

CHAPTER II

TOWN MEETING: AN AMERICAN CONVERSATION

This is what comes of their wretched town meetings—these are the proceedings of a tumultuous and riotous rabble, who ought, if they had the least produce, to follow their mercantile employment and not trouble themselves with politics and government, which they do not understand.

--Lord Germain (appointed by the King to be Secretary of State to the Colonies) when hearing of the Boston Tea Party.

“Senator Quayle, you said it’s not going to be the folks at town meeting who are going to resolve this thing, but isn’t that what has happened? Isn’t that the reason we’re here tonight? Isn’t that the reason the president’s speaking on it tonight because people at town meetings . . . have raised the issue?”

“Our military experts say that we’re in an inferior situation: the Soviet military experts believe that we are in an inferior situation. And they’re not going to ask some grassroots caucus taking place in Vermont whether they’re inferior or superior.”

—Senator Dan Quayle responding to a question. (The MacNeil-Lehrer Report, Public Broadcasting System, March 31, 1982.)

The heart of the American republic, it seems to me, has beat to the rhythm of only two philosophies that matter: liberalism by which we live, and communitarianism by which we dream.¹ My interest is the dream for I suspect that failing to recreate the nation’s inner spaces

¹ For an insightful essay on the two creeds see: Robert B. Thigpen and Lyle A. Downing, “Liberalism and the Communitarian Critique,” *American Journal of Political Science* 31 (August 1987): 607-637. By communitarianism I simply mean civic humanism, the notion that the political community is the locus for the virtuous life. Often called “classical republicanism” some argue it began with Aristotle with its first Anglo-Saxon rendition that of James Harrington’s *The Commonwealth of Oceana*. [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.] Communitarianism holds (unlike liberalism) that humanity and citizenship are more or less (depending on who you read) the same, that government is not a necessary evil to be employed to provide goods and services when the “private sector” fails. It is a secular humanist creed that sees citizenship as a pathway to ethical behavior and governance as an expression of moral action. The sacred values on which the future of the human race depends may *reside* in the individual but they are brought to *life* by the commonweal. I separate myself from the national

where citizens may indulge in *dreams* our national *life* will continue its increasingly dangerous decline. The voices of history that chronicle both these passions, it will surprise no one to learn, call from the intellectual ridgelines of our common landscape. The first American sound about real democracy from these distant elevations was fear.

But fear of local democracy, of town meeting, soon changed to celebration, a celebration that lasted past the midpoint of the 19th Century. Then with our great Civil War and following that the closing of the continent, the focus of politics shifted to the nation and town meeting slipped into the shadows cast by progressivism's bright light. It was not until the Depression and the New Deal that the sun began to shine on town meeting once again. Democracy was in the air. True it was a national one but it also was *political* featuring inclusiveness and the common man. Its promise coincided and indirectly reinforced a new interest in rural America (and with it institutions like town meeting) that arose from the many who began to feel uneasy about the excesses of the mass urban culture into which America was fast submerging. Remember please that Woody Guthrie was a Democrat. After the war this revival, while muted by the ambivalence of skeptical academics was boosted dramatically by the counter-culturalists of the 1960s and 1970s who urged a more populist turning away from representative institutions toward direct political action. Finally as this democratic revolution waned with Reagan and good times the closing of the century found town meeting instated in the lexicon of *national* politics. But not as

communitarian movement, however. Communitarianism unbounded by strict attention to scale is like country music without a fiddle or rock and roll without a backbeat. It doesn't work. For me the most eloquent communitarian manifesto is: Wilson Carey McWilliams "Democracy and the Citizen: Community, Dignity, and the Crisis of Contemporary Politics in America," in Robert A. Goldwin and William A. Schambra (eds.) *How Democratic is the Constitution?* (Washington D.C.: The American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, 1980) pp. 79-101. Anyway, I call myself a communitarian and it's my book.

democracy. It has become a tool in the media driven electrification of representative nationalism.

FROM FEAR TO CELEBRATION

We went to Philadelphia in 1787 dreading real democracy. Many say we adopted the Constitution *because* we dreaded it. As Mary Ritter Beard said in 1939 of the founding period: “At no time, at no place, in solemn convention assembled, through no chosen agents, had the American people officially proclaimed the United States to be a Democracy...when the Constitution was framed no respectable person called himself or herself a democrat.”² The Greeks were dismissed and the passions of the “mobs” decried.³ We had discovered (as the British had tried to tell us only a few years earlier) that it takes a certain stability and unified purpose to run a continental enterprise. Now the mobs that threw tea into harbors were raising hell in *America*, that is, just across the Connecticut River in western New England.⁴

² Charles A. Beard and Mary Ritter Beard, *America in Midpassage* (New York: The MacMillian Company, 1939): chap. 17. Remember, however, that real democracy was happening on the ground all over the new nation but especially in the hills and valleys and along the shores of New England. It found expression among the anti-federalists and provided a powerful theoretical and empirical infrastructure that would emerge clothed in different garments in the early decades of the 19th century.

³ The founders were serious. Madison: “...such democracies have ever been spectacles of turbulence and contention: have ever been as short in their lives as they have been violent in their deaths.” (Federalist No. 10) “Had every Athenian citizen been a Socrates, every Athenian assembly would still have been a mob.” (Federalist No. 55) Alexander B. Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay, *The Federalist Papers*, (New York: Mentor, 1961).

⁴ Well before Daniel Shay another radical named Ethan Allen had headed north into the New Hampshire Grants from western Connecticut (Salisbury) and later showed up at the gates of the largest British fortress in North America, Fort Ticonderoga on Lake Champlain, early on the morning of May 7, 1775. His capture of the fort sealed the action taken at Lexington and Concord a few weeks earlier by presenting (an embarrassed and perhaps frightened) Continental Congress with a *fait accompli*. What does one do with a fort that doesn’t belong to them? American school children are taught that the revolution began with the “shot” heard “round the world.” A case could be made that it in fact began with the bellow heard round the world: “Surrender in the name of the Great Jehovah and the Continental Congress.”

Yet it wasn't long before fear of democracy began to recede. Relief came with the opening of the frontier where most of the mob-like characters that might disrupt a town meeting or a fresh republic were wont to go. It came too from the acceptance of a new democracy-proof constitution that would handle what at the time were considered the rather incidental matters of the Republic itself. Then our first important political upheaval replaced America's emphasis on coastal mercantilism with inland agrarianism. With Jefferson the kind of democracy that once threatened the Republic ("shook it to its very foundations," he said) became "the wisest invention ever devised by the wit of man for the perfect exercise of self government."⁵

From there our national perspective on real democracy was defined predominantly by the New England, transcendentalist and romantic tradition and by Tocqueville.⁶ People like Henry

⁵ It is at least ironic to note that Jefferson, unlike his New England enemies, had little first-hand experience with real democracy, practiced as he was in the southern county tradition. After New England opposed his Embargo Act Jefferson later remarked (in 1816): "How powerful did we feel the energy of this system in the case of the embargo...I felt the foundations of the government shaken under my feet by the New England township..." But in his response to the towns he demonstrated (at least in hindsight) what historian Jere Daniell calls appropriately "the depth of his support" quoting (in language, ironically, that could have come straight out of Madison's *Federalist #10*) Jefferson's often overlooked lament for what the towns (with their numerous resolutions against the Embargo Act) had wrought: "...the organization of this little selfish minority enabled it to overrule the union." Letter to Joseph C. Cabell, Monticello, February 2, 1816 found in Joyce Appleby and Terence Ball (eds.) *Jefferson: Political Writing*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999): 205. It is in this context, Daniell argues that Jefferson's recommendation that the town meeting be adopted throughout the United States should be seen. After all said Jefferson: "What could the unwieldy countries of the Middle, the South, and the West do? Call a county Meeting?" Jere Daniell, "Town Meeting: Symbol for a Nation," (Hanover, New Hampshire: Unpublished working paper, Date unknown). Jefferson's other contribution was his passionate support for the agrarian ideal, which provided much of the deep sod for the growth of town meeting government. Yet the truest agrarian of the period was not Jefferson. It was John Taylor. His words: "At the awful day of judgment, the discrimination of the good from the wicked, is not made by the criterion of sects or of dogmas, but by one which employs the daily employment and the great end of agriculture." John Taylor, *Arator: Being a Series of Agricultural Essays, Practical and Political* (6th ed.), (Petersburg, Virginia: printed by Whitworth and Yancy for John M. Carter, 1818): 189. Jefferson may have said it better ("Those who labor in the earth are the chosen people of God") but Taylor of North Carolina was the one with the clearest vision of the link between virtue, agriculture and democracy. See: Grant McConnell, "John Taylor and the Democratic Tradition," *Western Political Quarterly* 4 (March, 1951): 17-31.

⁶ Lawrence Buell finds a believable connection in the writings of the Federalists and the New England romanticists: "...righteous sermonizing in the jeremiad vein; a caustic, mordant gallows humor, reflecting a tendency to see life in terms of extreme outcomes, a sense of belonging to a select vanishing few; and above all a vision of the stark discrepancy between the pleasing forms of republican government and the actual perversion of these forms." He notes, I think importantly, that the cadre that did the most to invigorate the town meeting tradition were not "lineal"

David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson inked town meeting and the real democracy it implied into the annals of the American way. It became (for Thoreau) “the true Congress...the most respectable one ever assembled in the United States.” In his famous speech before the people of Concord Emerson seems almost driven in his praise. Town meeting reveals “the great secret of political science” and solves the “problem” it entails: how to “give each individual his fair weight in the government.” In town meetings “the rich gave council, but the poor also; and, moreover, the just and the unjust...every opinion had its utterance, every fact, every acre of land, every bushel of rye, its entire weight.” About the same time Tocqueville was writing: “Town Meetings are to liberty what primary schools are to science; they bring it within the people’s reach, they teach men how to use and enjoy it.” Later in the century John Stuart Mill seconded the motion. It was “...a school of public spirit.” It seemed as though all had read and accepted the words of Yale’s President Timothy Dwight who wrote as early as 1821:

In these little schools men commence their apprenticeship to public life; and learn to do the public’s business. Here the young speaker makes his first essays: and here his talents are displayed, marked, and acknowledged. The aged, the discreet, here see with pleasure the promise of usefulness in the young; and fail not to reward with honorable testimonials every valuable effort of the rising generation.⁷

The litany could go on. But all in all it is hard to imagine how the central years of the 19th Century could have provided town meeting with a more impressive pedigree.⁸

to Jefferson, but rather reformers within the Whig party who were attached to the federalist tradition. See: Lawrence Buell, *New England Literary Culture: From Revolution Through Renaissance*, (Cambridge: The Cambridge University Press, 1986): 94-95.

⁷ Timothy Dwight, *Travels in New England and New York*, (New Haven: T. Dwight, 1821): 32. Dwight also spends a considerable amount of time defending in glowing terms the law making capacities of town meeting.

⁸ Henry David Thoreau, “Slavery in Massachusetts” in *Reform Papers*, (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1973): 99; Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Historical Discourse at Concord,” in *Miscellanies* (Vol. II) of *Collected Works*, (New York: AMS Press, 1968): 46-47; Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, (Cambridge: Sever

By century's end the applause had found its way into the textbooks. James Bryce in his important *The American Commonwealth* says: "The town or the township with its primary assembly is best... it is the most educative of citizens who bear a part in it. The town meeting has been not only the source but the school of democracy."⁹ A still more effusive example was provided by Harvard's John Fiske, whose *Civil Government of the United States*, published in 1890, became a classic. The professor does not mince his words: The town meeting he says is "the most complete democracy in the world." While his praise is more broad-based than most, he too focuses on the schoolhouse¹⁰ metaphor: "In the kind of discussion which it provokes, in the necessity of facing argument with argument and of keeping one's temper under control, the town-meeting is the best training school in existence."¹¹ Summarizing the century's intellectual exuberance about town meeting, James K. Hosmer, a professor of English and German Literature at Washington University in St. Louis: "Is there anything more valuable among Anglo-Saxon

and Francis, 1862): 76. John Stuart Mill, *Consideration on Representative Government*, (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1962): 73.

⁹ James Bryce, *The American Commonwealth*, (New York: McMillan, 1912): 601.

¹⁰ Clearly this is the most pronounced strain in the praise for town meeting. In 1907 the Supreme Judicial Court of Massachusetts argued: "No small part of the capacity for honest and efficient local government manifested by the people of the commonwealth has been due to the training of citizens in the forum of the town meeting...The practical instruction of the citizen in affairs of government through the instrumentality of public meetings and face-to-face discussions may be regarded quite as important as their amusement, edification, or assumed temporal advancement in ways heretofore expressly authorized by statute and held constitutional." *Wheelock v. Lowell*, 196 Mass. 220, 81 N.E. 977 (1907). Cited in Lane W. Lancaster, *Government in Rural America* 2nd ed. (New York: D. Van Nostrand Company, Inc., 1952): 37-38.

¹¹ John Fiske, *Civil Government in the United States*, (Boston and Cambridge, Massachusetts: Houghton, Mifflin and Company and the Riverside Press, 1890): 30-32. Fiske's assessment is refreshingly clear eyed. Town meeting will not work in big places. It sub-delegates substantial power to an executive board (the "selectmen"). Town officers are elected year after year resulting in minimal rotation in officers in many places. In a blaze of empirical audacity I find charming (and accurate, I might add—I will say more about this in the conclusion to the second volume) he seems to be saying: "If this doesn't fit your prescriptions for democracy, then change your prescriptions. It doesn't get any better than this and probably shouldn't."

institutions...? What a list of important men can be cited who have declared in the strongest terms that tongue can utter their conviction of its preciousness?"¹²

NATIONALIZATION AND THE PROGRESSIVE ALTERNATIVE

The timing was fortuitous. Town meeting made it into the textbooks just ahead of a band of progressives armed with shotguns and a rope. Historian Jere Daniell of Dartmouth College puts the time and place of the hinge in thinking in 1897 in an article entitled "The Decay of Town Government" published in *The Nation*. Here the author begins by noting that to question the New England town meeting would be like questioning democracy itself. No matter. The truth was, says Sedgwick, the institution has fallen on hard times. New England towns had become corrupt to the core, their meetings, dominated by "Village Tweeds," ignored the will of the people. Elections were rigged. Pockets were lined. Town meeting was no longer (if, indeed it ever was) a pretty picture. In short the progressives were not about to give town meeting a pass, hallowed ground or not. In the next two decades the attack continued in both the local and the national press.¹³

The progressive era dealt town meeting three blows. The first was perhaps the most devastating. Boredom. Looking for critiques of town meeting by the leading scholars of the period is like looking for a Vermont dandelion in February. As Bob Pepperman Taylor says

¹² James K. Hosmer, "Sam Adams the Man of Town Meeting" in Herbert B. Adams (ed.) *Johns Hopkins University Studies in Historical and Political Science*, (Second Series, IV) (Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins and N. Murray, Publication Agent, April, 1984).

¹³ Daniell, "Town Meeting."

