

# Familiar Strangers: Canadian Folklore Archives

#ACA2020 #SeeingArchivesDifferently

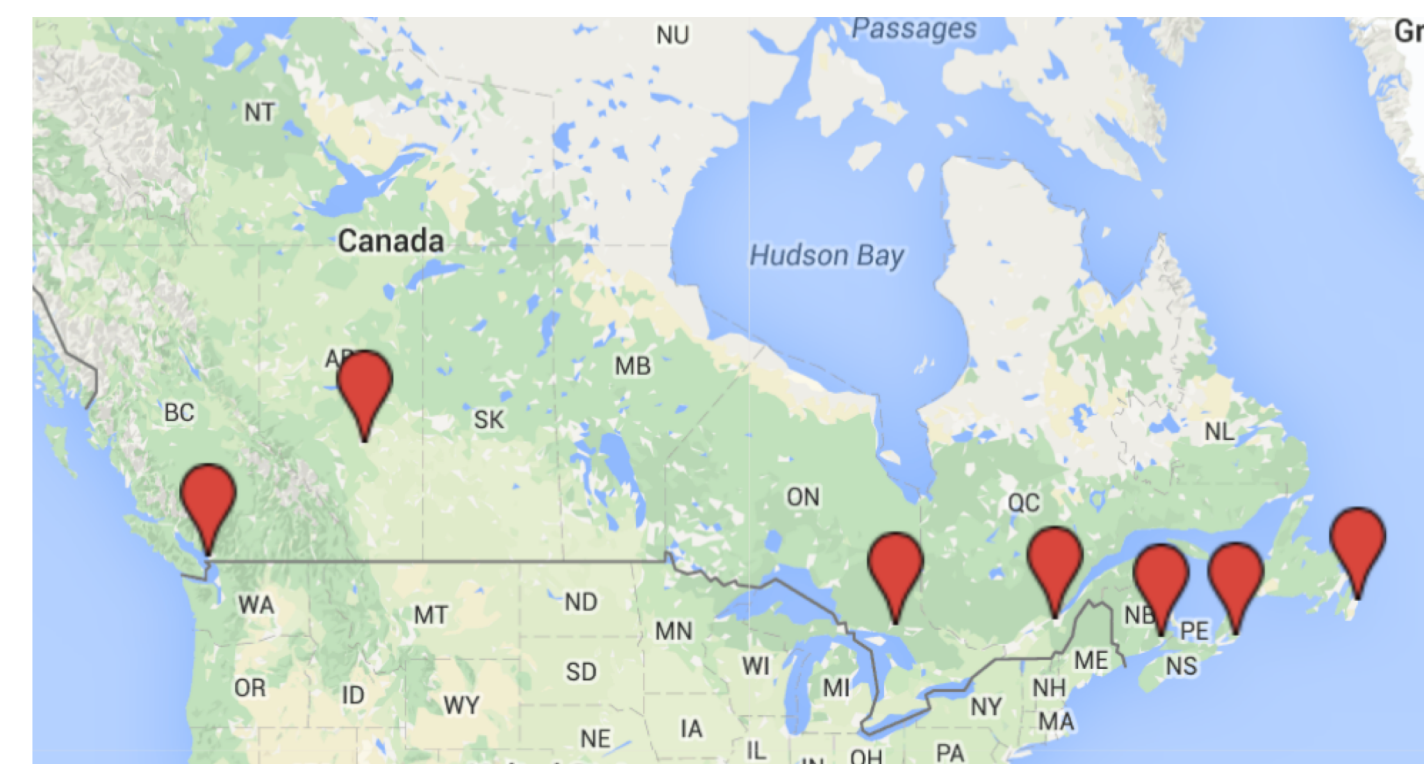
Maryna Chernyavska | University of Alberta | maryna.chernyavska@ualberta.ca

## Introduction

**Folklore archives** is a special type of cultural heritage institutions (Danielson) that document and preserve folk traditions and make them available for study and appreciation.

They **document traditional culture and folklife** in its multiple expressions. Contents of folklore archives reflect mandates of institutions and research interests of the individuals that have created and maintained them.

