

Where Do We Go From Here?

by Dave Laskey, UE

Well, folks, we're now more than half way through our Association's centennial year and from all accounts it has been a success. For me, such milestones usually prompt some reflection on what brought us to the milestone and, more importantly, some questions on what the future might hold.

I wasn't around when the UELAC was formed and I can only guess at the visions and motives of the founders. I'm quite certain, however, that today's Association is very different than what they envisaged. Just as the founders did not have the gift of clairvoyance, we cannot predict what the UELAC will look like in 2114 nor, indeed, whether it will survive. The best we can do is to develop plans and create structures that will, we hope, see us thriving in five or ten years.

Status Quo

All planning starts with some analysis of where we are today. Admittedly, my understanding of the problems in branches other than my own is limited. Is the situation in New Brunswick Branch symptomatic of an Association-wide malaise? I don't know for certain but there must be some lessons to be learned.

NB Branch total membership (including Other Family members) has been around 165 since I joined in 2008. We typically lose about 30 members each year and gain a similar number of new members. The average age has held steady at 69 years, so the increase in age of the renewing cohort is being offset by the younger ages of new members and by the loss of our oldest members.

About two thirds of our members live outside our home province and are generally unable to participate fully in Branch activities. However, many of our NB members do not live within easy driving distance of Saint John – the hub of most activities. That means that the pool of members who can participate in Branch events and who might be able to take on jobs is quite limited.

Of course, if we could reduce our non-renewal rate the Branch would expand and we'd have more resources – human and financial – for projects. Past surveys in our Branch, current surveys in other genealogical organisations and anecdotal evidence tell us that many people fail to renew because they don't believe they're getting value for money. (That includes the people who join just long enough to get a UE certificate.)

For me, joining UELAC was prompted by the belief that I would gain access to genealogical experts and significant research resources to assist me in the process of discovering and documenting my origins. While I have found a few resources that have been of value I can't say that joining UELAC has met my expectations. (However, there have been other things that have kept me engaged.)

So, to the extent that New Brunswick Branch is representative of the broader organisation, we are group of groups (i.e. branches) each struggling to attract and keep new members.

One more thing. We do not have the right to confer the UE designation on anybody. The right to append UE to our names is acquired at birth. We either have or we don't have it. The best that UELAC can do is to state that a particular person has submitted proofs of descent from a Loyalist in accordance with a rigorous set of genealogical standards.

Quo Vadis?

This is the prescriptive section of my article – the section where I, in my infinite wisdom, outline my view of where we should go. As you will see, my prescription is relatively simple. There is a risk that some feathers may be ruffled but, as Admiral Farragut said, “Damn the torpedoes, full speed ahead.”

First, we need to make it vastly easier for members to gain access to the vast treasure trove held in Dominion Office – all the past UE certificate applications. These applications contain an enormous amount of knowledge about Loyalists and their descendants but we don't make it easy or cheap to look at them.

Accessibility could be greatly improved by storing all applications as digital images. Doing this on a go-forward basis is quite simple although the technical details are beyond the scope of this article. Suffice to say that we could develop and implement a digital solution within a few months and at low cost. However, converting all existing applications to a digital format is more problematic. The technology to handle the digitisation of microfilm and microfiche is readily available but we've never asked for an estimate of the cost of conversion. To put it differently, the job may be easy but expensive. That said, let's get some quotes and try to move this file forward.

Second, we need to overcome our fears about privacy legislation. We ask applicants to authorise us to “publish” the information in their applications but seem to be paralysed by uncertainty about what that means. If needed, let's get legal opinions. Let's expand the application form's authorisation section to make it even more specific. Let's make sure that we conform to the privacy requirements of the province with the most stringent legislation and move on.

Of course, we have to respect the privacy of living persons and we also have to follow the wishes of applicants. If an applicant wants his/her entire application to be kept confidential, so be it. (As an aside, I have heard members say that there's no way they would share their work with others. Since I joined UELAC so I could access and build on the work done by others and am very willing to share my research results with others, I admit to bewilderment and consternation in this area. To my way of thinking there's no value in re-doing work that has already been nicely completed by somebody else. I'd rather devote my time to expanding our collective knowledge.)

Third, we should systematically and quickly update and expand the Loyalist Directory. Doug Grant does a great job of updating the Directory “as time permits” but the task, as I envisage it, is beyond any single person’s capabilities.

Could we not set up a country-wide project to handle this task? I suspect there are people in every branch who would be willing to devote time to such a project; I would, for one. I have proven Loyalist ancestors who are not listed, proven Loyalist ancestors whose listings are inaccurate, ancestors who are mistakenly listed as Loyalists and unproven Loyalist ancestors for whom I have lots of new information. (The last group will ultimately be proven in new UE certificate applications as I get around to them.)

Fourth, let’s break down some of the walls of secrecy that we’ve built over the years. Why do we so closely guard the access rights to the “Executive Information” section of our website? Relying on branch presidents to filter and relay information to their members is fraught with problems. During my tenure as president of NB Branch I was inconsistent in my dissemination of knowledge about Dominion concerns and I can’t imagine I was unique in that regard. The result for my branch was that many members were left feeling that they had no connection to the national organisation.

When I look at the contents of Executive Information I see nothing that should be shielded from the eyes of our members. That’s not to say that members will be deeply interested in the contents of Executive Information – most of that stuff is so arcane and obscure as to be meaningless to the casual observer – but it doesn’t need to be kept in the Tower of London with the Crown Jewels.

The solution, in my view, is to simply give all our members the right to look at Executive Information.

Conclusion

Clearly, my analysis of the problems facing our Association has not been exhaustive. By picking the issues that are near to my heart I have ignored other pressing issues. Equally, my prescription excludes other possible initiatives that could have wonderful outcomes for UELAC. That’s fine. This article is not intended to be the final word on the topic. Rather, it should be regarded as the opening statement in a long debate.

Ask yourself whether there’s any truth to what I’ve said. Think about other problems that drive you to distraction. Open your mind to new possibilities – new ways of doing things. Together let’s try to come up with a vision that will carry us forward for the next few years so that we can have a glimmer of hope about surviving for another century.