



The Lonely Villagers

Vermont in the Post Modern World*

by Frank Bryan

Prologue:

In the summer of 1969 a friend and I had driven up from Connecticut where I was in graduate school and were sitting on the back lawn of an abandoned farmhouse in North Pomfret watching the sun set over the White River Valley. The lawn was finely manicured. The house was neatly painted, the porches gray, the shutters green. The house, barn, the fences were in perfect condition. But did no one live here? We sat wishing together that people could be there to enjoy, as we were, the heavy scent of lilac in a late May twilight.

But then, suddenly, a light snapped on in the front room. That was more like it. We got up, thinking to apologize for our intrusion only to realize that a technological device had turned on the light automatically, perhaps to fend off prowlers. Some unseen, scientific gimmick had cut away at the loneliness, creating for the wrong reasons, an artificial warmth. Walking away down the country road, we looked back at the house, its light shining in the growing darkness. The little house looked happy. But we knew better.

Photo of East Corinth, Vermont by Barbara Doscher

*Based on a speech given at the Countryside Town Meeting at St. Michael's College, Winooski, Vermont, June 1982.



The Decline of Home Place

Like it or not, those who live in Vermont occupy the national homeland. "There is no more Yankee than Polynesian in me" said the historian Bernard DeVoto, "but when I go to Vermont I feel like I'm traveling toward my own place."

Yet Vermont the home place is vanishing like hillside frost under an October's morning sun. The markings are everywhere. We look for meandering country roads and find straight, glossy ones built not to countryside specifications but to national specifications. We look for pastured Jerseys and find "free stalls" shadowed by giant blue cylinders. We look for bounded villages, country stores, and neighbors. But the villages

have been extended, the country stores have been gentrified, and the neighbors are gone.

We are setting our schools apart from our communities. We are letting governance slip away from our town halls toward the state capital. We are closing the land to ordinary people to live on and work with. We are housing our poor in great tin and fiber glass ghettos. Will it be that a Morgan horse, a four-wheel drive vehicle, 10.1 acres of land, friends in New York or Boston, and a financial endowment are the prerequisites for life on the land in Vermont?

The Gods of the Valleys

Why? "The gods of the hills," Ethan Allen is reported to have said, "are not

the gods of the valleys." What we have done in Vermont is to embrace one very powerful god of the valley. It is the principal social-economic factor that has dominated Vermont for three decades and it is accompanied by an ethical spin-off. The factor is technology. The ethic is perfection.

Technology as such is not bad. What is bad is the application of urban technology to the countryside. It is not perfection itself that is bad. What is bad is the quest for ultimate perfection without regard to other competing values.

What has happened is relatively simple. Vermont is hamstrung by its own mythology. Newcomers and many Vermonters alike became committed to living a Currier and Ives print — to raising one's

own turkey for Thanksgiving, cutting one's own firewood, getting to know one's own neighbors, making one's own political decisions at town meeting. But butchering the turkey was messy, cutting the wood was dirty and time-consuming, the neighbors watched *Family Feud* on T.V. and owned a snowmobile, and the town's people voted down the kindergarten.

Last Stand of the Yankees

Winters are cold and lonely. Springs come late. There is cold rain in June and frost in August. Bugs eat tomatoes. Hogs break fences and root out gardens. The "Last Stand of the Yankees" is as Charles Morrissey says in his book, *Vermont: A History*, (required reading for any new migrant) a tough place indeed:

Many who have celebrated Vermont as a beautiful experience have afterwards turned to different subjects and life styles, as if coming to terms with Vermont were too hard a challenge for a sustained commitment. For many Vermonters life is a punishing, grueling ordeal of trying to scratch a living between a rock and a very hard place.

In order to fend off these realities we began to apply technologies of perfection to create a facade — a postcard image with no human need behind it. The homes and villages that were the framework of Currier and Ives were a product of culture. Too often the face of modern Vermont is a product of cosmetics — barn boards on houses; fences that hold nothing in.

