

4

UNDERSTANDING THE VERMONT EUGENICS SURVEY AND ITS IMPACTS TODAY

JUDY A. DOW

FROM 1925 TO 1936, the University of Vermont ran a science program used to identify thousands of what it saw as “defective,” “delinquent,” and “dependent” Vermonters. This program, called the Vermont Eugenics Survey (VES), had an impact on the lives of thousands of Indigenous people living in Vermont over many generations. The program was eventually deemed a pseudoscience, but not before it had broken families apart, leaving community continuity and history in shambles. The program’s labeling of traveling basket-makers as “gypsies” and people living in houseboats as “pirates” caused the old traditions, language, and history of the people to move underground or, in some cases, totally disappear. This chapter builds on twelve years of community-based research documenting, interpreting, and mapping the stories of survival of these families, including my family, which was the largest targeted by the VES.

As an adult, I have been haunted by bits and pieces of stories I remember hearing as a child. I always knew about the French Canadian heritage in my family, but as a child I did not quite understand the French Indian—or Abenaki—component. It just was not spoken about. The Abenaki are a group of people from the Wabanaki confederacy who occupy Vermont, New Hampshire, Maine, and southern Quebec. They are members of the Algonquian language group. Until the rise of the Red Power movement in the United States in the 1970s, Abenaki people living in Vermont usually self-identified as French Indian, and most historical documents prior to the 1970s refer to Abenaki in this way.

Because of the doctrine of terra nullius, colonial settlers convinced themselves that the land was theirs for the taking, and so they could not acknowledge that Indians lived in Vermont. Only those who traveled through the state to Canada, most of whom were on their way to visit relatives at a reserve in Quebec, were identified as Indian. Anyone claiming Indian identity while living in Vermont was called French Indian and ultimately seen as Canada’s problem. But my parents never spoke about the French Indian part of our family history. The way we looked, our respect for the land, what we ate, how we fished and hunted, and the language and stories that I heard around the house were all explained to me as being French Canadian. Not until I became much older and sought out answers to my nagging questions did I come to know who I was as a French Indian person and why I had an enormous love and understanding of our home, the Intervale, on the Winooski River, and “her” connection to my family.¹

An intervale is the low land that holds the excess water during times of flooding. The constant flooding of the Winooski River at this low point makes for very fertile land. It is the common pot, or *wlogan*, meaning “dish” in the Algonquian language (Brooks 2008, 4). The 1,700 acres of Intervale land is surrounded by the city of Burlington, Vermont, on the south and west; Colchester, Vermont, on the north; and Winooski, Vermont, on the east, with the Winooski River running down its center. This land has forever been the homeland of the Abenaki family band known as Winooski. This intervale has never once been traded or sold; it was “claimed” by Ethan Allen of the Green Mountain Boys on his arrival to our land and documented as “Winooski Indian land” on the first maps of this area.

My grandfather, mother, father, four sisters, and I lived in Burlington, Vermont, five months out of the year, and for the remaining seven months, we lived at our camp in South Hero, on a small island in the middle of Lake Champlain, with the rest of my extended family: grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins. Summer camp was different than living in Burlington. My whole family was there, and we learned from the olders and Elders alike how to read and live off the land in a sustainable way, unlike in Burlington, where we went to public school and learned from books.² We moved out to camp during April school vacation: it was here we fished, hunted, and harvested berries, apples, plums, and pears for the year, freezing and canning as summer went along. We did our chores in the morning and had the freedom to explore, create, swim, and fish during the day. Like the Intervale, which we would visit in the winter, South Hero was the place where we could always find family. Moving back to

Burlington, the largest city in Vermont, in the fall was difficult because we were away from our people and had to live immersed in the settler colonial culture. Every fall my mother would purchase stiff potato brushes from the Fuller Brush man. The intent of these brushes was not for cleaning potatoes but for me and my sisters to scrub the tan from our elbows, knees, and knuckles. We scrubbed until our skin bled. As a child I did not see us as being dirty, but as an adult I wondered, did others see us as dirty? It was not uncommon for us to hear “The wild Indians are back in town,” “Here come the ‘niggers,’” or “You need to go back to the farm where you came from” from the non-Indigenous people in Burlington. The potato brush became my mother’s way of protecting us from these comments.

As an adult, I urgently desired to understand not only the racism I had experienced, but the reason for our disconnection as a family and my parents’ outward opposition to identifying as Indigenous people. During the day I would search for answers by doing interviews with Elders and diving into the University of Vermont’s special collection, and late at night in my dreams, I would try to make sense of the research. My dreams provided me with the direction I needed. My research process was different from that of many academics—not because I did not have the research skills, but because I was part of a community that was hiding a secret.

In 2003, I was a presenter at a conference called “Abenaki Presence and Persistence: Where Are the Abenakis Today?”³ I stood among many other northeastern Native people to proclaim to the conference participants: We are still here. In the audience was Nancy Gallagher, the author of *Breeding Better Vermonters: The Eugenics Project in the Green Mountain State* (1999).⁴ Meeting Nancy and reading her book would forever change the path I was traveling in life. Nancy and I would subsequently spend many years digging in archives, interviewing people, and probing the impacts of the VES on my own and other families. The current chapter presents a portion of this research, showing my process, my discoveries, and finally, the answers to my many questions—specifically, why my family would not freely talk about our identity.

