

# VERMONT HISTORY

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Vol. 77, No. 1 Winter/Spring 2009

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## More About Vermont History

Compiled by PAUL A. CARNAHAN

# BOOK REVIEWS

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## *Country Stores of Vermont: A History and Guide*

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By Dennis Bathory-Kitsz (Charleston, S.C.: The History Press, 2008, pp. 254, paper, \$14.99).

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*C*ountry Stores of Vermont offers proof, if we need it, that the history of one thing is invariably tangled up with the history of everything else. In the course of the first half of this book, Dennis Bathory-Kitsz uses the lens of the country store to look, at least briefly, at issues like Vermont transportation, deforestation, sugaring, marble, granite, literacy, and how many Vermonters died in various wars. There are even visitations into the realm of poetry, with passages from David Budbill's *Judevine*.

Bathory-Kitsz reminds the reader in the opening paragraph that “we are never quaint in our own times” (p. 19), and that the life of a village storekeeper in the nineteenth century was not easy—they worked long hours for a modest living, relied on barter as much as they did cash, and were at times heartily despised by the community. “When Baxter’s Store burned in 1931,” we learn, “townspeople were unmoved; Baxter was not a well-loved figure in Marlboro” (p. 81). Grim and mean, Baxter is once said to have told a little girl who spilled a bag of sugar on the way home to go pick this precious commodity out of the mud, although he did give her a fresh bag. He is also said to have sold water to the fire department (p. 82) and this probably explains the community’s satisfaction when the store went up in flames.

The author goes on to talk about the architecture (variable) and the economics (ditto) of country stores in different towns, and the ongoing pressure of change that can turn a traditional village store into a conve-

nience store—“past and present collide” (p. 100). Blessed with a trim, plain ear for solid prose, Bathory-Kitsz puts the store into the wider context of the coming of the interstates and Act 250, the first bringing growth and political change, the second driven by an interest in preserving traditional land use. “Vermont fought potential environmental and economic degradation, ultimately squeezing its first Wal-Mart into an existing building” (p. 102).

Part two of the book is a visitor’s guide. After some introductory text about what goods might be found in a country store, travel in Vermont, and a guide to pronouncing place names (the sort of thing Jack McMullen could have used in the congressional race ten years ago), the book offers nine tours through towns, villages, and country stores. This section of the book has maps and driving instructions interspersed with long, boxed-off sections of text—running up to five pages—of historical, anecdotal, and photographic material. We encounter one of these sidebars in the first part of the book as well, where a ruled box is used to set off perhaps two hundred words about covered bridges. There, the effect is merely distracting; in this second part these boxes interrupt the reading and at times become an obstacle to coherence. Sadly, much of this boxed text reads as if it belongs in the first part of the book, and some of the text is actively confusing. During the course of an entry on the Hastings Store in West Danville, for example, we’re told that “[t]hough the train stopped running in the 1980s and the area is becoming a park, the Hastings Store serves box lunches to the daily train tours” (p. 194). The conundrum of daily train tours in a place where apparently the train no longer runs needs at least some explication, box lunches or no. And, by the time the reader gets to the final tour, the driving directions have gone from discursive (“On the banks of Caspian Lake, Greensboro is a Victorian vacation town” [p. 194]), to short-winded, even breathless (“4. Mosquitoville Road → Schoolhouse Road → Gadley Hill Road → Groton Road” [p. 221]). The result is that the second half of the book feels hurried, perhaps even unfinished.

Despite this problem, *Country Stores of Vermont* has value as a narrative of how village culture and commercial culture evolved in tandem, and the many photographs have archival value and appeal. The book also has an appendix listing the surviving country stores, followed by a bibliography and an index, and the reader comes away feeling that Bathory-Kitsz has done a workmanlike job, especially over the first part of the book, of placing local stores in a specific context. We can perhaps hope that a second edition of *Country Stores*, if there is one, will show improved organization.

HELEN HUSHER

*Helen Husher is the author of three books about Vermont, the most recent being a memoir, Conversations with a Prince: A Year of Riding at East Hill Farm. She lives in Montpelier.*

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## *Golden Wings and Hairy Toes: Encounters with New England's Most Imperiled Wildlife*

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By Todd McLeish (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 2007, pp. 242, \$26.00).

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**M**uch of what one reads about federally endangered species is written with little understanding of their biology, or of the particulars of ecology and land use history that intersect to make them the rarest of organisms. In the press we read debates about spectacularly attractive or contentious species like wolves, loons, and spotted owls. Todd McLeish, author of *Golden Wings and Hairy Toes*, skips the arguments. He assumes the intrinsic value of every species and writes to make these disappearing life-forms and their human friends real. This book is a lively and wide-ranging study of the current perilous situations of some fascinating living things. The fourteen species covered in the book were selected carefully: two plants, three insects, two fish, a turtle, three birds, and three mammals, from all over the region. Both the specialist and the general reader will get a picture of the practice of ecology in their backyards and local wild places.

McLeish, a Rhode Islander and author of over a hundred previous articles on wildlife subjects, has centered the book around his visits to the researchers who are intimately familiar with the organisms they study. Each species gets about fifteen to twenty pages; each chapter tells of an expedition, a personal experience with scientists and subjects, and weaves in plenty of general ecology and what's called conservation biology: biology that seeks to advocate for the organisms and ecosystems it studies, as well as to understand them for the sake of knowledge. The reader comes away with a pretty good picture of the many ways to get to the brink of extinction: Start with a rare or valuable organism or a scarce habitat; add a lot of humans messing up the habitat; import some invasive competitors, pests, and diseases; add the vagaries of weather disasters, oil spills, dams, climate change, and over-harvesting; stop natural processes like fires; then watch things disappear.

The subject is depressing, but somehow the book isn't. Maybe it's fun to read because it's by a guy getting pecked on the head and pooped on

by angry terns protecting their nests, or hanging on for dear life on the back of a snowmobile going fast through the Maine woods. McLeish, a serious birder, is happy outdoors, and he's quite good at describing people, places, and situations. And these are difficult situations, but the people are the kind who just won't give up trying to do something about them.

