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55 YEARS

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Outgoing president's message: New England Land Title Association's 50th anniversary year - by Barbara Smith

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NELTA

I appreciated serving as the President of the New England Land Title Association during its 50th anniversary year. Of course, due to the situation, we were unable to conduct our usual networking and educational activities, but like everyone else, we worked through it with Zoom meetings and conference calls.

As we begin to re-enter our offices and public buildings, I would like to take this opportunity to give thanks to those who are the foundation of the title industry: the title searchers (and/or title abstractors). During this past year and a half, they have had to deal with extreme challenges. In Connecticut, our land records are kept in 169 town halls. Many town clerks closed their offices to the public. Others had appointment-only availability, and the appointment times were often limited to one or two hours at a time. Not all town land records are online, and very few of those that are online have fully imaged land records and map availability. The title searchers worked from home when they could, but also braved the travel and hassle of accessing the land record vaults throughout the pandemic. Thanks to their intrepid efforts, title search reports kept coming in, and we were able to continue production.

I imagine the title searchers in other New England states have had similar challenges. Even with those counties or towns that are online, it is often necessary to view older documents or maps that are not imaged. Complex title searches often require a trip to the town hall or registry, which has been difficult, if not dangerous.

Prior to the pandemic, the title search industry was already under stress, due to many factors. The primary one is an aging work force, but the dramatic change in access to data has also taken its toll. Title searchers possess a rare combination of skills and intellectual curiosity. While putting the puzzle pieces of a chain of title in order, they possess knowledge about real property law, surveying, and history. It is a skill that is learned from others in the field, although there are some courses and manuals available. Now, the additional skill of working with different search engines and software programs has been added to their required knowledge base.

There was a time when conducting a title search was pretty much the same procedure at each location within a state. In the 21st century, we have seen that change. The title searcher has had to adapt to new methods of indexing with electronic indices. In Connecticut, there are about five different companies that provide online land records to the 140 or more towns that are now online. Each company has a unique approach, which must be learned and understood in order to conduct a proper title search or rundown.

For these reasons, I appreciate what title searchers go through each day. Going forward, I hope that our industry can encourage and develop a new generation of title searchers who possess these unique skill sets. Further, I think we would all be greatly benefited by a standardization of data access across New England, or at least across our individual states.

As we come out of our forced hibernation, perhaps we can plan some Continuing Legal Education courses that introduce, teach or refresh title searching skills. The New England Land Title Association is in a unique position to do this. While it would be necessary to tailor the courses to each state, it could benefit the industry going forward. Please let us at NELTA know if this is something that interests you as well, and if you are interested in participating. Thank you!

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