

WENATCHEE WORLD

The keeper of the truth

By [Tracy Warner](#)

Editorial Page Editor

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I am going to step out of character for a moment and praise an elected official. She is, perhaps, the most skilled and important public official you have never heard of. You probably voted for her, more than once if you live west of the Columbia. Wherever you live in Washington, you have been affected by her persistent work and innovation.

Her name is Siri Woods and she has been the Chelan County clerk since news reporters wore plaid bellbottoms and 6-inch-wide ties (I know). She is just completing her eighth term, and after being appointed to the post in 1977 has faced an opponent only once, in her first election. All other times, no one would have dared. She is the now the second-longest-serving county clerk in the state's history, but did not seek a ninth four-year term. She bows out officially on Dec. 31. Tuesday afternoon they put on a small adieu event for her at the county administrative offices, with cake and punch and many colleagues wishing her well. A scrapbook filled with 33 years of certificates and honors and congratulatory notes from state Supreme Court justices was passed around, the only memorabilia on hand from a long career.

The evidence of Siri Woods' accomplishments is mostly digitized now. The county clerk, if you didn't know, is the keeper of records for the Superior Court. The clerk is the court's administrator and financial officer and jury manager. The state's constitution provides that the county clerk be elected. Our founders considered the office too important for cronies and political appointees. The main charge is keeping a record of everything the court is asked to do, and everything the court did, for ever and ever. Every filing, every case, every verdict, judgment, award, order, affidavit, summons ... it's all there. Nearly everything is a public record. If you want to see it, just ask.

This is not a small job. It is very far from unimportant. The county's legal life flows through the clerk's office, where government intervenes in life's most crucial decisions and where the records of history are kept for all to see. Woods was always a champion of public access and open government. She was never afraid to make the point. She would press the issue with everyone from the ACLU to Supreme Court justices. "Those aren't your records," she said. "Those are the public's records."

This was an admirable attitude if, like me, you were a collector of public information. I started covering Superior Court as a reporter in 1979, when Woods was already a three-year veteran. The clerk's office on the fourth floor of the old courthouse, between two courtrooms, was a land of paper and folders and deputy clerks rushing around with more paper and folders, and lawyers dropping by to file lawsuits or check dockets. And all the records were kept in a vault that never seemed to be closed. If you were a reporter and curious, and good and tidy, you pretty much had the run of the place. In many years of seeking information I never once knew Siri Woods to withhold a public document. That's something I can't say for any other agency. I asked her Tuesday if she ever had. "Nope," she said. Adamant, as usual.

It was a policy that continued from the age of manual typewriters to the age of the data servers. The records are all electronic now. The vaults are empty. But the records are still available to you, thanks in part to Woods' persistent insistence, statewide.

The clerk's office was the one place you could count on finding the truth, and never getting the runaround. For me, an oasis. Thanks be to county clerks, especially clerks like Siri Woods.

Tracy Warner's column appears Tuesday through Friday. He can be reached at warner@wenatcheeworld.com or 665-1163.