“[town meeting] wasn’t where the action was.”¹⁴ It was with referenda and reform, city machines and the national system. It was the center not the parts. Just about the time the last state of the adjacent forty-eight joined the union and made us whole at last the celebrated progressive, Herbert Croly, expressed the exuberance and national perspective of the progressive agenda.

[The] salutary aspect of the present situation is the awakening of American public opinion to the necessity of scrutinizing the *national* [emphasis my own] ideal and of working over the guiding principles of its associated life. The American democracy is becoming aroused to take a searching look at its own meaning and responsibilities.¹⁵

Professor of Sociology at the University of Wisconsin Edward Alsworth in his optimistic, *Changing America*, published in 1912, likewise shows no interest in local democracy. As close as he comes is an early, explicit and prophetic affirmation of liberalism. The people are no longer

¹⁴ Bob Pepperman Taylor, “Personal Interview” (Burlington, Vermont: September, 1999).

¹⁵ Herbert Croly, *Progressive Democracy*, (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1914): 27. Croly’s only concern with town meeting democracy is indirect and instrumental. He credits the towns of Massachusetts and New Hampshire with “stubborn insistence” (even before the end of the revolution) that any proposed new scheme for post-British state governance be submitted to a statewide popular vote that was generated by a convention expressly formed to propose the new plan. He says: “The importance of this assertion by the people [the “towns” had become “the people” in one short paragraph] of New England of the reality of ultimate popular responsibility can scarcely be overestimated. Thereafter democracy obtained a new meaning and a new dignity.” *Ibid.* p. 33. The progressive movement began, he is telling us, in New England town meetings. The question one might have wanted to ask was: Can a huge, continental Republic survive without the continued existence of these local democratic institutions? It is no knock on a very hard working cadre of reformers with plenty to do at the turn of the century to point out that they ignored this question. (One wonders if we will be afforded the same slack.) Croly, the editor of the *New Republic*, is best known for *The Promise of American Life*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1965) first published in 1909 by Macmillan. In the earlier work he is much more clearly an engineer of social reform. His attack on Jefferson notes that Hamilton, at least, had a plan. Jefferson, whose view of democracy was superficial, was hobbled by a belief in a government that drifted on an egalitarian sea unfettered by the machinery of social order. In this Croly dismisses Jefferson’s faith in the governments of the “extremities.” As such Croly’s offense against Jefferson is a good example of why progressives had so little time for town meeting or other types of real democracy. The center was the key. Perhaps *Progressive Democracy* published five years later, was an early inkling of his movement in the 1920’s away from governmental policies and programs (away from political engineering at the center) toward what Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. called in the 1965 republication of *Promise* the “ability of individuals and groups to bring about an improved quality of human relations by other than political means.” If Schlesinger is right, it sounds as though Croly began to soften on Jeffersonianism or at least on what he (Croly) believed Jeffersonianism to mean when he wrote in *Promise* in 1909. See: Croly, *The Promise of American Life*, xxvi.

“masses” he says. They have “broken up into individuals.”¹⁶ Even the quintessential progressive, John Dewey, a Vermonter himself known for his admonition “democracy begins in the neighborhood,” finds no time to consider the role of town meeting as an institution of governance in the unfolding order of things.¹⁷ Those who did take the time to think about it at all gave it short shrift. The important progressive person of letters Charles Russell went to high school in St. Johnsbury, Vermont. His view of town meeting governance there: business ran things. “These men might be so good they were blue in the face; still the fact remained that without mandate from the people they were the government.” One simple assertion and that was that.¹⁸ In short with the horrible war that settled the question of the Union still fresh in the

¹⁶ Edward Alsworth Ross, *Changing America*, (New York: The Century Company, 1912): 6. Actually he goes further in his defense of direct democracy which in its denial of Greek democracy is reminiscent of the founders. “There is no real likeness between a deliberate referendum vote in sparsely settled Oregon and the offhand, tumultuous decision of six thousand Athenians meeting in their *agora*.” *Ibid*.

¹⁷ Many Vermonters are only too happy to accept the claim that his democratic faith, which does indeed depend on premises which are clearly supportive of face-to-face democracy was instilled in Vermont. Bob Pepperman Taylor, who knows as much about Dewey as anyone and more than most, resists the linkage between Vermont and Dewey’s public philosophy. Dewey’s thinking says Taylor is more apt to have come from his formal schooling and church experience *in* Vermont, rather than his experiences *with* Vermont. After all Dewey grew up in one of the few cities in Vermont, Burlington—a very small city to be sure but the biggest in the state. It had no town meeting. He left Vermont in his twenty’s and thereafter lived and worked almost exclusively in two of America’s greatest cities, Chicago and New York. See: Bob Pepperman Taylor, “John Dewey’s Vermont Inheritance,” in Robert V. Daniels (ed.) *The University of Vermont: The First Two Hundred Years*, (Burlington, Vermont and Hanover, New Hampshire: The University of Vermont and the University Press of New England, 1991): 121-137.

¹⁸ Charles Edward Russell, *Bare Hands and Stone Walls: Some Reflections of a Sideline Reformer*, (New York, Scribner, 1933). The population of St. Johnsbury in 1880 was 5,800, big for effective town meeting governance. Also, the town was home of the second most important business family of the century in Vermont, the Fairbanks of Fairbanks Scales. (The other was the Proctor family of Proctor marble in Proctor, Vermont.) It would be hard to imagine a better set up for the “company town” thesis. Besides Russell seems fair minded in his recollections. He pays the people of the town about the highest compliment one can, saying he could think of no community “blessed” with citizens more “. . . kindly, friendly, neighborly and good to know . . .” He also is lavish in his praise of the company. “They gave money for good objects, they financed the Academy, [which Russell attended] built and presented to the town the really remarkable Athenaeum, stocked it with a marvelous library, added an excellent collection of paintings. Liberally they subscribed to foreign missions; they had built one of the most beautiful churches in all New England; they were flawless in the performance of every pious duty.” Still, I wonder about Russell’s intentions. His delightful account of life in the private St. Johnsbury Academy makes one wish they could have been there at his side plotting and scheming against the hypocrisies of cant and decorum. But as there is powerful circumstantial evidence that he was right about governance there, so too does his own exuberant disdain for authority and passion for revolt create a *primia fasciae* suspicion that his claim that a few “Christian Business

memory, with the frontier closed and the industrial revolution and with it the threat of corruption and corporate greed in ascendance it was the time to fashion a national democracy. The quest was for a cleaner politics engineered by politics-free “good government,” democracy defined in terms of direct voting rather than face-to-face deliberation,¹⁹ and a larger, more centralized expression of American nationhood. On the canvass of the progressive dream, town meeting was nowhere to be found.²⁰

Fair enough.

Men” were the government was exaggerated. Big time. St. Johnsbury is in need of a good graduate student that likes snow. I grew up twenty-five miles south of “St. Jay.” When we went south for “culture” they took us to Hanover, New Hampshire. When we went north for it they took us to St. Jay. I had a hernia operation there at seven and spent my first money on a girl there at twelve, hot chocolate at the diner on Main Street. That would have been the eighth grade field trip to the St. Johnsbury Museum in 1954. Susan Thompson. We’re still friends. Two of Russell’s most important books are *Lawless Wealth: The Origin of Some Great American Fortunes*, (New York: B. W. Dodge & Co., 1908) and *Why I am A Socialist*, (New York: Hodder & Stoughton, 1919).

¹⁹ In 1912 while defending the gut level institutional processes of the progressive agenda Delos F. Wilcox pretty much writes town meeting off. It is “... a sort of national memory, a regret of days gone by and conditions that have passed.” In a passage that sounds strangely familiar in reference to my own work, he writes: “Even yet it occasionally happens that some ardent civic reformer, his soul burdened with the political failures of American city government, rings forward some complex and curious plan for reestablishing town-meeting methods in a metropolis. But these schemes are so manifestly visionary and impracticable that they hardly attract a passing notice. The town-meeting belongs essentially to the past.” Delos F. Wilcox, *Government of All the People or the Initiative, the Referendum, and the Recall as Instruments of Democracy*, (New York: Macmillan Company, 1912): 5-6.

²⁰ Some progressives had been willing to link the spirit of town meeting to the progressive democratic reforms of choice, referenda, and initiatives. “Town meeting,” one said, “gave great encouragement to the spread of the plebescital principal.” Historically, “the people in their town meetings had been made familiar with direct legislation representing their local concerns.” Ellis Paxson Oberholtzer, *The Referendum in America*, (New York: Charles Scribner and Sons, 1912): 108, 110. Indeed it could be that the tradition of “instructing delegates” in Massachusetts (representatives to the General Assembly elected at town meeting—one to a town) did support the notions of referenda, initiatives and recall. But it is also the case that these traditions were simply a natural unfolding of the concept of representation in the colonies. John Phillip Reid, *The Concept of Representation in the Age of the American Revolution*, (Chicago, Illinois: The University of Chicago Press, 1989): 90-93. I am inclined to agree with David Magleby that for referenda and initiatives “the town meeting has little relevance.” David B. Magleby, *Direct Legislation: Voting on Ballot Propositions in the United States*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984).

But there was a second movement underway, a parallel societal phenomenon that combined with the progressive vision to spell trouble for town meeting.²¹ It was no less than the building of the American century—that unique blending of continental expansion and urban industrialism that began in earnest in the 1820’s and created by 1910 the most powerful economic force (and by 1950 the most powerful political force) on the planet. With it came the decline of the town, itself a special New England conjunction of geographic cohesion and small population and the prime grassland of real democracy. New England was a major exporter of peoples west.²² Vermont’s influence on westward settlement, it is no exaggeration to say was singularly remarkable.²³

²¹ The strength of real democracy in the towns of New England (especially, by that time, in northern New England) served as a back burn to fires of progressivism in the region. James Wright in his thorough analysis of progressivism in New Hampshire emphasizes the role of localism and the “diffused nature of government” there. “The state’s democratic and decentralized political system mitigated against systematic approaches to new problems.” James Wright, *The Progressive Yankees*, (Hanover, New Hampshire: The University Press of New England, 1987). Marx had to deal with the opium of religion. The progressives of New England had to deal with town meeting. See also: Winston Allen Flint, *The Progressive Movement in Vermont*, (Washington, D.C. The American Council on Public Affairs) and Alon Jeffrey, “Vermont’s Pastor Politician: Frazier Metzger and the Bull Moose Campaign of 1912,” *Vermont History* 38 (1970): 58-69. Vermont was one of only two states to cast their votes from Taft in 1912. This was not a “conservative” response to progressivism. It was a Jeffersonian response.

²² Van Wyck Brooks calls this period New England’s “Indian summer.” Van Wyck Brooks *New England: Indian Summer 1865 - 1915* (E.P. Dutton & Co. Inc., 1940). See also: Stewart H. Holbrook, *The Yankee Exodus: An Account of Migration from New England*, (New York: Macmillan, 1950). The depletion of New England, especially small-town New England, began with the Civil War which provided a preview of the “keeping them down on the farm dilemma that followed World I – with an important difference. So many New England boys never lived to face the temptation of the cities. Vermont sent ten percent of its *entire population* off to war. We had a casualty rate of 15 percent. Dead casualties. These were the highest rates in the Union. Many of them died in the flanking action on Cemetery Ridge on that hot July afternoon in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. The next day the *New York Times* pinpointed it as the maneuver that won the battle and saved the Union. See: Howard Coffin, *Nine Months to Gettysburg*, (Woodstock, Vermont: Countryman Press, 1997): 35. The little town of Jaffrey, New Hampshire, sent an incredible 151 men to the South. Eighteen percent of them died. Goshen, Connecticut and Amherst, Massachusetts, lost over twenty-five percent of their young men who went to war. “For those who returned,” says Howard S. Russell, “ties to the old town had been loosened by absence and travel.” Plus the government in the liberalized Homestead Act of 1864 kicked in eighty percent of an ex-soldier’s cost to build a house on the 160 acres it promised to anyone who would go west and stay put for five years. In the outback of New England 160 acres was big time property in 1864. See: Howard S. Russell, *A Long Deep Furrow*, (Hanover, New Hampshire, The University Press of New England, 1976): 417-418. Russell tells the story of New England agriculture over three centuries. Although he sticks to the point with a fascination for detail that is both remarkable and charming (especially if you like things of the land) his work transcends his modest design and becomes a brilliant regional history.

But, to the dismay of people like Lewis Mumford, New Englanders failed to implant their democracy in the new lands they did so much to settle and fashion.²⁴ They tried all right and there is no doubt that the New England democratic *perspective* was ever present. But the *institution* didn't take.²⁵ The townships they created were bigger, flowing, not easily marked, and essentially artificial (in a geographic sense) structures. The land settlement patterns (mostly agricultural) of the mid-west and especially the middle border and the deep west were not hospitable to communal, deliberative enterprise.²⁶ The township of the new America evolved on its own, influenced by the wider open spaces that New Englanders coveted. Besides there were

²³ See: John O'Brien, "Vermont Fathers of Wisconsin" *Vermont History* 16 (1948): 74-82 and Louis D. Stillwell, *Migration from Vermont*, (Montpelier, The Vermont Historical Society, 1937).

²⁴ Said Mumford: "The political importance of this new form [the town and its town meeting] must not be underrated, through the failure to grasp it and to continue it—indeed to incorporate it in both the Federal and the State Constitutions—was one of the tragic oversights of post-revolutionary political development." He then quotes from Emerson's journal: "The town is the unit of the Republic. The New England states founded their constitutions on towns and not communities, which districting leads us to. And thus are the politics the school of the people, the game which everyone of them learns to play.... [omissions my own] ... In the Western States and in New York and Pennsylvania, the town system is not the base, and therefore the expenditure of the legislature is not economic but prodigal. By district, or whatever throws the election into the hands of committees, men are re-elected who could get the votes of whom they are known." Lewis Mumford, *The City in History*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1961): 332-333.

²⁵ In this George Wilson Pierson's witty dismemberment of New England as a coherent region in the American mosaic is off base. He likes Henry Ward Beecher's description of the New England westward movement so much ("New Englanders came across the continent driving their lowing herds and schools and churches, their courts and their Lyceums before them.") he gets carried away. "To these peculiar folk, a minister and a school teacher seemed almost as essential as axes and plows...In almost no time there were town meetings in Illinois and Michigan, and Wisconsin had a New England state government." George Wilson Pierson, "The Obstinate Concept of New England: A Study in Denudation," *The New England Quarterly* (March, 1955): 10.