We are doing something more serious yet, however. We are making life in the countryside palatable in spite of the land, in spite of the seasons, in spite of the temperature, in spite of the heaves and sighs of the working out of ecological dynamics. We have used the technologies of the valleys to protect us from the realities of the hills, to spin ourselves a technological cocoon and preserve a 68° lifestyle. Vermonters of the past lived with the land. Today we are more and more simply living on it. In a nutshell, instead of developing technologies appropriate to living with Vermont as it is, we are making Vermont appropriate to technologies developed elsewhere that will allow us to pretend a life of pastoral simplicity.

The Social Cost of Space

This development has especially serious implications for social technology. There is a connection I feel between the topography of a place and its social institutions. I lived two years in Montana, under a great white-blue canopy of sky and came to believe in the profound



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socializing effect of loneliness and distance, what others have called the "social cost of space." In Montana, where the distance between its southeastern and northwestern corners nearly matches the mileage between New York and Chicago, residents often live closer together than they do in Vermont. I call it enclave ruralism. Many people huddle together in cities and large towns in Montana because there are so few natural geographical settings for little communities.

But Vermont is naturally rural. It is a land of a thousand ups and downs. Charles Johnson in his splendid book, *The Nature of Vermont*, calls it "moderately grand, a softness over old ruggedness." Frank Smallwood of Dartmouth says it is "a patchwork quilt of pastures, meadows and small villages." This land of natural nooks and crannies

provides the perfect environment for decentralized communal living.

Yet we have given up communal living in the name of perfection — a perfection specified by modern, urban imperatives and values. Our schools were too "small." We made them bigger. Our roads were too "slow." We made them faster. Our governments were too "unwieldy." We made them efficient.

Life in "Systems" Vermont

The result is we are creating a life of administrative systems rather than human communities. We are destroying our neighborhoods and estranging ourselves from our neighbors. Now one's friends need not even be in the same town, to say nothing of next door. We live in one town and work in another. One may shop here and politic there, join a health club here and send the kids to school there.

All of this is dehumanizing because it tends to deny "complicated and dutiful" (as British author Jonathan Miller puts it) relationships. Linkages with other human beings only become human when they are multidimensional — complicated — not unidimensional and fragmented. When one parcels out one's relationships to a series of individuals — one to work with, another to play with, a third to buy from, a fourth to sell to, a fifth to educate the kids, a sixth to argue with — one dehumanizes existence. The best way to avoid this is to preserve small communities of neighbors in a relationship based on work and need.

And small communities of neighbors are natural to Vermont's topography. I contend, therefore, that our willingness to give up community life in favor of "system" life is a basic ecological insult, outdistancing in its implications for the countryside many more visible environmental travesties such as billboards or even dirty lakes or streams. What we are doing violates the essential character of the physical environment. Vermont's countryside spells "neighbor." Vermont's new society spells "system."

Lest one suppose that all this is but ivory tower speculation, one should remember that many noted sociologists of crime have argued that crime is often directly related to breakdowns in neighborhood life — where relationships are "dutiful." It may be more than a coincidence that rural crime is on the rise, so much so that it prompted Vermont's U.S. Senator Patrick Leahy recently to hold public hearings on the subject in Vermont.

Rebuilding the Homeland

What to do? I suggest three prescriptions.

First of all, we must decentralize and "democratize" technology (as Stavrianos says in his *The Promise of the Coming Dark Age*). Only by making technology comprehensible to ordinary people will ordinary people reject those technologies that are inappropriate to a continuation of their value sets. It has recently been argued, for instance, that the question of placing a high voltage power line in Vermont's Northeast Kingdom is "too complicated and technical" for Vermont's legislature to deal with. If this is true, democracy is lost. If this is true, there is little hope that ordinary people will be able to develop technologies of survival that are appropriate to small-scale neighborhood life. I doubt it's true.

