

IN THIS ISSUE

BOOK REVIEWS

CAROL KAMMEN, *On Doing Local History*. Deborah P. Clifford 229

PAUL B. FREDERIC, *Canning Gold: North New England's Sweet Corn Industry, a Historical Geography*. Sandra L. Oliver 230

SAMUEL B. HAND, *The Star That Set: The Vermont Republican Party, 1854–1974*. Travis Beal Jacobs 232

NANCY PRICE GRAFF, *Looking Back at Vermont: Farm Security Administration Photographs, 1936–1942*. Allen F. Davis 235

THOMAS C. DAVIS, *Out from Depot Square: Central Vermont Memories from the 1930s to the 1950s*. Richard Hathaway 238

BOOK REVIEWS



On Doing Local History

By Carol Kammen, 2nd edition (Walnut Creek, Calif.: AltaMira Press, 2003, pp. 189, \$70.00, paper \$24.95).

Whether you are a writer, a teacher, or the director of a historical society or museum, every person working in the field of local history should read *On Doing Local History*. For those familiar with the first edition, published in 1986, this revised version contains a lot of new material. Not only does Kammen chronicle changes in the field of local history that have taken place in the interim, she also displays a deepening of her own knowledge and understanding of history, particularly local history, which she writes and teaches about extensively.

While *On Doing Local History* is certainly a practical guide that takes the researcher and writer through the necessary steps for communicating local history to the public, it is much more than a manual. As Terry Barnhart notes in the foreword, this book “also probes deeply into the questions involved in presenting the past to public audiences and into what history at the grass roots ultimately means for communities and individuals” (xi). Kammen herself states that her primary purpose is “to identify problems that are particular to the field of local history and to open discussion of them” (7).

The book begins with an historical overview, starting with the Centennial boom in local history writing in the 1870s, through the ups and downs that followed to the present day. While Kammen applauds contemporary local historians for widening the scope of community history to include topics that their Victorian predecessors carefully avoided, she nonetheless faults modern practitioners of the craft for their own omissions and biases.

It is essential, Kammen tells her readers, for historians to remember

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that the past itself is a given that does not change. What do change are our ideas and questions about the past, which are in a constant state of flux. Recorded history is, she tells us, “what happens in the mind of the historian” (51). The documents we use “can reveal to us only what they are designed to record.” It is up to the local historian to form questions that will unveil a more complete, complex, and often a more interesting picture of the past (94).

Throughout this book Kammen stresses a number of do’s and don’ts for the practitioners of local history. These include: the importance of thorough and extensive research; placing your history in a regional and national context; and including negative happenings in your history, such as outmigration, labor conflicts, and economic downturns. At the same time Kammen warns local historians against ignoring the contradictions found in the course of their research or censoring material that doesn’t fit their preconceived ideas.

The one quibble I have with this wonderful book is that Kammen’s suspicion of folklore as a valid local history source is overstated. While she is rightfully critical of an unquestioning acceptance of myth as the truth, and concedes that folk tales are important for telling us what people believe to be true, she overlooks the fact that much valuable historical material is contained in those stories that have been passed down orally from one generation to the next. Folklore, after all, has been the traditional way of recalling the customs, beliefs, and traditions of our forebears, and these accounts, which tell us so much about the culture of bygone times cannot be too easily dismissed.

This one criticism aside, if you have to own one local history manual, *On Doing Local History* is the one to buy.

DEBORAH P. CLIFFORD

Deborah P. Clifford, historian and biographer, is the author of The Passion of Abby Hemenway: Memory, Spirit, and the Making of History, published by the Vermont Historical Society in 2001.

Canning Gold: North New England’s Sweet Corn Industry, a Historical Geography

By Paul B. Frederic (Lanham, New York, & Oxford: University Press of America, 2002, pp. 223, \$60.00).

