Part II: Under the Surface

Part II deepens the journey, digging beneath the surface of Vermont's bucolic image to explore labor wars, eugenics experiments, the McCarthy era, and progressive Republicanism. Covering over a century—from pre-Civil War to 2009—it chronicles the rise of unions and quarry work, Barre's Socialist Labor Party Hall, the marketing of Vermont, the state's reaction to New Deal policies, George Aiken's gentle populism, and Republican Ralph Flanders' heroic stand against Joe McCarthy during the Red Scare. Emigrés from urban areas, "back-to-the-landers" like Helen and Scott Nearing and filmmaker Nora Jacobson's father, Nicholas Jacobson, came to Vermont in search of an alternative lifestyle.

Old Vermont and New Vermont

By Tom Slayton

My first and most lasting impressions of Vermont were formed at the farm of my grandfather, Homer Kennedy, in North Duxbury. I spent my summers as a boy on that farm, and my experiences there were deep and lasting.

By today's standards, it wasn't much of a farm at all—three or four cows, a dozen or so sheep, an aging draft horse, two dogs, and a handful of chickens—one or two of which would migrate to the stewpot every summer. The farm's main cash crop was a two-acre field of wax beans that Grandpa Kennedy grew for the Demeritt Canning Company in Waterbury. The bean crop didn't produce much cash. But Grandpa sold a few quarts of milk here and there to his neighbors along the River Road, my grandmother, Mary Kennedy, grew a large vegetable garden, my Uncle Charles, who lived on the farm, hunted and fished and worked in the woods—and the Kennedys survived.

"Oh, he was a real old Vermonter," the head of the state Farm Bureau once said to me when we were talking about Homer Kennedy, "lived not so much on income as on lack of expense!" Grandpa, Grandma, and Uncle Charles squeaked out a living on that 200 acres alongside the Winooski River, and it was no play farm for them. They worked hard and had little, and knew both hardship and tragedy in their lives there. It can be easy to romanticize small Vermont farms; to forget the hard work and grinding poverty that often lies beneath the picturesque surface.

However, for two young boys, my younger brother Peter and myself, who showed up every summer, the North Duxbury farm was heaven on earth. It was our equivalent of summer camp. We ran like Indians though the pasture, caught frogs in the brook, fished and swam in the Winooski, and played with the two farm dogs, Jack, and Brownie. Each night, we slept the sleep of the just—and exhausted—on cornshuck mattresses in an upstairs bedroom, our way there lighted by kerosene lamps, because the old house had no electricity.

Once or twice every summer, my brother and I would help hay the lower meadow—though "help" is probably an incorrect term for the assistance offered by two little boys armed with pitchforks! We'd do our best to pitch the loose hay onto the load and at the end of the afternoon, we would climb atop the hay-laden wagon and sit atop the sweet-smelling, chaffy hay as Grandpa drove and Old Joe clip-clopped his way, slowly, meditatively, back to the barn.

The farm was a place of delight and adventure for us, but under the surface it was obsolete, an outmoded relic, even in the 1950s, when it seemed most idyllic. I once looked up the haying methods Grandpa used—horse-drawn cutter bar, horse-drawn hay rake and wagon, loose hay piled in twin mows in a simple English-style barn. They came straight from the 1880s and 1890s.

Grandpa simply would not modernize the farm or change with the times. And so today, the Kennedy farm is growing up to brush, the old farmhouse is long gone, and Grandpa, Grandma, Uncle Charles, the cows, Old Joe, and all the rest, the laughter and adventures included, are nothing but memories.

Nevertheless, the Kennedy farm imprinted itself deeply on my young mind. This was what Vermont was to me—a beautiful, rural place, rich with stories and hard-working, colorful people. Even though I have since learned that poverty is far from noble, and human life anywhere is always well-seasoned with tragedy and heartache, I still see the rural life as a good life and farming as a noble occupation.

Long after the farm was no longer a farm, the barn was collapsed, and the fields were filling with little trees, I would go and visit my Uncle Charles, who spent his last days there. Driving back from the farm, as I crossed the iron truss bridge from the River Road into Waterbury, I often had the distinct feeling that I was leaving one Vermont and crossing the Winooski into another, very different one.

The Kennedy Farm and the River Road epitomized Old Vermont—that complex, traditional Vermont that was rural, Republican, hard-working, stubbornly independent, and not all that prosperous. Once over the bridge, I entered downtown Waterbury with its spiffy restaurants, brewpubs, antique shops, art shows, and exercise studios: the pleasant and prosperous New Vermont.

The fact is that neither Old Vermont nor New Vermont are as good or as simple as our first, knee-jerk reactions would make them. Today's Vermont is a complex place, as was yesterday's Vermont. And the two are deeply related. Vermont has changed enormously in the last 50 years, and has become a functioning part of mainstream America. Just about everyone enjoys the New Vermont, even as we remain slightly nervous about its simple-minded, good-time prosperity. We are concerned, perhaps rightly so, about losing our birthright. But links to the values of Old Vermont remain, and help define us even today.

Today's Vermonters, like those of the past, value hard work and scorn idleness. They believe firm-

ly in their—and your—right to your own individual freedom and opinions, whether expressed in Town Meeting or at the local farmers' market. And, at the same time, they are, by habit and tradition, upholders of their local community.

Add to those elements a stubborn belief in human equality (most recently expressed in the state's leadership on civil unions and marriage rights for gay people), a genuine concern for the downtrodden, an abiding belief in frugality, and a heartfelt closeness to nature, and you have, even today, the basic components of the Vermont personality.

Not long ago, as I drove through the Mad River Valley, I saw numerous hand-lettered signs along the way. "Eat local squash," they urged. "Local food is the Best Food!" The fact that the locavore movement has its epicenter in Vermont is but one indication that Vermont's rural culture is still vital.

Likewise, you can see Vermont values in the state's courageous, hands-on recovery from Tropical Storm Irene, in the determination of a new generation of young farmers in the Mettowee Valley to make a go of dairy farming in that beautiful spot, in North Shrewsbury's ingenious use of a co-op structure to revitalize the historic Pierce's Store, and in the scattered but statewide resistance to huge wind turbines atop the Green Mountains.

All these and many more are examples of a rural culture that, although it is undeniably challenged by mass culture and mass values, lives on. Old Vermont is almost completely gone now. But there are echoes of the old Vermont in the similar values and attitudes that keep today's Vermont both distinctive—and to some degree, a place apart.

Tom Slayton is an author, editor, and commentator.
He was the editor of "Vermont Life" Magazine from 1986 to 2007.
He lives in Montpelier, Vermont.