

150 YEARS OF EXCELLENCE

The Commission's Past

by Spring Gearhart

The Pennsylvania Fish & Boat Commission (PFBC) celebrates its 150th anniversary on March 30, 2016.

Much has changed since PFBC's founding in 1866. Yet, many traditions and values remain the same. John A. Arway, PFBC Executive Director, shares his thoughts on the agency's past.

Past

Spring: Who are some of the agency's most influential past leaders?

John: I would start back with James Worrall, who was the first Commissioner of Fisheries in 1866. He was asked to do a pretty big job that we continue to work on today and that was restoring American Shad to the Susquehanna River. He tried by putting in a fish ladder around the Columbia Dam, and then, along came four more dams that we're struggling with trying to pass fish by today.

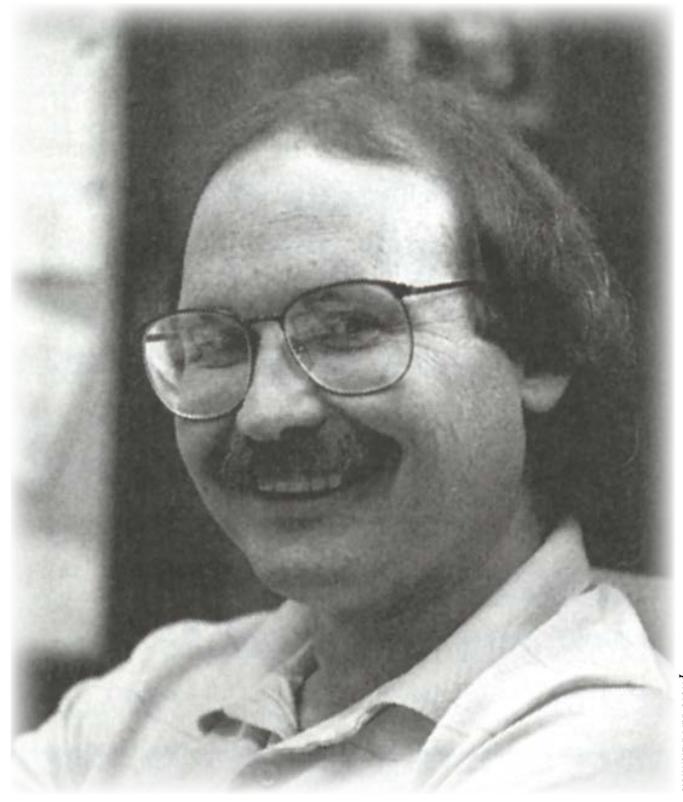
I would then point to all nine directors who preceded me beginning in 1949 with Charles A. French, William Voigt Jr., Albert M. Day, Robert (Bob) J. Bielo, Ralph W. Abele, Edward (Ed) R. Miller, Lawrence (Larry) W. Hoffman, Peter (Pete) A. Colangelo and Douglas J. Austen. They all left their imprint in some way on the agency with some of the initiatives and interests they brought. They had the ability to adjust to the times and set priorities for the direction of the agency.

I did an analysis in terms of director tenure and saw that the average tenure for a director was 7 years. That's kind of skewed by Abele and Colangelo since Abele was around for 15 years, and Colangelo was around for 10. They were the two longest serving directors. And, being around for as long as they were, they probably had the best chance of turning the boat in the direction they chose.

Ralph was a strong conservationist and really was the originator of Resource First in terms of our philosophy and mission that carries through today. I think that it's a testament to the strength of the message of Resource First. It really explains what our mission is as an agency, which continues until today.

Pete was extremely interested in public recreation, coming from the United States Army Corps of Engineers, and he spent a lot of time making sure our facilities were maintained and tried to improve them and develop more recreational access.

Ed Miller was an engineer, so he dealt with bricks and mortar. The



John A. Arway, 1991

Photo: Art Michaels

agency name changed from the Pennsylvania Fish Commission (PFC) to PFBC under Ed. Larry Hoffman was put in the position of director until Pete was hired, so Larry only served for about 6 or 8 months before Pete took over. But, he steadied the ship in some uncertain times and did a good job at keeping the ship moving forward and not backward.