The species McLeish considers that occur in Vermont are the Bicknell's Thrush, Indiana Bat, Jesup's Milk Vetch, Atlantic Salmon, and Canada Lynx. In the case of the Bicknell's Thrush, a songbird that inhabits the highest peaks in Vermont and elsewhere in New England, and whose range extends northward to Québec and the Maritime Provinces, much of the research has been done by Vermont ornithologists. Bicknell's researchers have spent over fifteen years learning about the species. McLeish visited Kent McFarland and the Bicknell's team on Mt. Mansfield, where they get up early and stay up late banding and tracking. Threatened by global warming, acid rain, mercury, red squirrels, mountaintop development, dangerous migrations, and habitat loss in the wintering grounds in the Caribbean, Bicknell's Thrushes are birds that we now know a great deal about, and which we may lose in spite of every effort. In the meantime, one can marvel at an elusive bird with unusual mating habits and an ethereal song, who hides its nest in the thickest fir forests in some of the most beautiful places in the state. There's plenty known about the bird that doesn't make it into this chapter, but the author has done well to distill the essentials.

One of the features of this book I especially appreciate is that McLeish puts each organism in context, among its relatives, around the world, in history and in the future. There's much to learn, but it's not a dry book. Even if you don't want to know the details of the lengths of the hairs between the toes of various bats, it's entertaining to read about a night spent out catching them. And I guarantee you won't think about caviar in quite the same way after you learn more about the history of sturgeon fishing.

Small black-and-white photographs introduce each chapter. They aren't bad, but if you want a really good picture of the creature in question, you'll have to find it elsewhere. This doesn't seem like a great problem; it's not a picture book. But I did wish someone at University Press of New England had spent more time checking facts, spelling, and grammar. It's distracting to read things like "pupa" for "pupae," climactic" for "climatic," [. . .] and "morning cloak" for "mourning cloak"—a butterfly. The Chin is the highest part of Mt. Mansfield, not the Nose, and the Odonata are an order of insects, not a family. McLeish's prose is conversational; it's readable and accessible, if sometimes not quite grammatical. These are minor complaints. The errors I noticed don't change

the big picture, that this is a very good book. I hope many of my friends and students will read it, because it will give them a much clearer idea of what fieldwork is like, and why things get rarer and rarer. Though some of these species may easily be gone from New England a few decades from now, it is good to know they are here now, and to meet the dedicated people who are trying to help them survive.

SUSAN SAWYER

*Susan Sawyer is a naturalist, artist, and teacher at the Four Winds Nature Institute and Union Institute and University.*

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## *Glastenbury: The History of a Vermont Ghost Town*

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By Tyler Resch (Charleston, S.C.: The History Press, 2008, pp. 128, paper, \$19.99).

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**G**lastenbury. On maps of Vermont it looks big, mountainous, isolated, empty, and maybe that you can't get there from here. Is everything as it appears on the surface of one of the state's few unorganized towns—that there's not much of a story here? As Tyler Resch's new book, *Glastenbury: The History of a Vermont Ghost Town*, reveals, this town with a population of six people as of the publication date has had a varied and unusual history. Resch uses all available resources—town records, newspapers, maps, period documents, photographs, oral history, archaeological evidence, other physical traces on the landscape, and his own personal experiences and observations—to rejuvenate this mysterious ghost and give it back some flesh and bones.

Resch tells us in the introduction that he became fascinated with Glastenbury, located in southwestern Vermont, in 1962 on his first hike into the town's ghostly lumbering village of Fayville, and has been collecting material ever since. There are twelve nicely illustrated chapters with extensive period quotes that take us from the roiling political background behind the town's charter in 1761 by Governor Benning Wentworth up to a portrait in words of the town at the start of the twenty-first century. Each self-contained chapter has its own character and pacing. Some of the story is dense and typical, such as early settlement or struggling to bring in a railroad. Some fulfills our interest in the odd or bizarre, such as two murders, including one on opening day of Vermont's first deer-hunting season in 1897. And the chapter on the charcoal-

making industry, with photographs of a working kiln and neighboring log cabins and a kiln in ruins, illuminates a once nearly forgotten aspect of industry in many Vermont mountain towns.

Solid detective work uncovers the history of the short-lived South Glastenbury summer resort, which was transformed from a logging village in 1897–98. Investors, whose names remain a mystery, updated the old boarding house into a hotel and clubhouse, turned the old company store into the Glastenbury Inn, and built fish hatcheries and grounds for croquet, tennis, and picnicking. Many happy parties took the electric railroad from Bennington to enjoy the mountain scenery, fresh air, and trout dinners. The possibilities for growth “came to a crashing disaster” (p. 75) when “the freshet of ’98” washed out the railroad tracks and damaged the road beyond repair.

In the chapter “Decline, Disincorporation, and Disappearance,” we meet most of the few people who lived in Glastenbury and also were its town officers from after the Civil War to December 31, 1937, when the town changed to unorganized status. We learn that Bennington notables Trenor W. Park and Hall Park McCullough purchased vast tracts of land in Glastenbury, property that eventually became part of the Green Mountain National Forest. Some interesting side stories appear in special boxed sections, but the light print is very difficult to read.

Also highlighted are several twentieth-century residents, Rowland Hazard, and noted psychoanalysts Drs. Richard and Editha Sterba. Hazard, from a wealthy and prominent Rhode Island family, was also an alcoholic, and Resch points out that he helped inspire Bill Wilson, born in nearby Dorset, and Bob Smith, born in St. Johnsbury, to found Alcoholics Anonymous. The Sterbas bought the large Hazard property. They had horses and miles of trails, and used their seasonal home to treat patients in quiet and privacy.

In the back are helpful notes with a description of sources for each chapter, a brief bibliography, and a basic index.

The history of our small towns in Vermont can be elusive, figuratively or physically buried, lost, or forgotten. In this case telling the human history of Glastenbury, a physically large town that has always been sparsely populated, is necessarily uneven, but gathering the evidence and presenting it in one place for the long term is an important service. After reading this book, readers coming across Glastenbury on a map will see not just that vast expanse of green and mountains but in their mind’s eye the friendly ghostly traces of the electric railroad, charcoal kilns, lumber camps, summer resort, and of course the people who put them there.

ELSA GILBERTSON



*Elsa Gilbertson is a regional historic site administrator for the Vermont Division for Historic Preservation.*

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## *The Ninth Vermont Infantry, A History and a Roster*

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By Paul Zeller (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co. Inc, pp. viii, 336, \$55.00).

