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Dorothy Canfield Fisher's *Tourists Accommodated* and Her Other Promotions of Vermont

When Fisher promoted tourism in Vermont, it was with the hope that this new industry might provide help to educational and social needs.

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“**T**here’s a stream of gold running right past the door all summer long. All you’ve got to do is to have gimp enough to dip your spoons in and take out your share,” says Aunt Nancy Ann in *Tourists Accommodated*,¹ as she introduces the idea of taking in tourists to raise money for the educational expenses of her niece.

Tourists Accommodated is one of many plays that author Dorothy Canfield Fisher wrote for the local community stage in Arlington, Vermont, but the only one ever published for general distribution. According to her own account, it grew out of a discussion among neighbors about their experiences in taking in overnight the tourists that flowed up and down Vermont’s Route 7 in increasing numbers. The play was enormously popular in Arlington, where the players were “obliged to keep repeating it till we were worn out.”² To the astonishment of the rural originators, requests for copies of the play soon began to arrive from other Vermont towns, and then from communities farther away. As the author reports, “Just as our typewritten copies were wearing out entirely, there appeared on the scene the group of Vermonters known as ‘The Committee for the Conservation of Vermont Traditions and Ideals’”³ asking to have *Tourists Accommodated* published under their auspices by Harcourt Brace and Company.

The author’s original copyright is dated 1932, and the published edition appeared in 1934, in the depth of the great depression. Conditions were hard in Vermont as they were in the rest of America. Prices for

farm produce were down, other work was scarce, and money for education or other special needs was difficult to find. To add to a meager cash income, those Vermonters who lived along well-traveled routes began to offer meals or overnight lodging to automobile travelers. As the author observes, "This was a strange, revolutionary venture for reticent, solitary-minded New England mountain people,"⁴ and for these first "bed and breakfast" hosts the tourist trade turned out to be, as it has been ever since, a mixed blessing. *Tourists Accommodated* shows in dramatic detail the ambivalence felt by Vermonters then and still today toward the tourist industry, a business which drives the economy and supports many basic state programs, but at the same time exacts a considerable toll from its participants.

In the planning of the play, Fisher and her friends first gave their attention to "the ridiculous absurdities of the city-folks,"⁵ but the fair-minded planners went on to include a "nice city family . . . as nice as folks can be."⁶ Finally, with the realization that "we're just as ridiculous as anybody,"⁷ the planners insisted that local peculiarities be included as well. With these plans complete, Fisher took the raw material and created scenes and dialogue.

The play opens with a gloomy scene of realization that the finances of the Lyman family cannot support college expenses for Lucy who wants to become a teacher. Impatiently she exclaims,

I can't *bear* to give it up. 'Tisn't as if I wanted something for myself—like a fur coat or a lot of good clothes. When all you want is a chance, it isn't really for yourself you want it—It's so you can amount to more, get hold of what's inside you and bring it out where it'll do somebody some good. *That's* what education does for you, seems to me.⁸

To this outburst her mother can only answer, "It's not for lack of *wanting* to help you, Lucy."⁹

The solution is found when Aunt Nancy bursts in and suggests that they earn the needed funds by taking in tourists, as many of their neighbors are already doing. The family can sleep upstairs in the barn and give up their four bedrooms to overnight guests. With some misgivings they decide to try this, and the bed and breakfast business begins.

The tourists are given type names, Man, Woman, Boy, Silly Tourist, Pretentious Tourist, etc., and the first ones exhibit all the worst traits of travelers away from home. They make unreasonable requests, try to get extra food for nothing, and bargain to buy the old furniture in the kitchen, constantly treating the family as ignorant social inferiors. These difficult visitors are followed, however, by nice people who strike up a real friendship with their farm hosts.



Dorothy Canfield Fisher, no date. Vermont Historical Society.