Growing up in the town of Starks, Maine, Paul Frederic saw the very last days of the sweet corn canning business and even participated

in it, growing sweet corn as a 4-H project, driving corn to a corn shop for canning, and listening to the grown-ups talk about the corn shop glory days before he was born. As a student of geography in college, Frederic saw the potential of examining Northern New England's corn-canning industry and in 1968 turned the project into a master's thesis. This thesis, nicely rounded out with oral history and additional information about the fate of the old corn shops, comprises this slender volume.

Frederic makes some excellent points about the nexus of agriculture with the industry, marketing, and distribution of food. By examining everything from soils to seed corn to labor, he shows how the pressure for profitability controls what the consumer eats, how the farmer makes a livelihood, and how our shared landscape changes. While this particular work is about the sweet corn business in Northern New England, it could just as well have been written about asparagus, peas, or green beans in any other region of the country. Surely the general issues of developing toothsome, prolific plants that have the additional virtue of ripening at once, resisting disease, and tolerating the canning process are not unique to sweet corn; nor are the constant tinkering and inventing, patenting, and manufacturing of machinery ideally suited to removing husks, plucking kernels, cutting stalks, or making, sealing, and heating cans. Surely, too, the prospect of cash income in exchange for long, sometimes relentless hours more in tune with the rhythm of a harvest and the pulse of a production line than the internal clocks of human beings, must have had appeal anywhere vegetables were grown for packing and shipping until other kinds of paying work took labor off farms and into cities, leaving the cannery jobs to housewives, high schoolers, and semi-retired old timers.

In Northern New England—Vermont, New Hampshire, but particularly Maine—the sweet corn industry created a product known for high quality for most of its 100 years of existence. Frederic traces the history of sweet corn from antiquity. He then unfolds the history of the canneries from their beginnings in the 1840s and gradual spread throughout the North Country into the late 1870s. For a fifty-year period between 1880 and 1930, the sweet corn industry thrived, both shaping and being shaped by consumer demand, technological innovation, and changes in agricultural methods. Farmers and packers both sought control over prices of sweet corn; farm communities sought corn shops of their own; and all during the era, powerful competition was gradually building in the West as sweet corn was grown and canned in Illinois, Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, and other Midwestern and Western states. Between 1930 and the closing of the last corn shop in 1968, the sweet corn industry saw a steady decline. Though Maine continued to grow and pack a higher-

quality canned corn than was produced outside the region, the more economically produced western corn captured the market, and fewer and fewer towns had corn shops and corn shop jobs.

Frederic's work contains great detail. Graphs, charts, and tables demonstrate everything from the changes in the price of corn in the husk over a forty-five-year period, to the flow of corn through a cannery, to percentages of farms growing sweet corn. Evocative photos show corn shops and their employees, various stages of corn moving along the production line, and handsome can labels. Histories of canning companies, case studies of corn-shop towns, and detailed descriptions of farm operations are also included. Marvelous human stories gleaned from oral histories and reminiscences recapture the meaning and importance of a corn shop to the towns that hosted them and the people who worked in them.

Historical geographers will find *Canning Gold* a fine analysis of the top-to-bottom effect of one agricultural product on the physical environment and cultural landscape. For the rest of us, the book will provide an education in the manipulation of agricultural products for their adaptability to industrialization, and as Frederic points out, the consistent pressure of globalization and its effect on the food supply. Frederic brings close to home what happens when large economic forces roll over communities; it is one thing to read about the North American Free Trade Agreement, and to see South American fruits and vegetables in the grocery store, but it is a whole other thing to understand the impact of those developments on individual lives.

SANDRA L. OLIVER

Sandra L. Oliver is a food historian in Islesboro, Maine, the author of Salt-water Foodways: New Englanders and Their Foods at Sea and Ashore in the 19th Century, and the publisher and editor of Food History News (www.foodhistorynews.com).

The Star That Set: The Vermont Republican Party, 1854–1974

By Samuel B. Hand (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2002, pp. 353, \$85.00, paper, \$24.95).

