

Story by Jackie Calder and Amanda Gustin/Photos courtesy of the Vermont Historical Society



## VERMONT HISTORY

# Counterculture in 1970s Vermont

*The 1970s brought an influx of young newcomers with new ideas to the Green Mountains.*

**Y**OU DON'T HAVE TO LOOK too hard, or talk too long, to find that many people in Vermont today are still divided on the changes that occurred in the state in the 1970s. Many people believe that the '70s were a deeply controversial time, and that the influx of new people ruined the state forever. Others believe that these newcomers, who brought invigorating ideas, politics, and social mores to a state that had been in serious decline, saved the state. What we know for sure is that the state was changed forever as the baby boomers, from Vermont and from away, exerted their political, cultural, and social influence for the next generation. After two years of research and collecting, the Vermont Historical Society will be presenting a series of programs about the 1970s; in particular, stories and items relating to the counterculture movement and its long-term influence on Vermont.

For a century, Vermont had been a conservative bastion, a Republican stronghold, but the 1960s saw the election of Democrat Phil Hoff to the governor's office and the reapportionment of the state legislature. The new state legislature was weighted toward urban areas, more dense-

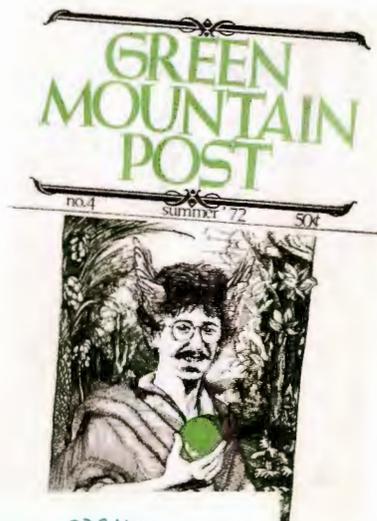
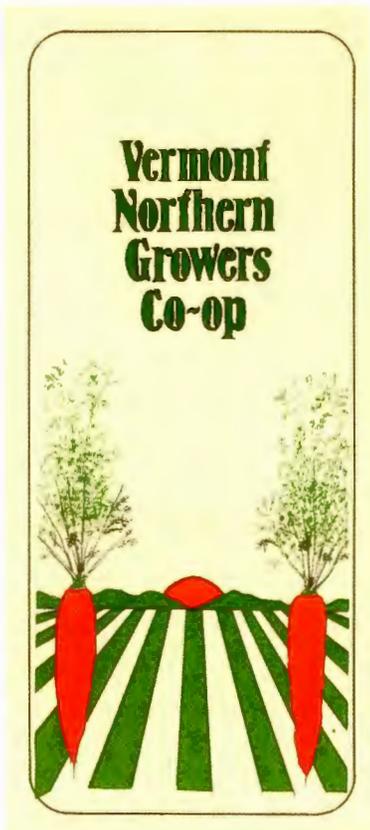


PHOTO BY HELECA LEMOFF, VHS COLLECTION

Residents gardening at the Pike Falls community in Jamaica. Most such collectives and communities were gone by the mid-1970s but were the genesis of the back-to-the-land movement.



Out of the work of the young newcomers—cheesemaking, organic farming, and other pursuits—came the creation of the first food cooperatives and open-air farmers' markets, such as this one set up in the '70s on a Montpelier street corner.



Clockwise from left: A brochure from the Vermont Northern Growers Co-op started in the 1970s by a group of vegetable farmers. *Green Mountain Post* magazine produced by the Monteverdi Artist Collective, included members of the Packer Corner commune. T-shirt design, Natural Organic Farmers Association (now Northeast Organic Farming Association) from the 1970s.

ly populated and leaning more to the left. In 1970, the population of Vermont stood at 444,732. By 1980, it had increased by more than 65,000 to 511,456. That change, an increase of 15 percent, was the largest increase in Vermont's population since the days after the Revolutionary War. What's more, 57 percent of that increase, a bit less than 40,000 people, came from people moving here from out of state. The majority of that population increase was in Chittenden County, as new industries and employers—IBM chief among them—expanded and hired skilled workers. Two other demographic facts about the 1970s are of note: The median age in the United States was 27, and for the first time 18-year-olds were able to vote.

The most visible new Vermonters were the "hippies," a derogatory term applied to the growing number of young people, often pictured as men with long hair and beards and women with long hair, long skirts or jeans and peasant shirts, usually barefoot. By the mid-1970s, that look became a fashion statement as much as an indication of one's political views. They were stereotyped as dirty, lazy, morally decadent, and a drain on social services—particularly food stamps, which saw major changes in the early 1970s, including the introduction of accountability measures.

A few counterculture activists had left urban centers and began settling in Vermont by the late 1960s. A growing number of Vermonters became concerned that these "hippies" would overrun the state, and this fear escalated in 1971 with the widespread rumor that more than 50,000 of them would be invading the state that summer with a plan to take over. Governor Deane Davis received so many letters expressing concern that he finally had to issue a press release trying to allay those fears. "It has become apparent that speculation about the so-called 'Hippie influx' this summer is causing mounting concern around the state," he began, and concluded that "Like most people, the bulk of the young transients go about their business in a self-sufficient, peaceful manner, although their habits and appearance may not be to our taste." Ultimately, nothing like 50,000 people traveled to Vermont that summer.