Bob Bielo had a significant challenge. In my article a couple of issues ago, I talked about the need for Operation Bootstrap 2 (www.fishandboat.com/straighttalk.htm). I talked quite a bit about what Bob did when he became director, because he became director when we were really bottoming out on license sales, probably the lowest point in our entire history, even dating back to 1922. He had to come up with a way to rebuild license sales and did that through Project 70 and Project 500, in terms of creating lakes. He actually put together a marketing program where he sent all our staff into cities to explain to the general public what PFC did at the time. And, amazingly, over the course of 10 years, he almost doubled the number of sales from when they started to crash in 1952. So, if you look just in terms of generated income, Bob probably did the most with the time he had with the agency in terms of rebuilding our revenues. Under his leadership, we survived and grew until we peaked out in 1990 with license sales. And, we have been on a diminishing trend since that time. We stabilized in the last 10 years, but this has always been a challenge over the course of our history, since we sold the first resident license in 1922.

With our Board of Commissioners, I would point to both William J. Sabatose and Ross J. Huhn. They were the



Ralph W. Abele



Peter A. Colangelo



Commissioner Ross J. Huhn,
June 17, 1980-August 15, 2005



Commissioner William J. Sabatose,
December 9, 1987-present

longest serving commissioners. Commissioner Sabatose just beat Commissioner Huhn's record a couple of years ago and continues to serve with us. So, they stand out in terms of Commissioners since they were on the Board for so long and probably spanned many of the Commission's directors.

In terms of staff, I would point towards people like Keen Buss, Gordon Trembly, Doc Hazard, Ken Corl and Bobby Ross from a hatchery perspective. They worked tireless hours back in the early days of hatcheries and really were some of the experts in the field at the time. They were well-published, did a lot of experimental work with fish culture and were known throughout the world as experts in fish culture.

People like Val Geary, the Mail Clerk, back in our old headquarters in Harrisburg, who had a personality that really picked everybody up at the office.

Blake Weirich was a fish biologist who went on to become our agency planner. Then, Blake moved on to the United States Fish & Wildlife Service and ended his career with them, teaching public policy issues at their national training center in West Virginia.

Vince Mudrak came out of the fish culture program and ran our fisheries research group and developed techniques on how to better grow fish. He followed in the footsteps of Gordon Trembly, Keen Buss, Doc Hazard and that generation.

Bob Hesser from Fisheries Management as well as Del Graff in Fisheries and Dick Snyder really were the architects of Resource First and Operation FUTURE in the 1980s under Abele and were also well-published and well-known within the fisheries field for the work that they did with Resource First and trout management.

Jack Miller was my predecessor in environmental services. Our environmental services program was created in 1971 under Jack and was an outcome of the Earth Day and the Environmental Amendment (Article 1, Section 27) to our state constitution. Prior to that time, the Commission really didn't have a lot of involvement in conservation issues per se except for a law enforcement presence. We began issuing permits and fighting the bad guys in those times.

That led to Maurice K. Goddard, who was the first secretary of the Department of Environmental Resources (DER) saying, when he accepted the Ralph W. Abele Conservation Heritage Award, that at the time, we were the environmental conscience of DER. This really made DER think twice before they issued a permit because of the threat that PFC was out there to appeal their decisions. Prior to that time, they were swayed by industry on permits that they issued.

In law enforcement, John Buck and Ed Manhart, who were both directors of the Bureau of Law Enforcement, brought law enforcement into today's world with a lot of the improvements that they made within the law enforcement ranks and from the field.

Paul Swanson and Tom Qualters Sr. were regional managers in the 1970s and 1980s, the early days of pollution law enforcement. They strengthened our ability to enforce water pollution law.

And, of course, Dennis Guise. Dennis was a steady force in many ways ranging from Deputy Director to Chief Counsel to webmaster to my supervisor for decades. Dennis was the glue that held together a number of administrations over the course of a number of directors.

Finally, I have to mention Wardens William E. Shoemaker and Raymond L. Schroll Jr. who lost their lives in the line of duty with the agency and are enshrined in the National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial in Washington D.C.

These are some of the people who come to mind in terms of those who have had the most impact on PFBC, but I'm sure that there are many others that I don't personally know or wasn't able to find in the archives. We have tremendous staff, and all of the directors have had tremendous staff, which is really a testament to why we have survived as long as we have as a conservation and recreation agency.