²⁶ The "social cost of space" extended to many spheres of human activity on the western plains. The classic source is: Carl Kraenzel, *The Northern Plains in a World of Change*, (Toronto: Printed by Gregory-Cartwright, 1942). Speaking of the five states of the Northwest Territory (and especially Indiana) Clyde Snider said in 1957: "The geographical townships marked out by the rectangular land surveyors of the national government commonly provided the areas for new civil townships (except in eastern Ohio); and the artificial nature of these areas as been an important factor in preventing the township in these regions from attaining the social unity and political importance of the New England town. Moreover, settlement was largely on isolated farmsteads rather than in compact communities; and this again hindered the development of strong township government." Clyde F. Snider, "Indiana Counties and Townships," *Indiana Magazine of History*, 33 (June, 1937): 119-152; Clyde F. Snider, *Local Government in Rural America*, (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, Publishers, 1957): 20.

countervailing influences at work, primarily the county, manor and parish systems that were fresh in the memories of fellow settlers from New York to Louisiana.²⁷

Urban industrialism played havoc with town meeting within New England itself. In the south (Massachusetts, Rhode Island and Connecticut) where town meeting first took hold and from whence came its essences, urbanization was chewing up the towns and with them the potential for sustained real democracy. Connecticut started the process as early as 1784, incorporating the four cities of Hartford, New Haven, Middletown, and Norwich each *within* its

²⁷ The best study of this process is: Lois Kimball Mathews, *The Expansion of New England*, (New York: Russell & Russell Inc., 1962). Like a splitting wedge in a block of elm New York and its county system stood guard on the west. To get out of New England by land one must go through New York. The degree to which New York local governance grew dissimilar to New England's is an astounding example of the subtle chemistry of tradition and geography. When first the New Englanders ventured south onto Long Island they took their town meetings with them. "Each of the English towns on Long Island was at first independent, all question being decided by a majority vote at town-meeting." (Mathews, p. 34.) But the town meeting did not survive the influence of first the Dutch and then, after the British defeat of the Dutch, the Duke of York. The New Englanders convinced the Dutch to grant them charters (Hamstead in 1644 was the first) but the granting of democratic privileges (both from the Dutch and then the English) was slow and tedious and in any event concentrated on appointed, then elected *representatives* of the people. Face-to-face *gatherings* of citizens passing local ordinances did not survive. [For an excellent summary of these events see: Snider, *Local Government*, 13-17.] Precisely the opposite was the case when New Englanders went north into the unsettled frontier of northern New England. The best summary of the development of local government in New York is; Nicholas Varga, "The Development and Structure of Local Government in Colonial New York" in Bruce C. Daniels (ed.), *Town and Country: Essays on the Structure of Local Government in the American Colonies*, (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1978): 186 – 215. Townships in Indiana and Illinois bore clear similarities to the New England town, primarily in the central and northern regions where the New England influences of congregationalism and the idea-free publicly governed schools was strong. The "Biblical Institute which came to Evanston, Illinois, for instance was modeled after the theological seminary in Newbury, Vermont, which was actually Methodist in denomination and also seeded Boston University. But the southern, county-based influence on governmental structure in the downstate regions of the mid-west coupled with the filter of the New York counties were not supportive of real democracy. Except for some townships in Michigan, where the practice held on longer, the critical face-to-face assembly of decision-makers requirement of town meeting was soon swallowed up by the distance-based imperatives of the flowing prairies. It was in the seven-room Town Central School building (grades 1-12) on the site of the Newbury Seminary (the original building burned down in the great fire of 1912 when Newbury lost over 25 homes and businesses, a church and the school) that I began school in 1947. It took only three teachers to get us through eight grades in those days—no principal, no nurse, no special reading instructors, no administrative personnel whatsoever. Mrs. Merrill, Mrs. Whitehill, and Mrs. Butson did everything but the janitorial work—and now and then some of that. It is somehow comforting to now realize that I spent the better part of my youth in a single school house with windows framing the exact same horizons of ridge, gully, maple and pine as did these builders of colleges and nations of so long ago. One of the best opportunities to study the transplantation of towns in this period is that of the Union or "Vermontville Colony" in Michigan. See: Douglas K. Meyer, "Union Colony, 1836-1870: Pattern and Process of Growth," *Vermont History* (Summer, 1973): 147 – 157.

respective town.²⁸ It was not a popular move. Not until 1822 when Boston, according to chronicler of early urbanism in New England, Harold A. Pinkham, Jr., broke out and “set the pace” that a rapid expansion of city charters began. After 38 years of failed proposals and petition drives and a three-day town debate, Bostonians voted away their town meeting. Providence became a city in 1830 and Portland, Maine, in 1832. In Connecticut Waterbury, Bridgeport and New Britain followed suit. By the end of the century, aided by the arrival of the streetcar, sub-urbanization was added to the mix and reduced the number of free standing towns still more. The Census of 1900 showed that majorities of the population in all three southern New England states no longer practiced real democracy. There wasn’t any where they lived.²⁹

The “north forty” of New England, Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont, which by 1850 was the nation’s best remaining natural range for real democracy, was hit especially hard by the movement inward out of the hills to the larger towns and outward to the West. Indeed, by the turn of the century a close observer of New England would write:

The children left [the farm] drawn by dreams of gains the city or the sea or the far West offers: and the parents are gone, too, now. The shingles and clapboards loosen and the roof sags and within, damp, mossy decay has fastened itself to the walls, floor and ceiling of every room. Gaps have broken in the stone walls along the roadway, and the brambles are thick, springing on either side. In the front yard is a gnarled, untrimmed apple tree, with a great broken limb

²⁸ Thus the city dwellers had dual residency, city and town. This process was adopted in Vermont with the incorporation of “villages” within towns. Growing up on the “intervals” of the Connecticut (just below the fall line) in Newbury I had dual citizenship. I was a citizen of Newbury Village and the Town of Newbury. In fact we had two incorporated villages in Newbury. The other was Wells River, named after the Vermont river (nice brown trout) which enters the Connecticut there at the spot where Robert Rogers’ rescue party (up from fort number four in Charleston) got tired of waiting for him and left for home a few hours early. He knew because their campfire was still warm when he arrived mostly dead from exposure and starvation. Today Vermont has two towns with two incorporated villages, Newbury and Barton, the latter with Barton and Orleans villages. Orleans, north of Newbury about fifty miles in Vermont’s Northeast Kingdom was where I began my teaching career in the local high school.

²⁹For a treatment of the urbanization process through 1873 see: Harold A. Pinkham, Jr., “Plantation to City Charter: The Rise of Urban New England, 1630 – 1873” in Joseph F. Rishel, *American Cities and Towns*, (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1992): 1 – 14.

sagging to the ground, and about, a ragged growth of bushes. As time goes on, the house falls, piece by piece, and at last only the shattered frame stands, a grim memorial of the dead past.³⁰

This picture is precisely on target.³¹ I will say more about the great “dark age” in Vermont (1830 – 1950) in the following chapter.³² For now understand that the death of the old rural New England in the north (and it *is* dead in all but a nook and a cranny here and there) had a different impact on town meeting than urbanization did in southern New England. Up north it created very few cities big enough to justify (in the eyes of the townspeople) giving up town status for municipal (elected) government.³³ What it did was increase the size of the valley towns (especially where there were train depots)³⁴ and dramatically reduce the populations of the hill

³⁰ Clifton Johnson, “The New England Country” (1893) quoted in: Perry D. Westbrook, *The New England Town in Fact and Fiction*, (Rutherford, New Jersey: The Fairleigh Dickenson University Press, 1982): 161. When I was ten years old I spent a good part of the fall and winter on a hill farm on Wallace Hill in Newbury, Vermont. Rural electrification had not yet arrived. I remember Mr. McKetcheran’s face in the yellow light of a kerosene lantern as he milked. A fuzzy pride of barn cats (mostly kittens) surrounded a huge bowl of steaming fresh milk, the purring so loud it competed with the sound of four alternating teats filling the pail between my best friend Joe’s knees. I milked my first cow there and shot my first gun. Now and then I got to drive their old jeep that they used for a tractor. The family moved away when I was thirteen. Joe got killed on his motorcycle somewhere in New Mexico I heard later. The last I saw of any of the McKetcheran family was the night Joe’s brother John beat the hell out of me at a dance at the town hall over a girl named Frances. (We danced, played basketball, watched plays, and marched in to graduate from high school on the same floor from which our parents practiced democracy.) The McKetcheran house lasted longer than the barn and I watched it rot and lean and tumble over the years. Like dozens of other hill farms I knew as a boy, it died hard. I often take the short cut over Wallace hill on my way back to Burlington from visits home to Newbury (85 miles). But the only trace of the old McKetcheran place is in a faraway corner of my heart.

³¹ See: John R. Stilgoe, “The Wildering of New England 1850–1950” in Timothy J. Richard (ed.) *Settlement in New England: The Last 100 Years*, (Storrs, Connecticut: The University of Connecticut, 1980): 1-6.

³² The best source for the entire region is: Harold F. Fisher, *The Hill Country of Northern New England: Its Social and Economic History 1790 – 1930*, (New York: Columbia University Press 1936).

³³ Of the 249 incorporated municipalities in 1900 in Vermont 244 were governed by town meetings and only five by city charters. The largest “city was Burlington with a population of 18,640. The smallest was St. Albans with 6239. Montpelier, the state capital, was right behind with 6266. State of Vermont, *State legislative Directory 1900*, (Montpelier: Secretary of State’s Office, 1900): 460 – 471.

³⁴ Seymour T. D. Bassett, “Urban Penetration of Rural Vermont” (Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University, 1952). This thorough study is not about urbanism in the modern sense. It is about the coming of the railroads (they were

towns. Adding population makes town meeting more difficult. But the reduction of the “outback” to “village” ratio of citizens in the hill towns put larger percentages of the population closer to the meeting hall. This makes town meetings easier.³⁵ The net result was a strengthening of town meeting in some towns and a weakening of it in others. Very few were actually killed off.

Yet the loss of rural/farm culture in so many places all at once in the very heartland of “town meeting country” did have an important debilitating effect on the public persona of town meeting. And it brings us to the third and final element in the swing of the national perspective on town meeting from good to bad in the four decades between 1895 and 1935. The dying hills fed the emerging anti-rural paradigm that accompanied the progressive vision and the urban-industrial revolution. The more or less benign country bumpkin image evident throughout the

prolific, even in the rugged ridges and hills of Vermont) and the way they restructured what still remained after they came very, very little places.

³⁵ Joseph Wood, who has published a definitive book on New England villages, argues that “the nineteenth century center village was an early American manifestation of urbanization that in its romantic guise justified the past.” Wood is right about the romanticism. When politicians and media commentators in Washington, D.C. and even New York City refer to these places as “towns” (which they often do) the same phenomenon is occurring. See: Joseph S. Wood, *The New England Village*, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997). There is no doubt that many villages were commercial centers, often near the depot, within a town. When incorporated they provided essential “urban” services like street maintenance, a fire department and streetlights. These villages were governed by their own village meeting. The problem with using the term “urban” is similar to equating representative democracy with real democracy; they are profoundly different things. If we were to follow Arthur Bentley’s advice and seek to learn through a process of “experimental naming” there is no way the word urban would be attached to these “villages.” John Dewey and Arthur Bentley, *Knowing and the Known*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1949). Also see my essay: “Defining Rural: Returning to our Roots” in Jim Seroka (ed.) *Rural Public Administration* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986): 9–20. In Newbury village where I grew up in the 1940’s and 1950’s the village plowed the three sidewalks (one of which ended at our house) and maintained lights on the three little streets that had them. It also provided water from a reservoir up on Moore Hill, which drained the “Adam’s lot” where I spent my high school weekends and vacations in 1959 logging with Ira Chamberlain and an old white horse named Captain. There were three good-sized dairy farms within a few hundred yards of our house and at least a dozen others within the village limits. The village population was 723.

19th Century turned sour in the twentieth.³⁶ In fact rural people remain the only clearly marked cohort of the American population who were not included (thank God I say) in the national cleansing called political correctness that peaked in the 1990's. But the belief that country people were not of the proper quality to sustain an elected democracy (to say nothing of a real one) began in earnest a hundred years ago.³⁷ Within three decades its darker side emerged in the eugenics movement. Town meeting suffered extensive collateral damage.

In fairness things did look bleak.³⁸ Listen to Rudyard Kipling describe the outback of Vermont as he worked on *The Jungle Book* and *Captains Courageous* from his home in Brattleboro:

³⁶ The rural/urban debate is as old as recorded history. There is blame on both sides. In a book about the time we are interested in here (the 1920's) Paul Carter reminds us: "Town and country have been putting each other down, with opposing stereotypes of the country bumpkin and the city-slicker since the Israelites left their flocks and herds in the hills to go down and denounce the sophisticated sins of Jerusalem." Paul Carter, *The Twentys*, (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1968): 73. See also my chapter on the subject "Country Mouse and City Mouse" in Frank Bryan, *Politics in the Rural States: People Parties and Processes*, (Boulder, Colorado, Westview Press, 1981):15-44.

³⁷ As late as 1973 the textbooks were reporting that: "The popular urban expression of rural people is that they are ignorant, slow in thought and action, and very gullible." J. B. Chitambar, *Introductory Rural Sociology*, (New York: Halsted Press, 1973): 130.

³⁸ The fact that town meeting had assumed such an inflated status in the national consciousness, of course, made it a sitting duck for revisionists. I can't prove it but I'd bet check-cashing money that it is one of the more significant causes for the thrashing town meeting received after 1890. This "*Rumplestilkskin*" syndrome forces defenders of town meeting to substantiate the silly notion that it can spin political straw into democratic gold. Similarly, Jefferson's claim that "those who labor in the earth are the chosen people of God" and Emerson's flagrant exaggerations may have done more to blight the rural image (and thereby town meeting) than Sinclair Lewis on his best day. Sinclair Lewis lived for a time in Barnard, Vermont, a hill town next to Woodstock, which had in the 1960's one of the toughest little Saturday night dance halls in the state. There are several entries for Barnard in the data base for this book and it appears for special reference on more than one occasion. Its bordering on Woodstock and the resulting mix of "woodchucks and flatlanders" (our terms of endearment for real Vermonters and newcomers) makes it an important (and fascinating) community. Sinclair Lewis was an example of this. He *lived* in Barnard. But would he have were it not for Woodstock? In the great covered bridge debate of 1936 Woodstock preservationists called on Lewis to defend the bridge in the local paper (*The Stannard*). He did, eloquently. His biographer, Mark Schorer also reports that after Lewis and Dorothy Thompson bought their estate in Barnard in September, 1928, all went well ("their first autumn was an enormous success") because, "They found servants in nearby Woodstock." You have to have lived in the hills of Vermont for a lifetime to understand that it doesn't get any better than that. The Lewis' were what we called in the 1950's "summer people." As Schorer explains: "The leaves turned in the spectacular Vermont October and Manhattan saw nothing of the Lewises" but "...at the very end of October, the first snows came and drove them back to New York." [Mark Schorer, *Sinclair Lewis An*

The land was denuding itself of its accustomed inhabitants, and their places had not yet been taken by the wreckage of Eastern Europe or the wealthy city-folk who later bought “pleasure farms.” What might have become characters, powers and attributes perverted themselves in that *desolation* (emphasis my own) as cankered trees grow out branches akimbo, and strange faiths and cruelties born of solitude to the edge of insanity, flourished like lichen on sick bark.³⁹

Jere Daniell says that this kind of Kipling-like observation reflected a “general belief, articulated by journalists and academics throughout the nation, that rural New England was experiencing a decay of morals, religion, population and self respect. What one observer labeled the ‘rural

American Life, (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1961): 510]. Two autumns hence Lewis closed his Vermont place in late October and was in Westport, Connecticut when he learned he had received the Noble Prize for literature, the first American ever to do so. Lewis Mumford, whose opinion is important in that it tells us what this century’s premiere student of the city thought of Lewis’ celebrated and controversial view of the small town, was less than gracious on the subject of his accomplishment in winning the Nobel Prize. The award came to Lewis claims Mumford, mostly because of a European need to belittle America. Mumford’s nomination would have gone to another American familiar (perhaps more than any other then or now) with Vermont, Robert Frost: “One has the notion, however, that Frost’s America is a country of which the Swedish Academy has never heard.” Lewis Mumford, “The America of Sinclair Lewis,” *Current History* (January, 1931).