Sam Hand, the dean of Vermont's historians, has directed his attention to Vermonters who for over a century "never failed to elect Republicans to all its state and national offices" and "returned a slate of electors

pledged to the Republican presidential nominee.” In *The Star That Set: The Vermont Republican Party, 1854–1974*, Hand embraces the daunting challenge of examining “that remarkable century of political hegemony.” Not only politics but religion, demographics, social institutions, personalities, and the state’s folkways also contributed to the Republican Party’s strength. Scholars and those interested in Vermont’s past have eagerly awaited this important book, and they will not be disappointed.

Vermont’s early antislavery stance prompted its residents in the 1850s to oppose the extension of slavery and propelled them into the Republican camp. They “cast aside former allegiances,” restructured “the state’s political topography,” and launched “a vaunted Vermont tradition.” During the Civil War, “Republicans forged antislavery with pro-union fervor” and in 1862 their gubernatorial candidate received “over 88 percent of the popular vote.” In the late nineteenth century Justin Smith Morrill and George Edmunds constituted the U.S. Senate’s “most enduring and arguably most powerful state delegation.” The Proctor, Fairbanks, Smith, and Prouty families, meanwhile, gained pre-eminence, while the Mountain Rule stabilized political succession and proposed an “inviolable” single two-year term for governor. Hand perceptively discusses “the massive emigration” that “inevitably skewed demographic trends,” election statistics, and the rhetoric about towns and local autonomy—the “Little Republics”—that “obscured the increasing subordination and diminution of town government to state authority” because of growing rural poverty.

In 1902 the Republicans, in “a harbinger of political ferment,” failed for the first time in a statewide election to win a popular majority, because of party dissidents, and the General Assembly selected the governor. In 1912 another party schism sent the election to the legislature; moreover, President William H. Taft preserved the state’s “unblemished record of Republican loyalty” by only 1,000 votes. While women’s suffrage had made little progress in Vermont, after the Nineteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution Republican candidates “capitalized upon woman voters,” whose registration soon nearly equaled that of men. By the 1920s Republicans “boasted of the ‘dawn of a new Vermont.’” Governors employed “business precepts” to promote reorganization and consolidation while paying “homage to local control.”

The 1927 flood forced the state to seek federal aid—Governor John Weeks’s ensuing reelection ended the one-term Mountain Rule—and the Great Depression compounded financial problems and agricultural decline. Vermonters welcomed federal aid, especially Works Progress Administration projects and the Civilian Conservation Corps camps, but “not all federal aid would be welcomed.” The Old Guard, led by Senator Warren Austin, resisted the New Deal, while progressive George

Aiken, whose opposition to federal plans for flood control and submarginal lands enhanced his reputation, challenged the Republican organization. In 1940 Aiken successfully won a Senate seat, after a primary setting “the Vermont standard for bitterness, rancor and divisiveness.” In 1946 his protégé Ernest Gibson, Jr., a WWII hero, defeated incumbent Governor Mortimer Proctor in an unprecedented party challenge.

The rift continued. In 1954, after another nasty primary, Vermont elected the nation’s first woman lieutenant governor, Consuelo Northrop Bailey. Though Vermont remained “a virtual one-party system,” Republican disarray cost them their first statewide election in the 1958 congressional race. Then in 1962 Democrat Phil Hoff won a close gubernatorial campaign, demonstrating his party’s long-term gains; and in 1964 Republican Barry Goldwater, who had opposed the 1964 Civil Rights Act, received only one-third of his party’s vote while Hoff led his entire state ticket to victory. Republicans still controlled the congressional delegation, but the elections constituted “unprecedented Republican disasters.” Court-ordered reapportionment, furthermore, ended the tradition of a “one-town, one vote house” and an upper house with at least one senator from every county, though “neither Republican fears nor Democratic hopes were immediately realized.”