Warden William E. Shoemaker



Warden Raymond L. Schroll Jr.

S: What can the agency learn from past predecessors?

J: When we were originally created, we were created as an independent and administrative Commission of state government that survives off customers sales, which started in 1922 after we got weaned off of the general appropriations. We can't forget that. I think prior directors understood it, but they didn't have to work as hard at it as we do today, because there were more people who had time to fish in the past. So, we have to remember to focus on our strengths. We can't get diverted into so many things that it takes away from our strengths, and I think our prior leaders were conscious of that, which led to our agency continuing to be a leader in the development and application of the science that we produce as well as providing the best possible customer service for our customers through

our Resource First initiatives. So, we need to continue on that path as an independent and administrative commission of state government, understanding that we have the rules of state government to operate within, but we also have the ability to be flexible in the way that we raise our own revenue. A lot of innovative things have happened throughout the course of our history.

I remember Ron Weis, former PFC Project Planner, telling me the story about how early in the 1900s, when PFC lived off general appropriations, the legislature and the governor forgot to put us in the state budget. The governor had to come up with his own personal funds to keep us operating for a couple of days until they fixed the problem. So, if we think we have tough times today, can you imagine being a staff member and being forgotten in the state budget, not knowing whether we were going to have to shut down operations, because we couldn't pay our light bill? It just turned out to be an accidental mistake by the legislature and the governor, and the governor, to his credit, bailed us out for a couple of days. Then, funding was restored, so we could continue to operate. I think we have to exercise independence whenever we need to, but we need to operate as a business at the same time to make sure we can earn the revenue to meet our customers' expectations.

S: What are some agency changes you have observed since becoming Executive Director?

J: Well, probably the most obvious is the fact that we had to downsize operations because of the financial condition that we are constrained with due to increased pension and health care obligations. I don't think that any other director, over the course of our history, has faced these kinds of fiscal challenges that we are facing today. And, it is not because of our own fault, it is because of investment decisions made by others that affect us. These are necessary changes, because they are obligations that we have to fulfill with the funds that we have, so either we have to decrease expenses or increase revenue. We have done that over the course of our history, because inflation always catches up to us. It devalues our dollar over time. Expenses increase: Light bills, fuel bills and salaries go up. And, as a result, revenues must increase. And, every time the red and black lines cross, we have to go to the legislature to get an increase in license fees. That's been the model we've been on since 1922. However, today, these additional debts have come due and are much different than anything we have faced before. Probably, the most difficult thing that I have to contend with as director is putting a plan together. We call it the Spending Reallocation Plan (SRP). I have been trying to minimize the impact not only on our staff but also on our customers and what they can see in terms of services and goods that they expect. The competing pressure to do more with less can't



be met today unless we do less with less. The challenge is that we need to continue to provide the same level of services and goods and better public services to a declining customer base. We are selling fewer licenses today than we did in 1990. Over the course of that time, the anglers and boaters that we still have today expect either the same or more service than we've

given them when we had more revenue coming in. So, that's been the most challenging part of my tenure as director in the course of the last six years. It would have been nice to have surplus funds, so we could spend it on other programs. Instead, we had to scale back our programs to meet these constraints until we convince others who control our revenue about our needs so that they can provide us more revenue, so we can grow back out our programs to meet customer expectations. I'm confident that once we have the ability to grow back out, here in the next several years, that we'll be stronger than we were before we had to scale back the programs.

On the legislative front, I believe that we forged a great working relationship with both the House and Senate and the past and current administrations over the six years that I've been director. I continue to remind myself that we need to stay apolitical. I'm not appointed by an administration but by our Board of Commissioners. Our Board is appointed by the governor, confirmed by the Senate, but on staggered terms so that no one governor appoints the entire board. As a result, we have to stay apolitical with our messages and positions and advocate for the issues that we believe are priorities for our aquatic resources and our anglers and boaters.

And, we need to do our duty. My tag line says, "Do your duty, and fear no one."—R. W. Abele. We have to do our duty

photo—Kevin Kelly



John A. Arway at a fish identification workshop at Cacapon Resort State Park, Berkeley Springs, WV, in the 1990s.