³⁹ Rudyard Kipling, *Something of Myself*, (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, Doran and Company, Inc., 1937). At the turn of the century Kipling was forced to take up residence in a cottage in Brattleboro belonging to his new bride’s family. He had run out of money on his honeymoon, a trip around the world. Thinking of him writing the *Jungle Book* looking out over snow level deep with his windowsill is somehow comforting. See: Derek Levin, “Rudyard Kipling’s Vermont Years,” *Window of Vermont* (October, 1986): 55-59. One day on a trip into the countryside he happened onto a farmstead where he met a woman “wild-eyed and flat fronted” which he claimed was typical of the region. From her isolation across the river some three miles from the Kipling’s new house, which they had named *Naulakha* (flatlanders have a strange habit of naming their houses) the woman could see Kipling’s lights in the windows at night. Kipling quotes her: “Be ye the new lights ‘crost the valley yonder? Ye don’t know what a comfort they’ve been to me this winter. Ye aren’t ever goin’ to shroud ‘em up – or be ye?” Kipling says he kept the lights on on her side of the house all night every night from that day forward. Thirty-four years later in 1936 George Aiken, who was to become a United States Senator from Vermont for six terms lived a few miles up the Connecticut valley from the old Kipling place. At that time he was serving as governor and writing a book entitled *Speaking from Vermont*. A passage: “I look off to the east and see Mount Monadnock rearing its peak through the clouds. Tonight the lights of the neighbors’ houses twinkle in friendliness from a dozen locations. Some of the neighboring houses are better than mine, some of them are not so good. None of us would willingly move away.” Thirty-four years after that (January 1, 1972) George Aiken sat down on a New Year’s Day in the very same house and began to write his final book. He is still haunted by lights in the nighttime. “Up here on Putney Mountain five miles from town,” he begins, “eight inches of new snow are piled on a foot of old snow and crust, the temperature is a little below zero.” The night before (New Year’s Eve) was cloudless. From his home in the hills he still finds it important to tell us that the night before he saw from across the valley the lights of his neighbors “blink at us from the distance.” Lights of hope in the darkness, a recurring theme in the hill country of northern New England. George Aiken, *Speaking from Vermont* (New York: Frederick A Stokes, 1938). George D. Aiken, *Aiken: Senate Diary: January 1972 – January 1975*, (Brattleboro, Vermont: The Stephen Greene Press, 1976): 3. After reading Kipling on Vermont women (wild-eyed and flat fronted) I was perplexed for some time. Then, weeks later, I happened to return to the account again and a glorious truth became apparent. The woman to whom Kipling referred lived across the Connecticut River in New Hampshire. Conundrum solved.

degeneracy cry' inevitably affected attitudes toward the town meeting." Citing one piece in the *Atlantic Monthly* that condemns town meeting for "a dearth of public spirit and civic honesty," always lowering expenditures to the "lowest possible limit" and the "buying and selling of votes," Daniell remarks: "One can almost hear Emerson turning in his grave."⁴⁰

Things were so bad in Vermont in the 1930's that the federal government went into action. Its proposal was to save the state by purchasing over 55 percent of it, throwing up most of the roads in the abandoned areas, closing the schools and moving all the farmers and townspeople—every living soul—down into the valley towns. There, if need be, they would receive federal money to start more productive farms. This would have finished almost half of the state's town meetings in an early example of "we had to destroy the village in order to save it." The plan was no mere speculation. Members of the Resettlement Administration arrived in Vermont in 1934 armed with maps and checkbooks and began attempts to purchase the lands involved. Finding few willing to sell they came up with an idea to lease all the land in one fell swoop. Accordingly they returned to Vermont in the winter of 1935 to make a formal presentation to the legislature. If Vermont would turn over 55 percent of the state to Washington, it would do all the work of depopulation (replacing the sub-marginal farms with forest and recreational areas), then lease it all back to Vermont for 100 years. All Vermont had to do was give up all rights to minerals and other natural products, pay for maintaining the new federal parks and forest lands and guarantee that none of the land *would ever again be occupied as homes*.

⁴⁰ Daniell, "Town Meeting." It is important to remember that Kipling is reflecting back on life in Brattleboro some thirty years hence. In fact these "reflections" were written at almost exactly the same time Aiken was writing *Speaking from Vermont*. His reference to "pleasure farms" has special relevance to Sinclair Lewis' place in Barnard called "Twin Farms."

The significance of the proposal was not only in *what* was proposed but the *ambiance* of those doing the proposing. Governor to be and then U.S. Senator to be George Aiken (on Vietnam: “Why don’t we declare victory and leave?”) was then Lieutenant Governor and Chairperson of the committee to consider the proposal. His take on the situation:

Such a display of flattery—attorneys, theorists, scientists, doctors of all degrees—converged on us. We should have been honored. This was February, and usually federal officials arrange to do their work in Vermont between June and October. . . . They placed before members of the legislature the astonishing story that, not only were these people in certain areas of the state very unhappy because of their condition, but that the State itself was very unhappy because such people existed in such areas. Vermont was very, very sick. . . . What of the fact that the people of these areas concerned did not care to be moved from their homes? Well, possibly these people weren’t of high enough *mental capacity* (emphasis my own) to understand that they really were unhappy.”⁴¹

Aiken himself, unbeknownst to the federal officials, was targeted for removal since his place was a sub-marginal farm surrounded by sub-marginal farms all around. In fact nearly half of the legislators were slated for relocation. Says Aiken. “The Vermont legislators exchanged strange looks on hearing the story from Washington. Some of them indulged in sly grins. Others maintained poker faces. The majority kept tongues in their cheeks. But all listened courteously. . . .” [but the] “federal government did not buy any sub-marginal land in Vermont.”⁴²

⁴¹ Aiken, *Speaking From Vermont*, 8-10. Two things to keep in mind. First, this is no conservative reaction against government as such. Aiken is not of the Vermont conservative Republican majority. In fact he was a leader of the opposition to it. Aiken was an agrarian, more a Jeffersonian republican. Aiken’s first book was entitled: *Pioneering with Wild Flowers*. See: Frank M. Bryan, *Yankee Politics in Rural Vermont*, (Hanover, New Hampshire: The University Press of New England, 1974): 85-93 and Duane Lockard, *New England State Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1959): 8-45. There is no better statement on Vermont politics prior to 1955 than Lockard’s. Second, the “sick” condition the federal officials found in Vermont was not one significantly influenced by the Depression, which was more muted in Vermont – especially on the hill-farms – precisely because “depressed” conditions had been a fact of life there as long as memory served.

⁴² A year later in a statewide referendum Vermonters rejected a federally sponsored Blue Ridge Ski Line Drive – type highway from Massachusetts to Canada down the spine of the state, the Green Mountains. They did this at their town meetings in March. If there is a better example of the relationship between real democracy and environmental protection in the history of the world, I’d like to hear about it. In the face of huge pots of gold offered by the federal government they voted not to have their mountains (as Ralph Nading Hill put it) hitched together by asphalt. Ralph

It is no giant step from this treatment of Vermonters to the eugenics movement.⁴³ The blurring of exuberant progressive reform and serious threats to liberalism was manifest in a book authored by “Two Hundred Vermonters” in 1931, which is mostly a compilation of plans for a better life through government. But time and again it nuzzles up to the dark side: “Most immigrant farmers bring with them a musical and artistic heritage far richer than that of our *native stock* (emphasis my own).” It was a scary book because while there are reforms to approve in its content there is no way one would give the authors the power to exercise their implementation.⁴⁴ Early on the movement had focused more purely on eugenics. Targets were rural families and ethnic groups, especially French Canadians and (to a lesser extent) the Irish.⁴⁵

Nading Hill *The Winooski – Heartway of Vermont* (New York: Rinehart, 1949) p p. 211. The nation got quite a kick out of our dilemma. From the *Saturday Evening Post* to the *Literary Digest* to *Harper’s Magazine* and all the leading papers up and down the east coast Vermont got free analysis, advice, and commentary. Frank M. Bryan and Kenneth Bruno, “Black-topping the Green Mountains: Socio-economic and Political Correlates of Ecological Decision-Making,” *Vermont History* 41 (Autumn, 1973): 224–235.

⁴³ There is in fact evidence of a linkage that transcends the conceptual. The *Fifth Annual Report of the Eugenics Survey of Vermont*, offered what historian Kevin Dann called a “strange inversion of the frontier myth” as a solution to what eugenicists called the decay of rural Vermont. They argue that people living in “infertile” areas should move to more “progressive communities” so that “degeneration in the quality of the stock of future citizens” will not occur. Further: “Deterioration can take place only in poor isolated communities where the potential capacities of the people are not challenged into use. The Report urged the State of Vermont to begin a program of buying up sub-marginal land. Three years later the federal government began to do that very thing. See: Kevin Dann, “From Degeneration to Regeneration: The Eugenics Survey of Vermont, 1925-1936,” *Vermont History* 59 (Winter, 1991): 5-29.

⁴⁴Two Hundred Vermonters, *Rural Vermont: A Program for the Future*, (Burlington, Vermont: The Vermont Commission on Country Life, 1931): 21. I first read this book in 1960 as a freshman at Saint Michael’s College in Winooski, Vermont, while writing a paper in defense of our little high school in Newbury which had about sixty students in four rooms and an FFA (Future Farmers of America) shop out back. It was fighting for its life against consolidation. We lost, of course. On finishing the book I had the distinct impression that I and too many of my friends were of a “stock” not altogether in tune with the author’s *program* for (as historian and former editor of *Vermont Life*, Charles Morrissey described their intentions) a more *invigorated* Vermont. Charles T. Morrissey, *Vermont: A Bicentennial History*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc. and Nashville: The American Association for State and Local History, 1981): 116. Anyone who doesn’t know Vermont and would like to get started should begin with Morrissey.

⁴⁵ As late as 1963 one finds the following claim in a section on town meeting in an American Government text: “Today, however, there are many conditions unfavorable to the town meeting type of government....The influx of French Canadians and Europeans who are unaccustomed to local self-government adds discord to the town

Professor of Zoology at the University of Vermont, founder and leading light of the eugenics movement in Vermont, Henry F. Perkins, describes the French Canadians as congenial, not very bright (“many have a pretty low I. Q.”) and liars (“You can’t believe a thing they tell you”). Otherwise (especially compared to the Irish) they are a hell-of-a race:

As a people they have a daintiness, a delicacy and liveliness that is not found in the older Yankee or Irish. Their poetry has as unusual charm and humor. Many of the traits of the French are superior to that of at least the Irish. They are always more friendly and congenial and kindly and make better neighbors than the Irish.⁴⁶

The eugenics movement in Vermont was complicated and in many ways subtle. But there was a clear connection between the search for misfits or “feebleminded” in rural places (as opposed to cities) and the efforts to develop and promote rural America. The enthusiasm of the reformers reinforced the specter that *genetic* decline was underway in many locations of the countryside.⁴⁷ How could town meetings, which presumably draw on our best behavior and our best reasoning, prosper in such environments?

By the 1930’s the emphasis of the movement had drifted from a weird kind of benign ethnic cleansing to benign landscape protection and legitimate (if debatable) progressive proposals for social and political reform. Then when funding dried up the movement faded and was pretty much over by mid-decade. That the eugenics movement (even broadly defined) was as successful as it was underlines the depth to which rural America had plunged in the national

meeting.” William A. McClenaghan, *Magruder’s American Government*, (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1963): 578.

⁴⁶ Dann, “*From Degeneration to Regeneration*,” 16.

⁴⁷ Vermont scholars and other interested scholars everywhere are fortunate to have a thorough, careful and sober analysis of the eugenics movement. See: Nancy L. Gallagher, *Breeding Better Vermonters*, (Hanover and London: The University Press of New England, 1999).

consciousness. It helps explain why in the years between 1890 and 1930 (give or take) town meeting was between a rock and a hard place.⁴⁸ The rock was progressivism. The hard place was the *authentic* decline of rural America as the homeland of choice for most Americans exacerbated by the *alleged* decline in the character of the people “who stayed behind.”⁴⁹

REVIVAL: SORT OF

The American conversation on town meeting was to shift one more time. The change featured a resuscitation that began in the 1930's in the popular and literary press—with a different twist. The electronic media, radio, had arrived. There would be no return, however, to the heady days of Jefferson, Emerson and de Tocqueville. The new tone seemed to be one of ambivalence. On the positive side the Depression demonstrated the frailty of large, distant institutions. Concurrent with the Depression northern New England was rediscovered by a new rural class with the intellectual wherewithal to extol the virtues of small town life to a national audience of readers. A tremendously successful radio program called “Town Meeting of the Air” did the

⁴⁸ My favorite town meeting put down was penned (it will come as no surprise) by H. L. Mencken at the high water mark of rural decline and the low water mark of the public's perception of town meeting. “Certainly no competent historian believes that the citizens assembled in a New England town meeting actually formulated *en masse* the transcendental and immortal measures that they adopted, nor even contributed anything of value to the discussion thereof . . . the New England town meeting was led and dominated by a few men of unusual initiative and determination, some of them genuinely superior, but most of them simply demagogues and fanatics. The citizens in general heard the discussion of several ideas and went through the motions of deciding between them, but there is no evidence that they ever had all the relevant facts before them or made any effort to unearth them, or that appeals to their reason always, or even usually, prevailed over appeals to their mere prejudice and superstition. Their appetite for logic, I venture, seldom got the better of their fear of hell, and the Beatitudes moved them far less powerfully than blood. Some of the most idiotic decisions ever come to mortal man were made by New England town meetings, and under the leadership of monomaniacs who are still looked upon as ineffable blossoms of the contemporary *kulture*.” H. L. Mencken, *Notes on Democracy*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1926): 72-73.

⁴⁹ See: Hal S. Barron's excellent treatment of Chelsea, Vermont; *Those Who Stayed Behind: Rural Society in 19th Century New England*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

same for over two million listeners per week. At the war's end the *New York Times Magazine* featured the century's most positive review of town meeting to appear in a journal of significant reputation.⁵⁰ Later the more wistful element of the revolutionary 1960's kicked in with its fascination with communal life and grassroots decision making. At the same time rural America benefited from the largest single shift in migration patterns since the beginning of the urban industrial revolution. On the negative side there came a continuing discontent from scholars trained by first generation progressives in the 1930's and 1940's and other liberal skeptics who were still suspicious of localized power structures. This was leavened by the "reapportionment revolution" a national movement to cleanse state legislatures of rural representatives whose numbers often made a mockery of the "one person one vote" principle. Joining in were the inevitable revisionists who found opportunity in town meeting's new popularity.

