The graceful accommodation of opposites—red brick and white clapboards, river and pasture—reflects Newbury's enduring vitality.

Not even Mark Twain could have created a better place to be young—or old, for that matter

By Frank Bryan
H
day was long and black, and it thurbered up through the valley like a snail with fins. It took a long time coming—years—but finally it leaked through the town itself, destroying everything in its path. It left Newbury village at once both more and less island than before—in the wrong way in both instances.

I saw it coming from a woodlot in the summer of 1979.

Looking south toward Bradford, you could see huge billows of black smoke where bulldozers had pushed hundreds of green trees together. Men then poured oil on drift and put them to the torch. Later that summer you could hear the constant grind and rumble of the giant earthmovers as they came nearer and nearer.

I managed to reuse fifty-two cords of firewood from what was to become the south woodland lane that summer with a chainsaw and a pair of Brown Swiss oxen (Boots and Hob). My toss (Charlie Cole) gave me $13 a cord, my room and board, and the company of a great family. He was a wise man.

Before the energy crisis hit in 1973 he said things like: “Too bad to see all that wood go to waste.”

In about half a forenoon, Interstate 91 covered over a field Charrie and I and others had spent weeks clearing by hand.

They wiped out “Grandma’s half” of his sugahshut after lunch. In a week the highway builders had so changed the face of the land that, standing by the fence beside the road this spring with one of my sons (he’s eleven), I couldn’t answer the question: “But where did you cut the wood, Dad?” Three months of work over five acres of land and I couldn’t even judge the lay of it any more. One of the best summers of my life in Newbury has been bulldozed—not only from the face of the earth—but also from the heartland of my memory.

Interstate 91 cut Newbury Town in half. There is an interchange in Bradford and one on the northern edge of town west of Wells River. This means cars no longer go through the village. It also means you can live in the village, drive to Bradford or north to Wells River and then on to work in St. Johnsbury or White River.

Culture leak. They say that nothing has had more impact on twentieth-century social structure than the automobile. It’s hard to disagree when you measure the impact Interstate 91 has had on Newbury: It’s not all bad, of course. There is less traffic through town. But even that traffic, while sometimes a pain in the summer months, brought a presence to the village that is now lacking.

The village shows none of the damage Interstate 91 caused, but there is no missing its effects. There seems to be a loneliness in the air, a certain atmosphere of isolation, a subliminal residue of estrangement from the pulse of the planet, a sorrow like the warm, soft wind that sometimes touches the back of your neck on a late August afternoon when the locusts cry.

On the other hand, Newbury survived the Revolution as the northernmost outpost of colonists on the Connecticut riv-

Isabel Whitney, writer, farmer, naturalist—comes to Newbury from Ireland.

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er. It grated on the winter of "eighteen hundred and forty-five" and the hundred year "dark age" of Vermont history, or the start of the war (as mentioned by Alexander Douglas) "the most glorious day on the face of the globe for the growth and development of human beings when he is very young."


Newbury survived the flood of '27 and the hurricane of '38. Hell, it'll lick that black topping too.

Newbury is the quintessential Connecticut River town, a long row of forms on either side and the village in between. There is a hill back, a hill called Mount Pulaski after the Revolutionary War hero, and a long contour of land holding the houses up from the river and its verdant flood plain. From the "summer house" on the top of Pulaski you can see—trust me—the most beautiful pastoral scene in Northern New England.

I arrived in Newbury in 1943, having come down from Canaan, (the northeastenmost town in Vermont) at the age of two. With Dad in North America, Mom was in charge of the more.

Two freshly-baked pies. Florence still lives in Newbury next door to Mom. At eighty-five, Florence doesn't bake much anymore, but she can still tell you how.

On the other side of the house lives Ted Dorr. She made the best doughnuts in town. You could count on them every Saturday. It was Ted who invented "morning rolls," and when they came hot out of her pot on a Jore morning, the aroma wafted mouthfuls for five or six houses in either direction. At ninety, Ian doesn't make them anymore. But she's still there in the same house. That'll tell you about Newbury.

Being raised between the best pie maker and best doughnut maker in town wasn't half bad. The other half was the valley itself, the cluster of houses on the Coos—the land the Abnaki called "the place of the white pines." Mark Twain could not have imagined a better setting in which to be young. Tom Sawyer had nothing on us.

