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BOOK REVIEWS



Vanish: Disappearing Icons of a Rural America

By Jim Westphalen (Self published: Jim Westphalen, 2017, pp. 106, \$207.29).

Although it may seem counterintuitive to think that something as large and seemingly permanent as a building can vanish, it happens all the time. This disappearance can be swift and abrupt or slow and gradual. An errant spark or lightning strike can reduce a 200-year-old house to ashes in a few hours. In contrast, a few missing roof slates can start a long process of degradation, as water infiltrates and slowly rots the structural timbers holding up an early-nineteenth-century barn. Regardless of the means, the result in both cases is the same: the buildings are gone.

Photographer Jim Westphalen has spent a lot of time and logged many miles seeking out buildings to document with his camera before they vanish. As a commercial photographer for over thirty years, Westphalen had to make his subjects look as perfect as possible, avoiding any hint of deterioration or decay. The work in his 2017 book of photography, *Vanish: Disappearing Icons of a Rural America*, serves as a counterpoint to his commercial work by relishing the weathered, overgrown, and collapsing edifices that populate the rural landscape.

Vanish documents humble places, the workhorse structures that many people take for granted because they seem ubiquitous. Primarily focused on barns, the book also includes gas stations, coal sheds, and farmhouses, all rendered in beautifully composed images that often incorporate the sweeping landscape in which these isolated buildings exist, captured in a moment of stasis. Most of the subjects are in Vermont, supplemented with images of buildings in Maine, Virginia, and Massachusetts. This

geographic diversity allows for interesting comparisons, such as the coal sheds in Randolph, VT, and Williamstown, MA. These gritty industrial structures seem to have settled into a crooked, but stable, point of existence. Both are abandoned, with little hope of reuse. How long will they last? Will they be left to deteriorate on their own, or will they be pulled down, either by people or by nature? The Gates homestead in Cambridge, VT, is photographed in the winter, its peeling paint and weathered exterior contrasting with the white snow. The house is still occupied, but what does its future hold? Will it have the same fate as the abandoned mansion in Searsport, ME, now demolished? Or will it be relocated and repaired like the C. M. Byington homestead in Charlotte, VT?

Westphalen's work fits into a continuum of twentieth-century documentary photography focused on vacant, abandoned, and run-down buildings. In the 1930s, photographers such as Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange, and Marion Post Wolcott traveled the country documenting rural America for the Farm Security Administration. Working independently in the mid twentieth century, photographers such as William Christenberry, William Eggleston, and Todd Webb turned their lenses on the everyday people and buildings of the rural environment. Eggleston is a particularly important touchstone for Westphalen's work, having pioneered the use of color photography for serious artistic work. Until the 1970s, only black and white photographs were considered of artistic quality; color was only suitable for advertisements. Westphalen's career as both a commercial and artistic photographer spans both formats, and his *Vanish* photographs are equally compelling in both black and white and color.

The text in *Vanish* is limited to a foreword by Thomas Durant Visser, professor in the University of Vermont Historic Preservation Program, and an expert on agricultural buildings. Visser thoughtfully notes that these are not just images of loss, but also images of resilience, in which abandoned structures persist against all odds. Westphalen contributes a brief introduction, explaining his motivation to undertake this project. He also makes a request of the reader, which is to open our eyes to our history before it is gone forever. Measuring 12 by 12-inches, the large format of the book allows Westphalen's images to fill each page, and in some cases, span across two pages. Except for a few cows, a cat, and one man fixing a slate roof, the photographs are devoid of animals and people. Nature is ever present, however, in some cases overtaking a building and hastening its return to the earth. A tangle of vines climbs into (or pours out of?) the second story window of an abandoned brick house in Shoreham, VT. Without a need to cut them back, trees, grass,

and brush grow up around stone foundations. Each image is accompanied by a caption identifying the subject and providing a brief description of the history of the building and its status in 2017. Several are abandoned ruins, many are minimally maintained and used for storage, a few have been demolished, and some are being restored. One piece of information missing from most of the captions is the date of the photograph, which would be useful information to readers who know these properties today. Photographers would probably appreciate knowing the camera equipment used to capture each image, but this information is not provided. Some of the captions offer intriguing tidbits of information that beg for more explanation, such as the fact that the Myrick farm in Bridport was purchased by the Russian government in the 1990s, and then abandoned. Surely there's a story there waiting to be uncovered.