A particularly objectionable character is the Pretentious Tourist, who observes with artificial good will, "I suppose we ought to make more of an effort to talk to these rustics. I know well enough their contact with city people in the summer is the only civilizing influence in their narrow lives."¹⁰

One tourist is especially eager to improve the lot of the poor Vermonters. After telling the family just how they ought to run their farm, he remarks impatiently, "Every farmer I've asked has told me he expects to give about a fortnight to his sugaring and no more. Now if they'd *keep at it!* Make sugar all the year around, they'd *get* somewhere."¹¹ Another visitor argues in favor of raising southern crops like sweet potatoes to improve the economy in Vermont.

While the absurdities of the tourists get primary attention in the play, local comic interest is supplied by deaf old Aunt Jane. She sits at one side of the stage throughout the action with her ear to the telephone and interrupts other characters from time to time to report what she is hearing on the party line.

At the end of the play, the Lyman family has earned enough money

to cover Lucy's college costs, while new furniture and a short wave radio for Aunt Jane show a general rise in the family's prosperity. The "Tourists Accommodated" sign is carried off to the attic, and in the general relief that their home is again theirs alone, Lucy's father remarks, "Well, I didn't get any year of book l'arning out of the summer. But I tell you, I know a hull lot more about human nater."¹²

Tourists Accommodated was not the first writing by Dorothy Canfield Fisher on the subject of Vermont tourism. Some years before the performance of the play a small pamphlet appeared with the title "An Open Letter to the Auto Tourists Stopping in the North District of Arlington." It was authored by Dorothy Canfield Fisher in her capacity as President of the Battenkill Woman's Club. Its premise is stated in the first sentence: "If you are not from New England, and especially if you are from the west or from a big city, you may be interested to know something about the sort of life led in this tiny corner of Vermont."¹³ The "letter" goes on to explain that "North District" refers to the school district north of the "Baker Bridge" with a picture of the old school building and the school as it is today. The interest this community might hold for tourists is that it is "typical of an old-time country district which has lived on with little change either of habits or inhabitants."¹⁴

A brief descriptive history tells of the events that have shaped the people of this valley. Then comes an interesting statement of a recent change in attitude of local people toward out-of-state visitors:

Up to a few years ago, most of us in this typical, remote farming community had had no contact at all with outsiders. The sight of a "stranger going by" brought us all to the front windows to stare and speculate about who it could be. We are bravely all over that! Strangers go by at the rate of about one a minute, all day long, every day of the season. At first we were alarmed by this, as we had read in the newspapers the most lurid accounts of how objectionable auto tourists were, how they robbed the farmer's fields and orchards, broke down his fences, set fire to his woods, and made fun of his wife's clothes. We didn't like the sound of all that, and prepared to draw into our shells, and lock them up tightly, a process that Yankees are good at.¹⁵

Admitting, however, that experience has proved these fears groundless, Fisher asserts, "The facts are that our experience of auto tourists has been entirely enjoyable and very profitable. . . . Life is pleasanter and more varied for us rooted-to-the-soil country women since auto travellers have begun to stop at our doors, and we are able to do more for our children's education and for the comfort of our homes with the extra money made in this way."¹⁶

The pamphlet concludes with a "personally conducted tour" and intro-

duction to the farms along the highway, and the statement that "we do not try to offer you more than the sort of clean, simple, decent country hospitality which is the natural outgrowth of our clean, simple decent country life." A postscript suggests to these potential tourists that "if you happen to have with you a book or two which you don't wish to keep, we will be glad to have you leave them as additions to our school library."¹⁷

When Fisher promoted tourism in Vermont, it was with the hope that this new industry might provide help to educational and social needs. Most of this help would not be as direct as the books to be donated to the Arlington school library. Rather it would, as Aunt Nancy suggests in *Tourists Accommodated*, be a chance for Vermonters to dip into the "stream of gold" running past their doors to supply funds for a variety of personal and community needs.

A deep knowledge of history informed Fisher's realization that one major source of Vermont cash income after another had withered and died over the centuries, only to be replaced by another and then another, and that the state might in the twentieth century be in just one more period of difficult transition. Tourism thus seemed to her an opportunity for the future.

Her promotion of Vermont tourism took three paths: direct invitations to an out-of-state audience, appeals to Vermonters, and the indirect promotion provided by her literary opus and many speaking engagements throughout America.

