

On the RECORD

Genealogical society maintains parish records, shares findings

Genealogists and those interested in family history can get a lead in an unexpected place: The Vermont Information Center on Interstate 89 North in Williston.

There they will find a display – including books with Catholic church sacramental record information – about genealogy and brochures from the Vermont French-Canadian Genealogical Society, a major resource in Colchester for genealogists.

The rest-area display – one of seven in a glass and wood case – also features family photographs, flags, a fleur-de-lis, a genealogy pin from the Filles du Roi, a six-generation pedigree chart and a small globe. Simple questions printed on white paper are scattered throughout the one-shelf display: Is that family story really true? How did my family get here? Where did my ancestors come from? What were the lives of my ancestor like?

Lynn Johnson, a parishioner of St. Pius X Church in Essex Center, and Jane Whitmore of South Burlington, members of the genealogical society, created the display earlier this year to let people know about the society and its work.

Among that work is the creation – so far – of 54 volumes and CDs of sacramental records. That project began in 2004 with the permission of Burlington Bishop Kenneth A. Angell. The ongoing project entails volunteers photographing parish baptismal and marriage records then putting the key information into a database and producing alphabetized books for the oldest parishes in the Diocese of Burlington.

The project won't include parishes founded after 1900 "when state records get pretty good," said John Fisher, a parishioner of St. Joseph Co-Cathedral Parish in Burlington and executive board member of the genealogy society. He has been instrumental in the compilation of the sacramental records books, copies of which can be found in the archives of the Diocese of Burlington in South Burlington.

The records are invaluable to genealogists searching for information on Catholic Vermont ancestors.

Much of the parish information recorded before 1857 is the only information available because there was no state law for record keeping until that year.

"It's very interesting work, like detective work,"

Fisher said.

Some of the records are difficult to read because they are written in Latin and/or in poor penmanship, but great effort is made to ensure accuracy.

The deterioration of parish records was of concern because the old paper tears and becomes brittle over time, the ink smudges with too much handling, and the book bindings break.

The genealogy society's preservation of the sacramental records reduces and/or eliminates wear and tear on fragile books and diminishes parish re-binding costs to maintain the books.

Fisher credited the late Msgr. John R. McSweeney, a historian and a member of the committee that studied the copying of sacramental records, with helping to get the project underway. At the time, the former chancellor said it was important to preserve the information contained in the records because "it's the heritage of our people, the sacramental history of the people of God of the Diocese of Burlington."

The Vermont French-Canadian Genealogical Society is providing this service free of charge.

Some people are interested only in learning who their great-grandparents were and where they came from, while others, once on the genealogy journey, keep wanting to learn more.

Finding out about ancestors through the genealogy process "makes you feel you get to know them," Johnson said.

More and more genealogy resources are available online, but not the Vermont sacramental records. For those, go to the Vermont French-Canadian Genealogical Society library in Dupont Hall on Hegeman Avenue in Colchester.

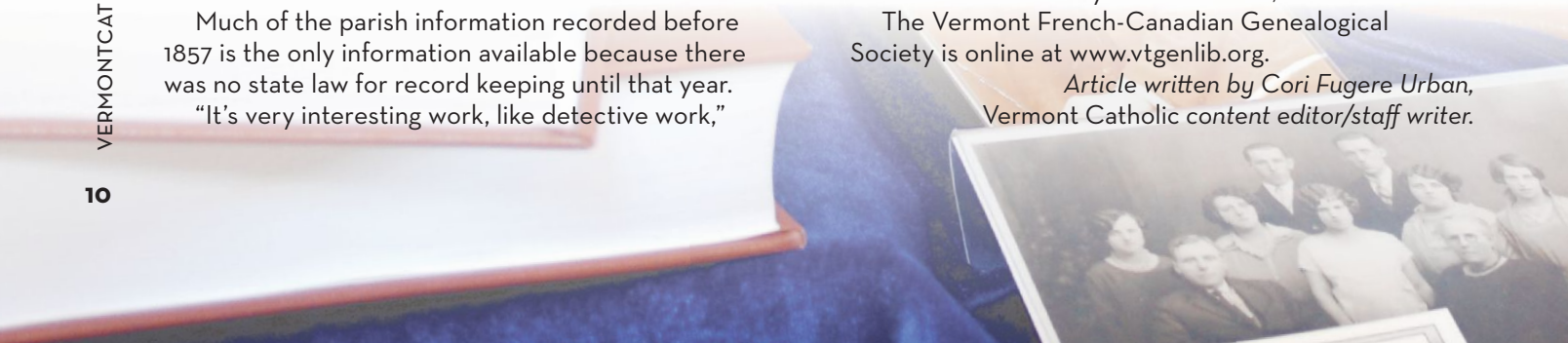
Volunteers there can assist in the use of the society's extensive resources including access to online databases, Vermont vital records and Quebec marriage records.

"Catholic records are the best," Fisher said.

"They say your family genealogy is done when someone else enters your death date," Whitmore said.

The Vermont French-Canadian Genealogical Society is online at www.vtgenlib.org.

*Article written by Cori Fugere Urban,
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(Photos by Cori Fugere Urban)

John Fisher (top photo), a Vermont French-Canadian Genealogical Society executive board member, shows one of the volumes of parish sacramental records on display at The Vermont Information Center on Interstate 89 North in Williston. In the bottom photo, Lynn Johnson and Jane Whitmore, members of the society, check the display they created earlier this year to let people know about the society and its work.