In *Vanish*, long cracks in masonry are celebrated. Flaking paint becomes a dramatic textural surface. Missing windows and doors provide partial views to interior spaces, long abandoned and empty. But these are not sad and forlorn images; rather, they depict a specific moment in the life of a building. This is reflected in the title, *Vanish*, which implies a sudden disappearance. Had Westphalen arrived a day or two later, the building might not have been there anymore. This fragility is evoked by the opening and closing images of the book, the aforementioned abandoned brick house in Shoreham. The first image shows the front of the one-and-a-half-story house, a portion of its brick veneer gone, the stout Greek Revival doorway barricaded, and the windows cracked. The last image shows the side elevation of the same house, its roof sagging like a saddle, held in check by a narrow brick chimney centered on the ridge-line. The caption states that Westphalen photographed the house in March 2016, and that it “inexplicably collapsed” in July of the same year. But its fate wasn't inexplicable: In this case, gravity won and the building vanished.

Westphalen's photographs in *Vanish* will appeal to anyone who finds beauty in decay and is willing to trust the eye of the artist to home in on the essential characteristics of their subject matter. Do not misinterpret the content as being mournful or depressing; rather, Westphalen's images capture and preserve one last record of these once-proud places with dignity and respect. Spend some time studying the photographs in *Vanish*, and you'll come away with a deeper appreciation for our rural built environment.

DEVIN COLMAN

Devin Colman is the director of the Graduate Program in Historic Preservation at the University of Vermont.

Kind of a Miracle: The Unlikely Story of the Community College of Vermont

By Doug Wilhelm (Middlebury, VT; Long Stride Books, 2023, pp. 371, paper. \$21.00).

Public education has two major reasons for being: the building and maintenance of a healthy democracy and the provision of a strong social and economic base. These are national as well as Vermont imperatives. Unfortunately, Vermont ranks an ignominious fiftieth out of fifty states in economic strength (Richard L. Drury, *Community Colleges in America: A Historical Perspective, Inquiry*, 8:1 [Spring 2003], 6 pages). Dry-mouthed politicians look at other states with envy and an empty purse.

Small class sizes and high expenditures characterize the bucolic Vermont education landscape, but in the 1960s the need for a major shift was evident. Too few young adults had the means to go beyond high school and still pay the bills. The hole in the system was at the post-secondary community college level. Many states had already expanded the role of community colleges. Vermont did not have the money or the infrastructure.

A miracle was needed. And it was provided.

In his book, *Kind of a Miracle: The Unlikely Story of the Community College of Vermont*, author and editor Doug Wilhelm assembled columns, essays, and foundation documents that capture the driving dedication, skills, disagreements, and energy of a group of twenty-five or so authors, contributors, teachers, parents, seniors, administrators, and a cartoonist. In 1970 they built out of nothing a statewide community college network with off-site branches within commuting distance of almost anywhere in the state. This cadre was an amazing collection of first-rate organizers who didn't know that they could not do what they did. Many were or became well known across the state.

U. S. Representative Peter Smith, Governors Deane Davis and Phil Hoff, education legend Harvey Scribner, Chancellor Tim Donovan, publisher Emerson Lynn, and Professor Ken Hood—who served as the *de facto* chief of staff—provided the leadership. Countless others pulled an oar while yet others put on jet skis. This book is their intriguing story.

Start-up money was the major problem. In building an entirely new school system (their dream was nothing less), they borrowed school buildings and miscellaneous real estate. The failure to receive an anti-

pated federal grant resulted in despair until later funds brought some stability to their plight.

Tuition was too little to cover the bills while sticking to their creed to bring economical high quality higher education to a population of limited means. Today's web page says "the Community College of Vermont (CCV) is a low tuition school. Applying to CCV is free and it takes just 10 minutes" (<https://ccv.edu/>).

In its early years, there was no money, so expedients were undertaken. In one location, electricity bills were reduced by leading an extension cord through the window of an adjoining hotel. One hopes the proprietor looked the other way. Another expedient was providing each patron with a negotiated payment plan that made it possible to attend attractive courses. Thus, if all the student had was a ten dollar bill, tuition could be set at \$1.00. The CCV system still has elements of this bargaining process.

Being the new and different kid on the block did not mean that the founders of CCV got any relief from the problems of the day. For example: academic versus technical emphasis.

Next to money, there is no issue as perennial as whether higher education at CCV should be liberal arts or trade school oriented. The expected problems emerged as the state's technical centers saw threats to their funding and mission. The University of Vermont likewise felt that their own underfunded mission should be better supported. The business community also sought to influence the technical/academic fight; and as all this happened, the technical/computer explosion rocked the foundations of how society gets and shares information. The CCV leadership group responded to this pushback from above and outside state government by concluding that the academic path was the way to go and bargained to have UVM accept Carnegie credits from CCV.

