

Voice from the Vault

By Gregory Sanford, State Archivist

Notes From The Cutting Room Floor

Last Friday (November 19th) it was my privilege to address the new legislators as part of their orientation. As in the past, I wove context for current events from odds and ends I culled from our records. To do so, I randomly reviewed records and legislative journals in ten year increments dating back from 2005, selecting whatever struck my fancy. I confess this is fun since it is one of the all too rare occasions when I actually get to use, rather than manage, public records.

Even spot checking left me with more material than I could use in a brief presentation. For this month's column I rescued some unused material from the cutting room floor.

Joint Resolution No. 62 of 1955 railed against the sale and distribution of crime comic books to juveniles. Noting that nationally ninety million comics were published and read each month, the legislature decried this "invitation to illiteracy" that created "an atmosphere of cruelty and deceit, suggest[ed] criminal or sexually abnormal ideas, create[d] a readiness to temptation" and encouraged "a delinquent impulse...by supplying details of technique." The legislators called on all agencies to "stem this tide of objectionable reading material" that was causing "increasingly deep concern among numerous religious leaders and civic groups in our State." I was going to weave this into our current fascination with whether any political party has a particular claim upon "moral values," but I found it all too depressing. In the interests of full disclosure, I confess that in my youth I was an inveterate comic book reader. I will leave it to the reader to decide whether my becoming an archivist is a sign of comic book-induced depravity.

Even randomly jumping around in ten year increments, it was easy to espy themes. Act No. 209 of 1915 required owners of businesses "where women or girls are employed as clerks, or help therein," to "provide chairs, stools, or other contrivances for the comfortable use of such female employees for the preservation of their health." In 1955, Act No. 123 required business owners to keep, and make public, overtime hours worked by women and children. That labor laws often singled out women, and frequently lumped them with children in devising special protections, speaks volumes about perceptions of women in the workforce..

Gun control also emerged as a theme. Act No. 102 of 1955 established a \$20 fine for anyone bringing a firearm onto school property. The act made an allowance for schools that taught hunter and firearm safety, a program the legislature encouraged. Ten years later the legislature

asked Vermont's congressional delegation to oppose a proposal to restrict the sale of firearms through mail orders (Joint Resolution 50 of 1965). In 1995, in the wake of horrific school shootings, the law was amended to require the expulsion of any student who brought a firearm to school.

One theme in particular caught my attention. In 1805, the general assembly chided former secretary of state Roswell Hopkins for his failure "to deliver to his successor...the journals of the proceedings of the Legislature for ten successive years." In 1915, Act No. 322 directed the auditor to rent typewriters for use by the clerk of the house, at a cost of \$25.75. Joint Resolution 34 of 1955 authorized the sergeant at arms to purchase for the senate "three 4-drawer metal filing cabinets to replace the broken wooden cabinets now in said office..." In 1995, the House Government Operations began an extensive study of the impact of technology on our public records laws. The bill they worked on, H. 780, did not get to the senate until late in the adjourned session and only that part of it addressing the actual cost of providing copies of public records survived, along with an expansion of the public record definition in 1 V.S.A. §317 to cover electronic records. The 2005 legislature will be reviewing a report on the public records, privacy, and information technology, mandated during this year's session.

In actions large and small, public records permeate our legislative deliberations. The 1805 act highlighted a problem that persists: how to assure the orderly management of records from one administration to the next. New office technologies, such as the typewriter and the filing cabinet, constantly change how we create, store, and retrieve public records. The typewriter, for example, created uniformly legible documents and, when combined with carbon paper, allowed for the simultaneous creation of multiple copies. The filing cabinet, which like the typewriter emerged in the late 19th century, changed how records were indexed and filed (for a fascinating look at the impact of these office technologies, read John Seely Brown and Paul Duguid's, *The Social Life of Information*). That the senate was belatedly replacing "broken wooden cabinets" is a sad reminder of how difficult it is to muster support for adequate storage space for records, whether filing cabinets, vaults or servers.

The 1995-96 struggle to define and manage public records in the computer age underscores the complexity of issues surrounding records. That another ten years elapsed before another comprehensive attempt was made to address public records in the computer age not only suggests the complexity of the issues, but also the difficulties in mustering the political will to tackle the problem. After all, at their core, public record issues touch the very heart of our governmental principles, from accountability to privacy (which, from my personal perspective, are too often seen as competing, rather than complementary, principles). We can anticipate that once again, public record issues will emerge in the 2005 session. Are we prepared?