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 delightedly 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 pit-head 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.

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.
A poetic exchange

One evening in October, 2002, a friend, author Roger MacGregor (When the Chestnut Was in Flower), chatted with Ken Homer by telephone. Roger’s summary of a part of that conversation follows:

I asked Ken where he had learned the Heinrich Heine poem from which he had recited the first stanza—in German—when Margery and I visited the Homers last August. He said he didn’t rightly know anymore; he had just picked it up along the way, he guessed. But, he added, he had learned a great deal when he was a boy from the books in the Yarmouth Public Library. He recalled a sign over a section not far inside the doors of the library. It said ‘Belles Letters. The sign fascinated him; he said; its appearance was lovely and it sounded musical. Talk turned to poetry. We had chatted about Robert Frost when Margery and I were last at the Homers. Tonight, we exchanged favourite lines from ‘Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening.’ I said I always loved the start: ‘Whose woods these are I think I know.’ I said I always loved the. . . .

I asked him if he liked Housman. He said: ‘Yes, very much.’ I asked: ‘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.

Silhouettes
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THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS of The Associates of the Provincial Archives of New Brunswick are members of the public who volunteer to facilitate the activities of the Provincial Archives.

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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—was 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 crudity. Both seemed to come naturally to him. His interest in literature was spurred when 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 Folksong 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. Inevitably, 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 fitting because in life, too, he never sought personal publicity. It was reward enough to champion the things he cared about.
ARCHIVES’ DIARIES: J.M. ROBINSON

Pleasant moments and sad on 19th Century sea voyage

On October 18, 1869, having a fair wind from the northwest, the barque Caledonia, John Hawson, captain, set sail from Saint John for Montevideo, Uruguay. Aboard 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 the events on this voyage. Excerpts follow.

A barque like the one J.M. Robinson and the Vroom family set sail on. A barque was a multi-masted, square-rigged vessel. This one was photographed on the Miramichi.

Although archivists are not yet certain, this J.M. Robinson is thought to be the diarist on the trip from Saint John to Montevideo, Uruguay. In young ones I ever saw. In the evening after we got the children to bed, Mr. & Mrs. Vroom, captain, the two mates and your humble servant – resolved ourselves into a singing committee on the quarter deck and there exhaustrad all the songs we knew after which we turned in, the Captain, Vroom and myself having first partaken of a cocktail of brandy and water.

Vroom是可以，the morning in constructing a cradle to be filled with bed bugs to such an extent that we threw the cradle overboard and I occupied the morning in constructing a new one out of an empty box...

SATURDAY 29th. This morning, I was called by Mr. Allen to get some coffee about 5 o'clock, I got on deck, the stars were falling on all sides and some so vast as almost to appear like lightning, leaving a mark in the sky like the tail of a comet.

SATURDAY 4th. This morning the Bathing Saloon and Barber Shop was opened about 11.45 o'clock. Mr. Allen, the same night having rigged a canvas covering from the companion to the (Minen) rigging which was placed a half hogshead filled with salt water and in which all the passengers bathed.

The Directory was initially published in paper form in 1996, with a revised and updated second edition published in 1996. Both were the result of decades of gathering data for a New Brunswick newspaper...
**Daniel Johnson body of work at Provincial Archives**

Support effort launched by Associates

AN 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 1754-1866. 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 online searchable database. The Daniel Johnson Vital Statistics Index will appear as a link on the popular PANB website, http://archives.gnb.ca/.

The Associates contributed an additional $3,000 to the purchase of the personal records of L. Governor Sir Howard Douglas, continued their invaluable fundraising support to the Archives through more financial support for the Josh Beaudit 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 relating to environmental topics, and through over $8,000 in sales of Chestnut Canoe memorabilia and publications.

During the year, the Associates committed to 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**

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**New Finding Aids**

**Government Records**

- RS717. New Brunswick Liquor Corporation Records, 1922-1997. 5 m. of textual records, 6 reels of microfilm. Funding and revised to include microfilmed records.
- RS161. Gloucester County Probate Court Records, 1876-1914. 5 m. Newly accessioned records.
- RS899. School Board Minutes, 1933-1996. 1 b. From the current District 15 (Houlton and area).
- RS702. Public Utilities Board of Commissioners Records, 1974-1975. 12 m.
- RS144. Board of Management Minutes, 1933-1977. 6 m.

**Private Records**

- RS63. District 11 (Bouctouche area).
- RS748. Gloucester County Judicial District Probate Court Records, 1922-1997. 5 m. of textual records, 6 reels of microfilm. Funding and revised to include microfilmed records.

**Recent acquisitions**

**Additions to Archives Website**

**Provincial Returns of Deaths**—RS141, 1931-1935 added
**County Registers of Deaths**—RS141C2. Additions from St. John, Gloucester, Westmorland, York, Victoria, and Northumberland Counties: Deaths for 1835-1838.
**Provincial Registrations of Births**—RS143. Over 15,000 digitized images of births from 1906 and 1908 can be accessed at the PANB website. Pictured above, from left to right, are Andy Gunter, Capital Branch New Brunswick Genealogical Society, Marion Beyea, Provincial Archivist, and Carol Brander, Capital Branch, NBGS.

**New at the Archives**

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A silhouette (English: /ˈsɪluət/ SIL-oo-ET, French: [silwɛt]) is the image of a person, animal, object or scene represented as a solid shape of a single colour, usually black, with its edges matching the outline of the subject. The interior of a silhouette is featureless, and the silhouette is usually presented on a light background, usually white, or none at all. The silhouette differs from an outline, which depicts the edge of an object in a linear form, while a silhouette appears as a solid shape.