This book is organized into twelve, thirteen, or maybe twenty-six chapters, many of which appear to have been written for other purposes and adapted for this book. This makes for serendipitous yet holistic presentations, and readers should not be too disturbed to find chapters buried inside other chapters; nor should the reader be concerned by having more than one page 1 or pages with more than one page number. Chapters are a crazy quilt written by different people: champions, some governors, an ex-congressman, some academics, and true believers. All points of view are expressed with some problems being rapidly resolved while others were ignored—for a while and maybe longer. This is likely the result of the work of many of this book's authors' papers. They brought to their tasks their unique skills, personalities, biases, and accomplishments.

Today, CCV enrolls over 2,000 students (the state's total K-12 enrollment is 83,000) in twelve centers and in addition to many traditional courses, concentrates on specialty courses with an emphasis on medical and educational work. It enrolls younger and older adults and teaches just about anything that can attract enough people to constitute a class (see the "Web Schedule 2024", <https://andromeda.ccv.vsc.edu/Learn/Grid/SiteList.cfm>). In this regard, it is truly a community college. The miracle happened.

WILLIAM J. MATHIS

William J. Mathis has served as a school superintendent in Brandon, Vermont, member and vice chair of the Vermont State Board of Education, managing director and senior policy advisor at the National Education Policy Center at the University of Colorado Boulder, and president of the Horace Mann League of America. Among his many books and articles is the chapter on education in Vermont State Government since 1965 (1999).

Derby in Distress: A Vermont Town Responds to the COVID-19 Pandemic, 2020-2023

By Kenneth E. Lawson (Newport, VT: Memphremagog Press, 2023, pp. 70, paper, \$10.00).

Likely everyone who has spent time studying history recognized the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020 for exactly what it was: a life-altering world event. Vermonters experienced the months and years of confusion, isolation, and turmoil in ways similar to the rest of the world—but also unique to their own small communities.

Author Kenneth Lawson lives in Derby and has written previously on Vermont history topics (*A Fire at the Pond: The December 27, 1813 Raid in Derby, Vermont* (2009) and *Rev. Luther Leland: Missionary Pioneer in the Northeast Kingdom of Vermont* as well as articles in this journal). He has also authored other books on religious history in America and abroad, a fitting tie to his professional career as a US Army chaplain.

In this slim volume, he tackles a challenge that has stymied many historians. How to document contemporary history with care and perspective—especially of a series of events that the chronicler lived through personally? Lawson also achieves a first. In the rich field of local history in Vermont, he has written and published the first town

history specifically of the COVID era. It may even be among the first in the country; hyperlocal and specific studies of COVID-19 have been slow to appear.

For his work, Lawson interviewed thirty-seven people with deep connections to Derby between October and December 2023. Interviewees spanned ages, professions, perspectives, and experiences. For some, the pandemic was a simple nuisance; for others, it was a deeply traumatizing event. Many found themselves questioning institutions and assumptions that had been straightforward and dependable until COVID. The depth and breadth of the primary source material is impressive, as is the speed with which it was accomplished.

The volume's singular achievement lies in its careful and thorough documentation of life in Derby at a specific moment. Lawson evokes a time and place, situating each interviewee within the community by describing their place of business or worship, their normal daily activities, and then showing how those routines were disrupted by the new disease. In many ways, his narrative is somewhat typical of a local history, as a relatively straightforward accounting of local institutions. His descriptions of Derby's churches are particularly thorough.

The real goal of the narrative, however, is to show the disruption in those local institutions, and Lawson accomplishes this by summarizing and occasionally excerpting the interviews he conducted with residents. Photographs of each interviewee also accompany their section. The structure of the book itself is relatively straightforward; the narratives do not interact with each other, but rather add to the overall picture. The original length of each interview is unclear, but this reader found herself wishing for slightly less summarizing and slightly longer passages in the voices of the residents of Derby.

Reading the book feels simultaneously familiar and surreal, and likely will for many years to come. Any reader who experienced and has clear memories of COVID-19 will likely find moments that echo their own experience, while also recalling experiences previously buried completely in memory. Lawson's work is thus a valuable addition to the Vermont history canon, presenting a history that is still very raw and not yet sepia toned.

AMANDA KAY GUSTIN

Amanda Kay Gustin is the Director of Collections and Access at the Vermont Historical Society, and the project director for "COVID-19: A Vermont Story," which is collecting oral histories and other documentation of the COVID-19 pandemic in Vermont.

For the Love of Vermont: The Lyman Orton Collection

By Anita Rafael with Lyman Orton (Weston, VT: The Vermont Country Store, 2023, pp. x+214, \$30.00).

