

Voice from the Vault

By Gregory Sanford

On Obituaries, Pets and the Municipal Office of the Future

Like most of us I have my share of quirks. One is the attention I pay to newspaper obituaries. I started reading obituaries when I was working on the George Aiken Oral History Project at UVM. I would scan the obits in search of people who were important to Governor Aiken's early career and administrations (sadly this also meant crossing names off the list of potential project interviewees).

Long after that project I continue to read the obits, finding insights into our changing society in the individual life stories. The waves of obituaries for World War II veterans, for example, give witness to how we are losing personal memories of that conflict.

Where quirkiness enters into my reading is my fascination with the images of the deceased. Some photographs are contemporary; others are from earlier in life, usually middle age; and in rare cases an obituary is accompanied by two or more photographs from different periods in the person's life. What picture would I use, from what period in my life? What, by extension, does this say about my own self-image of who I am?

These thoughts were stirred in reading H. 885, the proposed amendments to the St. Johnsbury charter. Section 3 of the bill abolishes the town offices of fence viewer, inspector of lumber, shingles and wood, second constable, and weigher of coal. No pictures or life history accompanied the obituary of these positions.

I have written before about how these local offices reflected earlier economic realities. Where once towns applied quality control standards to local products to gain market share, the expansion of the economy into state, national and international markets moved standard setting away from the towns. This eroded the importance of these local officers; where they persisted they were often accorded as humorous honors.

The proposed charter changes for St. Johnsbury included creation of a department of assessors "headed by a person experienced in the appraisal of real estate, who shall be appointed by the town manager with the approval of the select board." The voter approved proposals also included a change in how the town clerk's budget was set. These provisions suggested that the performance and duties of the remaining town offices are still evolving.

This, in turn, lead to thoughts about a recent extended discussion on the municipal government listserv about pets in town offices. A majority of the participants in this good humored discussion defended bringing their pets to work. In my role as Grumpy Gregory I suggested that pets could be a problem for citizens with allergies to, or phobias about, the various critters which now constitute "pets."

I used the discussion to elaborate on two distinct and understandable approaches to municipal offices. For the majority, the need to create a comfortable work environment by bringing a pet to work outweighed the rare instances when visitors were discomforted. I referred to this approach as "my-chives." Juxtaposed with this was the approach that as public officials, overseeing public records in a public space, we had to create a welcoming environment to all the public, even those with allergies and phobias. This approach I labeled

"our-chives."

As a pet owner I totally understand the "my-chives" approach with its homely image of town offices with a cat sleeping on a heat register or a dog loyally curled by the clerk's feet. It is an image worthy of Norman Rockwell. In contrast the cold efficiency of the pet-less "our-chives" conjures up no such comforting image; Norman Rockwell has left the building.

And yet my guess is that the "our-chives" approach will be the future. If nothing else we live in a litigious society and sooner or later there will be suit because someone has a bad allergic reaction or some other negative experience. We will become more professional, while something will be lost.

Just as the expanding breadth of commerce changed or even eliminated town offices, outside legal, social and economic forces will continue to change those offices into "our-chives." Recent experiences reveal the truth of this prediction. New educational funding mechanisms have brought standardization to the appraisal and reporting of property taxes. The demands of tax mapping are changing the skill sets needed by town officers as well as the shared recordkeeping requirements of state and municipal governments. National election laws stemming from the electoral chaos in other states are changing the policies and procedures surrounding local checklists. Increasing pressure from banking and insurance concerns, as well as evolving case law, are being brought to bear on how records affecting the marketability of title are managed. Concerns about identity theft and terrorism are bringing federal and state directives on the management of, and access to, vital and other records containing personal information.

These directives, regardless of origin, are bumping up against traditions of local control and the independence of town clerks and other officers. Even where directives allow for local input, municipalities can only adjust, not control, implementation.

While checklists and grandlists have been transformed, practices governing records affecting title remain largely under the policies and practices of individual municipalities. Municipal clerks have studied the future of land records through a series of commissions dating back to at least the 1990s (these reports can be found on our web site for the current municipal land records commission: <http://vermont-archives.org/records/vtmlrc/>).

To date these studies have not been translated into uniform practices and procedures. Lack of resources and training, the weight of long established practice, and increasingly outmoded laws (which still refer to volumes, pages, and index cards as new computer systems are contemplated and installed) serve as barriers to change. And our own fierce independence, heightened by the perceived erosion of local control, further shapes our response to pressures to standardize land record practices.

If clerks (if we, since the Archives confronts similar pressures to change), do not act soon then forces beyond our control will shape who we are, what we do, and how we do it. Without effective action the image accompanying our obituary may very well be of a clerk-less as well as pet-less office (as I am writing this a Muninet discussion is starting on whether technology can replace human minute taking by transcribing as well as recording meetings; will yet another clerk function be automated in the future?).

So I would love to hear from you. How do you envision your office and your workflow in ten years? What, from your perspective, are the tools needed for achieving that vision? What skills and training do you feel will be essential? What incentives do you see as appropriate for moving toward more uniform practice? I look forward to hearing your thoughts.

