

RECORD REVIEW

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PULLOUT

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ABBY LUBY PHOTO

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— Lee Roberts about Mary Vockins.

Bedford’s tax woman leaveth

By ABBY LUBY

She remembers when the annual Bedford school tax was roughly \$162 and all the other taxes added up to a little less than that. When residents got their bill, the exact tax amount was written by hand, Mary Vockins’s hand.

Ms. Vockins, 89, has been the receiver of taxes for the last 20 years and has worked for the town of Bedford for 53 years. Dec. 31 will be her last official day on the job.

Looking around her recently renovated office, Ms. Vockins remembered the older, smaller town house and how she initially ended up working for Bedford over half a century ago.

“I wouldn’t be here today if I didn’t play bridge,” said Ms. Vockins. “My friend Madeline Shaeffer was in my bridge club, and she heard about a clerical job in a town office. I applied for it and got it.”

Ms. Vockins was raised in Bedford Hills but relocated to New York City as a young adult to work in the garment district. She moved back to Westchester to raise her two sons and is a 61-year Katonah resident. She worked for successive town supervisors, starting with Douglas L. Barrett, Erwin Uellendahl, Albert V. Marchigiani, Robert Hazzard, Larry Dwyer, Josphe Del Sindaco, John Dinin, and the current supervisor, Lee Roberts.

Ms. Vockins was appointed receiver of taxes after Hobart Lent in 1986. “I learned on the job. Everything was written down and kept in large bound books,” she said. “We had this big clunky monster of a machine that stenciled in everybody’s name and address with a metal stencil. You put the bill in and pulled down with these large levers to imprint the name. We did all the tax bills individually, but we filled in the tax amount by hand. The machine was a big deal because we didn’t have to write in the names and addresses. Now everything is done by computer.”

“Taxes were low back then,” said Ms. Vockins. “The house where I live now, I pay over \$10,000 a year. But when I was paying \$164 for school and \$162 for town and county, I was only making \$45 a week.”

Getting a job with the town 40 or 50 years ago depended on who you knew. The best recommendation was by ‘word of mouth,’ said Ms. Vockins.

“If I knew of an opening and knew somebody that would be good at that job, I would tell them about it,” she said. “I’ve seen people I know over the years get work here that way.”

Before the town house was fully renovated, it was like a cozy family, said Ms. Vockins.

“We knew everybody and had so much fun when we were all in the same little building. Then, it was just a little courtroom added on the back, and the assessor’s office was just a little room,” she said. “You had a birthday party and everybody came. There was no air conditioning, and everything was always blowing all over the place.”

The sparkle in Ms. Vockins’s eye highlights her keen sense of humor, which has endeared her to many taxpayers over the years. “People used to come in to pay their taxes in person because they said I was entertaining,” said Ms. Vockins. “Even today I have people who come in and write out checks for hundreds of thousands of dollars because they like to pay right here in the office.”

“Mary lightens the mood in the tax office as well as the pain of having to pay,” said Town of Bedford Supervisor Lee Roberts. “She’s a Bedford institution who has worked over 50 years for the town. That’s a pretty long time in any profession. No one else has worked that long and that hard. It won’t be the same here without her.”

Ms. Roberts said she felt as though she has known Ms. Vockins forever.

“I remember walking through neighborhoods with Ms. Vockins at election time,” said Ms. Roberts. “Mary knows everyone in town.”

Who is the biggest taxpayer in Bedford?

“Don’t ever buy a dam in Cross River,” said Ms. Vockins. “New York City did, and they are our best customer and our biggest taxpayers. They pay us about \$1 million a year.”

Ms. Vockins ran for the post the first election year after her appointment. It was the only time she had a Democratic opponent. Over the years she became a household name in town, and you didn’t leave the voting booth without casting your ballot for Mary Vockins.

“I always got the most votes,” she said. “Even more than the other Republican candidates I was running with — like the town clerk, or the supervisor.”

The four-year term for receiver of taxes was recently changed from an elected post to an appointed one. Ms. Roberts said the change was part of the town’s streamlining effort to save money.

“When Mary leaves, that position, which is now an elected position, will become appointed,” said Ms. Roberts. “We will probably eliminate the receiver of taxes and move to a more automated system.” The position pays more than \$60,000.

“Mary is the institution within the institution,” said deputy supervisor Peter Chryssos.

“She has made what is otherwise a disagreeable position a very laughable one. A big part of the success of the town is how Mary relates to the situations in her office. She is a real asset, and we will miss her.”

“I’ve known Mary all my life,” said town clerk Boo Fumagalli. “Her brother was a neighbor of ours. She is a very rare woman, one of a kind. They don’t make them like that anymore. The thing I most treasure about Mary is her wonderful sense of humor, her

quick wit. She will always be able to bring a smile to anyone's face. She will be sorely missed, and I hope she comes back for a visit."

"We may hire Mary back on a temporary basis if needed," said Ms. Roberts, "but she has worked long and hard and is entitled to retire and have time to herself."

Ms. Vockins said she plans to stay in Katonah and volunteer her time at Caramoor and perhaps the Katonah Library.

About her long years working for the town she said, "They are very good to me. It's been a pleasure, it really has."