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The unfortunate Ninth Vermont is little noticed now, even among Civil War experts. The Ninth fought in only a handful of battles, and lost all but one through the faults of others. “[T]hough it fought its heart out, [it] seemed always to be at the wrong place at the wrong time” (p. 1). Yet it was a model regiment, well disciplined most of the time and well turned out for inspections. It had only been in the Union Army a few weeks when it was captured with the rest of the Union force at Harper’s Ferry by Stonewall Jackson. Freed on parole—a promise not to fight until exchanged—they were virtually imprisoned at Camp Douglas in Chicago waiting for enough Confederates to be captured. Their first duty on rejoining the Army: guarding Confederate prisoners across the street from them.

All Vermont regiments suffered severely from a variety of diseases: typhoid, cholera, “chronic diarrhea,” lung diseases, smallpox, and measles, among other killers. Men in the Ninth began to die almost at once, especially when they reached the unsanitary Camp Douglas. The Ninth continued to suffer at its next duty stations, in Suffolk and Williamsburg, Virginia, and eastern North Carolina. All told, 232 men died from disease, while there were just 23 combat deaths and 32 men died in Confederate prisons. By contrast, the Second Vermont had 220 combat deaths, 22 died in Confederate prisons, and there were 139 deaths from disease.

In North Carolina the Ninth participated in one battle, from which it had to flee. It was not the men’s fault, or even the officers’. They were overwhelmed by three Confederate regiments. Three hundred of the 370 men who fought that day were recruits from Vermont who had arrived only the day before. Those who had muskets received them only that morning.

Outside Richmond in 1864 the Ninth finally faced major battles. In the assault on Fort Harrison, September 29–30, 1864, they even won. But at Fair Oaks a month later they were whipped again, trying to capture

supposedly lightly held trenches. Intelligence failed; Lee had filled the trenches with veteran regiments. But the following spring they had something of a reward. They led the Union Army into Richmond, and their former colonel, now General Edward Ripley, commanded the city for a few weeks.

Paul Zeller's book is a compendium of detail, probably as much as you'll ever learn about a regiment. The entire roster of 1,878 men is in an appendix. Taken from Vermont's 1892 Revised Roster, it repeats the error that has bedeviled genealogists ever since: "Residence" means "place of enlistment," not the town where the man actually lived. Particularly after 1863, men went where the town enlistment bonus was the best.

Zeller has read the pension files and service records for hundreds of men. He has even delved into court martial records. The book includes sixty-six photos of officers and twenty-eight of enlisted men, most of them rare, including some showing gruesome wounds. Fourteen maps help make sense of the geography of the Ninth's war.

Excerpts from letters and diaries of men of the Ninth tell much of the story. Since not everyone wrote home, nor did many letters survive, a few men's versions of regimental life tend to get the most attention. Valentine Barney, originally a captain from Swanton but eventually the regiment's commander, wrote his wife almost daily. The letters have survived; being interesting and literate, they tend to dominate the book. A similar body of letters from a private would be an interesting contrast. Dozens of excerpts from privates' letters are included, but often they are brief and not too expository. Civil War officers' lives were very different from their men's. They were paid more, for one thing. The lowest-ranking officer received three times a private's pay—and most of the army was composed of privates. Only in battle did line officers and men face the same conditions.

The generous helping of detail about individuals sometimes makes the story of the Ninth hard to follow. Usually when a soldier is mentioned there's a paragraph on his life story, based mostly on pension files. Zeller's account of the Battle for Fort Harrison, for example, is interrupted repeatedly by blocks of accounts of the lives of several killed or wounded soldiers. It's hard to follow the action as a result. On the other hand, these mini-biographies are wonderful for researchers, and the reason why every library should have a copy of this book. Unless one is able to go to the National Archives in Washington, where they can be read at no charge, it costs \$75 to order a copy of just one pension file.

Don Wickman's recent book on the Ninth Vermont, *We Are Coming Father Abra'am: The History of the 9th Vermont Volunteer Infantry 1862–1865* (Lynchburg, Va.: Schroeder Publications, 2005), draws on similar

sources. It is a more readable account, and has more information on events but considerably less on individuals. To get a full account of the regiment, though, both books are valuable. *The Ninth Vermont Infantry* is the data resource, especially for photos, while Wickman's book is an easier read.

GRANT C. REYNOLDS

*Grant Reynolds is a retired attorney and a local historian in Tinmouth, Vermont.*

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## *Grace Coolidge: The People's Lady in Silent Cal's White House*

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By Robert H. Ferrell (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2008, pp. 183, \$29.95).

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With this volume, Grace Coolidge joins Mamie Eisenhower, Jackie Kennedy, and other presidential wives on the bookshelf as part of the University of Kansas Modern First Ladies series. Grace makes an excellent subject for biography. She was charming and clever, with a self-deprecating wit that appears in her many letters and her autobiography. The author of this volume, Robert Ferrell, is well acquainted with the Coolidges: He is the author of *The Presidency of Calvin Coolidge* (1998) and the co-editor of Grace Coolidge's memoir.

Grace grew up in Burlington, and Vermont readers will be especially interested in the first chapter with its portrait of the city and the University of Vermont. The author describes a bustling port of the 1880s, filled with churches, machine shops, lumber businesses, and cotton mills, which gradually faded into a turn-of-the-century city dominated by the university. The college appears not as an intellectual center—for Grace, this was the least of its attractions—but as the site of a continual round of parties, dancing, sleigh rides, and sorority functions.

Ferrell has a wonderful eye for detail, and vividly traces the evolution of Grace's personality. Early on, she appears as a fun-loving college student, standing in her friend's doorway one winter night in coat and hat. "We're going coasting," she announced, ignoring all protestations of bedtime. Several years later, we see her as she glimpses her future husband through his bathroom window: He stood shaving in a union suit with a bowler on his head and she laughed out loud at the sight. In the White House, Grace appears as a gracious and well-dressed hostess,

shaking over 3,000 hands at receptions and exerting all her warmth to make up for her husband's disinterest. At the end of the book, after Calvin's death, she emerges as a bohemian in her sixties: touring Europe with bobbed hair, trousers, and a cigarette, in a car named Oliver.

Ferrell argues that Grace made two important contributions as a presidential wife. First, she set the standard of fashion for her day. She wore enormous hats laced with taffeta and adorned with roses, drop-waisted gowns of gold lace over gold tissue, and ermine stoles around her neck. She particularly favored red. She was known to spend \$1,000 on dresses in a single day—nearly \$12,000 by today's standards—with no quarrel from her husband, who liked her to look well dressed. The society columnists reported on her every sartorial choice, describing hems and hats and shoes with relish.