The Republicans regained the governor’s office amidst the nationwide turmoil in 1968, and in 1970 held a Senate seat in a campaign “rife with vilification” against Hoff; support for presidential candidates, though, continued to fall “from its once lofty perch atop those states voting Republican.” Vermont’s recent economic growth, aided by the Interstate highways and air travel, brought significant population changes, and many of the “new arrivals” were “disproportionately predisposed to the Democratic party.”

While Hand might have emphasized more the impact of the Vietnam antiwar movement on society and politics, he shows that these long-term changes, combined with the international oil crisis, Watergate, and Aiken’s retirement, contributed to the Republican disaster in 1974: the narrow election of Democrat Patrick Leahy to the Senate. “Even the most visionary” Republican leadership might not have overcome the events of the previous decade, and Hand concludes: “By 1974 the star that for so long had shone so brightly in the Republican firmament had set.”

Hand has used his vast knowledge and insight skillfully to write a book with fascinating material, lively anecdotes and quotes, and extensive footnotes. The book is complex, though, with many names, facts, and figures, and the reader senses that page constraints limited fuller discussion. Moreover, chapter titles for the 1960s—“The Fall” and “After the Fall”—imply that the Republican “star” had set earlier. On the other

hand, although the Democrats have dominated recent Vermont politics, the Republicans, in spite of deep fissures, held the governor's office, 1977–1985, and regained it in 2003; the congressional seat until 1989; the other Senate seat until James Jeffords became an Independent in 2001; and both houses of the Vermont legislature until 1985. Nationwide, nonetheless, as Hand notes in one of the book's typical, perceptive comments, the state party also had lost prestige:

In March 1897, the Republican Party rewarded Vermont's unswerving allegiance with a special reviewing stand at President McKinley's inaugural. In August 2000, the national committee quartered Vermont delegates . . . at the furthest point from convention headquarters . . . and [they had] some of the worst seats on the convention floor (299).

Such observation illustrate the wealth of *The Star That Set* and Hand's significant contribution to our understanding of Vermont history.

TRAVIS BEAL JACOBS

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Looking Back at Vermont: Farm Security Administration Photographs, 1936–1942

By Nancy Price Graff (Middlebury, Vt.: Middlebury College of Art, 2002, pp. 112, paper, \$30.00).

On a warm mid-September day in 2002 I drove from Greensboro to Middlebury College to look at the exhibit of Farm Security Administration (FSA) photographs of Vermont. It was a remarkable collection of images mounted on the walls of the new art museum and well worth the trip. Unfortunately the exhibit closed on December 1, 2002, but those who missed it can look at many of the photographs and read the interesting text in the catalogue written by Nancy Price Graff, the curator of the exhibit.

The Farm Security Administration (which emerged from the earlier Resettlement Administration) was an obscure New Deal agency charged with improving rural life in Depression America. Most New Deal agencies had a photographic section designed to publicize and document the various social programs initiated by Franklin Roosevelt and his administration. Some Republicans charged that these photographic sections were all about propaganda and a way to spend more money. There may have been some propaganda involved, but the New Dealers' urge to

take photographs was part of America's fascination with the camera in the 1930s. *Life*, *Look*, and several other photographic magazines were launched during the decade, and Americans probably took more family photos during the Depression and war years than at any other time.

Yet all other photo projects pale beside the accomplishments of the historical photographic section of the FSA under the direction of Roy Stryker (1893–1975), a “short, nervous, energetic Westerner with a bullish temperament” (p. 15) who supervised an army of forty-four photographers (although sixteen took most of the photos). Stryker's official title was “Chief of the Historical Section of the Information Division.” The photographers were given a small salary, the use of a government car, a per diem, and unlimited film. They were told to go out and document life in America. The complete FSA photo file, now housed at the Library of Congress, includes 77,000 prints and an additional 145,000 negatives. It remains one of the most important historical and artistic legacies of the New Deal years. Some of the images became instant icons: for example Dorothea Lange, *Migrant Mother*, Arthur Rothstein, *Fleeing a Dust Storm*, and the carefully composed street scenes and stark interiors from the South and West created by Walker Evans.