The VES was instituted in 1925 by zoology professor Henry F. Perkins from the University of Vermont. He hired social workers as field investigators to collect data on families living on the outskirts of Burlington, whose lifestyle and culture he labeled degenerate and hereditary. While researching the VES records, I interviewed many people who were able to explain bits and pieces of the puzzle, but none had the whole story of the survey. Eugenics, which means

“well born,” describes a scientific movement combining human genetics, sociology, and government policy, which began in the late nineteenth century and continues today.⁵ In the United States, the eugenics movement was involved in creating and passing sterilization laws for the so-called unfit, implementing immigration quotas, and institutionalizing people believed to be feeble minded (Gallagher 1999). The sterilization laws, created in 1931 to address the “unfit,” changed in 1967 to address the “sexual criminal,” and amended again in 1987 to address the “mentally retarded,” are still on the books today. At the root of the eugenics movement in Vermont was fear—fear by the white Anglo-Saxon Protestants of losing control, power, and land. By some estimates, the sheer number of French Indians living in Vermont in the 1920s was 45 percent of the overall population (Anderson 1937). Fear of this population led those who subscribed to white supremacist views to believe they could control and produce a “superior” human, similar to their own “stock.”

The VES records are stored at the Vermont State Archives and Public Record Office in Middlesex, Vermont. The VES data consists of boxes of fragile, dusty paper, and the documents are often stolen, torn, or misfiled when they are accessed. All forty-four boxes of data were organized, labeled, and cataloged by Nancy Gallagher into surveys, including the Migrant Study, the Key Family Study, the Fitter Families Study, the Ethnic Study, the Mental Survey of School Children, Pedigree Studies, the Brandon Waiting List Study, the Rutland Reformatory Study, and the Rural Survey Study, later called the Vermont Commission of Country Life.⁶ The Ethnic Study interviews, which inform many of the observations in this chapter, were designed to collect data on the ethics, morals, values, and beliefs of each cultural group living in Burlington, and to thereby determine the qualities of a “good citizen” (see Anderson 1937). Field investigators collected the data, which included interviews with clergy, police officers, teachers, neighbors, families, and others, as well as pedigree charts, which indicated the genealogy and suspected defect, dependency, and delinquency of specific families. The data were used by people in positions of authority to rationalize forced institutionalization and/or sterilization.⁷ Ultimately, the goal was to break up unwanted families, their history and continuity, and of course, their presence on the land.

The VES disrupted the lives of thousands of French, Catholic, and Native people living in Vermont. Pressures from “Old Yankee” settlers to assimilate and speak English forced local French Indians to adapt their subsistence way of life: so they made and sold baskets seasonally, traveling from one traditional

location to another.⁸ And many lived year-round on houseboats, fishing and harvesting on the shores of Lake Champlain. These practices earned them the labels “gypsies” and “pirates.”⁹ Old Vermont Yankees did what they could to rid themselves of this “undesirable element,” as they were afraid of losing control of their power.¹⁰ Subsequently, French Indian traditions, language, and history were suppressed, hidden, or in some cases, totally disappeared. The research that Nancy Gallagher and I have conducted has allowed us to understand that the VES was a driving force behind the changes that divided and displaced French Indian families from their culture, land, and one another.

Since 2003, I have been documenting, interpreting, and mapping these families’ stories of survival. The records are a double-edged sword for many people: a collection of interviews filled with disparaging subjective comments and pedigree charts that often show inaccurate genealogy, which can lead to misunderstandings and heartbreak for those looking for specific family information. Yet, sometimes information about families that is not listed anywhere else can be found in the files, and for these precious bits and pieces of history, family members like me are forever thankful.

Even so, viewing the records can be traumatic. I became ill the first time I saw them. A newspaper clipping with a photo of Porter’s Point Elementary School students receiving an outstanding school award was in my family’s file. At first I wondered what could have warranted the photo’s inclusion in the VES files, but then I noticed the bright red circles around the heads of my aunts and uncles, with each child’s name written over his or her head. It seemed like a bull’s-eye on target paper to me. The photo was attached to a letter from VES field investigator Harriet Abbott to the principal of the school, requesting information about our family. I was so sick to my stomach I ran outside and threw up, but I could not stop the feeling that I needed to know more, no matter how painful.

Most of the families targeted by the VES were of French Indian descent; the French families were usually left alone. Together, these two cultural groups made up the majority population in Vermont at the time (VES 1925–1937; see also Anderson 1937). People living in and around the Intervale between 1925 and 1936 became the primary VES targets because of the way they lived, where they lived, their genealogy, the size of their families, and their language.¹¹ These and other cultural markers were indicators that this group of people was different from the white Anglo-Saxon Protestant leaders of the city, who did not view such differences graciously. For instance, French Indians burned the

Intervale well into the 1940s to promote the growth of arrowroot, a favorite food of muskrats.¹² This made it easy to see the muskrats and hunt them in the spring when they came looking for the new arrowroot plants. Then the hides were sold and used to make the famed muskrat coats. One hide yielded \$0.75 on the market, but tanning the hides in one’s backyard within the city limits did not sit well with Burlington’s elite and quickly became a conspicuous cultural marker (M. Bushey interview, 2008; R. Fortin interview, 2009; LaBombard interview, 2009).

For the first three years, VES fieldworkers compiled the pedigree charts and family histories of Vermont families who were already familiar to the Vermont Children’s Aid Society and the Department of Public Welfare, focusing first in the Burlington area and then expanding throughout the state. The survey records label the families as “dependent, delinquent and defective”—the three Ds (Dann 1991, 5–27; VES 1925–1937). VES investigators told some family members that they were being interviewed so that their family stories could appear in a book, and so the families freely shared information with great pride. In reality, the stories were placed in a report and used to lobby the state legislature for a sterilization law, first in 1927 and then successfully in 1931 (Gallagher 1999, 122; Perkins 1927). Furthermore, these records were available to social workers, police, and educators who wanted to use this information to further intervene into traditional family lifeways. When I revealed the story of the VES to the people I interviewed—those in the VES records, their families, and their descendants—most were visibly disturbed and some were in total denial.

