



Mike Newark shows his special tornado file to librarian Lilita Stripnieks while visiting the AES Downsview library.

The AES Downsview library has received a unique donation, of great practical value to meteorologists and researchers. It is a detailed record of Canadian tornadoes over a period of more than 200 years. The donor is Mike Newark currently head of the Building and Construction Research Unit of AES Canadian Climate Centre and formerly a supervising meteorologist at the Ontario Weather Centre who from 1980 to 1982 specialized in severe summer storms.

The story of this large and impressive tornado file runs as follows:

In the summer of 1975, a tornado struck the town of Georgetown, Ontario. Mike Newark, who was also a writer and a CBC radio weather commentator, drove out to view the damage. Wanting some historical and technical background to supplement the Georgetown incident, he was surprised to find that little Canadian information existed. Some meteorologists even denied tornadoes existed in Ontario. Challenged, Newark set out to prove that they do.

Proof itself was not hard to establish but now Newark was lured on by the

striking hiatus in meteorological literature — how often, when, and where do tornadoes occur in Canada. To answer this, it would be necessary to collect a large volume of material. He travelled widely out of town to the offices of daily and weekly newspapers, searching their “morgues”. He broadcast radio appeals for information, interviewed people who had witnessed tornadoes, made field surveys of severe weather events and searched for archive material.

In 1977, he was joined by Peter J. Elms, an AES meteorological technician, who for the next five years dedicated his spare time to collecting documentary facts and reports about tornadoes. A year later, in 1978 Newark and Elms began collaborating with Professor K.D. Hage, of the University of Alberta, who was doing much the same work in Alberta and Saskatchewan. By this time, Newark had hired a national newspaper clipping service — and what had begun in 1975 as a minor enquiry, now became a significant and original research project.

As the Newark-Elms collection expanded, other questions arose — about tornado seasons, the length and width of tornado paths, the extent and severity of damage, deaths and injuries. Newark now had to get all his raw material systematically organized.

The file is arranged chronologically by province, beginning with data about 18th and 19th century tornadoes and on into the more substantial data about 20th century tornadoes. Each processed file contains a project summary sheet listing such items as time, location, length and width of path, damage estimates, injuries, deaths, and homeless. Path maps and photographs are also included.

The files also contain statistical and interpretative reports on tornadoes which Newark terms “the most complex of severe weather phenomena.” From his raw material, he has extracted statistical tables, and maps and has transcribed ordinary language descriptions into digital format for data processing.

The entire file — four filing cabinet shelves — has now been donated to the AES library. In 1982, Peter J. Elms

retired and Newark himself, in 1983, was transferred to other AES duties in which tornado research "reluctantly became a much lower priority."

The Michael J. Newark-Peter J. Elms Tornado File will not circulate beyond the library as much of the material, if lost or destroyed, cannot be replaced. However, the file is open for everybody's use and its material may be photocopied. While the file itself will not be updated, the Library intends to search the Canadian Newspaper Index database periodically to provide up-to-date newspaper reports on tornadoes and invites donations of Canadian tornado material.

The file, according to Janice Glover, AES head librarian, is "a unique and original collection and a distinguished addition to the library's archives."