There is no better place to begin our understanding of these forces than in the mountain towns of Vermont. On September 12, 1928, the scourge of small town life, Sinclair Lewis—who was to little America what F. Scott Fitzgerald was to rich America—was visiting one of the country's tiniest towns. His postcard to H. L. Mencken of that date was stamped Plymouth, Vermont. One could find in Plymouth a population of 331 and the homeplace of the President of the United States. Would that we could know what was in his mind as he compared (as truly he must have) the rugged ups and downs of outback Vermont to the lonely prairies surrounding the Sauk Centre, Minnesota, of his youth. But we do know that the next day Lewis and his new wife, the journalist Dorothy Thompson, motored east through the Green Mountains to Barnard, another tiny hill town (population 584) where (within the week) they purchased a 300-acre farm.

⁵⁰ L. H. Thomas, "Democracy Town Meeting Style," *New York Times Magazine* (March 23, 1947): 24.

It was from the town of Barnard, Vermont, in the novel *Dodsworth* that Sinclair Lewis reversed his view of small town America. His biographer, Mark Schorer, calls *Dodsworth* a hinge in Lewis' writing because it "revealed what Sinclair Lewis believed in, at the very bottom of his blistered heart."⁵¹ The novel was, he says, *Main Street* in reverse.⁵² In Barnard Lewis made "detailed and drastic" revisions to the manuscript. He then returned to New York City and gave it to the publisher as the dark days of December began. The literary world would be shocked when it finally appeared in 1929. Sinclair Lewis had reneged.⁵³ His main character was decent and little places in America were almost humane. This symbolic moment marks the time the national mood began to list toward a more benign view of rural life.⁵⁴ Back up in the deep woods of Barnard the December wind howled and the big bucks that had survived deer season hunkered down in the snow. They didn't know it then but their world had begun to change.

In social science causation is as shy as a native trout. I suspect for instance that small towns and farm life would naturally have begun to look better to most Americans during the agony of the Depression. In the public eye economic collapse was a big place phenomenon. While blame for the calamity might well be cast at the feet of city bankers, business people, and bureaucrats, town meetings in places like Barnard were probably innocent. Certainly they could

⁵¹ Mark Schorer, *Sinclair Lewis* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: The University of Minnesota Press, 1963): 25.

⁵² Schorer, *Sinclair Lewis: An American Life*, 515.

⁵³ Lewis became one of Vermont's biggest boosters, calling Vermont "the only home he would ever really have." Historian Kevin Graffagnino says that his dream of an idealized rural life for himself lasted only eight years because of "personal conflicts [the breakup of his marriage to Dorothy Thompson] Lewis could not have anticipated before 1928 and could not control after 1937." Kevin Graffagnino, "It Did Happen Here: Sinclair Lewis and the Image of Vermont," *Vermont History* (Winter, 1981): 31- 38.

⁵⁴ Later in life of course, Lewis denied he had ever been part of the "revolt against the village." [August Derleth, *Three Literary Men: A Memoir of Sinclair Lewis, Sherwood Anderson, and Edgar Lee Masters*, (New York: Candlelight Press, 1963.)] Was this romantic retrospection? I tend to agree with Paul Carter. Maybe, maybe not. Carter, *The Twentys*, 9.

do no worse than what had been wrought by the people of the cities. At any rate the increase in national attention paid to town meeting beginning with and continuing throughout the Depression was dramatic.⁵⁵ The *Atlantic Monthly*, the *New York Times Magazine*, *Scribners*, *Life*, *Time* and *Colliers* are examples of major national outlets painting a pleasant picture of town meeting between 1935 and 1945.⁵⁶ In 1938 Thornton Wilder's popular play *Our Town* idealizes small town life in a place he calls Grovers Corners. It could be anywhere but Wilder chose New Hampshire and as Perry Westbrook reminds us he goes out of his way (with accents and speech rhythms) to nail down its location in northern New England.⁵⁷ How clear the connection between this renewed interest and a backlash from the Depression was nobody knows.

Jere Daniell offers a far bolder hypothesis. In 1935 the creation of what is now New England's premier regional voice, *Yankee* magazine had an influence when it immediately began publishing pieces on town meeting and town life and governance. So did regional novelists such

⁵⁵ A book entitled *Town Meeting Country* appeared in 1945 as part of an American Folkways series edited by Erskine Caldwell. Its importance is not in its content because the author, Clarence M. Webster, is content to champion myths and folklore as reality and to limit the only important town meetings in New England to those that meet in Connecticut (a lot of it any way) and a fair slice of western Massachusetts. But it is important that "town meeting" could be used to entitle a book in a series that featured other titles such as *Golden Gate Country*, *Blue Ridge Country* and *Buckeye Country* – titles which by definition and commercial impulse were sure to touch a positive chord among Americans. This would not have happened in 1920. Clarence M. Webster, *Town Meeting Country*, (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1945). The other major book on town meeting was published in 1940. (John Gould, *New England Town Meeting: Safeguard for Democracy*, (Brattleboro, Vermont, Stephen Daye Press, 1940). It is about town meeting in Maine. Some think it was inspired by the worldwide threat of Nazism. (Westbrook, *The New England Town*). But for whatever reason many of the important themes accented in most defenses of town meeting are found in the book. The ease of assimilation of outsiders into the town meeting process and the observation of children of all ages attending town meeting are important examples. Town meeting is romanticized in this book and there is too much causation linked to the "Yankee" character. Gould worries, for instance, that "French-Canadians are fine people [nice of him to say so] but in politics the organization is most unwieldy." (Gould, *New England Town Meeting*, 60). One suspects it is mill town unions he doesn't like. Or maybe "French-Canadian" is a code word for Catholic. Nevertheless in its fundamental description of town meeting and how it works the book reads and looks (there are a great many telling black and white pictures) true.

⁵⁶ Daniell, "Town Meeting."

⁵⁷ Westbrook, *The New England Town*, 217.

as Dorothy Canfield Fisher, who were building town meetings into their story lines. “But what really put the meetings back in the national limelight,” says Daniell, “was the extraordinary success of the radio program, ‘Town Meeting of the Air,’ which started broadcasting [on Memorial Day] the same year that *Yankee* got started.” The first program began with the words “Town Meetin’ Tonight! Town Meetin’ Tonight! Which way America—Fascism, Communism, Socialism, or Democracy?” “Town Meeting of the Air” sponsored the formation of discussion groups around the country to discuss the program’s weekly topics.⁵⁸ This was the golden age of radio and the National Broadcasting Company made use of it. So popular was the program that NBC found itself in court on several occasions protecting its name (“The Town Meetings”) and its trademark.⁵⁹ Within three years the program expanded from one radio station and 500,000 listeners to 78 stations and 2,500,000 listeners.⁶⁰ By the early 1950’s its prestige was immense. Awards included Peabodys⁶¹ in 1950 and 1954. Daniell is unequivocal in his assessment of the program’s influence: “‘Town Meeting of the Air’ did for twentieth century America what de Tocqueville had for the nineteenth.”⁶²

⁵⁸ An important text in rural sociology flagged “Town Meeting of the Air” as a popular radio program in rural America that exemplified the impact of communications technology on small town life. J. H. Kolb and Edmund de S. Brunner, *A Study of Rural Sociology: Its Organization and Changes*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1940): 488.

⁵⁹ “Town Meeting of the Air” has been put to sound academic uses. The most recent example is Barbara Dianne Savages, *Broadcasting Freedom: Radio War, and the Politics of Race*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1999). Savage uses individual programs aired in different locals throughout the country and responses to these programs (both in correspondence to the program’s managers by individuals and in the local press where the debates originated) to paint a compelling portrait of the nation’s evolving views on the race issue. See especially pages 206 – 222.

⁶⁰ Lawrence C. Zucker (Executive Director), The Town Hall, (<http://www.the-townhall-nyc.org/townmeetings.htm>).

⁶¹ The Peabody Award is the Oscar of radio.

⁶² Daniell, “Town Meeting.”

I would add a lone and friendly catalyst to Daniell's thesis. The remarkable influx of influential academics and intellectuals into the country that Frost called simply "north of Boston" (the title of his first book of poems) added an important legitimacy that "Town Meeting of the Air" could not.⁶³ From E. B. White in Maine⁶⁴ to Bernard DeVoto in Vermont a cadre of writers, editors, scientists and artists reestablished in the national mind the land Toynbee trivialized as "above the optimum climatic area" of America. Like sun on October's morning meadow, they melted the frost and warmed a nation's heart, which for a century had been fast asleep in the back pasture dreams of its youth. These intellectuals were but a vanguard of a massive relocation into rural New England that began in earnest in the 1960's and was to peak in the early 1980's. The earlier settlers (like Sinclair Lewis and Dorothy Thompson) came seeking peace and quiet in a place to think and to write. Land prices and the yearly rhythms of their work made it possible. Their disaffection with city life made it irresistible. Earlier, before the Depression a rampaging capitalism had brought huge vacation hotels to cool the rich in the summer mountains.⁶⁵ But the post-Depression newcomers were not rich and they were not

⁶³ The "Town Meeting of the Air" was far more populist in tone than its companion program, the *University of Chicago Round Table*. Although these two were the most popular, respected and influential of the growing number of such programs, "Town Meeting of the Air" "had a much livelier and less pretentious tone than the staid atmosphere of *Round Table*. Savages, *Broadcasting Freedom*, 206.

⁶⁴ As late as 1975 E. B. White was still fighting in Maine for the creativity that comes from local autonomy. E.B. White, "Letter from the East," *The New Yorker* (February 24, 1975): 40.

⁶⁵ Across the Connecticut River valley from my backyard in Newbury fifty miles of New Hampshire's White Mountain peaks marched uninterrupted north and south. But it was Mooselocke, which in its bulk is the largest single mountain east of the Mississippi that dominated. It was there that a huge hotel had been built on the *very top* at century's turn to please the wealthy. It burned to the ground in the 1930s. It was there that my brother David (who was a walker of mountain tops in his youth) and I had climbed on a summer's day in 1961 when I was 20. It was there among the boulders of the old foundation in the rare air of the mountain we sat and schemed about ways to save our town from the ravages of centralism. Kennedy was my hero when I started up Mooselocke. Like my mother I was a Truman Democrat. But by the time I had come down David had convinced me my loyalties were misplaced. His ten-hour seminar (up and down the mountain) took. I ditched Kennedy, the Democratic Party, and accepted communitarianism. Worse. He convinced me that localism was the only safe repository for the communal ideal. He was right, of course. *National* communitarianism is a dangerous oxymoron. But, my oh, my it has been lonely.

visitors. They became “summer people.” Heavily degraded, they bought an abandoned farm and stayed from last frost to first. Their work is heavy with their accounts of country life. Fundamentally, they told a benign story.

During this period another kind of intellectual began to pay attention to the American outback. These were conservationists and *practitioners* of rural life to a degree that the summer people were not. From Wisconsin Aldo Leopold gave us his classic *A Sand County Almanac*. From Maine Henry Beston wrote *Northern Farm*, a year’s chronicle of human and natural events in a small town; and Louise Dickenson Rich wrote *We Took to the Woods*. From Vermont (and then Maine) Helen and Scott Nearing came as close to anyone in fusing the life of social commentator and naturalist advocate, writing, for instance, back-to-back books on maple sugaring and economic theory. These and other voices from rural America cast a new and profoundly more benign light on the possibilities of living “the good life” in town meeting country.⁶⁶

There is no way to be in the hills of Peacham, Vermont, and not from time to time weep with the beauty of it.⁶⁷ Like most towns in Vermont it has a published history that (in terms of per capita words) is one of the most extensive histories of a political entity ever written. Here is

⁶⁶ Aldo Leopold, *Sand County Almanac*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1949); Henry Beston, *Northern Farm*, (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1948); Louise Dickenson Rich, *We Took to the Woods*, (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, Co., 1942); Helen Nearing, *Maple Sugar Book, Being a Plain, Practical Account of the Art of Sugaring with Remarks on Pioneering as a Way of Living in the Twentieth Century*, (New York: J. Day Company, 1950); Scott Nearing, *Economics for the Power Age: A Statement of First Principles*, (New York: J. Day, Co., 1952).

⁶⁷ I spent the summer of 1957 at age sixteen boarding at the Maple Corners Farm in Peacham while I worked for the State of Vermont (the State Geologist) mapping marl deposits under Eules Pond. I worked for Roger Wilder, the minister’s son in Newbury who managed to get me the job even though I was under age for State employees. This was my first real “paycheck” money. We came down every morning into a nice little dining room where usually sat a few tourists from here or there and where we were *served* breakfast with real juice and bacon and eggs and cereal. Days that summer were filled with black flies, muck, bloodsuckers (huge ones I still remember) and sweat. Still, I thought I had died and gone to heaven.

one of the paragraphs in which chroniclers of modern Peacham, Shepard B. Clough and Laura Quimby, describe the arrival of the summer people in the 1930's:

People of "back farms" also sold out and moved to better places. Sometimes the buyers were people from "away." Crane Briton, a Harvard University historian, acquired the farm of Mark Abbott on Penny Street; Herbert W. Schneider, a member of the Philosophy Department at Columbia, bought two adjoining places on Cow Hill, one from Will Sanborn and the other from Vernon Lamb; and Hamilton Slaight, a Vice-President of the Chase Manhattan Bank in New York, bought the farm of Wilbur Blodgett on East Hill after the barn burned in 1938. . . In the "in-migration" which took place, as in all migrations, pioneers blazed the trail and others, frequently their friends, followed. For example, Professor Schneider, who bought two places as early as 1929, had attracted fifteen of his friends to the area by 1939. Similarly, the first of the Harvard group had brought in a like number in the first ten years after the Depression began.⁶⁸

From the town of Arlington, Dorothy Canfield Fisher, an eclectic and best selling author with a national reputation worked hard to promote the image of rural America in the 1930's. More importantly she worked *directly* to resettle the outback of Vermont with people like herself, a Ph.D. (again) from Columbia. Robert Frost, Sarah Cleghorn, Stephany Humphrey and Norman Rockwell all lived close to Fisher's house in Arlington and there seems to be little doubt that her promotions of rural life had a class component attached.⁶⁹ In a remarkable speech before the State Chamber of Commerce in June of 1931 she called for a new promotional initiative

⁶⁸ Shepard B. Clough and Lorna Quimby, "Peacham, Vermont Fifty Years of Economic and Social Change 1929 – 1979," *Vermont History* 51(Winter, 1983): 5- 28. This article was an early excerpt from their volume to come, *the History of Peachman, Vermont*. Clough was one of the original "Columbia" pioneers and Quimby is a native, who at the publication of this article was Peacham's town clerk. What a perfect combination to write a local history of a Vermont town in the latter half of the 20th Century. Their project was conceived as an up date of Earnest L. Bogart's first class local history, *Peacham, The Story of a Vermont Hill Town*, (Montpelier: Vermont Historical Society, 1948). Thus we have 890 pages of local history for a town that averaged 515 men, women and children living in it the years they were published.