By the 1920s and 1930s Dorothy Canfield Fisher was a nationally known best-selling author of articles, short stories, and many books of both fiction and non-fiction. This reputation gave her an unusual opportunity to turn her considerable writing skills to the service of her home state.

An early direct contribution to bringing out-of-state people to Vermont is a pamphlet, published first in 1932, reprinted in 1934 and 1937, and reissued in a new format in 1941, entitled "Vermont Summer Homes," and finally included as an article in *Vermont Life* in 1949.¹⁸ The little brochure was aimed, not so much at the briefly vacationing tourist, but at those who might wish to establish a summer home in Vermont. Fisher here takes the visitor on a tour of a number of pictured Vermont houses to show how comfortable and attractive life in Vermont can be. It is a clear pitch also for the kind of neighbor she would like most to have in Vermont, and it is not at all surprising that her appeal is to professional people, who might buy a summer home to which they would later retire and become year-round residents. She was herself a scholar (Ph.D. in French from Columbia University) in addition to being a very suc-

cessful author. Within a few miles of the Fisher home in Arlington lived writers Robert Frost, Sarah Cleghorn, and Zephine Humphrey, and artist Norman Rockwell. Publishers Alfred Harcourt and Robert Haas had nearby summer homes. Other scholars, writers, and artists joined the community at various times, especially as refugees came from Europe in the period preceding and during the second world war. Many of these were directly sponsored by the Fishers.

In her recruitment of potential additions to this group of active-minded neighbors, Fisher could suggest that Vermont had an ideal "climate" for the pursuit of creative work. There is also a clear indication that this same "climate" is hostile to those who seek sophisticated or superficial sensual stimulation. The concern, so evident in *Tourists Accommodated*, that the tourists stopping briefly at Vermont farmhouses be "nice folks" extends with even greater specificity to those who might become permanent residents and neighbors.

In 1937 the Federal Writers Project of the Works Progress Administration for the State of Vermont published a volume on Vermont as part of the American Guide Series. This book was sponsored by the Vermont Planning Board. In addition to suggested tours of various parts of the state, it included an introductory section containing a number of essays. These cover topics ranging from geographical features through historical information to educational and recreational opportunities.

The first essay in this section is "Vermonters" by Dorothy Canfield Fisher. It begins with the following assumption and question:

A guide-book exists only, of course, for people who do not live in the region described. Presumably nobody who reads this book knows Vermonters. Are there, we wonder, as the volume goes to press, any general remarks about Vermont which might help visitors to understand, and hence better to enjoy their stay in our midst?¹⁹

After exploring the nature of Vermonters with a variety of anecdotes, the author suggests (with many reservations) the generalization that to those from more industrialized states a visit to Vermont is a trip into the American past. She stresses in her description the qualities that grow out of small political units and of a need for thrift, among them a habit of thinking of people in individual rather than mass terms, and the kind of good times that require neighborliness rather than wealth.

She warns visitors, however, that Vermonters will probably object to her generalization in every particular instance. While she is giving outsiders "a sort of master key to Vermont,"²⁰ it will be better "if you don't say too much to us about it."²¹ She does insist, nevertheless, that her "key" that Vermont still retains many practices and principles from an

earlier time will help visitors to Vermont to interpret correctly what they find there.

The essay was evidently not the only contribution made by its author to the volume, for in the preface by Dana Doten, State Director, Federal Writers' Project, we find this statement:

The share which Mrs. Dorothy Canfield Fisher . . . has had in the Guide is only partially indicated by her own essay, "Vermonters." She has taken an active interest in the work through all its stages, has been a steady friend and perceptive critic.²²

Two other essays by Mrs. Fisher also deserve mention because of their wide circulation. The first, with the title "Vermont: Our Rich Little Poor State," appeared on May 31, 1922, in *The Nation*. It was the fourth in a series entitled "These United States," whose aim was to "furnish an enlightening perspective of the America of today in the somewhat arbitrary terms of politico-geographic boundaries, and . . . be a valuable contribution to the new literature of national self-analysis."²³ The first three articles in the series were on Kansas by William Allen White, on Maryland by H. L. Mencken, and on Mississippi by Beulah Amidon Ratliff.