When we think of FSA photographs we usually think of images of vacant faces, desolate villages, and parched landscapes from the southern and western parts of the country, but many striking photographs of Vermont were gathered for this exhibit. These include Marion Post Wolcott's starkly beautiful photo of Woodstock during a snow storm, Jack Delano's portrait of a farmer on his plow near Fairfield, and Arthur Rothstein's image of two farmers walking with their scythes through a field of new mown hay, which is used on the cover of the catalogue.

One reason there are so many images of Vermont in the FSA files is that Stryker loved the state. Born in Kansas, raised in Colorado, he drifted East where he eventually became an instructor in the Economics Department at Columbia University. In 1931 he purchased eighty acres in Eden for \$1,000. He built a camp on the lake and spent most summers there, even after he followed his mentor, Rexford Tugwell, to Washington. Many of the FSA photographers enjoyed visiting Stryker's camp on Lake Eden, and several used it as a base to photograph the surrounding towns. The files contain many photos of Eden, though none were included in the exhibit or the catalogue. There are photographs of the Hastings Store in West Danville, a hired man hauling logs in Waterbury, a fair in Morrisville, an abandoned farm near Newport, and a fascinating photo of Hardwick taken on a September day in 1936 when political banners were strung across Main Street.

One of the strengths of this book, when compared to several other

state books using FSA photographs, is that it tells us a lot about the photographers, how they traveled, how they lived, and how they composed the images that so fascinate us today. Graff also attempts to place the FSA photographs in the context of other Vermont images, both written and visual.

The Hardwick photo mentioned above, for example, was taken by Carl Mydans, who grew up in a suburb north of Boston and graduated from the School of Journalism at Boston University. He was one of the first professional photographers to experiment with the new 35mm camera, which was small, lightweight, and could be hand held, unlike the large and awkward Glaflex, which had to be set on a tripod. With his 35mm camera he could take several shots rapidly without disturbing the people he sought to record. Mydans, who loved to spend time at Lake Eden, left the FSA shortly after the Hardwick photo was taken and joined the staff of the new *Life Magazine*. During World War II he was a war correspondent and photographer. Captured in the Philippines, he spent two years in a Japanese POW camp.

We learn how Arthur Rothstein, famous for his portraits of the dust bowl and controversial because he photographed the same bleached steer skull in several different locations, loved to go to country fairs in Vermont and to depict Vermonters working at many different tasks. Graff describes how Marion Post Wolcott arrived in Vermont during a blizzard. Cameras don't work very well in subzero weather so Wolcott warmed them by wrapping them with a hot water bottle or placing them near the engine in her car. The result was several beautiful scenes of Vermont in winter.

Among the interesting photographs that record the lives of ordinary Vermonters is one of the Ormsbee family of East Montpelier at their dinner table. By seeking out surviving family members to interview, Graff learned that Mrs. Ormsbee had kept a diary that indicated that the photograph actually was taken not in July 1942, as the official caption suggests, but on June 13. More important, she learned that the family members were upset by the way the photographer, Fritz Henle, ordered them around, even told them what to wear and where to sit. This photograph, like all FSA photographs, is not a candid slice of reality; it is strongly influenced by the photographer's point of view.

Posed or not, the photographs in this book are fascinating to study because they capture the look of Vermont between 1936 and 1942. But the book is especially important because Nancy Price Graff tells us the stories behind the photographs.

ALLEN F. DAVIS

Allen F. Davis is professor emeritus of history at Temple University. His latest book is: Postcards from Vermont: A Social History, 1905–1945 (2002).

*Out from Depot Square: Central Vermont
Memories from the 1930s to the 1950s*

By Thomas C. Davis (Barre, Vt.: The author, 2001, pp. 114, paper, \$13.95).

