

Thomas Day Seymour Bassett (1913–2001)

Tom Bassett was unlike anyone else I have ever known or likely will ever know. We met forty years ago, and after the first few minutes of conversation I realized that he marched to the beat of his own special drummer. In those days he served as curator of the Wilbur Collection of Vermontiana at the University of Vermont, then secreted in the bowels of the Fleming Museum. Ambitious young academics shunned state and local history, and I certainly never anticipated that in another decade I would follow Tom into Vermont studies. What most fascinated me about Tom during our early meetings was his commitment to collecting archival materials that documented the everyday lives of common citizens. Although this work went unappreciated at the time, he eventually ranked high among the first archivists to recognize the value of such sources and he pioneered their collection in Vermont, a practice that has since become commonplace. A university-trained historian and a self-trained curator and archivist, Tom became a major user of many of the collections he amassed and a prolific contributor to *Vermont History*, the *New England Quarterly*, and other regional and national journals.

As a graduate student at Harvard University Tom nourished his special interest in social and cultural history under the direction of Arthur Schlesinger, Sr. He initially planned to write his Ph.D. dissertation on Vermont politics, a project he abandoned only after he discovered that there were too few political collections to support it. (Tom and his successors have since remedied this deficiency.) Instead he took on a study of the urban impact on Vermont villages from 1840 through 1880 that ran to two hefty volumes and was read by all serious students of nineteenth-century Vermont. By 1992, when the Vermont Historical Society published an abridged version as *The Growing Edge*, notes in the margin and other paragraphs he affixed with tape to his copy had nearly doubled the size of his dissertation. Tom insisted on, some might say suffered from, a commitment to inclusion. He edited the Vermont volume of the New England Bibliography series, not only the most complete Vermont bibliography but also the most comprehensive of the New England series. Because it included a disproportionately greater number of entries than volumes for older and more heavily populated states, it required disproportionately greater fundraising efforts. Tom casually rejected concerns over such mundane matters as unworthy of Vermont scholars.

He also edited the New Hampshire volume in the same series, but his heart was with Vermont. Born in Burlington, where his father taught classics at the University of Vermont, Tom attended local schools, Choate



School in Massachusetts, Yale University, where he became a member of Phi Beta Kappa, and Harvard University, from which he received his Ph.D. A conscientious objector during World War II, he did alternative service and after the war taught at Princeton University, Earlham College, and the University of California, Riverside. He returned to Vermont in 1958 where he joined the University, taught Vermont history for some years, and served as curator of the Wilbur Collection and university archivist until his retirement.

Tom's physical appearance, tall, jaunty, and thin, lent him the stereotypical look of the picture-book Vermonter, while his individualism and idiosyncratic manners branded him a "character," as colorful as many of those whose personal accounts he edited in his 1967 volume *Outsiders Inside Vermont*. But his lifelong love affair with Vermont and a powerful intellect fueled by an unquenchable curiosity most distinguished him. Bassett phone calls—"Bassett here" was his unvarying form of identification—frequently brought questions that never would have occurred to me to ask, much less answer. Some of his best work provides answers to questions no one else was then asking, but should have been. Tom's last book, *The Gods of the Hills: Piety and Society in Nineteenth-Century Vermont*, reflects his "bias" that religious beliefs formed the "most important" influence on history and the "most difficult to identify." A dedicated Quaker, his pursuit of religious themes brought him to a Quaker history on which he was hard at work at the time of his death. His lifelong passion for music—he seldom missed the opportunity to participate in a local choir—made him familiar to many who would never read a Bassett book or article. Many of my former students who did study Tom's writings best remember him as the history music man. On occasion he would lecture to my Vermont history classes on what UVM was like in the 1930s. Although Tom did not attend UVM, as a faculty brat he grew up as part of the university community. During the 1980s, with the University Cakewalk weekend festivities long abandoned, students would ask about the practice. Tom, in his seventies, would conclude his presentation with a vocal rendition of "Cotton Babes" along with a very sprightly version of the walk. When Tom could no longer do the required kicks, he asked if I still wanted him to lecture.

Tom's publications, his major bibliographic work, and his archival collecting that laid the base for the cumulation of one of the two best repositories of the Vermont experience, have left an important legacy. He approached history with the zest he did music. About two years after he could no longer cakewalk Tom and I attended a conference in North Carolina that featured an exhibition by clog dancers. It shouldn't have surprised me, but it did: Tom was one of the cloggers.

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