More than thirty years later, in 1956, Fisher appended this note to a revised copy of the essay as she gave it to the University of Vermont:

This essay was written many years ago and was, I think, the first statement I ever made about the color of life in Vermont. It has been used in several anthologies and now, March 1956, was revised at the request of the Liveright Publishing Co.²⁴

She begins her essay with a whimsical personification of the characteristics of various states, identifying New York as "a glowing queenly creature, with a gold crown on her head and a flowing purple velvet cloak." Louisiana's face is "dark eyed, fascinating, temperamental," while "Massachusetts is a man, a serious, middle-aged man, with a hard conscientious intelligent face, and hair thinned by intellectual application."²⁵ Turning to Vermont, she says:

The little group of mountaineers who know the physiognomy of Vermont from having grown up with it have the most crabbed, obstinate affection and respect for their State, which they see as a tall, powerful man, with thick gray hair, rough out-door clothes, a sinewy ax-man's hand and arm, a humorous, candid, shrewd mouth and a weather-beaten face from which look out the most quietly fearless eyes ever set in any man's head. They know there is little money in the pockets of that woodman's coat, but there is strength in the long, corded arm, an un-hurried sense of fun lies behind the ironic glint in the eyes, and the life animating all the quaint, strong, unspoiled personality is tintured

to its last fiber by an unenvious satisfaction with plain ways which is quite literally worth a million dollars to any possessor. Not to envy other people is an inheritance rich enough; but Vermont adds to that treasure the greater one of not being afraid.²⁶

Fisher goes on to elaborate on the Vermonter's lack of fear. "What are some of the things that other people fear?" she asks. Her list begins with the fear of being poor, something the Vermonter does not fear "because he is already poor and has been for a hundred and fifty years." Next comes the fear of not keeping one's place on the social ladder, irrelevant in a state that deliberately chooses not to recognize purely social distinctions. The fear of hard times also holds no terrors for the Vermonter, who is insulated by long experience in coping with difficult living conditions. The worry about what to do with accumulated wealth is also of little importance to those who have sufficient but not extra possessions. The list ends with politics, "perhaps what Vermont is least afraid of, and what other people fear and hate most."²⁷ The reason that Vermonters do not fear politics is because they are part of it. They do their own governing and make their own decisions in town meetings. They are not part of a great mob, controlled by a few distant decision-making representatives.

Fisher sees the strength of Vermonters in her day as a direct inheritance from their Vermont ancestors, and so she puts in a brief account of historical events in the struggle between Vermont and New York and the part played in that struggle by Ethan Allen and the Green Mountain Boys. This heritage, she asserts, has shaped the residents of Vermont of today, and is one on which they can rest with pride. Their ancestors "stood steady in a whirling, shifting world, and proved to their own satisfaction that to stand steady is not an impossible task."²⁸ With the support of this tradition, the early Vermonters' cultural descendants can "with a tranquil heart read the news of the modern world and the frightened guessing of other folks at what is coming next!"²⁹

The other article, which appeared in *Holiday Magazine* in November 1949, was written for the tourist who might be coming to Vermont for the first time. What will the visitor see? The first thing is the scenery, a resemblance to scenic areas in other parts of the world, perhaps the Lake Country of England or the Vosges in France. Another is a pervasive orderliness, called by Mencken the "old-maidish neatness" of Vermont villages and the small number of mansions so large that it requires a staff of servants to maintain them.³⁰

Against this background stand the people, experienced by some as "sharp-spoken, unaccommodating, with a remarkably well-developed gift for being disagreeable," by others as "Americans with time to be kind, to be aware in the old neighborly way of the existence of other human

beings in the same world with them.”³¹ As in her other essays on Vermont and Vermonters, Fisher here again bases her explanation of the character of present day Vermonters on their historical heritage. The fact that indentured servants were unknown in Vermont, that people did their own work with the help of hired people they treated as social equals, contributes to the reluctance of Vermonters of today to be treated by wealthy outsiders as servants. A tradition of neighborliness, however, means that the typical Vermonter today will help a stranded traveler and refuse payment for his assistance, often with the standard phrase, “Might have happened to me.”³²

“Silent acquiescence of the inevitability of change”³³ is another Vermont quality that Fisher believes has been developed through historical experience. Political changes, territorial expansion, and new technologies have made the former cash sources of potash, wool, and textile production leave Vermont. Now farming is a threatened occupation, and tourism could be the immediate economic relief of the future.