⁶⁹ Ida H. Washington, Professor Emeritus from the University of Massachusetts living in Weybridge, Vermont, a town that has provided several town meetings to the case base of this book, provides an excellent description of Fisher's contributions to the "summer people" movement. Ida H. Washington, "Dorothy Canfield Fisher's 'Tourists Accommodated' and Her Other Promotions of Vermont," *Vermont History* (Summer/Fall, 1997): 153-164.

using college catalogues for mailing lists, and a “young college man” to visit college campuses equipped with a slide show. Moreover, academics and persons of letters, she felt, were “not accustomed to bargain for things.” Therefore the state government should set up a board to scrutinize land sales and thus *protect* ivory tower seekers of abandoned hill farms from shrewd dealing Yankees.⁷⁰

So many came and they did so much.⁷¹ To Bethel, Vermont, in 1940, for instance, came Johns Hopkins’ Marshall Dimock a political scientist and highly placed member of the Roosevelt Administration, who became one of America’s leading scholars in Public Administration. He and his wife, author Gladys Ogden Dimock, penned dozens of books from their hill farm and Marshall was elected a state representative to serve Bethel in Montpelier in 1949.⁷² Hundreds of such examples could be listed. Yet no pair did more to nationalize the new image of the real “town meeting country” of northern New England than Bernard DeVoto and (to a lesser extent)

⁷⁰ *Burlington Free Press* (June 17, 1931): 6; and *Burlington Free Press* (June 18, 1931): 6 in Dann, “From Degeneration to Regeneration,” 22. Although Canfield Fisher has clear sympathies for educational elites they are clearly unrelated to class bias and, unlike many of her progressive associates she sees town meeting as an agent of class harmony rather than an impediment. One of her most famous heroes is a second generation Irishman who convinces a room full of Yankees at an Arlington town meeting that schools are better than bridges. Canfield Fisher is important as a rare example of an unabashed promoter of Vermont and a progressive who is not impatient with town meeting and the often less than pristine politics it often exhibits. She is for the most part clear eyed about town meeting. It can be tedious, quarrelsome, and petty. She is also aware (well before Mucur Olson’s exquisite presentation) of the “collective action problem.” She knows there is a “paradox that strictly enjoins letting the neighbors alone should emerge the actual practice of collection action.” But the empirical record tells her that: “a bunch of quite ordinary men and women, if they are not permanently separated into rival competing classes or groups, are really able, in spite of human rancor, to get together on how to run things – for everybody’s benefit, not for any one or any few.” Dorothy Canfield Fisher, *Vermont Tradition: The Biography of an Outlook on Life*, (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1953): 409-410. Also see: Mucur Olson, *The Logic of Collective Action*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965).

⁷¹ William J. Lederer (*A Nation of Sheep*) and David Dillenger (of the “Chicago Seven”) still lived in Peacham at the turn of the century.

⁷² My two favorite Dimock books are Marshall Dimock’s autobiography *The Center of my World* (1980) and Gladys Dimock’s *Home Ground* (1985). Mrs. Dimock was blind by the time she wrote *Home Ground*. Both were published near the end of their remarkable lives by the Countryman Press of Woodstock, Vermont.

Wallace Stegner. An accomplished writer and essayist Stegner lived on Caspian Lake in Greensboro, Vermont. DeVoto, historian (*Across the Wide Missouri*), critic (*Mark Twain's America*), and columnist (*Harper's Magazine* for twenty years) lived on Lake Seymour in Morgan. Both lakes are deep, cold, blue waters in Vermont's fabled "Northeast Kingdom." Both lie near rolling fields cast among the hard line ridges of a glacier's bygone passing. Both have villages and a little country store. For half the year they know only ice, do these lakes and the people who live nearby. And wind. And snow. For half the other half the people first prepare for warmth and then prepare for cold. In the middle, between the preparations, the people come down to the water and out on the water and even into the water. They splash and play while from the surrounding hills the farm boys look down wistfully through the sweat of a hay-day afternoon.

It was from Morgan that DeVoto wrote the most famous description of the Green Mountain State of all time: "There is no more Yankee than Polynesian in me. But whenever I go to Vermont I feel like I am traveling toward my own place."⁷³ It was from Greensboro that Stegner wrote what in my opinion is the all-time best description of the social psychology of Vermont's weather:

To one born in the west, where grass does not make turf except in high pasture meadows, the cropped sward of a Vermont ...pasture has a touch of the paradisiacal about it...as well as a reminder of boyhood trips into the wilderness. Though rains are frequent and often torrential in that country, which lies under the St. Lawrence storm track, the good days are like the good days in the western mountains. The light is intense, the deep sky is crossed by navies of fair-weather, strato-cumulus clouds, the horizons are cut with a diamond, the air has never been

⁷³ Bernard DeVoto, "The Easy Chair: Wayfarers Daybook," *Harper's Magazine* 203 (December, 1951): 46. See also: Bernard DeVoto, "New England, There She Stands," *Harper's Magazine* (March, 1932).

breathed. And those days come so infrequently between days of clouds and rain and violent thunderstorms, and are spaced through such a brief and fragile time, that a man believes he deserves them and has a right, because of what else he has to put up with, to enjoy them thoroughly.⁷⁴

These men were not Vermonters. In fact they were both from Utah. But then Robert Frost was from California. There is something haunting in this. Perhaps they were, more than a half century before the Montanan, Daniel Kemmis, had even begun to think about it, evidence of his theme of a nation “going east to find the west.”⁷⁵ Whatever it was that touched the hearts of these crafters

⁷⁴ Wallace Stegner, *The Uneasy Chair: A Biography of Bernard DeVoto*, (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, 1974).

⁷⁵ Daniel Kemmis, *Community and the Politics of Place*, (Norman, Oklahoma: The University of Oklahoma Press, 1990): 141.

of thought and language, they found something here they understood⁷⁶ and they let it be known they had. Americans everywhere seemed to want to listen.⁷⁷

By the end of the 1960's the view of rural America and small town life had dramatically shifted. After nearly two hundred years of national life Americans began filling in the massive empty spaces left when the great rural exodus began.⁷⁸ In 1975 a statistical guru for the ruralist community, USDA's Calvin Beale presented the first important paper on this trend entitled

⁷⁶ In DeVoto's case it might have been the Quebec and Southeast Transportation Company. This was the name coined by members of the Harvard community for DeVoto's network for smuggling liquor across the Canadian border between Rock Island Quebec and Morgan, Vermont. DeVoto not only supplied visitors to his place in Vermont, but also to his colleagues at their homes in Cambridge, Massachusetts. DeVoto it turns out was an accomplished smuggler. Charles Morrissey relates the following account of one such shipment delivered in 1931. "Young Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., who would later be a student of DeVoto's and still later an ally and admirer and working colleague, was fourteen years old in the fall of 1931, and he first met DeVoto because the *Harper's* editor would often appear on the Schlesinger doorstep carrying packages for the senior Schlesinger, the eminent Harvard historian. For a long time young Schlesinger assumed that DeVoto was the family bootlegger." [Charles Morrissey, "Wanted: An Oral History of Vermont During the Prohibition Era," *Vermont History* 43 (Fall, 1975): 322.] Actually DeVoto was simply carrying on a long-standing Vermont tradition of free trade with Canada stretching back to the War of 1812, a practice I was unwittingly involved in myself during the winter of 1965. I was training for a golden-gloves tournament in Burlington while teaching social studies at Orleans High School eighty miles northeast in the Kingdom. My trainer lived in Derby Line, Vermont (next door to Morgan) and now and then we went across the border to spar with Canadian fighters in Rock Island. Don was a veterinarian and was well known by the crossing guards. I noted that he would sometimes stop and drop off a couple of big boxes at a little gas station. One night he told me he was in fact smuggling cigarettes. Here was a successful professional with a beautiful wife and family and a great big house. He could jitterbug like crazy, ski beautifully, loved track events and kept himself busy training fighters and sparing with others, which included at one point the U.S. heavy weight team when they trained for the 1976 Olympics in Montreal at the University of Vermont. I was astounded he would risk all that for a few bucks. "Are you nuts?" I asked. "Bored" was all he said. Fourteen years later I heard he'd walked out into his office in the barn and killed himself. Anyway. By involving me in a smuggling operation across the Canadian line just east of Morgan he got me the closest to Harvard I'll probably ever get.

⁷⁷ In the mid-1960's the Vermont Development Department was still hell-bent-for leather to bring as many people into Vermont as fast as possible. (Within a decade a complete about face had occurred and a Democrat pulled the biggest upset in Vermont political history winning the governorship with the campaign slogan: "Vermont is not for Sale"— but that's another story.) They chose DeVoto's quote to lead the campaign. Causation as I have said is a mysterious thing. It is doubtful that DeVoto's words by themselves tipped the balance in many minds on whether or not to come to Vermont to live. But it is at least intriguing to note that the population increase in the decade following their appearance was the single largest population influx into the state since the Civil War. My own view is that the bottom line on the new rural renaissance as it was called in those days was the arrival of technology that negated many of the negatives of everyday life in rural places before World War II.

⁷⁸ Frank Bryan, "Rural Renaissance: Is America on the Move Again?" *Public Opinion* 5 (June/July, 1982): 16-21.

“Where are All the People Going”.⁷⁹ It took awhile to sink in – academics in most places were still involved in the “urban crisis” that had crested in the 1960’s. But by 1980 Peter Morrison of the Rand Corporation called it “one of the most important turnabouts in migration in the nation’s history.”⁸⁰ I suspect George McGovern was a bit ahead of the curve in 1972. His campaign slogan was “Come Home America.” Come home from Southeast Asia? Most certainly. But the slogan’s power came from a quickening heartbeat that was pulsing loud and clear from the outback, a heartbeat McGovern himself must have heard on the prairie grasses of South Dakota.

As usual pop culture was ahead of academia. Country music changed from lament of country lost as in Bill Anderson’s “City Lights”⁸¹ to beckoning back as in John Denver’s “Take Me Home Country Roads.”⁸² More importantly it began to “cross over” (as Patsy Cline had done in the early 1960’s) more and more to lead weekly sales in popular music. The urban jazz-soul musician Ray Charles caught the wave early with his huge album “Modern Sounds in Country and Western Music” and rock-a-billy pioneer Jerry Lee Lewis was not far behind with “Country Songs for City Folks.” While it had always been a bit chic for urban singers to sing country songs (to show how “real” they were *dontchaknow*) in the 1980’s Willy Nelson had the audacity to produce an album of urban songs for country folks. Welchman Tom Jones was a

⁷⁹ Calvin L. Beale, “Where Are All the People Going?” (Paper presented at the First National Conference on Rural America, Washington, D.C., April 14-17, 1975).

⁸⁰ William Severini, “Suburbia: End of the Golden Age,” *New York Times Magazine*, (March 16, 1980): 106-109.

⁸¹ “The world was dark and God made lights / To brighten up the night. / But the God above that made the stars / Didn’t make those city lights. / There’re just a place for men to hide / When things don’t turn out right. / A masquerade for loneliness / Behind those city lights.”

⁸² From the Blue Ridge to the Rocky Mountains John Denver sang of “country roads,” “a night in the forest,” and a “truck out on the four lane.” He sang “Thank God, I’m a country boy” and “sometimes this old farm seems like a long, lost friend.” He sang these songs to people in the cities and the suburbs and the outback. In doing so he became one of the most popular vocalist of the 1970’s.

leading middle class American vocalist of the time. One of his biggest hits was Curly Putnam's

“Green, Green Grass of Home.” Hear the words:

“The old home place is still standing
 Though the paint is cracked and dried.
 There's the old oak tree that I used to play on
 ...
 Yes they'll all come to see me
 Arms reaching, smiling sweetly
 It's good to see the green, green grass of home.

In the national mind as rural goes so goes town meeting. But when the 1960's disappeared into the 1970's and country roads once more became a magnet for Americans, two fortuitous parallels were also present to revitalize the more positive tone of the American conversation on town meeting. First, the energy crisis so shook us up it led to a remarkable distrust of macro systems and a growing willingness to pay attention to small and decentralized – in energy sources and governance. The politics of this awareness (it could not be called a “movement”) reinforced and reinvigorated the second factor – the ideology of the left that had emerged from the youth, feminist and civil rights revolutions of the 1960's.⁸³ Crossover academics began to pay more attention to small places and human scale behavior, at least in metaphor, Charles Reich's *Greening of America* being the best example.⁸⁴

⁸³ An excellent anthology appeared in 1971 that provides an inclusive array of thinking about direct participatory democracy from the left during the period. C. George Benello and Dimetrios Roussopoulos, *The Case for Participatory Democracy: Some Prospects for a Radical Society*, (New York: Grossman Publishers, 1971).

⁸⁴ “For one almost convinced that it was necessary to accept ugliness and evil...” [that you read about in cities all the time] “and it was necessary to be a miser of dreams, it [the new consciousness] is an invitation to cry or laugh. For one who thought the world was inevitably incased in metal and plastic and plastic and sterile stone...” [translate, cities] “it seems a veritable greening of America.” Look, advised Reich, for “flowers pushing up through the concrete pavement.” Charles Reich, *The Greening of America* (New York: Random House, 1970): 6. The new rural romanticism became so silly that in some places city people began trying to lug the country into downtown America. Even one of my heroes, Lewis Mumford, got the fever. In the cities of the future “...ribbons of green must run through every quarter, forming a continuous web of garden and mall, widening at the edge of the city into protective greenbelts, so that the landscape and the garden will become an integral part of urban *no less than rural life*

This was sustained and developed by E. F. Schumacher⁸⁵ and his followers who formed a small⁸⁶ but ideologically eclectic band of true believers around the rallying cry “small is beautiful.” Scholars, activists, authors and poets like Wendell Berry, Murray Bookchin, Leopold Kohr, John McClaughry and Kirkpatrick Sale tended to the idea that governments work better when they are small rather than big.⁸⁷ From Rutgers University political scientist Benjamin Barber’s important book *Strong Democracy* reinforced the drive for a more human scale politics.⁸⁸ At the same time and pretty much in tune with this new intellectual commitment to small came a fresh look at community from the urban perspective.⁸⁹ The neighborhood government movement flourished throughout the post Vietnam period. The city could become in

(emphasis my own). Lewis Mumford, *The Urban Prospect*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1968): 27. Even in usually level headed Vermont city planners in Burlington hauled huge boulders down out of the hills and scattered them along the city’s new pedestrian mall. Here we’ve been working for two-hundred years to get the damn things off our fields and out of sight and the first time we go into town to soak in some urban ambiance there they are. “Let the city be a city,” I wailed [Frank Bryan, “Lilacs and Homeland,” *Vermont Magazine* (Spring 1987): 104.] to no avail – echoing another (and in this case wiser) heroine, Jane Jacobs. See: Jane Jacobs, *The Economy of Cities*, (New York: Random House, 1969).

⁸⁵ E. F. Schumacher, *Small is Beautiful*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1973).

⁸⁶ What else could it be? A good summary of the “small is beautiful” movement is found in: Richard Lingeman, *Small Town America: A Narrative History 1620-Present*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1980): 441-442.