We had the nicest village green in the valley, deep elms and a ball field. The green's still there. Houses surround it, and at the rear is a white-steepled church, the square with adventure in it, a little white town hall. Guarding the "corner" in front is the granite memorial to Revolutionary War Hero General Jacob Thompson, east, west, north, south, and west is the great Coos, flowing meadows marked by hedgerows where rice maple moved in to replace the elms.

In the long, winding Connecticut's flat, round and in the form of two ovals, called the "big" and "little" oxbow. From Montpelier you don't see much of the water, but you know the river's there in the trees along the bank.

It doesn't end there. From Pulaski you can see the other side of the river and more meadows in, yes, New Hampshire's town of Haverhill, Newbury's historical clone. But what's really important is the backdrop of the White Mountains. It begins with a monadnock of perfect dimension, called, ironically, Black Mountain. Beyond that is the entire length of majestic Mount Washington, the largest mountain massif of the Rockies. To the north Kinnsman and Lafayette match off into the universe.

Growing up in Newbury we didn't give a hoot about views, of course. Like bespectacled kids growing up in small towns all over America, we wanted action, baby. What better place to find action than in a sleepy little one-store village on the upper Connecticut?

There was the river that led away to God knows where. Give a kid a raft and a little placid (forget about the logistical interruption of Wilder Dam, downtown river in Hartford), and that deep-floating ribbon of clean water could bring an eleven-year-old enough adventure to last a lifetime. We never considered "running away" from home. Hell, we'd float for a't. One morning in August of the year 1956, 8:00 a.m. Newbury's fire alarm went off. Men and women raced to the fire station to tell that Mickey Blodgett and "Boo" Bryan had headed down the Connecticut on a raft. They'd have to be rescued before they fell off or went over the dam some thirty miles south. False alarm. In fact, we'd been
camping out behind the Octow Antique Shop all night.

There was a railroad, too. The Boston and Maine. We all have memories that establish our own positioning on the stages of history. Mine is when diesel replaced steam on the Boston and Maine.

With the track running beside the river down across "Pop" Green's meadows—about a quarter mile from our house—you could see the mighty trains late at night. The house quivered, and the cry of the whistle down at McGowan's crossing brought huge jumps to the arms of endless little boys awander in the dark with visions of flashing steel and steam rumbling south along the river.

Because there was a train there was a siding where one could explore freight cars at rest and a station where passenger trains stopped twice a day. It was a perfect place for hanging out and watching the passengers watch you—many with pity in their eyes at the sight of ragged kids without the brains to know how unhappy they were. I met many of them later in life. They still don't get it. But most of all the trains brought danger. When you were free, there trains were big. You couldn't negotiate with trains. They were, therefore, a perfect test of manhood for little boys. Like the day we played hobo with a slow freight that was inching past the Newbury dump where we'd gone to stone cars. Jump on, we would, and then off. Climb the ladder higher! Sit on top! Never notice the train was gathering speed. Then comes the awful moment that can be for even the silliest of kids a metaphor for decisions throughout a lifetime; jump now. With every passing second the consequences become even more terrifying. Jump now or end up in White River Junction. Jump. Now!

On the time "Pokey Smith" (I've lied about his last name because, knowing Pokey, I'm sure he wouldn't see me for this—even though he's gone to God knows where and I haven't seen him for thirty years) and I "borrowed" a Model A-beriberi gas gun from the American Legion building with the intent of holding up the Boston and Maine. Our punishment was immediate—dragging the monster through the picket fence a quarter mile to the tracks. It took half a day.

There I was, cut and bruised and netted to death, crouched behind the tripolded gun under the old German helmet Dale had sent home from Frankfurt in 1946—Moone had screamed when she opened the box, expecting I now understand, some kind of present from the man who had not yet come home to help raise those kids, one of whom only a few years later would attempt to heist 50 freight cars, two engines, a caboose, and five crew members from the Boston and Maine Railroad Company.

There was Pokey standing erect, a cartridge holder draped over his uncle's


There was a tar road (that soon changed to flet) that led beyond the village to "out back." There was a little pond called the fish pond about a mile through the woods, on an old logging road north of town. There was "checkerberry round," where mayflowers grew in abundance, and lady slippers, too. Florine could still tell you where to find them, but I doubt she will. There were ces built south of town. (And they tried to tell us a few years ago that the reeves of the 30s were nuts because they were psychologically affected by the" Up Down" of our lives.) We seemed to own only one pair of pants and no shirt. There were Town Meetings where we could go and wait, pure democracy in action. As long as you kept your mouth shut and behaved, once in a while you got to see grownups saw each other in public. Often they got really mad. It was funny.