To the potential tourists who will be the readers of her article in a nationally circulated travel magazine like *Holiday*, she issues this warning: “If you assume the manner of those who think the people who make beds and fry eggs are not as good as you, they’ll heartily hope you will move on, and a good long way, too.” Instead visitors need to remember that “everybody in sight is as human as you are, and recognizes you for being as human as he is.”³⁴ Then a warm welcome in Vermont will be assured.

While Dorothy Canfield Fisher wrote from Arlington, Vermont, for the many who lived outside the state and might someday visit it, at home she urged fellow Vermonters to use more effectively their potential for attracting tourists. In an interview reported in a Burlington *Free Press* clipping from 1937³⁵ Fisher suggests that Vermonters look to Switzerland as the model of a well organized tourist industry. On the premise that in Vermont, as in Switzerland, scenery is one of the most marketable assets, she sees a need to use it to bring needed economic relief to the state. Without an intelligent use of such resources she sees a danger that the standard of living and social and educational services will slip backward, especially in isolated rural areas.

Her own life prepared Dorothy Canfield Fisher to combine the insider and outsider views of Vermont. While growing up she spent winters in places as diverse as Kansas, Nebraska, Ohio, New York City, and Paris. Summers, however, found her almost always in Vermont, visiting grandparents and other relatives in Arlington. Though not literally a native, she always thought of herself as a Vermonter, and was locally regarded as one because of her family connections and participation in local affairs.

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In the outside world, however, the length of her sojourns in various places allowed her to get to know people well and to understand their values and interests. Thus she had a foot planted firmly both inside and outside Vermont and was unusually well qualified to speak for her chosen home to the world outside. In fictional as well as directly promotional works a comparison of Vermont ways with those of other parts of the world runs through many of her writings.

Her first collection of short stories, *Hillsboro People* (1915), is set in an imaginary Vermont village. The introduction to this volume is an explanation and defense of the relocation of Dorothy and her husband John Fisher from New York City to Arlington, Vermont, a move that had stirred a chorus of protest from their sophisticated urban friends. In her own defense Fisher explains the dramatic tension inherent in local events when the observer has full knowledge of the characters and circumstances involved. She sees her "Hillsboro" as a microcosm representing a much more general human scene, and her Vermonter a modern day "everyman." The short stories of the collection are examples of basic human problems as they occur in a Vermont setting.

Only her last novels, *Bonfire* (1933) and *Seasoned Timber* (1939), are set entirely in Vermont, and the picture they give of life in a small Vermont village is a realistic mixture of good and bad human qualities. Four earlier books begin outside the state and conclude in a Vermont village. To this group belong the novels *The Bent Twig* (1915), *Understood Betsy* (1917), *The Brimming Cup* (1921), and *Rough-Hewn* (1922). The novels with such a dual setting show rural Vermont as an ideal place in comparison with midwest cities, Europe, or eastern American suburbs. Dorothy Canfield Fisher is generally regarded as a Vermont author, but five of her eleven full-length novels are set entirely outside Vermont, one in Europe, one in both France and upstate New York, and three in midwest America.

There are just two Vermont books among the many non-fictional volumes written and published by Dorothy Canfield Fisher. *Memories of Arlington, Vermont* (1957) is a collection of sketches of people and events from the past and present. In charming detail we meet characters of historical significance and ordinary and extraordinary private citizens who in some way have contributed to the community. A number of the vignettes were first published in 1955 by the local historical society as *Memories of My Home Town*. This book sold out almost immediately, but was issued in an expanded edition in 1957 by Duell, Sloan and Pearce as part of their series of home town memories from around the country, and was given the new title *Memories of Arlington, Vermont*.