The three Ds—defective, dependent, delinquent—label used by the VES originated with the 1880 US census labeling of people that census takers felt fit into the following categories: the insane, blind, or deaf-mute; paupers and indigent persons; homeless children; and prisoners (US Census Office 1880). Over time, categories were added, deleted, and changed. Interviewing family members and town and institutional officials, VES field investigators arbitrarily began to label people as defective, dependent, or delinquent if records or local gossip indicated the targeted people were alcoholics, adulterers, sex offenders, “liars,” “queers,” or “wanderers”; had hemorrhoids, syphilis, TB, or signs of Huntington’s chorea; illegally cohabitated or had illegitimate children; were “feeble minded”; and so forth.¹³ Not until many years later, in the 1960s, was this program deemed a pseudoscience, but it was far too late: families had been destroyed, and their history and continuity had been left in shambles. Eugenics sterilization laws were passed in thirty-one states, and in 1956, Vermont was

one of twenty-seven states with such a law still on the books.¹⁴ Sterilization rates were low across the country until the 1927 US Supreme Court decision in *Buck v. Bell* which made it legal to allow the sterilization of people across the country believed to possess one of the three Ds.¹⁵ The aftermath that followed this decision was devastating, with more than sixty-two thousand people sterilized in the United States, mostly women (Robitscher 1973).

Approximately one thousand names in the records came from people already held in state institutions like prisons, orphanages, and state hospitals (Dow and Gallagher 2004; Gallagher 1999). These people were from many different cultural groups and had various disabilities. The remaining five thousand-plus names came from five main extended families living in and around the fertile Winooski Intervale in Burlington. These five large families were connected through intermarriage—a long history of kin and kinship relationships existed among them. The eugenicists began by creating pedigree charts, tracing names backward and then laterally to discover the families' genealogy, a process that eventually took them to other communities and related families throughout Vermont and New England (VES 1925–1937).

Three of these five families were identified in the VES as French Indian, but not typically as “gypsies” or “pirates.” These families were large, which was considered an undesirable trait. The Winooski chief of police Charles Barber (originally Baboeuf), for example, stated that “the tracing of the [St. Louis family] is no less difficult than would be the tracing of the pedigree of the frogs in the Lamoille River.”¹⁶ The St. Louis family created intentional and calculated marriages with the Phillippes, Jeromes, Ploofs, and two other Intervale families many times over, throughout many generations, as a means of establishing and maintaining kinship relationships. Referred to in the VES records as “Colored, Black, White, Indian, Mulatto, Little black devils, and hermits,” this family typically lived by fishing and hunting, as they had for generations. They ignored new Vermont state fishing and hunting laws, which alerted the eugenicists that they were involved in other “undesirable practices.” The St. Louis family names appeared henceforth on the lists (VES 1925–1937).¹⁷

The La Fountain family was described in the VES records as “lazy, thriftless, thieves, [and] alcoholics, [who] possessed negative moral habits and were quick tempered.”¹⁸ The fact that they were rumrunners from Canada and made and sold moonshine, a common means of survival for French Indian families during Prohibition, did not go over well with the elite of Burlington. This common practice led the La Fountain family to quickly become a target of the eugenicists.

In an effort to break up such families permanently, the eugenicists often institutionalized the children. The Old Yankees' perspective was that if these children lost contact with their parents and consequently their history, culture, and language, they would become “productive,” assimilated citizens. In VES director Henry Perkins's view, “Raise a child in a sub-standard home, surround him or her with vicious-minded playmates and frequently you get an adult who is a charge on the town, a drunken loafer or a criminal, for your pains” (1939, 5). Moreover, Perkins claimed, if the tenements and substandard housing where these families lived were torn down, then urban planning, including “Lakeshore Drive” and “Intervale Parkway,” would restore the “scenic views” for Burlington's elite (5).

In my own extended family, 623 people over six generations were tracked down, and many were institutionalized and sterilized. Labeled as French Indian and “defective,” we were the largest family targeted by the VES.¹⁹ Twenty-three people, all over the age of seventy and without any medical diagnoses, were deemed to have Huntington's chorea (HC), a hereditary disease marked by degeneration of the brain cells causing chorea and progressive dementia. This conclusion was drawn on spurious evidence. In interviews with VES field investigator Harriet Abbott, neighbors and disgruntled family members described the old people in the family in disparaging terms. After numerous interviews with one of my great-aunts, for example, Abbott decided that twenty-three people in the family had HC, a judgment used as evidence of hereditary defectiveness, which had social and political repercussions.²⁰ Abbott based her medical conclusions on stories about Elders in their seventies and eighties who did not remember well anymore, did not walk well, or did not have steady hands. Not one of these people was given a medical exam, all were over the average life expectancy for someone with HC, and nobody in the family today has HC, a hereditary disease.

These “undesirable” families, for the most part, were large Catholic families, making moonshine and rum running as a way to survive. Drinking on Saturday and sitting in church on Sunday morning with all sixteen children in tow was common practice for my mother's family, as it was for many other targeted families I interviewed. My father once told me, “It did not matter how drunk you got on Saturday, you never missed church on Sunday. Pépère just would not allow it.”²¹ I soon understood why. Prohibition was a difficult time for Burlingtonians, and there was a definite double standard: people like Henry Perkins and local judges could freely drink, whereas people of French Indian descent were identified as defective or delinquent and locked up for drinking. Incarceration had

serious consequences for the family unit: if a person was caught for drinking and jailed, he or she would be unable to contribute to the necessary task of hunting, fishing, gathering, or farming. As a child, I was repeatedly warned about how the occasional evening of drinking could be detrimental to the family.

