

Voice from the Vault

By Gregory Sanford, State Archivist

On Deer Herds and Public Records

My reading chair at home is surrounded by precariously stacked books that I work through in a rather desultory fashion. Recently, Charles Fish's *In the Land of the Wild Onion* surfaced. Mr. Fish traces the course of the Winooski River, pausing here and there to reflect upon geology, stream dynamics, fish and wildlife, waste treatment, history and a host of other fascinating subjects.

Two themes that flow through the book are management and professionalization. For example, in the chapter "The Deer Hunter," Fish examines the state's long term efforts to manage the deer herd within changing contexts such as environmental trends (extensive forests to extensive clear cutting to reforestation), human populations and development, and the cultural role of hunting. Fish writes that "to look at the details and language of a profession is to see the world through different eyes. The only hope for the survival of a healthy deer herd or indeed many wildlife species, plant and animal, is through management broadly

understood...[W]ildlife management is based on two disciplines: the biological sciences especially as they contribute to ecology (organisms in their environment) and the theory of management as control...Management as control assumes an instrumental relationship to the thing managed." Fish is not entirely comfortable with the concept of managed "wildlife," conscious of what is being lost. Still, "with an increasing human population and the physical and economic means to plant ourselves in ever more remote areas, management is critical."



As Fish talks with Vermont's botanists, geologists, fluvial geomorphologists, and other experts he is continually struck not only by the importance of trained professionals for understanding our complex world but also by the love these professionals bring to their work. This included the staff of the wastewater treatment plant in Montpelier, all of whom have to be certified in their work. Ron Mercier of the Montpelier plant exemplifies the professionalism and joy that Fish routinely encountered. Mercier felt he was a "lucky" man: "The work is varied. I do computer work, I do drawings, I figure things out and set things up...knowing that you're really accomplishing something, keeping the river clean."

As is often the case I found myself filtering the words before me through my current work at the Vermont State Archives and Records Administration (VSARA). Though it may be a stretch to equate public records with wildlife I found myself comparing records management with deer herd and other management activities highlighted by Fish. Unmanaged records cannot sustain a healthy "herd," as evidenced by our increasing difficulties in responding to public record requests, distinguishing records of short term value from records of long term legal, administrative, or information values, or in finding the resources ("bucks" if you will) to support the professional management/control needed for good recordkeeping.

While the state has attempted to manage public records since at least the 1930s, professional skills and management techniques have not kept pace with the changing environments in which records are created and used; nor for that matter with new species of records. Many of the traditional management practices, for

example, still reflect paper records and seek to manage voluminous paper files generated by an increasing array of public services. Though the vast majority of government records are born digital, there are still directives in place that require those that have to be kept ten years or longer to be printed out and, in some cases, microfilmed.

Over the decades some 4,000 separate record series and 10,000 disposition orders have been approved, but many of them are for agencies and departments that have been abolished or combined into something new (for example Fish and Game is now Fish and Wildlife); some series are inactive; some have become catch alls for new types of records that only loosely, if at all, meet the original series description; etc. This makes it hard to even understand the size of the herd, much less its health.

In a few cases established management practices lumber on despite the changing ecologies of government records. Take the humble time report, for example. Every two weeks state employees fill out their timesheets, often electronically, and then print them out so they can be signed. Agency business offices enter the data from the sheets into Finance's database and then mail the signed timesheets to Finance, which in turn sends the records to VSARA to be filmed. The film is treated as a permanent copy, though access to the records is limited by the need to hand crank through the microfilm reels to find individual time sheets. After filming, the paper copies are sent back to Finance, which in most—but apparently not all—cases mails them back to the original creating agency where they must be retained three years.

VSARA is addressing these management issues in a variety of ways. One was the creation of a professional class of record analyst. The record analysts work directly with agencies, through our Targeted Assistance Program (TAP), to update or create more current, standards-based management plans (we are currently talking with Finance about a TAP initiative). The analysts work with agency attorneys, business officers, and IT staff to understand the "natural habitats" in which records are created and used. Similar to the classification systems used by the botanists and other professions visited by Fish, the analysts have developed a common vocabulary so similar activities and the records they create are consistently described across bureaucratic boundaries.

We are also working with the Department of Information and Innovation's Enterprise Project Management Office and the Attorney General's Office, through a collaborative effort known as iSTART, to develop guidelines from managing digital records as digital records (the most recent example is a best practice for imaging found at: <http://vermont-archives.org/records/standards/pdf/ImagingGuideline2008.pdf>). We are now exploring a program, similar to Connecticut's, where agencies can self-certify that they meet these standards and can therefore dispose of the paper records once scanned.

Like Mr. Fish, I am impressed by the professionalism and joy of the many agency and VSARA personnel who are making all this possible. Like the flora and fauna of the Winooski Valley, I strongly believe that we will all benefit from the improved flow of government records and information. To keep pace with the work of VSARA please visit our website at: <http://vermont-archives.org/records/>

A note regarding last month's column: The elections have passed and I am happy to report that Chester A. Arthur did very well. Several readers contacted us after last month's column and chided me for not including President Arthur among Vermonters who had sought or attained the Oval Office. Mr. Arthur did not make the list (nor did Calvin Coolidge) since I had restricted the list to those who were Vermont residents at the time of their campaign or presidency. President Arthur was a New Yorker at the time of his presidency. Upon re-reading the column I realized that I did not make this point as explicitly as I should have; for that I apologize.