Vermont Tradition, The Biography of an Outlook on Life began in 1938

with a request from the publisher Little, Brown and Company for a book about Vermont. However, many other matters intervened, and it was 1953 when this last major work by Mrs. Fisher appeared. The writing of it was costly in time and energy, but the mature wisdom of the author, then past seventy, combined with serious research and the skill of the novelist produced a remarkable book. It is indeed, as the subtitle suggests, a detailed study of the history of Vermont as a tool for explaining how present day Vermonters look at life.

In many of the directly promotional articles in support of Vermont tourism, Fisher had touched on parts of Vermont history that explain peculiarities of contemporary Vermonters. *Vermont Tradition* expands the same theme into a full and detailed report and analysis. The result is a hybrid, a history that reads like a novel—so much so that even the author feared that readers would think her narrative a product of her imagination and included a factual reference section at the end of the book. Just how many tourists were attracted to Vermont by *Vermont Tradition* it is impossible to know. This is, however, one of the most important books written about Vermont and one that no one interested in the history or the character of the state can afford to ignore.

Did Fisher present an unrealistic, idealized Vermont in her writings, as some critics would suggest? No doubt she stressed the positive aspects of the state in her directly promotional writings, as she tried to bring visitors to Vermont to support its economic needs. This was only to be expected from a loyal Vermonter. A more balanced picture of the Vermont scene appears, however, in her serious writing, fiction and non-fiction. Her novels *Bonfire* and *Seasoned Timber* and a number of her shorter narratives show a clear-eyed realization that the Vermont village is sometimes narrow and repressive, especially to artistic personalities. In *Vermont Tradition* she again expresses her conviction that Vermont is not the best place for everyone, not the right social climate for the growth of some personalities. In *Vermont Tradition* she quotes the folk phrase, "Peaches and pomegranates do not, you see, grow on apple trees, but apples do."³⁶

In sum, Dorothy Canfield Fisher promoted Vermont tourism directly through appeals to travelers and exhortations directed to her fellow Vermonters. She also showed Vermont in her fiction and non-fiction. But there was one more way that she introduced Vermont to a wide audience, and that was through herself. Wherever she went (she traveled widely), and whenever she mounted a platform to give an address (she was a much sought-after speaker), she brought Vermont with her. Dorothy Canfield Fisher loved and promoted Vermont because its history was her heritage, its standards were her rule of life, and its outlook was her own.

NOTES

- ¹ Dorothy Canfield Fisher, *Tourists Accommodated, A Play* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1934), 17.
- ² *Ibid.*, 9.
- ³ *Ibid.*
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, 1.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, 4.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, 16.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 41.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, 64.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, 89-90.
- ¹³ Dorothy Canfield Fisher, *An Open Letter to the Auto Tourist Stopping in the North District of Arlington*, in Special Collections, Bailey-Howe Library, University of Vermont.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁸ Dorothy Canfield Fisher, *Vermont Summer Homes*, in the archives of the Martha Canfield Library, Arlington, Vermont.
- ¹⁹ Dorothy Canfield Fisher, "Vermonters," *Vermont: A Guide to the Green Mountain State* (Cambridge, MA: The Riverside Press, 1937), 3.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, 9.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*
- ²² *Ibid.*, x.
- ²³ Dorothy Canfield Fisher, "Vermont: Our Rich Little Poor State," *The Nation* (May 31, 1922): 643.
- ²⁴ Dorothy Canfield Fisher, "Vermont," in Special Collections, Bailey-Howe Library, University of Vermont.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*
- ³⁰ Dorothy Canfield Fisher, "Vermont," *Holiday* (November 1949), typescript in Special Collections, Bailey-Howe Library, University of Vermont.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*
- ³² *Ibid.*
- ³³ *Ibid.*
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*
- ³⁵ In the archives of the Martha Canfield Library, Arlington, Vermont.
- ³⁶ Dorothy Canfield Fisher, *Vermont Tradition* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1953), 392.