The large size of many French Indian families enabled subsistence and survival, even as it made children the target of truant officers and drew the attention of VES investigators; ethnic and racial ideologies motivated eugenicists to pursue the containment of these families and their growth. Most French Indians were influenced by an old Quebec law: An Act to Confer a Privilege upon Fathers or Mothers of Families Who Have Twelve Children Living (53 Vict. 1890, c. 26), *La loi de douze enfants*, or the "Law of twelve children" (Lachance and Lessard, n.d.). In 1890, in an effort to increase its dwindling Francophone population, Quebec promised one hundred acres of land to families that could produce twelve children ("Big Families in Quebec" 1894). The Catholic Church, a great supporter of the law, assisted with the documentation of these large Catholic families. In some cases, families with thirty-six children applied for the land giveaway, and by 1894, Quebec had distributed nearly a half million acres. They then amended the law in 1894 so that, instead of land, some families with twelve children received up to \$100, which was equivalent to approximately \$10,900 today (Lachance and Lessard, n.d.). This amendment contributed to the huge migration of Québécois to Vermont, as many families who had been traveling back and forth took their payment from Quebec and went south to work the mills. Many new mills and lumberyards sprung up almost overnight, and many new social welfare laws were created almost as quickly. These people created permanent homes in Winooski, Burlington, and Colchester, and they were no longer seen as seasonal workers. Their lifestyle was seen as a threat to the elite of Burlington, as Old Yankee families rarely thought of having families this large.

Quebec was hemorrhaging citizens, but its loss was New England's gain: more than one million people migrated south from Quebec from 1830 to 1930.²² New England valued the influx of the labor; it was just the force they needed to be economically competitive within the United States. Yet the Old Yankees were concerned about the impact of immigration on the perceived identity and racial purity of New England. Elin Anderson, assistant director of the VES, wrote in *We Americans: A Study of Cleavage in an American City*, "The largest single immigrant group in the city [Burlington] is the French Canadian" (1937, 14). Anderson identified traditions and religion as primary factors that accentuated the social and economic disparities between French and Old Yankee

ethnic groups. Vermont, she asserted, lagged behind the rest of America in making a conscious effort to assimilate new people (1937, 14). Because Anderson used the term "English Canadian" to refer to all the Canadians who spoke English, an assumption on her part, and because she did not understand the subtle differences between French Indian people and those who identified only as French, her understanding of the numbers of Canadians living in Burlington and to which groups they belonged was flawed.²³ While she drew on records from the Catholic Church to determine that two-fifths of the total population of Burlington was French Canadian (1937, 18), I suspect that this population was even larger. In addition to many of these families not being listed in Catholic Church records, Anderson failed to recognize that there were three distinctly different groups of "Canadians": those adapting and surviving as best they could with traditional Native ways; those who maintained their French language and culture in hopes of creating a new "New France"; and those who assimilated into Anglo-American culture. My grandfather and father told me many times that you could not walk down the main street in Burlington without hearing French being spoken, which would seem to indicate that a lot of French Indians and nonassimilated French Canadians lived there.

As the story unfolded before me, I understood the Old Yankees' fear of losing the political power to control their Queen City as they faced the exploding French Canadian population in "their" state.²⁴ The Ethnic Study, one of the surveys embedded in the VES records, reveals how Old Yankees did not want French Canadian neighbors unless they were assimilated into Anglo-American culture, language, religion, and economic status.²⁵ This same study also shows how French Canadian women of mixed marriages lost their voices and identities in the survey process, often assuming the ethnicity of their husbands when answering the questions on the interview forms. Such mixed marriages were usually between a first-generation French Canadian woman and a third-generation immigrant man who had achieved cultural fluency in the Anglo-American way of life and language. Even when both the husband and wife were French, their surname was often anglicized by Yankee people of authority who could not be bothered to learn the French names, or in some instances by the French themselves to conceal their ethnic identity to protect the family from overt racism.²⁶

Most interviewees for the French Ethnic Study were women; the men were typically at work when the researchers conducted their surveys. The women's responses reveal their fear and mistrust; they often gave answers on behalf of

their husbands to the questions interviewers posed, rather than providing their own personal information. For example, a woman who feared that her French Canadian identity might make her a target of discrimination might, rather than identify as Franco, assume the “American” identity of her husband. My family and I know the people described in the Ethnic Study surveys, and in many cases, we are related to them. Because of the long association between and among our families, it is clear to me that the women’s evasive and dismissive responses are rooted in a sense of exasperation with the researchers and a desire to protect themselves and their families from the stereotypes and discrimination they faced as French Indian and French Canadian people.

Comments in the American Ethnic Study interviews show the noblesse oblige attitudes that many Old Yankees had toward French Canadians living in the Burlington area.²⁷ As Anderson’s interview notes make clear, French Canadians were seen as “one lazy class of people who work for just enough to get by. . . . They are apt to be a worthless lot. . . . rather ignorant and never make any intellectual progress. . . . Make wonderful servants but truth is not their highest virtue. . . . Very quaint but enjoy life in a simple way.” Her comments highlight stereotypes and biases against French Canadians: “There are two classes, progressive and Canucks,” she states.²⁸ Comments like these go on for pages. My father once asked me, as I read him Anderson’s book *We Americans* (1937), “Who is this lady? She sounds like someone that flew in, wrote a book, and flew back out again. She doesn’t understand.” Of course, I knew he was correct.

