

Voice from the Vault By Gregory Sanford, State Archivist

After the 19th Amendment: Vermont's First Women Legislators

March is also Women's History Month. Not so incidentally I have before me a wonderful student paper entitled "Issues of the Hearth: Women in the Vermont Legislature, 1920-1940." No self-respecting, deadline-haunted columnist can ignore such a windfall.

To digress for a moment: every once in a while, just when I become resigned to a bureaucratic life of maximizing parameters and squashing the hopes of citizens, a researcher will spark memories of my earlier existence as a user of records. Jack Zeilenga, a UVM history student, is such a researcher. Jack was interested in what happened after the 19th amendment. Most people seem content knowing that Edna Beard was the first woman to serve in the Vermont house (1921) and senate (1923); beyond that there has been little research on the first women in government and politics. Jack wanted to know more.

The result is a paper that looks beyond Edna Beard as a "first" and examines the nature of the service of Vermont's first women legislators. Edna Beard's story, for example, is more complex than most people are aware. A month after the ratification of the 19th amendment in 1920, Miss Beard was nominated as a Republican candidate for Orange town representative. Despite her long service on the school board and as town treasurer, she lost the primary to Burt L. Richardson. Undeterred, Miss Beard then ran in the general election on the "Citizen Party" label and won.

She received a mixed reception in the house. The *Rutland Herald* reported that, "Miss Edna Beard, the only woman member, was given the first choice of seats by unanimous consent. She chose seat No. 146, and for a long time no mere man had the courage to select seat No. 145, which adjoins hers. The seat stood vacant for over an hour until Horatio E. Luce of Pomfret took the dare of his fellow members and sat down beside Miss Beard amid a storm of laughter and applause." One can only image what Rep. Beard felt during this process.

In 1923 she was elected to the senate and became chair of the Library Committee, another first. She was suggested as a candidate for lieutenant governor, but never ran. Edna Beard died in 1928 at the age of 51.

Miss Beard, however, is only part of the story. The paper examines three areas: the number of women who served; the types of legislation introduced by the women; and what roles women played within the committee system.

On the whole, women did relatively well in Vermont legislative races, holding 100 house and 8 senate seats between 1921-1940 (the house had, for most of that period, 248 members). Within New England, New Hampshire had the next highest number of women representatives with 86; while Vermont's 8 women senators trailed only Maine's 11. Mr. Zeilenga grouped legislation introduced by the women into "issues of the hearth"; that is issues such as family, children, education, and the environment which were traditionally seen as of particular concern to women. While there are legitimate questions about whether all the legislation Mr. Zeilenga identifies actually falls within issues of the hearth, women clearly added new perspectives to the general assembly. For example, *Representative* Edna Beard's first bill, which was enacted, raised compensation for women with children whose husbands were dead, incapacitated, or who had abandoned them. *Senator* Beard's first (successful) bill allowed for county sheriffs hiring

women as deputies.

In 1927 Rep. Mehitable C. Robinson of West Rutland sponsored a bill that required investigation of potential adoptive families. In 1931 Rep. Nina Mason of Pawlet sponsored legislation limiting children under the age of 16 to eight-hour work days and prohibiting such children from working at all if they had not met certain educational thresholds. Other legislation sponsored by women during this period ranged from liability insurance for school transportation to children in state custody to marriage and taxation.

The third section of the paper looks at committee service. During the 1921-41 period Mr. Zeilenga identified women as chairing seven house and six senate committees (this may be a low count since he appears to have missed at least one committee chair, Mrs. Helena Skeels who chaired the House Conservation and Development Committee in 1931, though he does correctly identify her as chair of the Senate Conservation and Development Committee in 1933. As an aside, a freshman representative serving on the 1931 House Conservation and Development opposed a bill Mrs. Skeels supported, which gave, in his mind, too much power to private utilities over the development of Vermont's hydroelectric potential. He waited until Mrs. Skeels was absent and then had the committee adversely report the bill. This successful maneuver gained him political visibility and helped launch a political career that would not end until 1975; that freshman legislator was George Aiken of Putney).

The committees chaired by women seem to follow the issues of the hearth template. For example five of the house chairs were of the Library Committee, as were two of the senate chairs. Education, Public Health, Conservation and Development, Public Buildings, and Suffrage and Elections were other committees chaired by women during this period.

Women, who were increasingly filling secretarial roles in the business sector, were frequently elected as clerks of their respective committees. For example, in 1927 women served on nine different committees and were clerks on four of them; in 1929 it was four of seven; and in 1931 it was ten of twelve.

Mr. Zeilenga has made an excellent start on examining the roles of women in government. His paper, which shows some of the limits of undergraduate research, is nonetheless an important step beyond our blinkered fascination with who was the first woman legislator. I offer my congratulations and welcome Mr. Zeilenga, or anyone reading this column, to build on this research. We look forward to seeing you.