Grace's second contribution was less material but more important: charm. Her charm smoothed her husband's way in Washington; as one of her Democratic admirers put it, "Mrs. Coolidge is worth \$1,000,000 a year to the Republican Party." Calvin disapproved of Grace's involvement in anything remotely political, but she opened the White House to as many visitors as she could and presided at state dinners, musicals, and formal receptions. Her efforts were much appreciated. "She is the one woman in official life," observed a contemporary, "of whom I have never heard a single disparaging remark in the course of nearly twenty years."

The book provides a domestic rather than political perspective on Calvin Coolidge. The Coolidge marriage was rocky from the start. Grace was lively and expansive; Calvin was serious and contained. He was quick to criticize, often with a cutting wit. When the cook was taken sick and Grace baked an apple pie for company, Calvin waited until the plates were cleared before asking his guests, "Don't you think the road commissioner would be willing to pay my wife something for her recipe for piecrust?" The couple's differences were magnified with the tragic death of their son Calvin Jr. from blood poisoning in 1924. The following three years were difficult ones for their marriage, culminating in Calvin's dismissal of a Secret Serviceman that he thought too solicitous of Grace. Ferrell argues that it was Calvin's realization that he could not both run the country and maintain a happy home life that led him to refuse a virtually certain bid for reelection.

For those interested in the Coolidges, this book is a welcome treat, full of revealing vignettes: It makes an excellent complement to Cynthia Bittinger's *Sudden Star* (2005). For a wider audience, one wishes for a broader lens on the subject. Ferrell encounters a difficulty common to biographers of presidential wives: Their role is both political and apolitical, and it can be difficult to tell where their importance lies. Was Grace

typical of her era? Was her interest in fashion an enduring legacy? Did her use of charm somehow transform the role of first lady? While Ferrell provides many useful comparisons to other first ladies, there is no sustained argument along these lines. This biography provides a full-bodied portrait of Grace herself; it does not attempt to use her life as a vista onto her social and cultural landscape.

WODEN TEACHOUT

*Woden Teachout is Professor of Graduate Studies at Union Institute and University.*

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## *Wallace Stegner and the American West*

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By Philip L. Fradkin (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008, pp. 369, \$27.50).

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Philip L. Fradkin, a Pulitzer Prize reporter for the *Los Angeles Times*, has composed a comprehensive biography of novelist Wallace Stegner (1909–1993). While Fradkin focuses on Stegner’s career as a novelist, historian, professor, and powerful conservation advocate in the West, he also includes considerable material about Stegner’s life in Vermont, a state that he grew to love over the years and chose to be the site of the scattering of his ashes after his death.

Stegner is best known for his thirteen novels, including *Angle of Repose*, which won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1972. His nonfiction works include *Beyond the Hundredth Meridian: John Wesley Powell and the Second Opening of the West*, a detailed study of the career of the first white man to explore the Colorado River through the Grand Canyon, who later became an influential government scientist and advocate of water conservation in the West.

Fradkin devotes considerable attention to Stegner’s important contributions as a university professor and teacher of creative writing. Stegner was a professor at several universities including the University of Wisconsin and Harvard before settling down at Stanford, where for over two decades he developed one of the foremost creative writing programs in the country. Over the years he greatly influenced and helped launch the careers of dozens of celebrated writers and poets. Stegner also found time to work as an editor for a major publishing house.

In 1938 a colleague and close friend in the University of Wisconsin English department, Philip Gray, invited Stegner and his wife Mary to visit the Grays’ summer home in Greensboro, Vermont. The Stegners

bought land in Greensboro and gradually came to love the peaceful life and beautiful scenery of the town. Fradkin writes that “Greensboro was a place without a personal past and familiar territory for Stegner. He could make of it what he wanted. He felt safe there. New England values, as he perceived them, were his values and the values of an earlier West. Change was seemingly arrested in Vermont. He could detect the same historical cycles of development and abandonment that he wrote about in the West, but in Vermont those cycles were softened by fewer people drifting through the landscape, more families remaining in one place for generations, and the prolific vegetation. . . . Vermont did not mold Stegner. . . . It attracted him. It gave him the tranquility, stability, and friendships that enabled him to write about other places” (p. 121).

Stegner’s first novel with a New England setting, *Second Growth* (1947), was a thinly disguised novel about life in Greensboro. Stegner was stunned to find that neither the summer residents nor the natives of Greensboro cared for the book and its often unflattering depictions of some residents. He made numerous examinations of the social strata of the town, including relations with the lone Jewish couple, Ruth Liebowitz and Abe Kaplan, in real life Esther and Louis Kesselman. Fradkin writes:

Esther was the Greensboro village librarian for fifteen years. A member of the library board dropped by one day to compliment her on the fine job she was doing. “I didn’t know there were Jews like you,” he said. “How many Jews have you known?” asked Esther. “Jews are just people like everybody else,” she said. That was one of the book’s messages that didn’t go down well in Greensboro (p. 122).

Even his friend Phil Gray complained that Stegner had depicted the village as a rather sinister place, to which the author replied, “Actually, if you can clear your mind of Greensboro and look at it as a novel, you’ll see that three quarters of it is pure fiction, and that the other quarter is pretty much improvised from a few incidents. Actually, too, I took situations from the town, the situations that seemed to be symbolic and characteristic, and bent them to fit what I was doing” (p. 227).

Stegner’s last novel, *Crossing to Safety* (1987), also located in Greensboro, is far less controversial. It is, the author notes, “about the reaffirmation of a friendship that takes place in Vermont during the course of one day.” It deals with two couples who resemble the Stegners and the Grays.

Late in life, despite his ties to the West, Stegner felt that Vermont was closer to his heart. Shortly before his death he said of Greensboro: “This is a place you feel loyal about. Maybe because it’s a stable community—the kind of community I had never lived in. Even the summer people here . . . are fourth generation campers.” He was attracted to Vermont

because “it heals. The rest of the country—the West—when you damage it, you get a wasteland. Here we spend half our time cutting trees just to keep a view of the lake open. Then you turn your back, you come back the next year, and it’s woods again” (p. 322).

