

## A Record of Summer Reading

The long days of summer allow enough time, at the end of the day, to retire to the back lawn with a stack of books. Depending on the level of companionship provided by noseeums and deerfly, I then give free rein to my eclectic reading interests.

For example, I began the summer with thoughts of building a stone retaining wall for one of our gardens. To learn about different building techniques I read Kevin Gardner's *The Granite Kiss*. The title, which refers to getting your finger smashed between two stones, was not encouraging but the book was helpful and also pointed me toward Susan Allport's *Sermons in Stone: The Stone Walls of New England and New York*. Here I gleaned that in 1870 there were 252,539 miles of stonewalls in New England and New York and that it would take 15,000 people, working 365 days a year, 243 years to build stonewalls of comparable mileage. Apparently the work that went into these walls would have built the pyramids of Egypt a hundred times over.

I am never quite sure how to respond to such nuggets. How were the calculations arrived at, for example? But this is summer reading, so I don't care as long as I can trot out such factoids at dinner parties (this may explain the declining number of invitations we receive).

What struck me, however, was how stonewalls, an efficient and necessary response to an agricultural need (clearing land for farming), ultimately became barriers to the increasing mechanization of agriculture. New horse-drawn harvesters and other technologies were designed for the wide open fields of the west, not the small, stonewall-enclosed fields of New England. This contributed to the decline of New England agriculture. This, in turn, led to thoughts about several on-going projects on implementing electronic record systems; how can we identify and implement standards so current computer systems don't become barriers to new information technologies?

That train of thought suggests that my summer reading is not the escape it should be. So I picked up Jodi Picoult's *Second Glance*, a mystery/ghost story set in Vermont. I was delighted to discover that the author not only incorporated the Vermont Eugenic Survey into her story, but also availed herself of some of the Survey's records that we had helped process a number of years ago. Alas, part of the tale turned on the discovery of eugenic records in a town clerk's office; if I recall correctly the records were described as neglected and scattered across the floor of the clerk's vault. Encounters with the myth of the "dark and dusty" archives are too common, whatever your reading tastes.

Though I should have known better, in order to escape my record-haunted reading, I then picked up Geoffrey Stone's *Perilous Times: Free Speech in Wartime*. Though the book was a hernia-inducing 730 pages long, it was well written and fascinating. Vermont figured prominently in the first chapter on the Alien and Sedition Acts from 1798-1801. Twenty-five leading Jeffersonians were arrested under the Sedition Act, ten of whom were brought to trial. All ten were convicted, including two Vermonters: Matthew Lyon and Anthony Haswell. Lyon's case is relatively well known, particularly the fact that Vermonters re-elected him to Congress while he was serving his sentence in a local jail. Haswell, publisher of the *Vermont Gazette*, created a lottery to help pay Lyon's fine, writing that "your representative...is holden by the oppressive hand of usurped power in a loathsome prison, suffering all the indignities which can be heaped upon him by a hard-hearted savage, who has, to the disgrace of Federalism, been

elevated to a station where he can satiate his barbarity on the misery of his victim" (the "hard-hearted savage" was the Federalist sheriff Jabez Fitch). This was enough to earn Haswell his own conviction under the Sedition Act in 1798. Since Haswell's sentence ended on July 7<sup>th</sup> Vermonters postponed their 4<sup>th</sup> of July celebrations until the 7<sup>th</sup> and some 2,000 supporters gathered to greet Haswell upon his release. Of course civil liberties and records are closely tied and once again I found myself reading about recordkeeping issues (the section on Daniel Ellsberg's theft and publication of the Pentagon Papers not only touched on record issues but stirred memories from my youth).

Figuring I had found a safe, if depressing, harbor from records I began reading Romeo Dallaire's *Shake Hands with the Devil* on the Rwanda genocide. Lt. General Dallaire was the UN commander in Rwanda who tried valiantly but in vain to bring world attention to the horror that was taking place around him. Even within this horrifying memoir of inhumanity and indifference one could find references to Vermont and records. While General Dallaire has particularly harsh words for Belgium, France and the United States, he gives thanks to two U.S. Senators who contacted him in order to move the Clinton Administration to action; one of those senators was Jim Jeffords (the other Paul Simon).

Dallaire also noted the role of records, including how extremist Hutus used an identity card system that included ethnic identity, first created during Belgium's colonial rule, to target Tutsis for death. He also expressed his suspicion that memos, received after the genocide began to receive international attention, were "included only for the archives"; that is to create a historical record that protected the UN from charges of indifference.

My professional reading underscored how recordkeeping can be important to documenting genocide. I recently read an article by Dawne Adam on the meticulous recordkeeping conducted by the Pol Pot regime in Cambodia ("The Tuol Sleng Archives and the Cambodian Genocide" in the Spring 1998 issue of *Archivaria*). Ms Adam noted that "obsessive documenting allowed [the Khmer Rouge] to reassure themselves that all measures had been taken to cleanse the country" and thus defend their ideology. If that obsessive documentation was not depressing enough, Ms Adam went on to explain how difficult it was to bring Khmer Rouge leaders to trial despite the capture of their extensive files from the Tuol Sleng death camp. Our celebration of records as instruments of accountability is sometimes overblown.

As the above suggests, I include professional literature in my summer reading. One such book is Richard Cox's *No Innocent Deposits: Forming Archives by Rethinking Appraisal*. Dr. Cox wonders about the decisions, over time, that have filled our archives and historical societies; about criteria we are currently using to identify archival records; and about how those decisions affect perceptions of archives as either repositories of evidence and as "memory houses." These are interesting questions in Vermont where the core collections of the Archives, UVM's Special Collections, the Vermont Historical Society, the Sheldon Museum, the Fairbanks Museum, the Shelburne Museum, etc. originated from the idiosyncratic collecting impulses of a few individuals like Henry Stevens Sr and Jr, Henry Sheldon, Horace Fairbanks, Electra Webb and others. Dr. Cox's musings are also timely as the Archives attempts to respond to a host of new legislative directives to document the executive and judicial branches of government. What is it we, that is, all of us, need to document and why? Have the answers to those questions changed over time and what records of accountability and memory will we collect?

Where all this gets me or what book will next surface from my stack of summer reading is unclear. Meanwhile the stonewall for the garden awaits; but wait, the new Harry Potter just arrived; let me take a look then I will get back to work.