⁸⁷ Wendell Berry, *The Unsettling of America*, (New York: Avon Books, 1977); Murray Bookchin, *The Ecology of Freedom*, (Palo Alto: Cheshire Books, 1982); Bookchin, *The Limits of the City*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1974); Bookchin, *The Rise of Urbanization and the Decline of Citizenship*, (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1987); Leopold Kohr, “Critical Size” in Michael North (ed.) *Time Running Out? Best of Resurgence*, (Dorchester, Dorset: Prism Press, 1976); Kohr, *The Breakdown of Nations*, (New York: E. P., Dutton, 1978); Bryan and McClaughry, *The Vermont Papers*; Kirkpatrick Sale, *Dwellers in the Land: The Bioregional Union*, (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1985); Sale, *Human Scale*, (New York: Coward, McCann & Geoghegan, 1980).

⁸⁸ Benjamin R. Barber, *Strong Democracy*, (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1984).

⁸⁹ See Daniel Bell and Virginia Held, “The Community Revolution,” *The Public Interest* 16 (Summer 1969): 142-177; Harry C. Boyte, *The Backyard Revolution*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980); Bureau of Municipal Research, “Neighbor Participation in Local Government,” *Civic Affairs* 6 (January 1970); Bill Berkowitz, *Community Dreams*, (San Luis Obispo: Impact Publishers, 1984); Mark O. Hatfield, “Bringing Political Power Back Home: The Case for Neighborhood Government,” *Ripon Quarterly* 1 (1974); Milton Kotler, *Neighborhood Government*, (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1969); Robert A. Nisbet, *The Quest for Community*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971); Douglas Yates, *Neighborhood Democracy*, (Lexington, Massachusetts: D. C. Heath, 1973).

some limited but useful ways a federation of little neighborhoods, each with avenues of direct participation for citizens. Not surprisingly “town meeting” was heard more and more in the lexicon of the metropolis.⁹⁰

Political scientists as well were beginning to take a scholarly interest, if not in town meeting directly, at least in more direct forms of face-to-face politics – in instruments of street level bureaucracy, open hearings, and neighborhood decision-making. “Maximum feasible participation” became a rallying cry for academics and reformers alike.⁹¹ While, ironically, its intellectual credentials were established early by sociologists of the inner city, its popularity was linked to notions of small, direct, local and human scale, in a word, small town and rural notions.⁹² But serious scientific research on town meeting democracy got underway in the 1970’s as well. Two doctoral dissertations appeared in 1974.⁹³ By the end of the decade a group of political scientists at Dartmouth College skillfully integrated town meeting into the question of options for a citizenry grown restless with the national government. While they are not enthusiastic about town meeting’s chances to reinvigorate the national democracy, it was the first

⁹⁰ See “Town Meeting Gets Miami Tryout,” *American City*, (August 1972) and Aaron Levis, “Town Meeting Comes to Philadelphia,” *American City* 69 (May 1964).

⁹¹ In one of the more remarkable democratic expressions in the history of state constitutional reform Montana completely restructured its provisions for local government in its new constitution of 1972. One of the four forms of local government Montanans granted themselves the power to adopt (if in any particular place they so wished) was the town meeting. This was the first time this had ever happened in America. It didn’t take. Frank Bryan, “Town Meeting: Pure Democracy in Action?” *What this Community Needs* (Helena Montana: The State Commission on Local Government, 1976): 31-37.

⁹² Even some progressives were beginning to rethink their position on town meeting. See: J. Allen Smith, *The Spirit of American Government*, (New York: MacMillan Co., 1967): 352.

⁹³ Vivian Scott Hixson, “The New England Town Meeting Democracy: A Study of Matched Towns,” (Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, Michigan State University, 1974) and Neil G. Kotler, “Politics and Citizenship in New England Towns: A Study of participation and Political Education,” (Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, The University of Chicago, 1974).

time a major textbook designed for undergraduates featured town meeting.⁹⁴ Most importantly in 1969 Jane Mansbridge left the comforts of Cambridge behind and headed into the hills of Vermont for two years of difficult on the ground research in “Shelby.” She was the first to apply a complete array of state of the art intellectual technology to a study of town meeting. The result was the most important statement on the subject ever published.⁹⁵

While all this was happening boisterous criticism of town meeting continued. It came primarily from community power theorists who seriously undercut even the possibility for town meeting governance by seemingly questioning the legitimacy of democratic governance of *any form* in small communities. But there were also a goodly number of die-hard progressives that suspected (quite correctly) that much of the hoopla about rural life was nothing more than romantic nonsense.⁹⁶ Both groups were energized in the beginning (at least on their home turf – the halls of academia) by the reapportionment movement that crested in 1962 with the Supreme Court’s decision in *Baker v. Carr*. A crown fire of criticism from academia, journals of opinion and politicians exploded after World War II and ravaged the woodlands where town meeting was encamped.

⁹⁴ Dennis G. Sullivan, Robert T. Nalamura and Richard F. Winters, *How America is Ruled*, (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1980): 26-38. Their thoughtful treatment of town meeting presents a strong challenge to those who hold the merits of town meeting are sufficient to bequeath it a fundamental role in American democracy. I will deal with this challenge in the final chapter of Volume II.

⁹⁵ Mansbridge, *Beyond Adversary Democracy*. In academia and the journals of opinion Mansbridge’s book is almost universally viewed as being critical of town meeting. It was. But it was also balanced. One of the most poignant demonstrations of what seems to me to be our latent hostility to town meeting is the degree to which we seized on the negative and chose to ignore the positive in her chapters on “Selby.”

⁹⁶ Although Richard Hofstadter doesn’t fit the bill of a “die-hard progressive, see: Richard Hofstadter, “The Agrarian Myth and Commercial Realities,” in his *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to FDR*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1972): 3-22.

They had a point. As the people moved from country to city throughout the century the state legislatures failed to reapportion their seats to the districts in which the people had moved. By 1960 Vermont's smallest town with a population of 38 elected one member of the House of Representatives in Montpelier and the state's largest town with a population of 38,000 elected but one. Twelve percent of the population controlled 51 percent of the seats. In Mississippi twenty-nine percent of the people elected 51 percent of the members of the House. In Montana 16 percent of the population had that power in the Senate. Jack Kennedy summed up the problem in a speech before the American Municipal Conference in 1959. Rural dominated legislatures will "never distribute to our cities and suburbs a fair share of the tax dollars collected within their boundaries."⁹⁷

Everywhere the cities seemed to be stagnated or dying. Someone had poisoned the water. Who? The circumstantial evidence was overwhelming. Farmers and their small-town cousins had the motive, the opportunity, and the voting weapon. Hang 'em high said the journals of opinion.⁹⁸ Malapportioned state legislatures were "barnyards"⁹⁹ where pigs¹⁰⁰ were more important than people. City folks could never get justice¹⁰¹ when monopolistic,¹⁰²

⁹⁷ Quoted in Daniel R. Grant and H. C. Nixon, *State and Local Government*, 2nd Ed. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1968): 285.

⁹⁸ One of the few feisty defenders of the old system was Dartmouth's Noel Perrin, the scholar, essayist, and humorist who lives across the river in Vermont and has delighted readers and audiences for years with his wit and wisdom. See: Noel Perrin, "In Defense of Country Votes," *Yale Review* 25 (Autumn, 1962): 16-24.

⁹⁹ J. Anthony Lukas, "Barnyard Government in Maryland," *Reporter* 26 (April, 1962): 31-34.

¹⁰⁰ "People vs. Pigs," *Newsweek* 58 (July, 24, 1961): 25.

¹⁰¹ Editorial, "Justice for Metropolis," *America* 101 (July 18, 1959): 522-523.

¹⁰² Helen Hill Miller, "The City Vote and the Rural Monopoly," *Atlantic Monthly* 210 (October, 1962): 61-65.

unrepresentative¹⁰³ rural majorities, holed up in rotten borough legislatures¹⁰⁴ had the next election already rigged.¹⁰⁵ There were voices of reason and caution (many of them were political scientists—and good ones)¹⁰⁶ prior to the Court’s decision in 1962. But anyone who couldn’t hear the nastiness and clear rural bias from the crowd in those days didn’t want to. It wasn’t that rural people were innocent of the charge that they were protecting their seats in the legislature. They were guilty as hell. The city folks of course were shocked, *shocked* to discover that such behavior was going on. But as we were soon to discover (again because political scientists did a lot of hard work)¹⁰⁷ that was about all they were guilty of. The farmers were innocent of any serious felony. A misdemeanor, perhaps, but it didn’t require a rope. Rural people may have had

¹⁰³ Editorial, “Unrepresentatives,” *New Republic* (January, 1962): 3-5

¹⁰⁴ Richard L. Neuberger, “Our Rotten Borough Legislatures,” *Survey* 83 (February, 1954): 54.

¹⁰⁵ Richard Lee Strout, “The Next Election is Already Rigged,” *Harpers* (December, 1961): 34-40.

¹⁰⁶ Some of these are: John B. McConaughy, “Certain Personality Factors of State Legislators in South Carolina,” *American Political Science Review* 44 (June, 1950): 1051-1065; Murray C. Havens, *City vs. Farm*, (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press); David R. Derge, “Metropolitan and Outstate Alignments in Illinois and Missouri Legislative Delegations,” *The American Political Science Review* 52 (December, 1958): 1051-1065; Robert J. Pitchell, “Reapportionment as a Control of Voting in California,” *Western Political Quarterly* 14 (March, 1961): 214-215. Daniel P. Moynihan, “The Question of the States,” *Commonweal* 77 (October, 12, 1962): 65-68; Duane Lockard, *The Politics of State and Local Government*, (New York: The Macmillian Company, 1963).

¹⁰⁷ Some of these are: David Brady and Douglas Edmunds, “One Man, One Vote – So What?” *Trans-action* 4 (March, 1967); Thomas R. Dye, “Malapportionment and Public Policy in the States,” *Journal of Politics* 27 (August, 1965): 586-601; Robert E. Firestone, “The Impact of Reapportionment Upon Government Aid Receipts Within Large Metropolitan Areas,” *Social Science Quarterly* 54 (September, 1973): 394-402; Richard R. Hofferbert, “The Relation Between Public Policy and Some Structural and Environmental Variables in the American States,” *American Political Science Review* 60 (March 1966): 73-82. Herbert Jacob “The Consequences of Malapportionment: A Note of Caution,” *Social Forces* 43 (December, 1964): 256-261; John P. White and Norman C. Thomas, “Urban and Rural Representation and State Legislative Apportionment,” *Western Political Quarterly* 17 (December, 1964): 724-742; A. Spencer Hill, “The Reapportionment Decisions: A Return to Dogma?” *Journal of Politics* 31 (February, 1969): 186-213. William de Ruberets, “How Apportionment and Selected Demographic Variables Relates to Policy Orientation,” *Western Political Quarterly* 22 (December, 1969): 904-920. Later more general studies of the effects of reapportionment are: Yung Hyo Cho and H. George Frederickson, “The Effects of Reapportionment: Subtle, Selective, Limited,” *National Civic Review* 63 (July, 1974): 357-362; Timothy G. O’Rourke, *The Impact of Reapportionment*, (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Books, 1980); Ward Y. Elliott, *The Rise of Guardian Democracy*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1974).

the opportunity, motive and weapon to destroy the city. But as it turns out they lacked the inclination.

It is but a baby step from the popular literature of the reapportionment movement to the more serious scholarship generated by several important community power studies published after World War II. These set the tone for an entire generation of social scientists interested in the possibility for and the character of democracy in localities. On the model of the Lynds' early classic, *Middletown: A Study of Modern American Culture*,¹⁰⁸ Arthur Vidich and Joseph Bensman published their equally important *Small Town in Mass Society* in 1958.¹⁰⁹ In both "Middletown" and "Springdale" whether or not the small town is capable of replicating (even in a cursory way) the democratic models forwarded in the first half of the 19th Century is open, suggest the authors, to serious question. Neither of these studies involved New England towns with town meetings. But Robert C. Wood's well-received *Suburbia: Its People and Their Problems*¹¹⁰ did. He was highly critical of town meeting democracy in Lincoln, Massachusetts. These and other community power studies of small towns were not seriously challenged with efforts of similar quality.¹¹¹ Moreover beyond these strong empirical contributions careful

¹⁰⁸ Robert S. Lynd and Helen M. Lynd, *Middletown*, (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1929) and Robert S. Lynd and Helen M. Lynd, *Middletown in Transition*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1937). About the same time as the appearance of *Middletown*, Thorstein Veblen laid waste to what he called "the country town" it was, he said, "an enclave of business elite where competition for sales precludes any hope of open, honest, democratic resolution of conflict." Thorstein Veblen, *Absentee Ownership and Business Enterprise in Recent Times* (New York: Viking Press, 1954) Chapter VII.

¹⁰⁹ Arthur J. Vidich and Joseph Bensman, *Small Town in Mass Society*, (rev. ed.) (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1968).

¹¹⁰ Robert C. Wood, *Suburbia: Its People and Their Problems*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1959). For a response see Joseph Zimmerman, "On the Other Hand," *National Civic Review* (January, 1966): 14 – 20, 28.

¹¹¹ Granville Hicks was more sympathetic but there is still little in *Small Town* to provide hope for anyone working for a continuance of the town meeting in the modern world. The town of his study, located in New York just across from Massachusetts and a bit below the Vermont / Massachusetts border. As for town meeting he says: "New

theoretical support was forthcoming from scholars like Grant McConnell who focused on the question of size in general and its negative implications for real democracy in small places.¹¹² In effect an entire generation of political scientists was teaching that both big *and* small were very bad for real democracy. With big, real democracy was impossible by definition.¹¹³ The best one could hope for was pluralism.¹¹⁴ With small, it was impossible by theory and this, it was said, had been demonstrated empirically.¹¹⁵ The best one could hope for was benign rule by a village elite.¹¹⁶ Either way town meeting was out of the picture.

Englander that I am, I believe that New York State would be better off if the town meeting system had persisted on this side of the border. I know, however, that the town meeting itself is an institution that is having to be reshaped to meet new needs.”(Granville Hicks, *Small Town*, (New York: The Macmillian Company, 1946): 194. For one of the best counterpoints to the dominant negative strain in the small town literature see French archeologist Herve Vareene’s treatment of “Appleton” a small town in Illinois. Harve Vareene, *Americans Together: Structural Diversity in a Midwestern Town*, (New York: Teacher’s College, Columbia University, 1977).

¹¹² Grant McConnell, *Private Power and American Democracy*, (New York: Alfred H. Knopf, 1966).

¹¹³ No one put this more beautifully than E. E. Schattschneider. “In other words an all American town meeting would be the largest, longest, and most boring and frustrating meeting imaginable. What would such a meeting produce? Total paralysis. What could it do? Nothing.” E.E. Schattschneider, *Two Hundred Million Americans in Search of a Government*, (New York: Holt Rinehart and Winston, 1969): 63.

¹¹⁴ Nelson W. Polsby, *Community Power and Political Party*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980).

¹¹⁵ Actually it wasn’t, quite. The huge preponderance of case studies claimed to show that *representative* democracy in small towns didn’t work. Little communities governed by town councils or village boards, they said, failed to parry the natural thrusts of oligarchy. That town meeting democracies would fail as well was (one can only suppose) assumed.