Fradkin adds that Stegner loved the Northeast Kingdom because it was the “frontier of his youth—wild and rough with resourceful year-round residents who could fix anything, survived harsh winters, worked hard, had integrity, and were stickers. There was too much money to be had in California, he thought, and that resulted in a certain shoddiness of place and character” (p. 322).

Fradkin’s *Wallace Stegner and the American West* may well be the definitive study of one of this country’s most influential writers and teachers. Fradkin certainly likes Stegner, but is not afraid to offer an honest and occasionally critical view of the man and his work. Fradkin has traveled to all of the places that Stegner called home and is deeply familiar with most if not all of his work. The writing is lively and clear and the research is most impressive. Even Stegner would be pleased with this biography.

DANIEL A. MÉTRAUX

*Daniel A. Métraux is a professor of Asian Studies at Mary Baldwin College in Virginia, a forty-year part-time resident of Greensboro, Vermont, and founding editor of the town’s history journal, The Hazen Road Dispatch.*

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## *How Strange It Seems: The Cultural Life of Jews in Small-Town New England*

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By Michael Hoberman (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2008, pp. xii, 253; photos by Janice Sorensen; paper, \$28.95).

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Michael Hoberman’s *How Strange It Seems* is a well-written and thoughtful contribution to New England ethnohistory. While working on a small-town stage, he has produced valuable insights into both New England and Jewish life.

The title of the work under review is from a Judeophilic poem by Longfellow, “The Jewish Cemetery at Newport” (1852). The opening line is, “How strange it seems! These Hebrews in their graves.” The scope of the work is the 1890s to the present. Hoberman uses Longfellow to bridge from the long-ago Puritan past to the twentieth century, what he calls the “convergence of Jewish exceptionalism and New England exceptionalism” (p. 234).

The basis of this study is fifty interviews with sixty “tradition bearers.” Hoberman does not define that term beyond being oral history interviewees. They are, of course, Jews from rural New England, chiefly Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Vermont. The index has around sixty entries for Vermont.

Hoberman does an excellent job of telling the individual stories. He describes his book as “more impressionistic than exhaustive” (p. 16). He is too modest. While not exhaustive, his work provides a thoughtful and rich context for the tales he recorded.

It begins with peddlers on the back roads who eventually settled in small towns to open retail stores on main streets. The native Yankees may have viewed this as an invasion of cosmopolites. These Jews did not have an old country homeland. However, within one generation they gained acceptance through hard work and full participation in the civic life of the community. Their children continued the family businesses and involvement in town life. Some were farmers, although this situation did not usually last beyond two generations. The agricultural lives of these Jews ranges from large potato farms in Maine to a communal farm in western Massachusetts. Most of the second generation went to college and joined the professional middle class.

By the last third of the twentieth century a different kind of identity developed. It was L.L. Bean meets Woody Allen, no relation to Ethan. Many of the Jews in this period wanted to go back to a simpler time. Rural New England seemed to offer that, along with a tradition of leaving people alone in their differences.

The term I use for the religious life of these Jews is reconformodox, *i.e.* a little bit Orthodox, a little bit more Conservative, even more Reform, and a pinch of Reconstructionism. Obviously this mix will vary from time to time, place to place, even holiday to holiday. Interfaith courtship and marriage are part of Hoberman’s stories, including the availability of Jewish mates and conversions.

One surprising lacuna is the Christmas/Hanukkah revels. Given the ubiquity of Christmas and the coincidence of a minor Jewish holiday, why is there no discussion of this issue? It happens every year and for Jewish children it is inescapable. Possibly Hoberman’s interviewees did not mention it. It would have been worth asking.

I found two mistakes. One is trivial: Vermont has fourteen counties not thirteen (p. 15). The other is that the community described on page 184 is not Montpelier, Vermont. It is the Upper Connecticut Valley, centered in Hanover, New Hampshire.

Hoberman’s conclusion is an excellent discussion of the future of Jews in small-town New England and to some extent American Jewry



in general. He posits two alternatives, assimilation and transformation. Jews have always adapted while holding to a core. In twentieth-century America some argue the core itself has adapted. Whether the monotheists will meet the Unitarians at the altar is yet to be revealed.

I can recommend Hoberman's work as a contribution to the study of New England's tapestry, as well as a sensitive treatment of a small part of American Jewry.

BARNEY BLOOM

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## *Almost Utopia: The Residents and Radicals of Pikes Falls, Vermont, 1950*

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Photographs by Rebecca Lepkoff, text by Greg Joly (Barre, Vt.: Vermont Historical Society, 2008, pp. xvii, 109, \$42, paper \$32).

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*Almost Utopia* portrays the short-lived community of former conscientious objectors, draft evaders, and other earnest odd fellows who gathered in the late 1940s in a region known as Pikes Falls. (The neighborhood is a little hard to define because it is located in three towns—Jamaica, Stratton, and Winhall—and two counties, Windham and Bennington.) These families gravitated around the charismatic Scott and Helen Nearing, who had built a sturdy house of native stone near Bondville.

The *sine qua non* of *Almost Utopia* is the series of black and white photographs taken by Rebecca Lepkoff during the summer of 1950, a season that coincided with the time of greatest amiability and cooperation at Pikes Falls. Her photographs show close-up portraits of individuals, couples dancing joyfully on the lawn on a summer evening, sturdy men hard at work logging, and plain women preparing meals or caressing their children. A rustic little building with a tarpaper roof served as a community center; an image of it is featured in one of Lepkoff's photos on the book's cover. But according to author Greg Joly it wasn't long before near-utopia began to unravel. Scott Nearing's rigid time-management practices irritated many who tried to cooperate with him; his reputation as a "fellow traveler" and citations by the FBI caused some to fear associating with him as the Korean War intensified; and he and Helen soon departed for Maine, where he lived to age 100 and she to 91. A dispute over whether alcoholic beverages would be served at community center

events escalated into a divisive controversy. As the dark shadow of McCarthyism loomed over America in the early 1950s, Vermonters of longstanding who resided near Pikes Falls developed suspicions about the nonconformist newcomers who had tried so hard to be friendly. One woman slammed her door in the face of photographer Lepkoff “because she had been seen with those Commies, the Nearings” (p. 85).

Two other books kept coming to mind while I was reading *Almost Utopia*. One relevant volume for comparison is the classic *Social Ferment in Vermont, 1790–1850* by David Ludlum. The other is a recollection of another twentieth-century intentional community, Tom Fels’s *Farm Friends*, also published in 2008 (and reviewed in this issue of *Vermont History*).