Some forty years ago, respected historian Benjamin Labaree suggested that wonderful insights could be attained were we to shift our gaze from a cosmic and national focus to local history—or, as he termed it, “history through a blade of grass.” In this engaging and insightful look at Barre history from the 1930s to the 1950s, Thomas Davis has taken full advantage of the immense possibilities to be found in his home town.

In the eyes of a gifted storyteller, the tales are most certainly there for the finding, given that Barre possesses as much history per square foot as any community in Vermont. It is also no surprise that many others have mined these rich ores, including such community classics as Elizabeth Ramon Bacon’s *From Santander to Barre*, Marjorie Strong and Greg Sharrow’s *They Came to Work: Oral Histories of the Vermont Granite Industry During the 1920’s and 1930’s*, Pat Belding’s *Through Hell and High Water in Barre, Vermont*, and, on the fictional level, Mari Tomasi’s evocative *Like Lesser Gods*.

Davis delights in relating Barre as seen through the eyes of a very talented and observant boy. His whimsical prologue describes his visit as a nine year old to both the Republican and Democrat campaign headquarters in 1940. He survived his visit to the GOP without incident. But when it was discovered that he was the son of a dedicated Republican (Deane Davis) as he encountered a room full of sturdy, working-class figures in Democratic headquarters, he “felt one foot tall among these strange, powerful giant-like men” (3). Eventually, he was rescued by an elder who bestowed two buttons and offered a gentle word as Davis hastened homeward.

Davis’s appetite for the savvy plot line and acute observation saves this work from the raw nostalgia and unbridled sentimentality that sometimes marks this writing genre. Rather, Davis—even as he terms this book an attempt to tell the stories of his “own Brigadoon”—meticulously portrays “the wondrous, exciting, and occasionally fearful world of a young boy” (5). As befits the author’s later career in politics and administration, many of these stories celebrate relationships, such as his friendships with Ed Granai and Calef Heininger.

Davis also describes the raw and feisty world of Depot Square, the

geographic and social center of Barre, where on summer evenings as many as one hundred people would assemble. The square was a gathering place, an ongoing debating society, a locale where baseball fanatics (and Barre was a fervent baseball town) could hover over the Western Union ticker tape that marked the progress of major league baseball, a half-inning at a time. Here too was Marr's Smoke Shop, presided over by the energetic and sometimes boisterous Howard Marr, the unofficial "mayor" of the square. Davis relishes, in retrospect, the full-bodied and vigorous social and economic activities of Main Street before World War II, when farmers would drive into the city on Saturday nights, attentively viewing from their vehicles the activities of this multiethnic city.

Additional chapters deal with the fascination of radio, the joys of skiing on a crisp, moonlit night from Granai's hill, and the remarkable contributions of Miss Agnes Garland, Davis's dedicated music teacher who would haul a forty-pound Victrola up the stairs into the classroom for a homegrown concert of classical music. Davis describes the fierce debates that preceded the construction of the Barre Auditorium, President Franklin Roosevelt's 1936 tour of central Vermont to inspect flood-control projects, and the changes brought about after the U.S. entered the war. Finally, Davis briefly traces the return of veterans from the war in 1945, concluding the book with a tender fiction essay, "A Return To Wildersburg," poignantly reflecting upon the passing of time. A pictorial selection of thirty contemporary photos nicely complements Davis's prose.

Davis has produced an attractive, insightful, and utterly readable book. He fills in some of the gaps in Barre's social history, which understandably has stressed aspects of the granite industry, the workingmen and labor organizations, and examinations of the ethnic groups that made Barre such a vibrant mixing bowl. His reflections about his own circumscribed but intensely viewed world result in a splendid contribution to local history of a time when the technology of TV and the regional malls had not yet compromised an energetic downtown life and a vital sense of community.

RICHARD HATHAWAY

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