Still is.

How could one blasted highway destroy an incubator of memories like that?

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DERRY HAS A HISTORY OF STIFFNESS; OF CONSERVATIVE FIBER in the better parts of the world. It is in Newbury that the fall line of the Connecticut established a junctural barrier to river transportation and because of this, Newbury became one of the largest and most important towns in Vermont during the last century. And it has lain.

In the Revolutionary War the British sent an expedition down from Canada to capture Jacob Bailey and destroy the town. They missed, and destroyed the town of Royalton instead, in 1780.

Newbury north in history day. In the pages of the Newbury Historical Society's "News Letter" for June 1899, we find the following: "This is a year of celebrations! The 240th anniversary of the organization of the First Congregational Church of Newbury, 1810 for the daughter Church of Wells River, the 1850th for the Town House and the 1830th for the Newbury Methodist Societ-

It was in Newbury where Boston University began when in 1829 an energetic woman, "Percycess Miss Beryl Dow," began teaching religion and dancing.

Think of it this way: Here is a little place torn to page 107.
Newbury

river town of less than 2,000 people which published a history of itself in 1902—a 780-page volume by Frederic Wells, called by authorities "one of the best town histories in the state." In 1978 the people of Newbury published a second volume, History of Newbury, Vermont 1908-1977. It has 585 pages—small print pages—over 100 photographs, and several maps. The people of Newbury cherish their past, and he is the mark of true community. About the time I was ten years old, I began to discover this history by reading Ralph Nading Hill and Earl Newton's wonderful book The Hurricane. Newbury began to take on new meaning. (Drat it—why didn't I recognize the symptom? I was growing up—or is it down?) But it was too late. Two years later I rediscovored my thumb. That's when Newbury really began to grow. It became for me a more town and a less a village.

I learned to walk across the front lawn, across the sidewalk, onto the edge of Route 5, and stick out my thumb. More never had a car, but I discovered that a thumb and a fine-tuned plaid gazing were reasonable substitutes. It wasn't long before I was in Wells River or South Newbury or "out to Hall's Pond" between West Newbury and Newbury Center. It befuddled those "from away," but it is important to understand that in Vermont towns one often finds incorporated villages. I grew up in Newbury "village," on the east. But Newbury is among the ten biggest Vermont towns in terms of acreage. There is also a "Wells River Village" in Newbury town and several smaller "places": Boltonville, Newbury Center, South Newbury, and West Newbury. And understand this, too. When Wells wrote his History of Newbury in 1902, there were four railroad stations for passengers and freight in Newbury, five U.S. post offices, and at least one store and creamery in each "place." There were two high schools. There were eighteen rural school districts, each with its small schoolhouse.

Today there are no passenger trains,
no buses through town. (Thus older people like Mom, who don't drive, are trapped. Before, they could catch a Vermont Transit to Bradford or White River or St. Johnsbury. There is no high school—thus no junior prom and no senior play. The post office and train station in Montpelier are gone. The store is gone from West Newbury, but the post office remains.

Yet the face of Newbury remains intact. We've left for good in 1999. There were three public buildings in the center of the village: Jim's store, the town clerk's office, and the Post Office. The town clerk and the Post Office now share one of them. The Bradford National Bank moved a teller and a window (it's too small to be called a "branch") into the old town clerk's office. Three buildings in 1999. Same there in 1989.

Newbury, like all real places, has had some shame, too. Perhaps the worst event in the village's history, at least in this century, was the abdication and murder of farmer Orville Gibson in 1957. The Gibson killing has become probably the state's most infamous unsolved murder case. Newbury became the subject of many national stories on the case, including "One in the Baggage." A novel, The Landing of George Newcomb, was published based on the case. Press reports were fed by the byzantines of small-town life, and Newbury became the "beautiful little village where white church steeples among the elms hold dark and sinister forces of evil." Most of that was boloney. But we did kill Orville Gibson.