Ludlum’s study includes descriptions of earlier utopian communities, attempts to enforce temperance, and the brief political success of anti-Masonry, all early-nineteenth-century phenomena in Vermont. Fels recalls the days of communes called Total Loss Farm and Packer Corners, both not far from Brattleboro, formed by recent college grads who were demoralized by the Vietnam war and sought refuge in self-sufficiency and open relationships that sometimes offended New England’s standards. Like the coda in *Almost Utopia*, Fels brings the reader up to date about the cast of characters.

Flashback: During the 1830s in Vermont, as described by historian Ludlum, anti-Masonry flourished among people who feared strange foreign influences. The movement gained such strength that an anti-Masonic candidate, William Palmer of Danville, was actually elected to four one-year terms as governor; and in 1832 Vermont was the only state to award its electoral college votes to national anti-Masonic candidates for president and vice president. Fast forward slightly more than a century: Vermont Governor Harold J. Arthur is quoted in *Almost Utopia* (p. 85) as wanting to toss out all the “commies,” and Congressman Charles A. Plumley calls for an investigation into “communists, fellow travelers and sympathizers” (p. 91) in the state he represents in the U.S. House, where an “Un-American Activities Committee” is in full flower. Governor Lee Emerson, who succeeded Arthur in 1951, shares those views (p. 91).

An annoying design element of this book of photographs challenges the reader to identify the subjects of the photos because captioning is inconsistent, occasionally on the page with the photo but usually hidden in a series of overleaf references. Although all photos are identified at the beginning with page references (p. vi), many pages are unnumbered.

Author Joly’s well-written account of the Pikes Falls experiment helps one understand the ambiance Ludlum described a century earlier: the

tricky dynamics of a utopian community, the perils of enforcing temperance, the atmosphere of suspicion aroused by persons of different values, customs, or religious beliefs, and a national frenzy about possible fellow travelers.

TYLER RESCH

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### *Farm Friends: From the Late Sixties to the West Seventies and Beyond*

By Tom Fels (North Bennington, Vt.: RSI Press, 2008, pp. 407, paper, \$19.95).

The decades of the 1960s and 1970s marked a seismic shift in the history of Vermont. For our state more than for almost any other, it is critical that historians begin to come to grips with the significance of those now-mythic “back-to-the-landers” who are said to have altered the very landscape of the state, but about whom we still know so little. Until very recently, although legends and tall tales have abounded, historians have had very little real information to work with. That is one reason that Tom Fels’s *Farm Friends* is such an important book. (Fels has rendered an equally important service by founding the Famous Long Ago Archive at the University of Massachusetts, a repository of the history of the western Massachusetts and southern Vermont farm communes described in his book.)

*Farm Friends* recounts the life stories of a group of men and women who founded a cluster of farm communes in Vermont and western Massachusetts in the 1960s. As Fels points out, those communes were among the few that actually generated their own first-hand contemporary documentation, in Raymond Mungo’s *Total Loss Farm* and *Home Comfort*, and in the poetry and prose of Verandah Porche and others. More than anything else, these communes were the home of journalists, novelists, and poets. *Farm Friends*, too, is a literary reminiscence, but it offers a more distanced perspective, interweaving Fels’s own memories with tales drawn from his encounters with “farm friends” over the forty years since the farms were founded. It looks back from a generation now approaching old age, across the historical distance created by the Reagan era and beyond.

*Farm Friends* is not primarily devoted to the commune years, which are dealt with in one early chapter, but to the decades that followed. That choice is a reflection of Fels's primary interest in assessing the meaning and impact of his life choices and those of his friends over the decades. The central focus of *Farm Friends* is on the 1970s and 1980s, when former communards moved away from the farms to a wide variety of new living arrangements, from New York lofts to reclusive Bolinas, California. An eclectic group from the beginning, Fels's friends ranged widely in later life: They were real estate lawyers and big-time drug dealers; anti-nuclear activists, environmentalists, and feminists; and always, writers and artists. Fels also chronicles his own return to the professional world, beginning with graduate studies in art history and concluding with his career as a respected freelance curator and writer.

Like many other former communards, Fels has taken other roads in the decades that followed his days on the farm, not without regret. *Farm Friends* records several decades' worth of late-night conversations, chance meetings, and stories relayed from one "farm friend" to another. These scattered and fragmented stories shift from one point of view to another, but a common thread runs through them. Together, the characters celebrated, bemoaned, revised, and reevaluated their ethical commitments: Their former rural self-sufficiency; the ethics of their post-communal choices; the value of their continued political activism; and their relationships to capital accumulation, the mainstream political system, and the law.

Indeed, because Fels is most interested in the post-farm readjustments of his cohort, a younger generation of readers may have trouble understanding the basic story of how these friends got to the communes in the first place—what brought them there, and how they lived and why. Given how much hazy inaccuracy surrounds the question of the character and even the personal morality of the "hippies" who seemed to "invade" Vermont in the 1960s and 1970s, however, it may have been a good choice to focus on where the former communards ended up. Did back-to-the-landers really become right-wing politicians and Wall Street speculators later in life? Or did they become left-wing congressmen and woodstove entrepreneurs? Local legends are deceptive. Some Vermonters harbor an unshakeable conviction that all "hippies" came to Vermont with trust funds to support them—and left with those trust funds intact. Stories like these, no matter how dubious, gain power with the passage of time. *Farm Friends* offers an antidote to such myths: a much more complex and nuanced portrait of the people, the time, and the place.

*Farm Friends* is sometimes bleak in its assessment. Comparing his farm adventures with *The Blythedale Romance*, Nathaniel Hawthorne's story

of failed communal living, Fels asks a grave and difficult question: Why did his generation of devoted activists and humanitarians produce so little lasting change? “How could so much of the social progress apparent on the horizon a generation ago have evaporated, if not been reversed,” he asks, “in the years of our greatest energy and activity?” (p. 379). That Fels has the courage to ask such a question, however, suggests a story that is not so bleak. After all, at least one “farm friend” has survived the decades with his intellectual honesty and progressive principles intact.

DONA BROWN

*Dona Brown is associate professor of history at the University of Vermont.*

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## *The Lamoille Stories: Uncle Benoit’s Wake and Other Tales from Vermont*

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By Bill Schubart (White River Junction, Vt.: White River Press, 2008, pp. 200, paper, \$15.00).

