

'Real Democracy'

UVM professor analyzes town meeting from all angles

By Sally Pollak
Free Press Staff Writer

Franks Bryan was born in New Hampshire, a statistical blip in a life devoted to gathering and analyzing Vermont statistics.

Not just any statistics, but Vermont data at their most Vermont-y: Bryan is a town meeting aficionado. He has amassed thousands and thousands of pieces of information about town meeting.

Like much of Bryan's data, the location of his birthplace comes with a footnote — one that he delights in describing. Bryan was born 62 years ago in West Stewartstown, N.H., just across the river from Canaan, where his parents lived. His mother gave birth at the county farm, which had a four-bed hospital wing along with a four-cell lockup.

Bryan is a political scientist at the University of Vermont who has made the study of town meetings an academic specialty. With the help of his students, who gathered data, Bryan has compiled information about 1,500 town meetings spanning three decades. His work is published in a new book, "Real Democracy," which tracks factors including attendance, participation, repetition (how many people repeated themselves), gender participation, issues debated, and more. Much more.

The data, he believes, are more accurate than public opinion polls. "We're there," he said. "We count."

The book recounts the counting, and includes "witness" accounts of town meetings. These narratives include the famous farewell by Alexander Solzhenitsyn to his Cavendish neighbors, and the observations of longtime Vermonters.

"It wasn't published because of me," Bryan said the other day at his UVM office. "It was published because of the data banks. Whether the book lives or dies, there's an empirical record about New England's most important contribution to political democracy. It's hard-ass data."

State archivist Gregory Sanford also deals in statistical minutiae — and even big ideas. He has a gentler way of describing Bryan's book.

"I think that there is a value to Frank's book in that we have certain mythic phrases — local control, citizen legislature, town meeting," Sanford said. "And we use them often but we rarely stop and define what they are or understand much about them in any sort of quantitative sense...."



GLENN RUSSELL, Free Press

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"To some, town meeting is a relic unsuitable for modern Vermont communities. To others, it's a cherished vestige of direct democracy. Frank's book sorts that out and gives shape to what we talk about with 'Town Meeting.'"

Bryan has been tracking Vermonters' voting interests and trends for 40 years, since he polled his 1964

class at Orleans High School about that year's presidential contest. His students voted 2-to-1 in favor of President Johnson over Barry Goldwater.

"If the kids in the Kingdom were for Johnson," Bryan said, "I knew Vermont would vote Democratic."

Bryan is a devoted and die-hard Vermonter who twice has returned

The hard data

- "Real Democracy: The New England Town Meeting and How It Works (American Politics and Political Economy)" by Frank M. Bryan
- Publisher: University of Chicago Press
- Pages: 320
- Price: \$19

to the state out of homesickness. The first time he was 12, and the affliction struck his entire family.

When dial telephones came to Vermont, Bryan's mother lost her job as a telephone operator. The telephone company offered her a job in North Carolina, which she accepted. Bryan remembers riding out of Newbury on a pickup truck, heading for the bus depot and a trip to North Carolina.

A year later, Jeanne Allen Bryan and her three children were back home. "We were all miserable down there," Bryan recalled.

He had another chance to leave the state as a kid when his father, a foreign service officer, wanted his children to live with him for a year at one of his overseas posts. Bryan wasn't interested. "Being a redneck," he said, "I would never do it."

The second time Bryan returned to Vermont out of sheer homesickness was in 1976, when he gave up a tenured professorship at Montana State University. He simply missed his native state too much.

"Everybody's got a homeland," Bryan said. "I think Vermont is America's homeland. When people think of the way it was and the way it should be, they're apt to think of Vermont. It's the quintessential homeland."

He returned to Vermont, drove a school bus and taught a class at UVM. The next semester, spring 1977, Bryan taught two classes. Soon, he joined the political science faculty. With a quarter-century in the department, he still appreciates academic life.

"I look out the window and feel so darn lucky," Bryan said. "I grew up in farming country. I know what it is to be out there with a John Deere bulldozer, praying for noon and then waiting for dark so I can get the hell off."

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