



SPOTLIGHT: VICTORIA COUNTY, TEXAS

How Aumentum Recorder is helping citizens recover from a hurricane and find their lost cattle. By Tad Simons

Victoria County, Texas, is located near the Gulf Coast between Houston and Corpus Christi. On Aug. 25, 2017, the county took a direct hit from Hurricane Harvey, which virtually destroyed the city of Rockport, less than an hour's drive south. None of Victoria County's public records were damaged in the storm, but Rockport's city hall and courthouse were all but destroyed, along with many public records. Though the storm shut down Victoria County government offices for a week, it reinforced for county clerk Heidi Easley and her team the importance of archiving public records electronically, and of continuing their work to make Victoria County's public records as safe, accessible, and comprehensive as possible. One very Texas project that's almost finished: a database of cattle brands, developed with the help of Thomson Reuters' Aumentum team, to help police and citizens identify lost livestock.

On a good day in Victoria County, Texas, it is not uncommon for authorities to get reports of a stray cow or two roaming where they don't belong. But when Hurricane Harvey hit the area, hundreds of cattle broke down fences and scattered across the county as they fled from rising floodwaters—water that contained, among other things, poisonous snakes, fire ants, and the occasional alligator. (It is south Texas, after all.)

Once the water receded, however, all those wayward cattle had to be identified and returned. In this regard, nothing much has changed in Texas since the 1800s. Cattle are still identified chiefly by their brand, a unique symbol burned into their flank that serves as proof of ownership. All cattle brands in Texas are registered with the state; authorities must simply match the brand with the registered owner in order to return the cows to their rightful pasture.

Unfortunately, identifying cattle brands is often easier said than done. If no one recognizes the brand on sight, officials may ultimately have to visit the county records office and leaf through a large binder that contains more than 2,000 distinct brands, hoping to find one that matches.

It's a tedious, time-consuming task. That's why Easley and her team put their heads together and came up with a great service idea: What if they could build an online database of cattle brands that was accessible and searchable not only by law enforcement and other authorities, but by the public as well? That way, anyone could identify a wayward steer from their mobile phone, saving everyone a lot of time and hassle.

A herd of cows stand on high ground to escape Hurricane Harvey floodwaters near East Columbia, Texas August 29, 2017. REUTERS/Rick Wilking



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Heidi Easley
Victoria County Clerk

As long-time users of Thomson Reuters' Aumentum Recorder software, Easley and her team thought it might be possible to adapt Recorder's "Assumed Name" function to build a brand module. To find out, they called a Thomson Reuters support representative and asked. Not only was it possible, they discovered, the customer-support team was happy to help.

"The Thomson Reuters team was great," says Easley. "They listened to us, and helped guide us through the whole process."

According to Easley's system analyst John Williams, the local Cattleman's Association has had a cattle-brand database on its wish list for a long time. The big hurdle, he says, was that "we needed to develop a common vocabulary for describing the brands (arrows, circles, letters, numbers, etc.) so that we could develop a standard index that would make searches easier." To accomplish this, certain data fields were adapted to accommodate the various brand markers, making the symbols themselves searchable. A public rollout for the brand database on the Victoria County website is scheduled for December.

"Another benefit of the brands module is that once all the brands are registered, we can alert ranchers when their brands are about to expire," says Easley. (Brands in Texas have to be renewed every ten years, and the next round of expirations is in 2021.) "By then, we should have everyone in the system, and no one will be caught by surprise."

She isn't the only one in her family looking forward to a brand database online. "My husband is one of four constables for Victoria County. It is not unusual for a call to come in at two o'clock in the morning about cows being out," she says. "We've talked about how nice it would be to be able to search for the brand online and be able to match it with the animal's rightful owner."

More than 2,000 cattle brands are on file in Texas



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Heidi Easley

Advanced Back-Filing to the Rescue

Under Easley's leadership, the Victoria County clerk's office has made it a priority to remain technologically up-to-date; the brand project is just one example among many. As a long-time Thomson Reuters customer, for instance, Victoria County has already made most of its public records for the past fifty years available to the public online. Now, the county is using Recorder's "advanced back-filing" feature to incorporate public records—particularly land deeds and marriage licenses—from the 1960s and beyond. Currently, the county's e-records go back to 1962, and Easley's goal is to take them as far back as possible.

"Texas is rich in historical value, especially when it comes to deeds and property rights," Easley says. "Lots of oil and gas companies do research in that area, as well as people interested in their family heritage, so having it online makes it easier to access. We have hand-written deeds going back to the 1800s, and having access to those historical documents is important to a lot of people."

Before, the only way to search old records was manually or through OCR software, which made it impossible to put them online in any useful way. With advanced back-filing, the entered records are automatically indexed and searchable, and easily made available to the public through the county's website. Easley's office has set a goal of adding 15,000 documents per year to the county's database, all of which it is doing in-house.

"We don't have the budget to outsource that work," explains Easley, "but with more lawyers using e-filing and banks and mortgage companies looking up information online, our staff has more time to take on projects like this."

Cataloguing old marriage licenses alone is worth the effort, says analyst John Williams. "Before, if you wanted a certified copy of an older marriage license, you had to print out the page, make a PDF, print the PDF, cut the page out, tape it to another PDF, then certify it. It was a pain. Now, once the old licenses are entered into a template, the index fields are all populated with the correct information, people can access the records and we don't have to print and sign them."



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Heidi Easley



The "Arrow E" brand on the flank of a Texas cow.
Kenneth Easley, Jr.

Recovering from Harvey

Though the brands module and back-filing of records are priorities for Victoria County, the clerk's office also expects the fallout from Hurricane Harvey to add to its immediate workload. "Right now, a lot of people are trying to put their lives back together," Easley says. "People applying for FEMA aid or emergency loans need certified copies of their property deeds, so we're concentrating on the documentation they need to fill out those applications."

Many people don't realize how important it is to keep such records safe and available until they need it for themselves, she says. Easley herself has traveled down to Rockport to deliver supplies in order to help the county clerk's office in that devastated area, where residents weren't as fortunate as those in Victoria County. Back home, Easley also expects an up-tick in real-estate transactions as people try to re-finance or sell their homes, and as more people apply for state and federal aid.

"As bad as it was here, it could have been a lot worse," she says philosophically.

Through it all, she's been comforted by the certain knowledge that Thomson Reuters' support staff is there if and when she needs them. "I've looked at other programs, but what really keeps me with Aumentum is the people," she says. "From the very beginning, they set my desktop up and helped me configure it for my use. If I didn't understand something, they'd come in and explain it. If we needed something extra, like the brands module, they helped us figure it out. Every interaction with TR staffers feels like a "team effort," she says. Thomson Reuters' Austin office also keeps her in the loop about software upgrades and additional features, a courtesy she appreciates because budget constraints prevent her from attending regular user conferences.

Superior customer service is, of course, something Thomson Reuters takes a great deal of pride in. But, as capable as the Aumentum software is, it does have its limitations. Once Victoria County's wayward livestock is identified, it still has to be trailered and transported.

And in Texas, they still do that the old-fashioned way.

CONTACT US TODAY

866.471.2900

tax.thomsonreuters.com/aumentum

AUMENTUM@thomsonreuters.com



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