Anderson (1937) describes the locations of the French Canadian communities throughout Burlington and depicts their “dreams of a New France” (26). What she fails to recognize are the subdivisions that existed *within* the French communities—including the streets, alleys, and tenement buildings that were home to French Indians. These became the places regularly targeted by eugenicists, the very same places called home by my relatives the gypsies and pirates, where kinships had been forged since the beginning of time. My grandfather and father, as well as other family members and community people, referred to these places by colorful local names. They called the place where my father was raised Moccasin Village because all twenty families living there were French Indian. This community was built in 1886 specifically to house the poor French Indian people who were transitioning from seasonal migration to a more settled lifestyle; here the people had the same language (primarily French, with broken English and Abenaki) and the same history. At the Ten Commandments, a tenement house down the road, there were ten apartments in one building

where supposedly all Ten Commandments were broken. At the Old Beehive, a huge apartment building abuzz with activity, adaptation reached new levels of creativity: at a time when the city of Burlington was discouraging the use of out-houses, my grandfather plumbed a bathroom in each of the apartments. When he returned a month later to check for leaks, he found signs in most of the windows advertising “Bait for Sale,” and all the bathtubs were full of minnows, frogs, and crawdads. For the best backdoor deals on moonshine, counterfeit money, and so forth, people went to Tammany Hall, yet another large tenement house. Nicknamed for the “wheelin’ and dealin’” that went on there, it was where the latest politics were discussed, which sometimes ended in a shooting. The residents of these places were concerned with the everyday struggle to survive, not with conforming to the image cultivated by the Queen City Yankees, but in the eyes of the Burlington authorities, the “dark and shabby” (Anderson 1937, 10) residences of the French Indians were, according to Henry Perkins, an obstacle that “blocked their scenic view.”²⁹

Each summer, one Intervale family, the Phillips, would gather and travel a specific route around the Intervale and lakeshores, selling their baskets as a way of adapting to being pushed out of their Native homeland and way of life. Adapting to environmental, social, political, and economic changes has been a way of life for Abenaki people since the beginning of time: it is traditional to adapt, and adaptation is traditional. The Phillips family was one of the five families first targeted by the VES and were locally known as “gypsies” because, according to the VES, a large number of them used to travel from place to place in wagons, “camping down wherever they happened to be at night fall.”³⁰ The VES records list this family as “dependent,” in part because they lived on so-called poor farms, which were understood as an indicator of one of the three Ds. Poor farms were farms maintained at public expense to employ and house able-bodied residents who were poor or down on their luck. When I went to Burlington, South Burlington, Essex, and Williston and read the reports of the Overseers of the Poor, I found that the Phillips family names appear frequently in poorhouse records, year after year, at snowfall. Queen City Yankees frowned on those who repeatedly needed assistance, yet this family was never “warned out” of any of these towns (in other words, asked to leave), indicating that they were not only longtime residents but in some cases born there.³¹

The Phillips family followed a calculated route through Burlington, Win-ooski, South Burlington, and Colchester to sell their baskets, carefully choosing their regular campsites every year. I researched, documented, and mapped each

location where they camped. They did not, in fact, set up camp “wherever they happened to be at nightfall,” as eugenicist investigators stated in the VES records, but rather camped on land in the Intervale, their “common pot,” or adjacent to the homes of family members.³² They camped at sites that were ideal for subsistence and maintaining kinship relations. They called each campsite home.

Several French Indian families, including the Phillipses, camped at a well-known camping spot on the corner of the Lower Road entering Burlington and the Intervale, a spot that has been camped at for more than ten thousand years. At this location, they met time and time again to sell their baskets. But repeated editorials in the *Burlington Free Press* by the elite of Burlington, including Henry Perkins, asked that this land become a park. In 1906, it happened: the land became a park for the youth of Burlington, and signs were posted to stop anyone from camping there from dusk to dawn. Native basketmakers were forced to pack up and move to another spot. The breaking up of open lands to disrupt traditional Indian migrations was not peculiar to Burlington. It was, in fact, part of a national movement at this time to make “parks” of the land where Native people camped in hopes of preventing them from roaming the land; this was an integral component of the creation of the national parks (Spence 1999).

Through my research, I made the acquaintance of many members of the Phillips family and was able to bring together two estranged sisters from one line of this family. For much of their early childhood, they had lived in a tent on Broad Brook in Guilford, Vermont. After their mother died of polio when they were still young girls, their father was overcome with grief, unable to care for them, and was institutionalized in Brattleboro Retreat, one of more than twenty facilities throughout the state of Vermont where eugenicists regularly institutionalized both children and adults.³³ Together, along with their third sister, Ginger, the children were sent to Kurn Hattin and became wards of the state.³⁴ Eventually, the older ones were farmed out as mothers’ helpers, and they did not see one another again until they were grown.

When I brought two of the elderly sisters together, I thought I was doing them a great favor, but when they started sharing their life stories, I was mortified. From the age of four years old, Beatrice, the younger sister, had been passed from household to household as a ward of the state and was sexually abused by the men in these households. Diane, the elder sister, had suffered from depression throughout her life, remembering her mother’s last words: “Take care of your sisters” (Diane interview, 2008). Institutionalized and separated from her younger sisters at the age of nine, Diane could not possibly have fulfilled her

mother’s wishes, but she suffered from a crushing guilt nonetheless. Knowing the real story of Beatrice’s life only deepened Diane’s depression, and when Beatrice later died in pain, depression, and poverty, Diane was deeply affected. This story of abuse and institutionalization is not an uncommon story, but one that is seldom told because the breakup of families was usually permanent.