But hey, That's August in Newbury, so it's time to talk (the real Vermontian's least favorite month because it raves nothing to look forward to). Let's talk today 20th! It's the best day of the year because it is within two weeks of Groundhog Day, which is within three more weeks (or so) of Town Meeting Day, which starts sugar making season (which ends—please always remember—because it's too warm for the trees to freeze), which puts us within a month of May Day, which is only two or three weeks from garden planting, which is within three weeks of June 21, the longest day of the year and the day which real Vermonters dread the most: because every day after that is shorter and there is nothing to look forward to but August.

Let's talk January.

The reason Newbury has survived Interstate 91 is because its people thrive. There are Newburrians all over the place. Ray, Carlson still lives on the Jefferson Hill, As long as she does, Town Meeting is safe. She's only one-year now, so Town Meeting is going to last for long time to come. "Sig" Carver (who has held almost every local office imaginable) may work in Hanover, but she still lives in Newbury. Jimmie Wheeler's there—former mayor of the basketball team—and my old classmate Breece Wheeler and his cousin Donald.

South Newbury, Isabel Whitney at eighty still runs her Sleepers Meadows Cabins and writes for the newspaper behind the Times. Born in Dubuque, she came to Newbury via Jamaica married to a former World War I aviator. Sleepers Meadows is one of the older farms in Newbury, Isabel herself is fast becoming a legend in her own right. Up in Wells River, Al Stevens, who has made more motions and "seconds," and called more questions at Town Meeting than anybody in town, doesn't farm any more, but he still lives there. Rick Hamilton, a surprisingly likable falstaffer "from away," serves Newbury in the legislature so well he's been unchallengeable so far. But Wheeler, who had the fastest eye in town (a near 50/30) when we were listening to Elvis Presley on WFTP in Albany, hasn't left yet, either. Carl Schwarze, who wrote In A Big Eye, from Newbury, is still there, as is Sue Swenwone, master teacher. There's selection Ken Alger, who's been in town all his life and can get through the toughest political problem like Burt Rabbit in a briar patch.

The point is obvious. There's a mixture of natives and newcomers in Newbury that has preserved the community—against (it often seems) all odds. Not that there isn't controversy—and often bitter debate. But the community is strong enough to contain it and survive it. There is no greater testimonial to
community. Democracy is not the absence of conflict. It is the capacity to see it through and maintain the civil order. Newbury, like most Vermont towns, has proved it's good at that.

So, we may yet survive Interstate '91. In fact I'd say it's a safe bet.

Meanwhile, the river flows on, and the planet spins through the galaxy. Because Newbury is halfway between White River and St. Johnsbury and it's a good commute to either, and because there are no large populations to the east or west, the town has not been dragged irrevocably into the magnetic influence of a megalopolis, despite Interstate '91. It's still small. It's still beautiful. It's still quiet. Things change, as they must, but the people there hold on to their sense of place with fierceness and pride. Fundamental to it all is the river and the Coos is created, the great meadows of the bow.

What to do in Newbury? Oh, no you don't. I'm not going to be tricked into that! It would violate one of my most sacred bunches about being a Vermonter. We all have been asked the question by someone from down-state that goes something like this: "Vermont's a beautiful place, but what do you do up there?" I figure you're in trouble when you begin to get a handle on the answer. Vermont is a place to be. Newbury is Vermont. I can tell you what I'd like to do this summer if I get an evening off. I'd like to put the canoe in at Placey's farm about two miles above the village around 7:00 p.m. on the night of August's full moon and drift the oarsmen down to the bridge below town, getting there in the new boat landing, say, about midnight.

Or find a place to sit back and watch the sun rise over Mount Moosilauke. Hear the bell from the church strike nine. Watch the swallows twist and turn in the heavens. Feel the centuries. Sense the peace. Newbury can give you that.

The Newbury I grew up with is gone. No matter. The Coos remains. And there is much to hold on to. I can still return to the house of my childhood, still fall asleep to the murmur of wind in the boughs of the great pine beside the house (that sound never changes), still hear the twinkle whisperroll from Top Green's pasture across the road (as is related to those olden whisperrolls of the 1940's), still feel the rumble of a freight train in the night. Automobiles still slip by the house on Route 5 with the same snarl sound they always made.

Meat, who would never move away, although she spent forty years threatening to, has given me the greatest gift a parent can ever give a kid: the gift of place—an honest-to-God time machine. Every time I go home, the number of strange faces has decreased. I can handle that. The Coos remains. And so do enough old facts, and newer ones related to the old, to remind me of the security found in generational continuity.

So far so good. Newbury is still the place where, when I go there, I know they gotta make me in.