

Voice from the Vault

By Gregory Sanford, State Archivist

NOTE: As the new Vermont State Archives and Records Administration takes shape it is necessary to focus our limited resources on our core mission, which is to provide professional, standards-based guidance to public agencies on the management of their records. Consequently the difficult decision had been made to phase out some services, including reformatting (microfilm and a limited scanning program). Our reformatting unit will close down in early February. For those who are still using the service we will be providing additional information over the coming month. While programmatically the decision is sound, it is very difficult. Our reformatting staff has given years of good service to Vermont, often working with aging equipment and limited resources. For that service we extend our heartfelt thanks and best wishes.

Records Management, Then and Now

The new technology had "come to rank with the sulpha drugs, penicillin and electronics as one of the things which science has brought to make life more simple and pleasant." What was that new technology? Microfilm. The paean to microfilm quoted above is from the *First Annual Report of the Public Records Commission* released on September 1, 1944.



Microfilm had gained public awareness as the result of V-mail, the microfilming of correspondence between Americans in the armed forces and their friends and family back in the States. V-mail stood for "Victory mail." By "miniaturizing" letters the military was able to reduce the volume of mail that had to be transported. For example, thirty-seven mail bags, weighing 2,575 pounds, could be reduced to a single mail bag weighing 45 pounds.

The 1944 report went on to opine that "despite a certain romanticism which has clung to microfilm, there is no doubt that as an aid to the compression and preservation of records it has great possibilities. Furthermore, with technical advances resulting from war experimentation and with the accumulation of experience which ripens any new method, we will undoubtedly see improved instruments and methods, and lowered costs, resulting in spreading use of photography in archives work."

Okay, in my personal experience I don't recall attaching any romanticism to microfilm, nor do I recall it making life more pleasant. Still, I find the 1944 Public Records Commission report fascinating. I was reading it for context to our ongoing efforts of bringing the new Vermont State Archives and Records Administration (VSARA) into reality. Created on July 1st through the consolidation of the Public Records Division with the State Archives, VSARA is seeking to integrate the previously distinct archival, public records, and information management programs. We are also working to improve our

services to agencies through active partnerships that can analyze the administrative and legal processes through which records are created.

It is interesting how closely our current vision parallels the vision of the early Public Records Commission. The commission, for example, supported what was then an emerging professional field. "Records administration is emerging as a specialized field, a body of experience in records management is being built up, centering in America at the National Archives in Washington; and records problems, everywhere akin but nowhere identical, can be treated in a systematic fashion." The commission's call for professional records staff and standards is echoed in VSARA's development.

The commission also supported active partnerships with agencies, sending staff to work with agencies in identifying and scheduling records according to their administrative and legal values. This had to be an active partnership since "officials busy each in his own department cannot be expected to devote to the records the sustained attention which the serious and complicated nature of the problems demands." Actively trying to understand the functions and activities of individual offices was essential because of "the spread of government functions from the general and the rudimentary to fields as specific and divergent as the hatching of trout and the vocational guidance of children." VSARA is seeking to re-establish the commission's vision of active partnerships through record analysts charged with working with agencies, primarily through our new Targeted Assistance Program (TAP).

While celebrating microfilm the commission was also aware of the limitations of applying technologies without establishing solid records management plans. "Before one starts, however, it is well to realize that the photographing of records of trivial content does not by magic make the records important and worthy of preservation. In a wave of enthusiasm it is quite possible to waste money in photographing trash. The photograph of records inaccurately filed, lacking clear finding devices and with important documents missing, does not permit ready and satisfactory reference."

The commission also recognized that microfilm was not an effective technology for semi-active records where additional material has to be added or existing records amended or deleted. "For certain files the necessity of adding material in sequence at a later date lessens the desirability of reel film," the commission cautioned. It elaborated that "to change the order of items once they have been filmed, or to insert items..., requires splicing which is possible but undesirable."

In our digital age the commission's cautions are often summarized as "garbage in/garbage out" and, as the volume of digital records explodes, many agencies are finding that insufficient or inconsistent metadata and other descriptive standards can make locating records difficult if not impossible. VSARA is working with the Department of Information and Innovation and others to address metadata and other issues.

While it is comforting to realize that sixty years ago the commission supported many of the initiatives we are currently undertaking, the 1944 report also occasions concerns. The commission's support for professionally trained staff actively working with agencies eroded over time as the records programs confronted declining resources and inconsistent high level support. Applying professional records and information management prior to employing technology also became inconsistent and too often microfilm was simply used to miniaturize increasingly voluminous records without an analysis of content or legal and administrative need. The filming of semi-active records reduced the staff to physically scratching off images of amended, sealed or expunged records from the film and, where appropriate putting the amended on a separate film, complicating research. It appears that a similar disconnect between record and information management and our use of digital technologies, including scanning, is occurring. Indeed, though we once hailed microfilm as gift of science, we have not reassessed it as a records management tool in a digital world. It is currently not uncommon for digital records to be printed out to allow for filming or even scanning. Instead we need to develop guidelines so we can manage digital records digitally.

And so, just as we have often urged others in this column to use government records for context we use the 1944 report as a guide and a caution. You can follow VSARA's work, from our Targeted Assistance Program to standards development to guidance on managing digital records by visiting the "managing records" section of our website at: <http://vermont-archives.org/records/>. We welcome your thoughts and comments.