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BRINGING HISTORY TO LIFE

Gore Mutual unearths its past; Old documents and maps dating to Cambridge firm's founding in 1839 are being digitized for use by history buffs and others seeking a glimpse of region's past

MICHAEL HAMMOND
RECORD STAFF

CAMBRIDGE

A small vault in the basement of Gore Mutual Insurance Co.'s picturesque Cambridge headquarters is beginning to divulge its historic secrets.

The 3.9- by 4.8-metre vault, protected by a thick, slow-moving safe door and two interior steel doors, holds more than a century's worth of maps, documents, photographs, newspapers and letters that are now being made accessible to history buffs so the company's story can be told.

A quick peek at the vault's documents shows they not only tell Gore's story but Canada's as well.

Over the summer, the company has worked with a Waterloo photo studio to create digital versions of 2,467 historic insurance maps. The company has set up a room in its main lobby where anyone can scan old maps of Kitchener, Galt, Waterloo, Woodstock or any number of other Ontario towns where Gore had policyholders.

The project is no small feat considering Gore's history goes back to 1839.

Sara McLennan, Gore's director of marketing and product innovation, took on the mammoth task of digitizing the company's historic relics. She is now considering how to share other items, such as board of director minute books, with the public.

"I feel a responsibility not only to preserve it but share it," McLennan says. "It's too great a resource to have it tucked away in a vault."

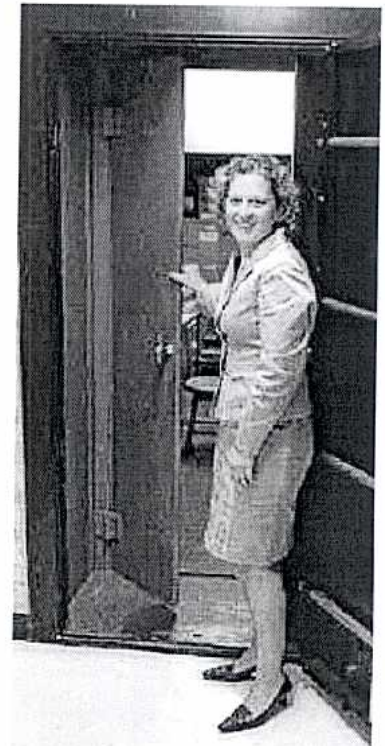
Besides the thousands of fire insurance maps, a number of other historic curiosities are waiting to see the light of day.

In one of the company's minute books from 1941, a cashed \$100,000 cheque made out to the federal government is stuffed with thanks from then prime minister William Lyon Mackenzie King.

The donation, worth \$1.3 million in today's dollars, was Gore's contribution to the Canadian war effort.

The prime minister praises Gore for its "inspiring" gesture.

"It is a matter of profound encouragement that, at this time, when all Canadians are being urged to lend to the government, your company have afforded such an inspiring example of freely giving," Mackenzie King writes.



DAVID BEBEE, RECORD STAFF

Sara McLennan, director of marketing and product innovation at Gore Mutual Insurance Co., stands in the doorway of the vault in the basement at the Cambridge headquarters. Inside are maps, documents and photographs dating back to the company's founding in 1839. Some of the maps have been digitized and are available for public viewing.

This is just one example of the historic relics contained in the vault that paint a picture of Canada's evolution from sparsely populated British colony to full-fledged nation.

McLennan, who joined the company last summer, says she was brought down to the vault on one of her first days with the company.

She was fascinated with the historic maps since many include ornate city logos and intricate artistic drawings. She looked at a map of Waterloo to see what her area of the city was like in the past.

The old maps detail the potential fire risks that Gore faced in dozens of towns. One old map of Waterloo, for example, details where water buckets were located in a factory in case there was a fire. Another map, this one of Woodstock, notes that the town had one horse-drawn fire department carriage and eight volunteer firefighters.

McLennan says some history buffs have gone down to the vault for research purposes, but the problem was that a Gore employee had to accompany visitors for hours, in many cases.

The new history room, with its searchable digital archive, allows more people to view crisp digital versions of documents on a widescreen computer monitor.

Still, McLennan admits she loves being in the basement vault, where each document has a small piece of the company's story to tell. "If I could, I would hang out here every day," she says.

McLennan is considering organizing a display of some of the other artifacts that would rotate through the company's main lobby.

Susan Burke, the curator and director of McDougall Cottage in Cambridge and Joseph Schneider Haus in Kitchener, has made use of Gore's old fire maps for research on McDougall Cottage.