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Bill Schubart’s *The Lamoille Stories* bring back the Vermont of the 1950s and 1960s, before the decline of agriculture, increased tourism, hippie invaders, and urbanization transformed the state.

Schubart captures life in small-town Vermont as I remember it, where everyone knew everyone else—by reputation if not personally. He portrays a time when human peculiarities and failings that today might be candidates for psychological counseling and polite sensitivity were generally accepted and appreciated both as normal and as grist for storytelling, a major source of entertainment. Humor often came from pranks aimed at friends and neighbors and the perennial fun of outwitting the educated and sophisticated out-of-staters.

With naturally flowing narratives and deft use of both Yankee and French Canadian dialects, Schubart brings to life characters who are happy to dye a pig if there’s money to be made from “Dem pibbles in Stowe [who] pay crazy for anyt’ing.” If a second-home owner shows no respect for local ways, he is a “flatlander eedjit” whose property can be land-scaped with dynamite or held hostage with deceptive work until payment is made. The newcomers, on the other hand, find rural independence and self-reliance often difficult to distinguish from lawlessness and irresponsibility.

Not all of these stories are humorous. A few are poignant, even sad. They all reveal Schubart’s great affection for the people and culture of

northern Vermont. Although he offers these stories as fiction, many of the characters, places, and events are real. In some, familiar local names or place names are applied to fictional characters and places. This is sometimes disconcerting to those who know the area and will approach the stories as mysteries encoded in scrambled history with real people in disguise.

The stories are a great read whether you are a life-long Vermonter or a newcomer, a city dweller or a Lamoille county local. In these times, when so much humor is found in one-liners about politics, sex, or our culture of self-indulgence, traditional rural humor is refreshing. Bill Schubart's natural voice, lively characters, and rich, yet spare, description carry us to a time and place that I believe we all miss, even if we were never there.

DAWN ANDREWS

*Dawn Andrews lives in Morrisville and works with non-profit organizations.*

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## *Retrieving Times*

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By Granville Austin (White River Junction, Vt.: White River Press, 2008, pp. 209, paper, \$15).

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**I**n *Retrieving Times*, author Granville Austin offers the story of a charmed boyhood. The book is a collection of memories of growing up in Norwich, Vermont, during the 1930s and 1940s. It is an entertaining example of autobiographical childhood memories. Unlike many examples of this literary genre, it is not based on diaries, but rather on the author's own recollections. Austin writes "The Town of Norwich, Vermont, laid its spell on me in 1932 when I arrived at age five. It has never let go. Neither have I" (p. 9). After graduating from Hanover High School and Dartmouth College, Austin received a degree from Oxford University and pursued a career in government service. He authored two political histories on the constitutions of India.

The reader joins the experiences that Austin had with those who influenced his young life. They range from school teachers, shooting and ski instructors, to neighboring farmers, close boyhood friends, as well as community characters. They are "giants" that entered his life, as mentors, each "an example for life."

He includes just enough of the history of the town to provide background for the stories he tells. The conversations he recalls include the laconic vocabulary and humor of Vermonters of that time, when "the

community's culture said that individuals should *do right* by others. Works should be done well, debts paid, and prices fair. The lines of duty were clean and square, serene and lasting" (p. 159). It was also a time of economic depression and world war, events that touched Norwich as they did almost every community.

Austin recalls the seasons of childhood in rural Vermont: Haying, fishing, and concerts in summer; beginnings of school and hunting deer and 'chucks in the autumn; sliding, skiing, and town hall dances during the winter months; and muddy roads and sugaring in their own special seasons. These are experiences he shared with friends such as "Clink" LaPorte and Bill DeVaux. They were "boys together."

Austin also includes stories of the activities of adults, such as farmer Fred Ammel, "Marsh" Fitzgerald, a skier and worker with wood, and Donald Grover, a high school math teacher. He includes stories of residents' interactions with each other and with their family members. He often writes of their lives beyond Norwich. The relationship that Norwich had with nearby Dartmouth and Hanover hospital in neighboring New Hampshire adds a dimension not found in most Vermont communities.

The author reinforces the idea that a lad's education comes in many forms and teachers may be found in all parts of a community's life. Marion Cross, known to Austin as "Miz Cross," receives special treatment. In addition to a description of her role in the Norwich school that now bears her name, he recounts a series of interviews he held with her in later years. These sections are well worth reading by those who are constantly re-inventing public schools.

It is from teachers such as these that the author "learnd." And that learning included both practical skills and character-building traits. While some of the lessons may have had limited application, the lessons of civility, patience, acceptance of others, questioning assertions, and the significance of consequences have, according to Austin, served him well in life. In a chapter entitled "A Portrait Comes Alive," the author introduces neighbor Will Bond and describes the hard life of farming Will endured. He was young Austin's friend and teacher. Austin laments that he did not prod Will to reminisce more.

The stories Austin tells are of a Norwich, and in fact a Vermont, that was changing as he grew up and has now faded with time. While there are still noteworthy characters to be found in Vermont, they have been molded in a different way, for better or worse. Austin asserts that growing up in Vermont in that earlier time was truly special. He "absorbed" those times. He writes: "I hope newcomers will mourn what they've missed" (p. 78).

Readers will find themselves recalling people they knew or wished they had known better; characters who influenced their lives in ways similar or different from those described in the book; ordinary folks, each of whom is extraordinary in his or her own way. Austin reflects in some ways all our yesterdays. He also emphasizes the importance of bonds between elders and youth and of story-telling. That bond is made more meaningful for youngsters who are open to friendships with people of all sorts. Austin was just one such youngster.

One final point that Austin would have us consider is taken from a shooting lesson he took from his father and Charlie DeVaux: “‘Where will the bullet stop?’ is a momentous question. If you don’t know the answer, you may kill someone. More, what may be the results of a word or an action—your own or another’s—on the shooting range, in the voting booth, from a favor bestowed or received, in a policy, in an idea? It’s a rural question with global applications” (p. 209).

LAWRENCE COFFIN

*Lawrence Coffin is a retired Social Studies teacher and president of the Bradford (Vt.) Historical Society. He writes a monthly column on local history entitled “In Times Past” for the Journal-Opinion. Growing up in rural Vermont and New Hampshire, he was fortunate enough to have similar influential mentors in his own life.*

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## *Vintage Vermont Villainies: True Tales of Murder & Mystery from the 19th and 20th Centuries*

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By John Stark Bellamy II (Woodstock, Vt.: The Countryman Press, 2007, pp. 236, \$13.95, paper).