Straight TALK:

www.fishandboat.com/straighttalk.htm

as assigned by our law. The legislature saw fit to define or set boundaries for the agency and what we do. We have to stay within those boundaries.

S: As Executive Director, how do traditions from the past direct decisions today?

J: I constantly look to the past to guide me for decisions that I need to make today that will affect the future of the agency. You can't manage the agency without learning from what other directors did, both from their failures and their successes. We all have failures, and we all have successes. We have to learn from them, so we can chart a course for the future. We must always look forward. We can't be managing for the present; we have to be managing for the future. It's extremely important to learn from past mistakes and perhaps even repeat some of the things that were successful for past directors.

I talked previously about Bob Bielo. A lot of those lakes that he was able to build with new money, we're currently trying to repair. And, one of the things that we need to explain to the public is that even though we're not creating more waters to fish in, the waters that we are repairing are going to provide better fishing for the next 10 years. As lakes age, the fishing gets worse. We can rejuvenate these lakes and make them new again through the high-hazard dam projects that we're working on.

I was really overwhelmed by our history when I was researching my "Straight Talk" article about our 150th anniversary. We have been extremely fortunate to have the dedicated staff, directors and boards who have committed to public service over the years. I'm just amazed that many of the problems that were discussed in the early part of the century, in the 1800s and 1900s, are still being discussed today.

One of the premier issues, restoring shad to the Susquehanna River, was front and center since the agency was created for that reason. We're still trying to restore American Shad to the Susquehanna River today. Right now, we're negotiating fish passage requirements at the four high-head dams on the Susquehanna River in an attempt to try to pass more shad around those dams. History will tell if we are successful with today's solutions.

We're on the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission, and we put prescriptions together for regulating the commercial fishing industry, which is overharvesting shad in the ocean. That is another important dynamic of shad restoration.

Our predecessors built a strong foundation for both our aquatic resources and the recreation programs that we have today. They fought back projects like Tocks Island Dam on the Delaware River,

so it continues to be free flowing, and American Shad and Striped Bass can migrate freely up and down the river.

The City of Harrisburg applied for a permit to add hydropower to Dock Street Dam on the Susquehanna River in the 1980s. This would have increased the height of Dock Street Dam and

had a negative impact on the Smallmouth Bass fishery but a positive impact on boat use of the river. Our predecessors fought back, knowing the consequences, and they balanced the need for boating versus the need for protecting our fishery and sided with the fishery. The Dock Street Dam project was never developed, which is why we still have Smallmouth Bass living in the river, despite the other problems we have with water quality.

We fought for pollution control of our sewage and industrial pollution, so the dissolved oxygen pollution block near Philadelphia on the Delaware River was removed. Much like the Tocks Island Dam that would have prevented the fish from freely migrating up river, the pollution block prevented the fish from coming back from the ocean to the river, because there wasn't enough oxygen in the river to allow them to swim past Philadelphia. So, we now control pollution by building sewage plants in Philadelphia, and the river's water quality has improved dramatically. The same holds true for the Three Rivers in Pittsburgh. All three rivers were seriously polluted when I was a young child to where they couldn't support sport fisheries. We were lucky to catch catfish and carp out of the rivers, which are very pollution tolerant fish.

In 2005, we hosted the Bassmaster Classic, the Super Bowl of bass tournaments, on the Three Rivers, and we hosted a Bassmaster Elite professional tournament on the Delaware River in Philadelphia last year.

We are also fighting for the protection of our rare species and putting together management plans for our common ones.

Our forefathers developed one of our premier fish culture programs in the country, dating back to the late 1800s, that we continue to operate and advance. We are in a major rebuild and renovation of our Reynoldsdale State Fish Hatchery that was built in 1928, but that technology and that infrastructure lasted for almost 100 years, which is testament to their science and engineering back at that time.

Our law enforcement staff is second to none and has evolved from Fish Wardens to Waterways Patrolmen to Waterways Conservation Officers. The evolution of their name is a result of society's changes. Officers didn't need body armor, semi-automatic weapons or even computers and smartphones when they were Fish Wardens, but they do today. A lot of the traditions that have evolved over time have really affected the way the agency operates today.

Don't miss the May/June 2016 issue of *Pennsylvania Angler & Boater*. PFBC Executive John A. Arway will share his thoughts on the Commission's present and future. □