Diane currently lives in a nursing facility.³⁵ Many of her memories are now fading, but some live on. At meal times, she often recalls being nine years old and sitting at Kurn Hattin. Watching her food get cold, she remembers not being allowed to eat until everyone had been served. Even now, she waits patiently for everyone to be served so that she can eat. During my visits, I have often heard her say, “It’s not supposed to be this way.” I recently asked her to tell me more. “When you get old, your children are supposed to help you,” she said. “I know, Diane,” I replied. Her answer saddened me because I understood the many reasons for her confusion, but I could not share them with her for fear of doing more damage than good. Many elderly French Indian women in the greater Burlington area, such as Diane, lament the fact that they have no children and do not know why; others clearly know that at some unknown time, they were sterilized. Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) regulations prevent the sharing of information to determine who was sterilized and who was not. Some elderly people have been able to access their own medical records, only to discover nothing recorded about sterilization or confusing information about previous surgeries such as appendix removal. The pain of not knowing why they could not have children runs deep and wide in these women. The cultural cost of not being able to share these stories is tremendous, and the public refusal to acknowledge that forced sterilization occurred denies the victims and their families the emotional, psychological, and spiritual time and space to heal.

Another family listed in the VES records is the Jeromes, a large “pirate” family with eleven boys that was characterized as “delinquent.” On the Burlington side of the Intervale, in an area called French Town, the family lived on the lakefront in a big old tenement house. The lake provided everything the family needed. They freely moved back and forth between the states of New York and Vermont, maneuvering around the lake to avoid people of authority. When the family was targeted in New York, they would travel to Vermont; when targeted in Vermont, they would move back to New York until things calmed down. After reading the VES records and documenting their movements on a map, I was able to determine that these people knew every inch of Lake Champlain.

The Jeromes' presence on the lake made many in Vermont unhappy, mostly because they felt that the "pirates" and their unsightly boats were an eyesore to the scenic views. Many of the stories reflected in the VES reports show that the Jeromes were looked on as thieves who roamed the beautiful lake, instead of people who were adapting to changing times the best they could. The family often lived in temporary tent homes on the shores of both New York and Vermont, sustaining themselves by fishing, hunting, and gathering driftwood to sell to campers living on the shores in newly gentrified locations. The Jeromes traveled just as the "gypsies" had done. Inhabiting their homelands in the same ways as their ancestors, they moved seasonally between places on which they could rely for subsistence and support. In writing about such "pirate" families, Fred M. Wiseman (2001) claims, "While nowhere as nomadic as the 'Gypsies' . . . these families were still mobile. They always had canoes or rowboats available to leave, with some pork and flour and a bedroll for fishing, hunting or gathering trips of one day to several weeks" (121). To the contrary, my interviews, photos, conversations, and archival research, as well as my family connections with the Jeromes, show that they lived on substantial boats, canal barges, houseboats, and sloops (Gallagher 1999, 169). Many of the Jeromes lived in their boats year round, docking only for supplies, subsistence, or to catch up with family (VES 1925–1928; Vogel 2001; Charlie Auer interviews, 2000 to present).³⁶ The Jeromes were masters of the lake, not transient pirates as Wiseman's work implies; they knew every alcove, sandbar, and narrow, and they maneuvered back and forth across the lake, surviving—not a small feat considering the vastness of Lake Champlain. It is interesting to note that many of their travels, business ventures, and family meetings occurred at traditional Abenaki woodland subsistence and sacred sites. By reading hundreds of Vermont state archeological reports and juxtaposing them with the VES records of travel for this family, I discovered that not only was this family surviving as their ancestors had for thousands of years, but they were adapting to their changing environment by continuing to live off the lake.

In an effort to protect the family from continued state surveillance and intervention, the eleven Jerome boys decided to leave home and never communicate again (Yaratz 2006), an impact of the VES that the family continues to deal with today, as they often bump into or read about family members they do not even know.³⁷ The family continuity was lost forever. The Jerome family, like many of the Native families discussed in this chapter and listed in the Eugenics Survey Pedigree charts, have not yet received state recognition as Indigenous

people. Lack of recognition is a double-edged knife: some do not want their Indigenous identity recognized by the state because it would mean being on yet another list, and they are well aware of what being on a list can do, while others want this recognition and its benefits.

While the descendants of the families targeted by the VES continue to experience multigenerational impacts, the eugenics stories, records, and history have been appropriated by many people today; often these stories are subject to misuse for political and personal agendas. Recently, several books have been published that sensationalize Abenaki people and the history of the VES, and interested readers often learn their history from inaccurately written fictional versions of the story. Jodi Picoult's widely acclaimed novel *Second Glance* (2003) presents a fictional version of eugenics history through a parade of Native stereotypes: the lazy Indian, the ignorant Indian, the drunken Indian, the perverted Indian, and among many others, the vanishing Indian. Shortly after the publication of Picoult's book, another fictional account of the VES appeared: *Darkness Under the Water*, by Beth Kanell (2008). Kanell takes her young readers through a gory misrepresentation of one of the most recent historical traumas Vermont Indians have experienced, including a forced sterilization on a kitchen table by a state nurse. These problematic recreations of eugenics history pass as "truth" because there are little to no nonfictional accounts or Indigenous perspectives in print to educate the public about Vermont's egregious past. By sensationalizing a horrific crime against the Abenaki people, these books belittle the brutal traumatic reality of the VES, which continues to have intergenerational effects on families in the present. Sensationalizing and romanticizing the reality of this event denies the pain and suffering we have endured. Our children need to be proud of the survival of their families, not relive the pain. And teachers, unknowingly for the most part, continue to use these books as historical fiction to supplement their history classes, reinforcing stereotypes and inaccurate history, only to ensure this painful legacy will continue.

