Changing the narrative: A new history of Vermont women, Native and African Americans

by Greg Guma | September 9, 2012

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Calvin Coolidge was adopted by a Sioux tribe in 1927, but had Abenaki relatives. (Coolidge Presidential Library)

Given Vermont's contemporary image as a refuge for independent and progressive thinkers it can be jarring to look at a not-so-distant past when the state was an isolationist bastion in which Native Americans had to call themselves gypsies to avoid sterilization.

Cynthia D. Bittinger's new book, "Vermont Women, Native Americans and African Americans," does not over-stress this "saddest chapter" in 20th century state history. But Vermont's eugenics movement does suggest a central target of this slim, significant volume, which updates the traditional narrative.

In the 1930s, immigrants to Vermont and any other "non-Yankees" were considered outsiders, at best. Today about half of all residents are "transplants," another good reason to reconsider just who is a Vermonter and what has been previously omitted or downplayed in telling the state's story.

In her section on eugenics, Bittinger notes that even Calvin Coolidge, one of two Vermonters to become president, had Indian blood in his background. This was not so uncommon. Unlike many Abenakis, however, Coolidge did not feel the need to hide his ancestry.

Vermont was viewed as the "last great white hope" of New England in the 1920s. But immigrants, "nomadic tribes" and others did not fit in with this squeaky clean image and a related "domestic hygiene" movement. Bittinger provides a concise, restrained review of the state's shameless plunge into control of "human breeding," apparently driven by a mixture of xenophobia and a confused desire to weed out so-called defects.

Harry Perkins, the University of Vermont professor who led the state's Commission on Country Life, presented eugenics as a way to build a healthier society, eliminate poverty and prevent genetic diseases. But he focused specifically on the "hereditary degeneracy" of many Native Americans and French-Canadians. "Perkins was judging who was unfit to reproduce," Bittinger writes. "So he drafted a sterilization law that would provide prevention of propagation by consent."

It took almost half a century for the state to publicly acknowledge this disturbing human rights crime. Vermont's sterilization law remained in place until 1981. As she does throughout the book, Bittinger provides useful references for more information – in this case, files at Vermont's Department of Public Welfare – and generously credits other writers and researchers who have led the way.

The book is divided into three sections. Bittinger, who teaches history at Community College of Vermont, begins with "natives on the land," grappling with the notion that the winners normally get to write history. She argues that the Abenakis lost their chance in large part by siding with the French before the American Revolution. However, what distinguishes her study is not so much the revisiting of well-known moments as an abundance of intriguing biographical sketches.

In a section on settlers who were captured by Native Americans, for example, she recounts the journey of Susanna Johnson. In a later memoir Johnson described life at an Abenaki village north of Lake Memphremagog in 1754: people living "in perfect harmony, holding most of their

property in common." The Abenaki were kinder and gentler, Johnson concluded, than the French jailers she met later on.

Part Two grapples with the significant, often underrated impact of African Americans on Vermont's traditions of innovation and independent thinking. Bittinger's ability to edit biographical material comes in especially handy here.

Among the leaders she profiles are Lucy Terry Prince, a former slave who resettled in Guilford and became the first African American poet in the United States; Lemuel Haynes, a minister in Rutland and first African American ordained by a U.S. religious denomination; and Alexander Twilight, first to serve in any state legislature. This section of the book concludes with a list of "national and state first-time successes for African Americans in Vermont."

Twilight was a teacher, but also designed Athenian Hall, a school and dormitory that today is the home of the Orleans Historical Society. In 1836, a crucial transition period in Vermont, Twilight fought early to reform education funding in the Legislature.

Vermont's laudable record in the fight to end slavery is revisited in a series of sections that illustrates the broad range of leaders and strategies employed, from Thomas Waterman Wood's sympathetic paintings of free blacks to the decision by Martin Freeman, the first black professor at a U.S. college, to relocate to Liberia near the end of the Civil War.

Nevertheless, when William John Anderson Jr. became the second black elected to the state legislature in 1945 – more than a century after Twilight – he could not enter the Montpelier Tavern and Pavilion Hotel.

Part Two also revisits the influence of the Ku Klux Klan, which saw a brief revival in the 1920s. There were cross burnings and rallies, but also acts of courageous resistance. In order to go after the KKK's secrecy, Burlington passed an ordinance against wearing masks. Rutland residents staged a boycott of any business owner who dared admit to Klan membership. Frequent condemnation by local newspapers also made a difference.