For the Love of Vermont is an exhibition catalog published in conjunction with an art exhibition first mounted in 2023 at the Southern Vermont Arts Center and the Bennington Museum, and in 2024 at the Manchester Community Library and the Vermont History Museum in Barre. The exhibitions showcase a collection assembled over the past forty-five years by Weston resident Lyman Orton, best known to most as the second-generation proprietor of The Vermont Country Store. Founded as a small-scale mail-order company in 1946, it has now grown to be one of Vermont’s most important retail operations. As the largest private collection of Vermont-based twentieth-century artwork, the Lyman Orton Collection is an immensely valuable resource for anyone interested in Vermont history and culture. The exhibits and the catalog provide an important opportunity to study that collection. And the book is a pleasure to look at, jam-packed with beautifully reproduced paintings from the collection. It would grace any coffee table, providing both pure viewing pleasure and fascinating glimpses of a time when rural Vermont was a place very different from today.

The focus of the Orton Collection is on mid-twentieth-century works, mostly from the 1930s through the 1950s. Paintings predominate, although the collection includes a few works in other media. It includes artists as famous as Rockwell Kent and as little known as the self-taught Dorset painter Arthur Jones. The painters associated with the Southern Vermont Artists are particularly well represented, and the landscape of the area around Manchester is featured prominently. Naturally, the collection reflects Lyman Orton’s artistic preferences, but it is also a deeply personal expression, reflecting his own memories of his hometown and state. As the writers of the catalog explain, the Orton Collection is like a “personal reminiscence—in a way, the art collection is his memoir” (p. 28).

Most of the works reproduced here are landscapes, and many share a similar style and approach. The scenes are generally serene and still, and the visible imprint of people on the land is often faint. Even the representations of the human-built environment—villages, farms, saw-mills—typically feature few or no humans. When they appear, people

are often shown engaged in age-old occupations. Signs of human life usually contribute to the general sense of timeless quiet: laundry waving on clotheslines, an empty schoolhouse, a village main street with a lone figure in the distance. The authors of the catalog make the important point that these “timeless” artworks bear a strong resemblance to the images of Vermont generated by state tourist promotional campaigns in the same years. That was no accident, as the authors explain: “Vermont’s most successful endeavor has been meticulously cultivating its own image” (p. 41).

The Orton Collection artworks are clearly part of that long process of image-making. Yet they are something more than advertising. They often seem to express two competing visions of Vermont, not always easily disentangled. On the one hand, they celebrate the beauty of Vermont’s “unspoiled” landscape with the zeal of a promoter. On the other hand, the paintings often evoke a sense of deep melancholy and loss rooted precisely in the accelerating rate of change overtaking that “unchanging” rural Vermont. In that sense, it is not “timelessness,” but the passage of time itself that is captured in the Orton Collection paintings. That duality is part of what makes these works so absorbing.

The text that accompanies the images in this book is somewhat different from that of the usual exhibition catalog. It is not focused on artistic interpretation or historical narrative, but rather on the story of the collecting itself, as the subtitle makes clear: “How Lyman Orton, proprietor of The Vermont Country Store, saves the art of Vermont from leaving his home state.” Thus, the artworks are not arranged by artist or time or even region, but by a sequence of themes: winter landscapes, barns, country fairs. This arrangement may serve the purpose of emphasizing the things that matter most to the creators of the collection, but it makes the loosely organized accompanying text difficult to use. Biographical vignettes of individual painters are scattered throughout the text, interspersed with historical explanations of everything from ox “pulls” to *plein air* painting. Much of that information is relevant and some of it is fascinating. But it is also quite inaccessible.

In general, the text offers very little assistance to a reader attempting to find out about a specific subject. Few dates are provided in the captions or text. Citations are sparse, and occasionally quite inadequate, as in “One writer said this about Dorset Hollow” (p. 53), or an attribution to “Dorset historian Tyler Resch” (p. 82) without mentioning which of the many published works of Resch is being quoted. With no index, no list of painters, and a bare-bones table of contents, it is nearly impossible to locate any information about a specific historical subject, region, artist, or work. Clearly, a book like this should not be burdened with a

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cumbersome scholarly apparatus, but it is still important to provide some simple ways of navigating the text: Thematic subheadings, for example, would have been a useful and simple addition.

Despite these shortcomings, *For the Love of Vermont* provides an uncommonly fine opportunity to look at and think about a collection of works that are both beautiful on their own terms and a valuable addition to our understanding of twentieth-century Vermont history. It is a book that many people interested in Vermont history and culture will want to own, even if only for browsing.

DONA BROWN

Dona Brown is Professor Emerita of History at the University of Vermont. She is the author of several books, including the forthcoming Hill Farms: Surviving Modern Times in Early Twentieth-Century Vermont.