Through my research process, I have come to understand the sense of urgency that followed me everywhere when I first started my journey. When the old ones passed on, so did their stories. Some have been recovered; some are twisted and confused. Many will never be known, but it is necessary to recover those that remain. When I first discovered our relatives in the records, I tried to explain the bigger picture of the VES to my father. At first, he could not grasp the concept. "Don't know what you're talking about," he would say. "Never heard of such a thing before. It sounds like Hitler." Having served in World War II, he

clearly understood the atrocities of that time and place and could not connect them to Vermont. I kept at it for years, showing him document after document. Eventually, he began to see. Finally, he said to me one day, “Those bastards.” I knew then that he understood. Today, the legacy of eugenics continues, but we cannot continue to be unwitting participants. The historical trauma is too great for too many generations, and so much has been lost. Generations have lost their identity, history, and culture. Generations have lost family and connection with the land. The VES continues to be claimed, manipulated, and rewritten to meet the needs of whoever uses the VES collection to achieve personal, political, or literary goals, including formal state recognition of Native American tribal status, to the detriment of recovering the real stories of the families most affected. In this chapter, I have presented a small segment of accumulated VES stories, but it is only a start.

NOTES

1. *Intervale* is an English word, originating in New England, which describes a long narrow valley between two high points. The land is usually a floodplain (often flooding several times a year) and is very fertile. Winooski(k) is an Abenaki word for the place of the wild onions. For additional information, see Brooks (2008). My family always referred to the Intervale as “her,” reflecting our understanding of the land’s animacy, perhaps coming from the Abenaki language, as well as the French.
2. Olders are older people in the community. Elders pick the community up wherever it is and move it forward.
3. The 2003 Vermont Academy of Arts and Sciences fall conference was hosted at Saint Michael’s College in Colchester, Vermont.
4. Gallagher’s book is the first in-depth study of the VES and its goal of human racial progress through selective breeding in Vermont.
5. Francis Galton (1904) first defined eugenics as study that may improve or impair the racial qualities of future generations either physically or mentally. In 1935, Ellsworth Huntington and Frank Lorimer, in *Tomorrow’s Children*, defined eugenics as the synthesis of human genetics and sociology.
6. One box is missing.
7. In this context, people of authority were those who used the VES data in a way that they believed would help themselves or their own community. There was a huge cavern of distrust between the people of authority and French Indian families.
8. “Old Yankee” and “Old American” were terms used in the VES records to describe Anglo-Americans (and western European Protestants like the Huguenots) who had been in the United States for four generations or more. The terms were extended to include those claiming a similarly long ancestry in the United States on one side of their family, even though one of their grandparents had come from Canada, England, Scotland, or some other country. See Anderson (1937, 7).
9. The label “gypsy” was given to those Abenaki who traveled throughout the state making and selling their baskets. The passage of the Quota Laws of 1924 saw many Roma Gypsies (a distinct ethnic group) prohibited from entering the United States through Ellis Island. Many entered by passing the Canadian border via Vermont. Local Vermonters distinguished between the two as “local” and “foreign” gypsies. Newspaper articles from the 1920s and 1930s clearly delineate between the two with very descriptive words. “Pirates” was a label given to Abenaki people making a living from their boats.
10. “Undesirable element” is a term used in the VES records and annual reports. For additional information on Old Yankee arrogance and control of power, see Anderson (1937, 21–24).
11. The collection of surveys closed on October 20, 1936. In 1937, Elin Anderson’s book was published, files were packed up, and the VES office was closed.
12. I listened to many stories about burning the Intervale and finally checked the Burlington Fire Department records and was able to pinpoint a time frame in which the burnings happened each year. The records erroneously indicated that the fires were started by boys playing with matches each time. These boys, now in their eighties and nineties, were proud to tell me their stories of burning the Intervale for subsistence purposes and were surprised their deeds were listed as mischief.
13. Boxes PRA-11 and PRA-12, VES files, Vermont State Archives, Middlesex, Vermont. These are a few of the “defects” listed in the Eugenics Survey’s “Pedigrees of Degenerate Families” (actually genealogies of French Indian families). The three Ds gained currency in the late nineteenth century in social science literature as well as in eugenics literature in the early decades of the twentieth century. See, for example, Henderson (1893). Pedigree charts were files of genealogical records both typed out and in a fan chart in each VES family file.
14. For more information on sterilization in Vermont, see Gallagher (1999, 122–26).
15. *Buck v. Bell*, 274 S. Ct. 200 (1927).
16. VES files, box PRA-14. St. Louis is a pseudonym. I have chosen not to use real names if the family has not come forward publicly in some other venue. My hopes are to protect the family from more pain and suffering. Many times French-speaking people would anglicize their surname either to protect their family from being targeted by the VES or to assimilate. In this case, Charles Barber assimilated.
17. Located in box PRA-14, VES files. St. Louis is a pseudonym.
18. *Ibid.* La Fountain is a pseudonym.
19. *Ibid.*
20. VES family pedigree charts and records, box PRA-12, VES files.
21. From 2003 to April 1, 2010, when my father passed on, I recorded many of my father’s stories. This comment was one I often heard from childhood to the final recording of these tapes.

