

Voice from the Vault

By Gregory Sanford, State Archivist

Historical Records Go To School

Why, the student wanted to know, could he serve in Afghanistan or Iraq, but not be served in Vermont?

"Then what?" another student asked, wondering about women's participation in politics following passage of the 19th amendment. What were people in our town like in 1800, asked a school class.

These students are part of on-going efforts to incorporate local history, and local records, into school curricula. Use of historical records in the classroom not only makes history come alive (history didn't always happen somewhere else to someone else), but also encourages critical thinking beyond what textbooks can provide. How to locate, and interpret, historical records allows a student to participate in learning rather than merely memorizing pre-selected facts and interpretation. Using historical records can also open discussions on the nature of citizenship, or the nature of civic discourse, or on what it means to be a Vermonter or a member of your community.

The Vermont Historical Records Advisory Board (VHRAB) will be highlighting and promoting the use of historical records as teaching tools through Vermont Archives Week (November 7-13). VHRAB welcomes stories on the use of local records in your schools; please send the stories to me at gsanford@sec.state.vt.us or give me a call at 828-2369.

Several students recently contacted the Archives about the drinking age (in the interest of full disclosure, one of those students is my 13 year old daughter). One, a jazz

student, became interested when he was unable to see several acts during the Burlington Jazz Festival because they were held in bars and he was under-aged. He felt this was a barrier to his education since he believes live performances are an essential part of learning. Other students became interested as the result of current events and their awareness that 18 to 20 year olds could serve in the military, and possibly be put in harm's way, yet could not be served alcohol in Vermont. They looked at committee minutes from 1973 that discussed lowering Vermont's voting age and age of majority; they read Governor Richard Snelling's two veto messages of bills that would have raised the drinking age in the 1982 and 1983; and they examined the arguments for raising the drinking age in Governor Madeleine

Kunin's records, including statistics on alcohol-related automobile fatalities. Interpreting the statistics, they discovered that while, based on number of miles driven, 18 to 20 year olds were the mostly likely to be involved in such accidents, overall it was the 21 to 25 year old bracket that had the highest number of alcohol-related fatalities (and that the problem persisted across all age groups). In looking at Governor Snelling's vetoes, they were exposed to his concern that you could not create two classes of citizens, based solely on age, and that education, enforcement and treatment were better ways to address the problem across all age groups. Underneath that lurked the questions of what is a citizen; what are the distinctions between rights, obligations and privileges; and whether removing any of those rights and privileges changed the nature of citizenship.

The student looking at women in politics was not content with the normal brief notice that women gained the right to vote in state and national elections in 1920 and that Edna Beard was the first women elected to the Vermont House (1920) and Senate (1922). He discovered that the male legislators were initially reluctant to be Ms. Beard's seatmate and that the first bill she introduced became a law raising the level of assistance to women with children whose husbands were incapacitated by catastrophic illness. He is now looking at what committees women served on, what leadership positions they held, and what bills they introduced in the 1921 to 1941 period.

I am just learning about other efforts involving the use of historical records in the classroom since they involve municipal, rather than state, records. In Woodstock, for example, students are using probate records to examine what town residents were like in 1800. These efforts, as I am learning, are taking place in everything from third grades through high school. There are several organizations, like the Vermont Alliance for the Social Studies (<http://www.vermontsocialstudies.org/>); the Flow of History (<http://www.flowofhistory.org/>); and Vermont Community Works (<http://www.vermontcommunityworks.org/>) that are encouraging teachers to use historical records through workshops and the posting of models and other resources.

Again, as VHRAB prepares for Vermont Archives Week we would love to hear from any of you who are working with your local schools to provide historical records for the classroom.