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If readers of *Vintage Vermont Villainies* are shocked by the book’s content, it’s not as if they weren’t warned. Apart from the title, there is also the subtitle “True Tales of Murder & Mystery from the 19th and 20th Centuries.” And then there is author John Stark Bellamy II’s comment in the introduction that he is “unapologetically captivated and hugely entertained by [murderers’] violent misbehavior and their quirks of personality” (p. x).

Despite Bellamy’s sangfroid about such a distressing topic, he manages to tell the stories without providing too many of the gory details. Instead, Bellamy uses the violent incidents he explores in the book to examine questions of “who” and “why” more than “how.” The result is an engaging book that delves into a darker side of Vermont than is often



seen. For all our belief that Vermont is in many ways a world apart, Bellamy reminds us that some Vermonters are capable of the same barbarities as people elsewhere.

Writing about such shocking incidents requires a degree of tact. Bellamy has wisely chosen to discuss events that occurred at least fifty years ago. “The reason,” he writes, “is sheer delicacy: I do not wish to revive awful memories in the minds of those persons who were secondary victims of the crimes I chronicle” (p. x).

The twelve incidents he describes in the book took place between the 1850s and the 1950s and involved murders, manslaughters, a missing person case, and a possible suicide. Shorter versions of many of the book’s chapters first appeared in *Vermont Sunday Magazine*, which is published by the *Rutland Herald* and *Barre-Montpelier Times Argus* newspapers.

Expanding the stories to chapter length has allowed Bellamy to add details. The longer format serves him well, especially when he is describing incidents that readers may know well, such as Mary Rogers’s dispatching her husband, for which she was hanged (Chapter 3: “500 Clean Dollars”), or the shooting death of renowned stone carver Elia Corti in Barre’s Labor Hall (Chapter 11: “Death of an Anarchist”). Bellamy provides details that few readers will have encountered before. His handling of the Corti chapter is effective because he creates a thorough portrait of the killer’s trial, having evidently taken the time to read through contemporary newspaper accounts.

Indeed, Bellamy focuses much of his writing on the trials related to the incidents. Trials provide the author and his readers a picture of what authorities believed happened, as well as the defendants’ version of events. While Bellamy’s descriptions of the legal proceedings offer some interesting insights into how events were perceived at the time, in several sections they would have benefited from tighter editing.

Some episodes, though still remembered in the part of Vermont where they occurred, are no longer known in the state at large. An example of such an incident was the discovery in 1929 of the body of a young woman in a grove of spruce trees in Chester. George Packard, a candy store clerk in Rutland, identified the body as that of his estranged wife, Catherine. He also declared that a suicide note found with the body was in her handwriting. Only later did it become clear that he had been wrong — Catherine was very much alive, though living out of state. Packard might have been lying, Bellamy notes. He had motivation. After his wife was declared dead, he remarried and his mother tried unsuccessfully to cash in a life insurance policy she held on Catherine. Catherine’s resurrection complicated life for the Packards, and for the authorities, who never did determine whose body had been found.

Bellamy also introduces readers to the 1957 murder of Orville Gibson in Newbury. Bellamy explains that Gibson was known locally as a bully, who was probably done in by a group of local men seeking retribution. No one was convicted in his death, though Bellamy adds chillingly that some older residents of Newbury or surrounding towns might know who killed him.

A book that details a series of violent crimes, or in fact details a series of anything, runs the risk of feeling monotonous, with each chapter having a certain sameness. Bellamy manages to avoid this pitfall by varying the structure of his pieces. He made the task easier for himself by carefully selecting crimes that had little in common, other than the bloody-mindedness it took to commit them. In the end, he has created a book that people who are not repelled by the topic will find compelling.

MARK BUSHNELL

*Mark Bushnell writes a weekly Vermont history column, "Life in the Past Lane," for the Sunday Rutland Herald and Barre-Montpelier Times Argus. He is the author of It Happened in Vermont, published in 2009 by Globe Pequot Press.*

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## *The Annotated Cemetery Book II, Stowe, Vermont, 1798–1915: Four Burial Record Books*

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By Patricia L. Haslam (Stowe, Vt.: Cemetery Commission, 2007, pp. xii, 401, \$64.00).

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Genealogists and local historians have long appreciated the value of careful compilations of gravestone inscriptions. Etched in stone though they may be, these inscriptions are sometimes lost to easy perusal. Stowe's gravestone records have already been well documented in Patricia Haslam's *The Annotated Cemetery Book I, Stowe, Vermont, 1798–1998: Histories and Inscriptions* (Stowe: Cemetery Commission, 1998). In this second volume, Mrs. Haslam goes beyond the usual cemetery transcriptions and looks into the records in the town vault. Not everyone who is buried gets a legible gravestone, and some of the stones were already beyond reading when the transcriptions were done. The town's records supply considerable additional information. Not every town is so well supplied with such archives, and indeed (as the introduction to this volume points out) Stowe would be less well supplied were it not for Mrs. Haslam's prescience in photocopying one unofficial but extensive 1896 document before a town clerk cleaned house and discarded it in 1999.

The bulk of the present volume consists of easily read photographic images of every page of the relevant town record books. When necessary, Mrs. Haslam provides transcriptions. Of interest both to family history and medical history are the statements of causes of death. Starting in 1857, Vermont required certification of deaths with statements of the cause, but physicians and town clerks varied in the enthusiasm and reliability of their compliance with the law. Stowe clearly took the job seriously, and some of the records of causes of death considerably predate 1857. This book includes a glossary of terms commonly used for fatal diseases in the nineteenth century (p. 195). If a researcher is interested in someone who had lived in Stowe but died elsewhere, a search of the index of this book may be fruitful, as the aforementioned 1896 document includes some such individuals.

Town clerks are kept quite busy attending to the day-to-day needs of their communities and can be excused for not placing the highest priority on finding and preserving old documents for genealogists and other historians. Citizens of Vermont towns, equipped with some knowledge of good archival technique and transcription standards, can do posterity a tremendous favor by locating the treasures in their town vaults and historical societies and assuring that the information is not lost. Stowe's cemetery books provide a standard of excellence for this sort of preservation.

JOHN A. LEPPMAN

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