22. This information comes from an exhibit (*La Survivance*) held at the Museum of Civilization in Quebec City in August 2014.
23. Many of the Ethnic Study surveys indicate that some English-speaking people were indeed of French descent.
24. For more information on the French Indian population of Burlington, see the RETN documentary *The Moccasin Village Project*, by Judy Down and Nancy Gallagher.
25. Anderson (1937) explains the divisions of Burlington's citizens into working class, business class, and professional class, and how each ethnic group was associated with an industry, for example, the French with millwork.
26. At St. Joseph Cemetery in Burlington, one can clearly see the name changes on tombstones—e.g., Benoit, Benway, Benware, and Banwer were variations of the same name used by a group of brothers. The Ethnic Study interviews contain similar information. Distrust and fear of the system kept people from sharing too much personal information.
27. The interviewer worked for Howard Relief Agency, one of several agencies where French Indian people went for assistance, after which they were placed on a list and characterized as dependent. The VES records contain a list of "Characteristics and Contributions" about French Canadians. The list was collected and created by Elin Anderson from the interviews she had collected from the Old Yankee population. The full typed page had less than a handful of contributions, and those were slipped in with derogatory comments. Box PRA-16, VES files.
28. Notes from interviews with Old Yankees, Ethnic Study of Burlington, box PRA-16, VES files. Canuck is a disparaging word used by Old Yankees to describe French Canadian "immigrants." Some in Canada use it differently today, as with the Vancouver Canucks National Hockey League team.
29. In chapter 2 of *We Americans*, Anderson (1937) describes most of the places where the French and French Indian people lived in a negative and dark, dreary way.
30. Phillips family file, box PRA-12, VES files.
31. In colonial Vermont, as in other parts of New England, each town was responsible for the care of its citizens, including the poor, the infirm, the elderly, orphans, widows, and the like. Town governments, therefore, were not anxious to allow new people to move into town who might become a burden. Anyone who was not a legal resident could be warned out (Rollins 1999).
32. Phillips family file, box PRA-12, VES files.
33. This is a facility today that provides care for people with mental health and addiction issues. One hundred years ago, it was an institution where eugenicists placed people deemed to be defective, delinquent, and dependent.
34. Ginger is a pseudonym. Phillips family file, box PRA-12, VES files. Kurn Hattin is a nonprofit located in Westminster, Vermont, that serves as a charitable home and school for boys and girls; one hundred years ago, it was a place where social workers placed children when they were taken from their homes.

35. At the time this chapter was first drafted in 2015, Diane was still living, and I was her legal guardian. She is now deceased. We have used Diane's story in the past many times with her permission.
36. Jerome Family file, box PRA-12, VES files. For additional stories about this family, including a legal case regarding damage to their houseboat, see Vogel (2001).
37. My understanding of the Jerome family dynamics comes in part from interviews I conducted with Lois Jerome (1987 to present) and Mary Jerome (2005 to 2012).

REFERENCES

- Anderson, Elin. 1937. *We Americans: A Study of Cleavage in an American City*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- "Big Families in Quebec." 1894. *New York Times*, August 23, 1894, 1.
- Brooks, L. 2008. *The Common Pot: The Recovery of Native Space in the Northeast*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Dann, K. 1991. "From Degeneration to Regeneration: The Eugenics Survey of Vermont, 1925–1936." *Vermont History*, Winter, 5–29.
- Dow, Judy, and Nancy Gallagher. 2004. *The Moccasin Village Project*. CRV Research Seminars. Produced by Center for Research on Vermont, Burlington, for the Regional Educational Television Network (RETN). 105 min.
- Gallagher, Nancy. 1999. *Breeding Better Vermonters: The Eugenics Project in the Green Mountain State*. Lebanon, NH: University Press of New England.
- Galton, Francis. 1904. "Eugenics: Its Definition, Scope and Aims." *American Journal of Sociology* 10 (1): n.p. <http://galton.org/essays/1900-1911/galton-1904-am-journ-soc-eugenics-scope-aims.htm>.
- Henderson, John Robertson. 1893. "X: A Contribution to Indian Carcinology." *Transactions of the Linnean Society of London* 5 (10): 325–458.
- Huntington, Ellsworth, and Frank Lorimer. 1935. *Tomorrow's Children: The Goal of Eugenics*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.
- Kanell, Beth. 2008. *Darkness Under the Water*. Cambridge, MA: Candlewick Press.
- Lachance, Renée, and Rénaud Lessard. n.d. "Demandes d'octrois gratuits de terre aux familles de 12 enfants vivants en vertu de la loi de 1890 du premier ministre Honoré Mercier." Bibliothèque et Archives nationales du Québec. Accessed April 14, 2018. http://www.banq.qc.ca/archives/genealogie_histoire_familiale/ressources/bd/instr_demande_de_terre/famille/index.html?language_id=3.
- Perkins, Henry F. 1927. *Lessons from a Eugenic Survey of Vermont: First Annual Report*. Burlington: Eugenics Survey of Vermont, University of Vermont.
- . 1939. "Housing and the Next Generation." *Burlington Free Press*, February 1939, 5.
- Picoult, Jodi. 2003. *Second Glance*. New York: Atria Books.
- Robitscher, Jonas. 1973. *Eugenic Sterilization*. Springfield, IL: Bannerstone House.
- Rollins, Aiden M. 1999. *Vermont Warnings Out, 1779–1817*. Vol. 1, *Northern Vermont*. Camden, ME: Picton Press.

- Spence, M. D. 1999. *Dispossessing the Wilderness: Indian Removal and the Making of the National Parks*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- US Census Office. 1880. *US Federal Census—1880 Schedules of Defective, Dependent, and Delinquent Classes*. Ancestry.com. <http://search.ancestry.com/search/db.aspx?dbid=1634>.
- Vermont Eugenics Survey (VES). 1925–1937. *Annual Report of the Eugenics Survey of Vermont*. Burlington: University of Vermont.
- Vogel, Joan. 2001. "Cases in Context: Lake Champlain Wars." *Saint Louis University Law Journal*, 45:791–815.
- Wiseman, Fred M. 2001. *The Voice of the Dawn: An Autohistory of the Abenaki Nation*. Hanover, NH: University Press of New England.
- Yaratz, W. J. 2006. *A Brief History of Abenaki Phillips and Blake Families and Genealogy*. N.p.: Elk River Buffalo Press.

PART II

Environmental and Ecological Health