She advised the company on its plans to display its historic artifacts. Burke says it is crucial for the items to be protected from pollutants in the air as well as excessive amounts of light.

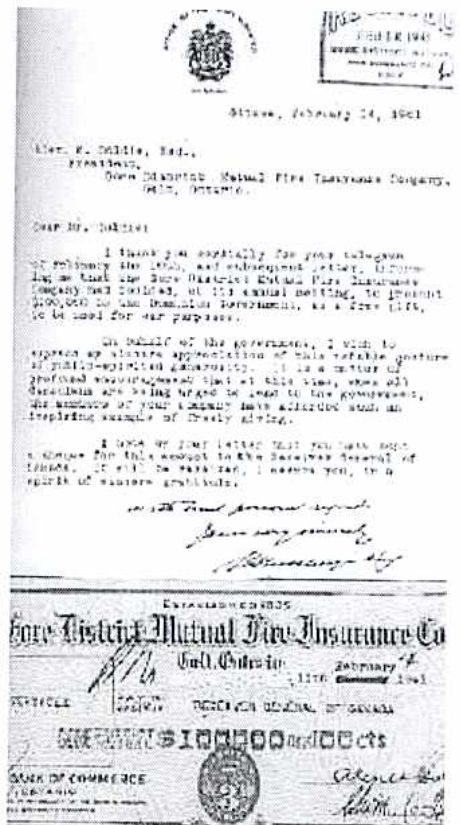
There are types of Mylar film that can be used to prevent ultraviolet light hitting the documents. Burke also says it is important for the items not to come into contact with people's hands since natural oils can degrade old paper.

Like other local history buffs, Burke is thrilled an important piece of the region's history is being made available.

"It's really encouraging that a corporation is taking such an interest in their history," she says. "Museums can't do it all. You can tell from their building that they take pride in their history."

Gore's headquarters are perched atop a hill on Dundas Street North overlooking Soper Park in old Galt. Its offices are partly housed in a neo-Georgian-style stone mansion, completed in 1936. The company's grounds include old-growth trees, including a hawthorn tree believed to be one of the oldest in North America. The company's grounds are surrounded by a rustic fieldstone wall with a wrought-iron main gate.

Despite Gore's rich heritage, McLennan is quick to point out that the company is one of the most innovative in Canada. It was the one of the first to introduce computerized policy handling for auto insurance in 1968. Today, the company operates an almost "paperless" operation, McLennan says.



SUBMITTED PHOTO

Gore Mutual Insurance Co.'s \$100,000 the Canadian war effort in 1941 didn't. In a thank-you letter, then prime minister Lyon Mackenzie King told Gore president the gift was an "inspiring" show of patriotism. The letter and cancelled cheque are at Gore head office.



DAVID BEBEE, RECORD STAFF

Inside a concrete bunker behind a head office at Gore Mutual Insurance Co. is this vault. It holds old maps, documents and antique items.

Gore, Canada's oldest provider of property and casualty insurance, employs 235 people, mainly at its Cambridge headquarters.

The company also has a branch in British Columbia.

In 2006, it had \$421.9 million in assets and profits of \$12.2 million.

The company was originally supposed to have been founded in 1837, but its founders decided against the idea because of uncertainty following the ill-fated William Lyon Mackenzie-led rebellion north of Toronto on Yonge Street.

Gore was founded two years later as a fire insurance provider, since fire was a constant threat in the colonies as most buildings were made of lumber, heated by wood stoves and illuminated by kerosene lamps.

Gore's first corporate seal, which sits in the basement vault, depicts the mythical bird, the phoenix, to signify the company's goal of protecting policyholders in the event that fire might destroy their home or business.

Some of the notes from the company's agents are in the vault. One agent reports how he found an old graveyard for British soldiers when inspecting a barn.

Also in the vault is a policy from 1846, which warns the policyholder he cannot have more than 25 pounds of gunpowder in his house.

Old copies of the Galt Reporter are also in the room, some from the 1940s when Canada was in the grip of the Second World War.

Much has changed since Gore was founded in 1839, but McLennan says the company's core values haven't, which is why Gore has survived.

"I'm sure my colleagues now have the same conversations people in the company had in the past," McLennan said.

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DAVID BEBEE, RECORD STAFF

This Gore Mutual Insurance cal when the company operated as Co.



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GORE MUTUAL INSURANCE CO
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