Clarina Nichols (Inroads)

On the other hand, Bittinger points out that Kake Walk, a minstrel show performed in blackface, continued at UVM fraternities until 1969. When eventually confronted, UVM President Lyman Rowell defiantly refused to "remake the university" for the benefit of blacks. The student senate ended the tradition. Bittinger concludes that the persistence of Kake Walk "revealed a state university with a real paradox on race issues."

The book's final section, a refresher course on women's history, is subtitled "the other half of the story." In line with Bittingers' intention to influence the state narrative, she begins here by describing the lives of Native American women. They had a "large degree of authority," she notes, and older native women were respected as authorities on herbal medicine, sacred matters and tribal history.

In contrast, early female settlers from Europe "were dominated legally by patriarchy and religious beliefs." They could not own property, sign a contract or keep any wages they earned. Even though Vermont's constitution promised education for all, most women obtained little before becoming parents.

"A woman was only remembered through her connection to her husband," Bittinger writes. She also explains how the word "relict," meaning a widow but also an inferior person, was carved on tombstones rather than the maiden name of the deceased, a practice demonstrating that women were deprived of identity even in death.

Bittinger's portraits in this section of the book are particularly compelling, and point to some intriguing cultural cross-currents. For example, Mother Ann Lee was a British "shaking Quaker" who resettled near Albany and attracted hundreds of Vermonters during the Second Great Awakening of the early 19th century. Among her disciples was Jane Blancard, who left patriarchy and farm life behind in Norwich after seeing visions and joined the movement.

She also profiles Emma Hart Willard, who first opened a school for women in her Middlebury home in 1814. Willard may be the first woman to teach other women science and math. However, as Bittinger notes, she decided that Vermont was not the ideal place to pursue her vision of higher education for women.

Clarina Nichols made a similar decision more than 30 years later after fighting for suffrage and other legal reforms. "She wanted to tackle a new state and set up new laws. Vermont was just too conservative, with patriarchy too entrenched," Bittinger concludes.

Ending the section on women, Bittinger points to a 19th century migration trend that "often took the best and the brightest" out of Vermont. Even before the Civil War, she notes, almost 150,000 women left. From there, however, the summary jumps forward almost a century, to the rise of women politicians like Consuelo Northrup Bailey and Madeleine Kunin.

This begs a nagging question: Why did Vermont lag behind on women's rights when it was ahead in many other areas?

In June 1870, for example, a year after it was founded, the Vermont Suffrage Association brought its signature issue to a Council of Censors' Convention. It was defeated 233 to one. The only yes vote was Harvey Howes of Fair Haven.

Women had mounted an active lobbying campaign, but it somehow ended up alienating the press and clergy, which made the defeat more overwhelming than it might have been. Afterward, Howes found it impossible to obtain a publisher for a written defense of his position.

For that matter, why did Vermont's leaders resist giving women the vote until the bitter end? Bittinger does not stress this, but when a suffrage bill finally passed in the state legislature in 1919, Governor Percival Clement – at one time the leader of a progressive fusion

movement – called it unconstitutional and refused to sign. A year later, when the state was pressured to ratify the 19th amendment, he refused to call a special legislative session. What was he thinking?

Years earlier, Clarina Nichols' first appearance at the Statehouse – the first ever by a woman – outraged many in the audience. Why? Here's a clue. The editor of the Rutland Herald threatened to come to the capital with a man's suit and dress her in it.

The year Nichols left the state, when feminist leader Lucy Stone told people in Randolph that they should withhold their taxes until women had the right to vote, what did the papers say? They wondered why attractive young women in the audience were parading around in "unfeminine" bloomers. What's with Vermont's wardrobe police?

Due to the approach of Bittinger's book, there is sometimes not enough attention to such cultural and contextual issues. The analysis is brief, and insights tend to fade in comparison with colorful vignettes and topical subheadings. Issues like the tactics of patriarchy and the complex roles played by women in the abolition, temperance and suffrage movements could use more attention in the next edition.

What Bittinger has done in the meantime is assemble a broad, intelligent and popularly written three-part survey that challenges stereotypes and acknowledges numerous historical trailblazers. Some of them have been native Vermonters — with visions that occasionally took them somewhere else. Others have been immigrants who found something in Vermont that nurtured their talents and souls.

The book's subtitle, "Out of the shadows of history," makes its intention plain – to reclaim the past and re-frame the discussion. Bittinger's central approach – and largest success – in this effort is her focus on change agents, "people who made a difference to their gender, their race or their family band." She makes a credible case that they have among the most meaningful stories to tell.

Vermont Women, Native Americans & African Americans: Out of the Shadows of History, Cynthia D. Bittinger, The History Press, 160 pages, illustrated.

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