

Voice from the Vault

By Gregory Sanford, State Archivist

In Search of Bunny Piper

I haven't seen Bunny Piper in a while and now Beetle is dating Sheila Buxley. Of course these things happen; before Beetle started dating Bunny in 1959 he dated Buzz, who similarly disappeared.

I am not suggesting Beetle Bailey is a serial killer. Instead, Bunny reminds us that if we only view issues like we read comic strips, as a set of discrete daily events, we lose larger contexts. We forget Bunny or that Beetle Bailey's sister is Lois Flagston of Hi & Lois. We miss patterns such as the tradition of Miss Buxley always appearing in Wednesday's strip (this is less rigorous than it once was, but traditions are like that).

The Archives hold 235 years of records that provide, in greater or lesser detail, context to current issues. This column occasionally reminded us of those contexts: that we have discussed vaccinations since the 1780s, the balance between economic development and the environment since the 1790s, or a Canadian-style health care system since the 1930s and so on.

Vermonters and our guests visit the Archives to exercise their own curiosity, their own senses of wonder. Some seek their family's history, tracing their individual threads within the fabric of our history. Some visitors seek to understand the intent of particular laws, others to know more about the events of our past.

It is our constant privilege to watch the wonderfully creative ways people tease knowledge from the records. We witnessed 18th Century town boundary surveys become sources of data on Vermont's pre-settlement forests since the surveys enumerate the exact type and location of trees blazed as boundary markers. We watched old "noxious animal" bounty records become sources for attempting to understand our lost wolf populations. We observed mid-19th Century health statistics used in search of signs of post-traumatic stress disorder among the Civil War generation.

Archival records, of course, do not magically appear in our vaults. Too often in the past they were unidentified and lost or simply arrived here without context or organization. Too often they arrived as strays rescued by a concerned state employee or as part of an agency's need to relocate or free up space from "old stuff."

That is why in 2008 we became the Vermont State Archives and Records Administration (VSARA) so we could help agencies manage their records effectively. We can now see the ebb and flow of information across bureaucratic boundaries and help manage records from their point of creation in accordance with their legal, administrative, and archival values. This column occasionally sought to explain the processes of archival and records management.

How records are created, stored, and transmitted has undergone immense and rapid change since I first started in 1982. This re-enforced the value of creating VSARA as records became less tangible and more vulnerable to alteration or loss across rapidly changing technologies. Managing records from point of creation became essential.

Technology also offers exciting opportunities for making records and information accessible in new ways. We have used our website to bring information to you in your homes and offices; we are looking at ways to create a more inter-active presence online.

Key to meeting these challenges and opportunities is the staff of VSARA. The staff has a diversity of backgrounds, interests, and responsibilities but is united in a commitment to public service. They are a joy to work with.

For 30 years it has been my privilege to be a public servant and to serve not only my institution, Vermont state government, but also the Vermonters it represents. After 60 years Beetle Bailey is also an institution of sorts. Bunny played her role in that institution, like I have in mine. We helped move our institutions' stories forward and then stepped off stage. The story will continue without us.