**Ethnographic field collections** constitute the core of folklore archives. They comprise “multi-format unpublished group(s) of materials gathered and organized by an anthropologist, folklorist, ethnomusicologist, or other cultural researcher to document human life and traditions.” (American Folklife Centre)



- What are folklore archives?
- How do they acquire material?
- How are they described?
- Who are creators of records?

- Who and what is a folklore archivist?
- Around whom records' provenance is articulated?
- What communities do folklore archives serve?

There are 7 folklore archives and many more folklore collections in Canada.

- ✓ Asian Folklore Archive, University of British Columbia, '07
- ✓ Ukrainian Folklore Archives, University of Alberta, '77
- ✓ Archives de folklore de l'Université de Sudbury, '75
- ✓ Archives de folklore et d'ethnologie de l'Université de Laval, '44
- ✓ Archives de folklore de Centre d'études acadiennes, Université de Moncton, '70
- ✓ Cape Breton Folklore Collections, St. Francis Xavier University, '77-82
- ✓ Memorial University of Newfoundland Folklore & Language Archives, '68

## Research design & methods

This study is a qualitative research that uses web analysis and ethnography as its main methods. Data collection plan:

- Annotated bibliography
- Literature review
- Web analysis
- Interviews



## Findings



- Historically, folklore archives were created as standalone repositories associated with a research institute or a folklore program at a university.
- In Canada, folklore archives usually focus around: language group, ethnicity, or locality.
- Folklore archives often have an active collecting program.
- Folklore archives are often still used by their creators (inactive records become active).
- For a long time, they had been most often managed by folklorists, and not by archivists or other information professionals.
- Audio interviews constitute the core of most folklore archives, although video materials, images and text are also common.
- Some folklore archives are described using Canadian Rules for Archival Description (RAD), most do not follow any established standard, but develop an in-house description model.
- Some folklore archives are described on a fonds or collection level, but most tend to have very detailed, granular item-level descriptions.
- Folklore archives view subject headings as the main access point to their materials, however, do not utilize standard vocabularies, but rather create in-house vocabularies that cover specificity of the folk culture in question.
- Most folklore archives have digitized their materials, especially audiovisual collections.
- Some folklore archives have been merged with academic libraries and/or archives.

## References

American Folklife Centre. (n.d.). What is an ethnographic field collection? Retrieved from <http://www.loc.gov/folklife/ethno.html>

Danielson, V., Cohen, E., Seeger, A., American Folklore Society., & American Folklife Center. (2001). *Folk heritage collections in crisis*. Washington, D.C: Council on Library and Information Resources.

Photo courtesy of the Bohdan Medwidsky Ukrainian Folklore Archives, UofA

## Conclusions

Canadian folklore archives provide rich resources for the study of lived experiences of ethnocultural identity with a nuanced focus: interaction, isolation, integration, hybridization, accommodation and community life.

Canadian folklore archives fill gaps in the official history voicing previously untold stories of those oppressed and/or underrepresented (women, children, ethnic minorities).

Canadian folklore archives help promote cultural understanding and tolerance in local, national and international contexts.

Canadian folklore archives are focused on ethnic (Asian, Ukrainian) or regional culture (Newfoundland), or specific language group (French, Gaelic).

Since they focus on unofficial culture and everyday people, folklore archival materials are discoverable most efficiently using topical subjects as access points rather than creators' names, as is often the case with archives.

Multiple creators: creator of folk traditions = the folk (collective ownership), creators of specific cultural expressions = individuals and groups (tradition bearers). Researcher/collector = contributor.

Researchers who collect folklore materials often are part of the culture they study (emic and etic perspectives).

Context of folklore creation, use, and dissemination is extremely important (e.g. storytelling event, performance, ritual, custom, etc.)

Emphasis on cultural sensitivity when archiving traditions that can be practised only by a specific audience, or during a particular event, or time.

Canadian folklore archives would benefit from better communication and closer collaboration with archival professionals. Folklore archives' experience of work with and for communities, as well as dealing with large volume of a/v records could be, it turn, useful to information professionals.



## Next steps



- In-depth interviews with managers of the Canadian folklore archives
- Examination of documentation & records
- Development of recommendations for arrangement & description of folklore archives
- Learn from Indigenous methodologies