Some of the newcomers lived in communes and collectives that sprouted up all over the state. Most were started as short-lived experiments in the early '70s and

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Bread and Puppet's *Domestic Resurrection Circus* performance at Cate Farm in Calais, when they were artists-in-residence at Goddard College during the early 1970s.

had disbanded by the middle of the decade. They usually consisted of a core group that averaged 10 to 30 people, which would sometimes expand during the warm summer months or during a special event. The impulses behind their formations were varied. Some were radically political collectives like Red Clover in Putney and Mount Philo in Ferrisburgh with organized goals and activities, particularly those aligned with the "Free Vermont" movement. Commune and collective members who talked about practical actions they could undertake to help create the society that they envisioned started Free Vermont as an outgrowth of discussions. Some of their activities resulted in a collective school, food cooperatives, a free garden, a free garage, free health clinics, and a cooperative restaurant. Others, disillusioned by the violence of the 1960s, just wanted to "drop out" and create their own self-sustaining society and culture that rejected the perceived ills of society at large.

Many of those communes epitomized the "back-to-the-land" narrative and focused on subsistence farming like Earthworks in Franklin and Frog Run Farm in West Charleston. Some were religious retreats such as Tail of the Tiger in Barnet, and some like Packers Corner in Guilford were known for their writing. Mad Brook Farm in East Charleston had well-known dancers, musicians, and craftspeople. Two, Johnson's Pasture and Earth People's Park, became notorious because of their large size and chaotic nature, but they were not representative of the majority of communities. These communes were the most visible and prominent example of the counterculture movements in the state, but they were very much the tip of the iceberg.



Members of the French Hill commune of St. Albans raising posts and beams during construction of their Big House in 1971. Vermont farms had been fading away for a generation and many of the newcomers sought a return to a rural, self-sufficient lifestyle via agriculture.



Robert Houriet and his daughter Susan, taken in the early 1970s at Frog Run Farm. In addition to helping to start the Frog Run Farm commune and another, Robert was instrumental helping to organize the Northeast Organic Farming Association.

Many people were politically aligned with the counterculture, although not necessarily communards, and moved to the country to live their ideals on a smaller scale. Vermont farms had been fading into the landscape for a generation, and this new wave of back-to-the-landers purchased old farmhouses and barns to live anti-consumerist, self-sufficient lives. They raised families and livestock, experimented with traditional tools, and developed deep connections to the older generations of Vermonters in their new communities. Some developed small businesses based on the skills they had learned—cheesemaking, letterpress printing, timber framing, and other often-lost skills very much in demand. Out of their work came Vermont's support for organic farming and the creation and development of food cooperatives and farmers' markets. The Northeast Organic Farming Association (NOFA) was founded in 1971 to organize organic farmers and to provide a strong link and steady supply of healthy food to the new co-ops and markets.

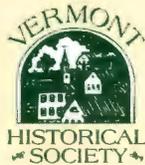
Other politically active groups were on Vermont's college campuses, particularly Goddard in Plainfield, where newcomers and natives both participated in political dissent—especially after the shootings at Kent State in May 1970. Several colleges and universities—UVM, Middlebury, Goddard, and Marlboro among them—briefly closed due to student strikes. Other ideas that gained broad-based support in Vermont over time include the anti-nuclear movement, alternative energy, women's rights, gay rights, and land and water conservation. Free health clinics opened in Burlington and Brattleboro, and important laws such as “the Tooth Fairy” bill, providing dental care to Vermont children, were passed.

Many companies in Vermont with counterculture roots can be

# Freaks, Radicals, & Hippies

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traced directly back to the 1970s. These include Ben & Jerry's ice cream, stove maker Vermont Castings, and wind turbine manufacturer Northern Wind Power. Llama, Toucan & Crow, a natural food distributor in Brattleboro founded in the mid-1970s, was the predecessor of Stow Mills. Black River Produce started in the late 1970s as the Black River Market in Ludlow, selling local produce and natural food products.

By the mid-1970s, after the publications of the Pentagon Papers, Watergate, and the resignation of President Nixon, many in the U.S. and Vermont began to share the counterculture protesters' distrust of the government and become more accepting of them and some of their ideas. Many of the people who came to Vermont in the 1970s stayed and became teachers, social workers, psychologists, psychiatrists, doctors, herbalists, farmers, carpenters, craftsmen, politicians, businesspeople, government workers, and perhaps most important, involved caring members of their communities. The story about 50,000 invading hippies may have been an exaggeration, but those who did come throughout the decade of the 1970s changed the state forever. ▮



Governor Deane Davis received so many letters in the summer of '71 expressing concern about the so-called "hippie influx" that he issued a press release trying to allay those fears. "Like most people, the bulk of the young transients go about their business in a self-sufficient, peaceful manner, although their habits and appearance may not be to our taste," he observed. Ultimately, nothing like 50,000 people traveled to Vermont that summer.

Jackie Calder is curator of the Vermont Historical Society; Amanda Gustin is the society's public program coordinator.

## JUST THE FACTS

The exhibition *Freaks, Radicals, and Hippies: Counterculture in 1970s Vermont* opened at the Vermont History Center in Barre on Saturday, September 24, 2016. The counterculture archive created as part of this project, which includes oral histories, artwork, objects, photographs, and documents, will be accessible to researchers as part of the permanent collection of the Vermont Historical Society. Funding for this project was made possible by a grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services.

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