Therefore, secondly, we must learn to be brighter than before, more disciplined and hard working. A new community life in rural America must not be viewed as a "going back." It must be understood to be what it is, a great challenge of ingenuity and skill. In order to become again rooted to place and neighbors — dependent on one another in communities of human scale — we must utilize the very most advanced technologies. Far from being a return to the past, far from being counter culturists to the present, we must be the cultural futurists and innovators of the 21st century. We must apply the tough mindedness of the "right" with the vision of the "left."

One great tragedy of the new left revolutionaries of the 1960s is that they said so much that was true but lacked the character to carry it out. There is no room for those who (quoting Karl Hess) say "oh wow" a lot. There is no room for those who believe that loving a row of corn is equivalent to weeding it.

Caring for the Earth

Finally, we must jettison the ethic of perfection.

The replacement for the perfection ethic ought to be the ethic of "husbandry." Vermonters must again become nurturers, growers, and harvesters. They must dig their hands into the soil and feel once more the pulse of the planet. Land cannot be protected unless it is worked, lived on, felt, tasted and loved. If we will do that, we will develop an ethical commitment to husbandry and nurturing — caring for the earth.

Only by becoming part of the environment will we be able to discern which technologies are, in fact, appropriate. Only through a healthy ethical commitment will we care enough to try to make the judgments and take the risks necessary for success. If we force ourselves to stay in touch with the working out of the seasons in the physical



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world. Vermont's mythology will crumble and from the ashes of that process reality might take over. Communities of human scale are only possible in the modern period if they are occupied by realists. Husbandry is the bridge to understanding and appreciating the reality of life in Vermont. Wendell Barry in his book *The Unsettling of America* puts it better than I.

I am talking about the idea that as many as possible should share in the ownership of the land and thus be bound to it by economic enterprise, by investment of love and work, by family loyalty, by memory and tradition. How much land this should be is a question and the answer will vary with geography... It proposes an economy of necessities rather than an economy based on anxiety, fantasy, luxury, and idle wishing. It proposes the independent, free standing

citizenry that Jefferson thought to be the surest safeguard of democratic liberty. And perhaps most important of all, it proposes an agriculture based upon intensive work, local energies, care, and long-living communities....

A Final Understanding

It must be understood that people, ordinary people, can be relied on to be stewards of the land. A great Vermonter once reacted strongly against the view that life on Vermont land that was typed "submarginal" was not worthy of living. They did not understand, said George Aiken, that there are other values that tie people to the land. In 1938 he said in his book *Speaking From Vermont*:

They asked us here in Vermont to agree that we would never again permit our hills to be occupied as homesteads and we told them 'No.' I hope the time will never come when the hills, submarginal land, or otherwise, will be closed to occupancy as homes.

What the countryside needs above all else is people, people in homes as Aiken wished in 1938, people with a stake in the land, people who need the land. Aiken has not abandoned these views. In June of this year, speaking at the dedication of a natural resource complex at the University of Vermont named in his honor, he again insisted that the concept of inhabitation and use be grafted to the idea of "natural resource." He said: "In my opinion natural resources mean not only the availability of materials to make a better life, but also good land to live on and good neighbors to enjoy it with."*

Some years ago the noted sociologist David Reisman wrote a book about loneliness in the city. He called it *The Lonely Crowd*. How bitterly ironic it would be if we in Vermont, surrounded by a natural habitat for togetherness and imbued with passionate desire for community, became lonely too. Lonely because we forgot that our greatest natural resource is ourselves; lonely because we lost touch with reality and learned to live amid the cosmetic trappings of a mythical world; lonely because we abandoned the greatest bond we have tying one to the other, the land on which we live; lonely finally because we forgot that neat little buildings with lights in the windows are lifeless if they are not, as Aiken said, occupied as homes.

Frank Bryan, assistant professor of political science, has taught at UVM since 1976. Dr. Bryan received his undergraduate degree from St. Michael's College and his graduate degrees from UVM and the University of Connecticut. His highly regarded book, Yankee Politics in Vermont, was published in 1974.

*See Vermont, Summer 1982, "George Aiken's Lasting Stewardship"