

# Voice from the Vault

By Gregory Sanford, State Archivist

## RUNNING ON EMPTY

We should create a loan program and tax credits to improve the energy efficiency of existing homes and to require new construction to meet energy standards. We should explore alternative, renewable energy sources from solar to wind to wood to hydro. We should use methane from livestock manure to generate power. We should commit to conservation from energy efficient appliances to carpooling. States should be allowed to set fuel mileage targets for cars, coupled with tax incentives for buying fuel efficient automobiles. UVM should make a stronger commitment to energy research. We should be careful of committing to coal and not reduce clean air requirements. We should look at nuclear power only within the context of public safety and solutions to nuclear waste.

Thirty years can dim our collective memory. The above ideas, which sound familiar to us today, were proposed in the mid-1970s as part of Vermont's response to the 1973 oil embargo launched by the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC). The resulting energy crisis opened up a collective examination of sustainable and renewable energy that anticipated current energy concerns (though climate change had not yet been added as a major component within that discussion).

That earlier energy crisis cut across all levels of society. On November 11, 1973, Human Resources Commissioner Paul Philbrook wrote Governor Thomas Salmon, "It seems apparent that we are going to be one of the first departments in State government to feel the brunt of the results of the fuel crisis. It takes little...to imagine that very early this winter we are going to have folks coming to us and saying, "We are almost out of fuel...[and] we do not have cash"...[We] ought to try to find a way to keep the fuel prices from impacting most immediately and most severely on low-income people." (Governor Salmon Papers, Box BBB, File 517). At the same

time the tourism and recreation businesses, facing a Sunday prohibition on gas sales and possible rationing, plead with the governor to mitigate the impact of high costs and limited supplies of energy on travel, snowmaking, snowmobiling, and other activities upon which their economic lives depended. Other economic interests from service stations (which had already experienced a 20% decline before the embargo) to utility companies sought state support.

Former Governor Philip Hoff, who Governor Salmon appointed chair of a Commission on

Electrical Energy, saw an even deeper problem beneath the immediate crisis. On May 4, 1973, he wrote Governor Salmon that, "The primary problem in terms of electrical energy...deals with the problem of growth...A 10.3 annual increase or growth factor means we are doubling our need for electrical energy in approximately seven years. This is intolerable. Unfortunately, from a straight

business economic point of view, it may be virtually impossible for the utility industry to operate without a continuing growth factor. As a matter of fact, the whole business economy of this nation...is built upon growth and there is not a single economist...who would dare predict what would happen to the economy...if that growth cycle were interrupted." (Salmon Papers, Box CCC, File 521).

Governor Hoff was not the only Vermonter who questioned our basic economic assumptions because of the crisis. Representative Steve McLeod of Barre, among others, felt that Vermont state government should no longer support tourism and marketing since tourism was a significant consumer of energy and should be self-sustaining rather than subsidized (Box ZZ, Folder 513). Secretary Martin Johnson of the Agency of Environmental Conservation bemoaned decisions made in the 1960s, such as a



commitment to four lane highways and motels that encouraged car-based tourism. He also expressed ire with "a fourth rate College of Engineering at the University" that frustrated Vermont's efforts to attract a solar energy research institute (Box CCC, Folder 527).

Secretary Martin was not the only Vermonter disgruntled with UVM's engineering department. Jeff McDonald of Vergennes wrote the governor that the search for alternative, renewable energy had overlooked an obvious source that could also bolster Vermont agriculture: "Vermont has 3,312 farms (1974) and 196,678 cows, plus countless other livestock...[A] cow produces 96 lbs of manure a day, or roughly 18 tons per year. This manure, in a natural process known as anaerobic digestion, will produce 38,000 cubic feet of methane gas a year...[which] can be used for heating and running machinery." Mr. McDonald went on to explain how he and a group of friends had developed such a digester but his request for a state grant lost out to a proposal to study the practicality of digesters from the UVM's Engineering Department. The department ultimately produced a report saying such digesters were impracticable. Governor Salmon sent Gilbert Parker, Director of Market Development, to visit Mr. McDonald. He reported that the digester worked and could not only produce \$5,370 worth of gas a year, but also increased the value of manure as fertilizer by \$4,790 a year. Subtracting annual maintenance and depreciation costs, Mr. Parker calculated that the digester provided a net profit of \$2,000 a year (Box K, File 92).

Many of us recall the more obvious reactions to the energy crisis: lower temperatures in public buildings,

lower speed limits on the interstate, and the Sunday prohibition on gas sales. Governor Salmon's records reveal a government and a society that, in the face of crisis, was willing to work together not only to explore new ideas, but also to revisit basic social understandings.

The range of exploration is astounding: carpooling for migrant workers in Vermont's orchards; making Vermont food self-sufficient; development of local energy sources such as a wood pellet plant in Wallingford; and a host of other ideas. This was indeed a dialogue. The Vermont Chamber of Commerce weighed in on Governor Salmon's State Energy Plan; businesses offered alternatives to ideas they feared carried competitive disadvantages; public power advocates made counter proposals to utility plans; etc.

Governor Salmon ended his 1975 inaugural with a quote from Walter Lippman capturing a similar social essence that emerged immediately prior to World War II: "We shall turn from the soft vices in which a civilization decays. We shall return to the stern virtues by which a civilization is made. We shall do this because at long last, we know that we must, because finally we begin to see that the hard way is the only enduring way." For a brief moment, it appeared we would not shrink from the hard way. And then fuel prices fell.

A final reflection: archival management is sometimes represented by the Roman god Janus who had two faces, one turned to the past, the other to the future. As the Salmon records suggest it is not often the course of wisdom to leave the past behind when trying to peer into the future.