¹¹⁶ This was the centerpiece of the matured progressive argument. Vermont’s best progressive columnist of the period who fashioned a distinguished career with the state’s largest newspaper, the *Burlington Free Press* and then in Senator Robert Stafford’s office in Washington, expressed it as follows. “The Moderator is usually selected the night before the meeting by the clique that runs things, and he is quite often a front man for the ruling establishment in town. The Moderator can be counted on to decide disputes in favor of the Establishment on critical issues.” Vic Merki, “The Politics of Town Meeting,” *Chittenden* (February, 1971): 17-19. Another engaging essay that comes down hard on town meeting by a second generation progressive is: Robert Cenedella, “A Lesson in Civics,” *American Heritage* 12 (December, 1960).

This was often reflected in American government and politics textbooks beginning in the 1950's and 1960's and extending into the 1980's.¹¹⁷ Phrases like “attendance is often very poor” and “sparsely attended” are typical of the choices political scientists made when they contributed a sentence or two to town meeting democracy.¹¹⁸ In general they were not totally wrong. But equally correct and far more positive things could have been said as well or instead. Many textbooks, limited by the availability of hard data, resorted to pictures to augment their commentary. One shows an old man sleeping in the foreground of a town meeting in Vermont. The author is intent on emphasizing the point. The caption reads: “Direct Democracy: A Town Meeting in Vermont. You Will Note that Some of the Participants Appear to be Sleeping.”¹¹⁹ Another textbook features a picture of what appears to be a very lightly attended town meeting in Victory, Vermont. What the student is not told is that Victory is the smallest of Vermont's 246 incorporated towns and cities. At the time Victory had a *total* of 29 registered voters. One can

¹¹⁷ Authors of local government textbooks, who obviously were more familiar with the terrain, treated town meeting more objectively. Their view of town meeting in the future, however, was still not optimistic. Clyde Snider's judgment is typical: “The New England town meeting has had an illustrious history, and it seems still to function effectively in many small communities, particularly those in strictly rural areas. In general, however, popular interest in town meeting seems to be on the wane. Snider, *Local Government in Rural America*, 198. In 1952 Lane W. Lancaster is highly supportive of town meeting. But he is speaking in the past tense: “Taking all things into account, the New England town meeting was an admirable device. We may well admit it was inquisitive and gossipy, that it gave liberal rein to the crank, the bore, the windbag, and the trouble-maker, that it put a premium on talk, and that it was tolerant of somnolent administration. But in spite of these defects it had the sovereign merit of bringing the rulers and the ruled together, it made easy the ventilation of grievances, it encouraged an intelligent and disinterested attitude toward public questions, and it fostered at its best a keen sense of the reality of the community. In an age when the community was self-conscious it institutionalized the neighborliness of the village.” Lancaster goes on to argue the standard and fair hypothesis that modernism and town meeting cannot live together. I will treat this argument in some depth at the end of Volume II. Lane W. Lancaster, *Government in Rural America*, (New York: D. Van Nostrand Company, 1952): 41.

¹¹⁸ Frank M. Bryan, “Direct Democracy in the New England Town Meeting: Establishing Empirical Parameters,” (Paper delivered at the 1986 Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association. Washington D.C. August 28-31, 1986).

¹¹⁹ Harry T. Burnham, *Government and Politics in America*, (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1983): 36. How many pictures of the Congress of the United States of America could be taken, one wonders, which would show the same thing?

count 9 people in a picture that showed about one-third the hall. It is reasonable to assume that the other two thirds of the hall had at least an equal number of people. That would equal over 62 percent attendance, much higher than the percentage voting for president of the United States at the time.¹²⁰

In this way the liberal/progressive vs. communitarian dichotomy produced a palpable ambivalence in the public mind on the question of town meeting. Thus in 1962 *Newsweek* refers to it as a “Farce Down East.”

To hear granite-ribbed New Englanders tell it, the town meeting remains as staunch as Yankee frugality, as sacred as the flag on the Fourth of July. Sacred it may be, among local historians and starry-eyed artists like Norman Rockwell, but staunch it no longer is—at least in the state of Maine.

“Town meetings are poorly attended, manipulated by minorities, unrepresentative of the community, and cumbersome to the point of rendering town government unresponsive...” Modern complexities in local government...have forced many a Maine community...to switch important decisions to either elected officials or appointed town managers. This evolution is inevitable.¹²¹

Inevitable or not four years later the same magazine (one of America’s most influential) had changed its tune. “Farce Down East” was replaced with “New England: Basic Democracy” and the story told was one of town meeting working well in New London, New Hampshire on the question of whether or not to adopt a town plan.

¹²⁰ Weissberg, (1980).

¹²¹ “Farce Down East,” *Newsweek* (January 29, 1962): 74. Also see: John Guy La Plante, “What Killed the Town Meeting?” *Nation* (180 (February, 1958): 96 – 97. La Plante points out that one town in Massachusetts, Athol, failing to get a quorum for the second night in a row, had the fire department stage “a fake fire at the town hall, complete with a general alarm sounded on the warning system, screaming sirens, roaring engines and flashing lights, in an attempt to attract townspeople to the building.” *Ibid.* p. 97.

Thus did one of the oldest forms of democracy extant, the New England town meeting, resolve a major local issue—in a way that defied all the defeatist discussion about modern man’s alienation from his complex government. The town-meeting season wound up last week with hundreds of such gatherings having been held and decisions made in town halls, gymnasiums and school auditoriums from Maine to Massachusetts. And together they added up to solid testimony that this venerable and distinctly American institution, dating from 150 years before the Revolution, was still a spry and vital form of government.¹²²

About ten years after the *Newsweek* piece *Time Magazine* spent town meeting day in Huntington, Vermont (just down the hollow from where I’m sitting at this moment) and left impressed. “The budget was approved at 2:27. The meeting adjourned two minutes later, after one citizen’s parting complaint that the dog-pound keeper was letting too many loose dogs run around town.¹²³ By and large Huntingtonians seemed to genuinely like and trust each other.

¹²² “New England: Basic Democracy,” *Newsweek* (April 4, 1966): 32, 34. It is time for some Yankee skepticism. My forty years of watching, participating in, studying and writing about town meeting has provided me with built in danger signals. They were immediately activated when this piece began with the description of New London as a “lovely old lakeside village.” It is old and lovely. But so what? And it is not a “village on lake.” There is a lake but the village (really a town) is nearby but not exactly on it. The school gym “was jammed,” says the *Newsweek* reporter. No doubt. That night. Moreover, the issue turned on a reasoned debate. Maybe. But it is just as likely that “pro-plan” citizens simply got the word around and outnumbered the anti-plan folks. Most suspicious of all is the fact the town *did the right thing* according to *Newsweek*. They adopted the plan. Would the reporter have been as happy with town meeting if they had not? Would he have sung New London’s praises as loudly if the opposition to the plan led by a “full bearded” town officer with thirty years incumbency named Paul Gay had won? Mr. Gay, who spoke with “an exaggerated Yankee twang” (dontchknow) is reported as saying ““We know where everything is in this town, and there’s no need for outsiders coming in and trying to tell us what to do.” Perfect. This silly reasoning was trumped by one Lansing Bailey. Lansing was a “slim soft spoken” recent arrival in town. Newcomers are always slim and soft spoken, especially when described by reporters who live in big cities near a health club. Lansing Baily (I swear to God) had bought a local establishment called the Edgewood Inn only two years earlier. It could only get better if Paul Gay had had a brother named Paul. Defenders of town meeting will want to take heart with this particular report by such a prestigious national publication. They should. Town meeting did work. But town meeting also must be credited when the locals make a “mistake.” If it is not it is doomed.

¹²³ I had a loose dog running around Huntington after he took off from my place in Starksboro on a winter night in 1972. His name was Flip and I often took him to work and he’d wait patiently outside the classroom for me. He even made the Saint Michael’s Yearbook of 1971 when some student took a picture of us sitting under a tree eating lunch. He got shot running deer in Huntington. I never held it against the guy who shot him. I’d shoot a dog chasing deer in the deep snow too. In this case Flip died happy chasing deer. I was the damn fool for letting him get loose in the first place.

Tocqueville would have been pleased.”¹²⁴ About ten years after that in 1986 the *Washington Post* published an article on its editorial page entitled “Town Meetings Don’t Work” with the subtitle, “In New England These Days, Small Isn’t So Beautiful.”¹²⁵ At the same time New England’s most important newspaper, *The Boston Globe* featured an article entitled “Maybe It’s Sloppy, But It’s Good Government.”¹²⁶

In my review of the popular literature on town meeting since the 1940’s (of which I have presented only a few examples) one thing stands out. Those who criticize it or question its usefulness almost always seem repentant at the end. It is a strange thing this craving to place in the record a final apology in the guise of a kind word or two or a nod to better times long past. It is almost as if they were putting the gun to the head of Old Shep. No doubt some of this is disingenuous or patronizing, maybe even a Pascalian wager. But most of it seems sincere. One of the more thoughtful and accurate of the critical assessments was published by John Pierson who semi-retired from his job in the Washington Bureau of *The Wall Street Journal* to help run his

¹²⁴ “New England: Rites of March: *Time* (March 14, 1977) I doubt the author knew it but this was quite a compliment. Huntington has had more than its share of conflict over the past thirty years – over the school, taxes, plans for an upscale golf course / housing development moving the post office away from the village center and so on. If he is right we have a case where town meeting, contrary to most of the expectations generated in the literature is capable of channeling and resolving legitimate conflict in the context of open, communal, and face-to-face processes. Earlier in 1970 *Time* devoted its “American Scene” report to the town meeting to Mount Vernon, Maine, the town from which Erskine Caldwell wrote *Tobacco Road*. It too was very positive. Gregory Wierzniski, “American Scene: Participatory Democracy,” *Time* (April 13, 1970): 24.

¹²⁵ Robert Preer, “Town Meetings Don’t Work,” *The Washington Post* (July 13, 1986). Preer was a doctoral candidate in political science at Boston University. He interviewed me at some length prior to writing the article and I am pleased to announce that his final product wasn’t half bad. Actually it was about 40 percent bad. This was quite good given how little he knew at the outset. In 1998 Fred Bayles quoted me in *USA Today* as saying that “although the towns [in Vermont] have grown over three decades the number of citizens in attendance has dropped dramatically.” What I said was *because* the towns have grown larger the *percentage* of voters attending has gone down. He also wrote that I found “attendance in towns of 1,000 people or fewer remains a constant 25 percent.” No. The percentage of the citizens attending *increases* dramatically as towns get smaller. Fred Bayles, “Venerable Town Meeting is Slowly Losing its Voice,” *USA Today* (April 14, 1998): 3A. On reading Barnes’ article I vowed never to give another phone interview to the Press. I renege with the first request. Ego, I guess.

¹²⁶ Raymond Clark, “Maybe It’s Sloppy, But It’s Good Government,” *The Boston Globe* (February 22, 1985): 14.

family's farm in Pomfret, Vermont. One of the questions debated at the Pomfret town meeting was the matter of salt on the roads. Most of the working people along with the road crew were for it. Newcomers and the better off and the environmentalists were against it. Hear the final words of Pierson's "The Decline and Fall of Town Meeting":

The mind tells us that Town Meeting is a government whose time, in this space age, has passed. Towns just aren't efficient enough to be worth saving. But let's not fool ourselves about what we're giving up. Nothing—and that goes for the new form of town/country government I've proposed—nothing can replace a town's and Town Meeting's rich sense of history, community, and close human association. These are the things that give life to social arrangements. These are the heart.

And this citizen's heart? Well, it is still up there in Pomfret, where the late afternoon sun is pouring through those old glass windows, turning our company to gold. Salt has just lost, but a moment later someone makes a motion to thank the road crew "for its fine work in keeping the roads open this winter."

Now, if seventeen years as a Washington reporter have taught me anything, they've taught me that the press never applauds anyone, not even the president. We'll stand for the president, but we'll clap for no one simply out of obligation. Point of professional chastity, I guess.

But when someone moved to thank the Pomfret road crew, and the motion was seconded and approved, friends and foes of salt applauded with a roar. As for me, I dropped my pen and notebook and banged my hands together as lustily as my neighbors.

You see, they *are* my neighbors.¹²⁷

I know Pomfret well.¹²⁸ I do not know John Pierson well. I suspect, however, his words are more than romantic nonsense. I think they are wise. If so then they stand as a profound indictment of

¹²⁷ John Pierson, "The Decline and Fall of Town Meeting," *Blair and Ketcham's Country Journal* (March, 1982): 98-101. For an excellent balanced account of the problems facing town meeting published about the same time see: David Shribman, "The Town Meeting: New England Staple Faces Tide of Change," *Wall Street Journal* (March 7, 1986): 24.

¹²⁸ Pomfret is a town that appears more than the average in our town meeting data. We have minute-to-minute data on attendance, participation and debate in 11 meetings between 1970 and 1998. I have spent a lot of time deer hunting there and in the 1960's haying one of the little hill farms then owned by May Cole. One of my good friends

what is to follow. For the dominant national thesis on town meeting since the late 1970's is neither support nor attack. It is manipulation by prevarication for selfish ends. In the year 2000 more ordinary citizens of America know *about* town meeting than ever before. In the year 2000 fewer of these than ever before know what it *is*.

TOWN MEETING: A TOOL FOR REPRESENTATIVE NATIONALISM

On Monday night March 4, 1974 the little Connecticut River valley town of Thetford, Vermont, did something no duly constituted, legally incorporated, general purpose municipal government of the United States had ever done before. From that moment on the town meeting took on an entirely new meaning for Americans. The citizens of Thetford passed Article 14 on the agenda of the annual town meeting. Discussion had begun at 10:57 p.m. Voting started about 11:30 and stopped (and the ballot box was closed) at 11:55 p.m. It was all over except the counting. At ten minutes after midnight the vote was announced. The local and national press had been waiting since 7:30 p.m. At that time the town moderator, Matthew Wiencke, on opening the town meeting and seeing how many press people had showed up issued an order. The press would “be kept to the bleachers and the back of the hall.”¹²⁹ There were 420 citizens and 30 reporters in attendance at 7:30. By voting time, 31 percent of the citizens left for home. The vote was 160 “yea” and 130 “nay.”

Bucky Cole (a first class ox teamster and maker of fine yokes) was the subject of an essay I published in a book of contemporary Vermont essays. [Frank Bryan, “We are all Farmers,” in C. L. Gilbert (ed) *Vermont Odysseys: Contemporary Tales from the Green Mountain State*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1991):72 – 83.] His father, Tom Cole, was the foreman of the road crew in Pomfret the day John Pierson rose to applaud. He’s dead now and Bucky got married and moved out of town. But I still own a pair of oxen he kept for me during the winter of 1985-86 when they were calves and I was on a semester’s sabbatical in Washington. We haven’t gone deer hunting for years. But we will again one of these days.

¹²⁹ Town of Thetford, “Minutes of the 1974 Annual Town and School District Meeting,” *Town Report*, (Year ending December 1974): 64-66.

Impeach him, said the town. Impeach Nixon.¹³⁰

In mid-February a newcomer to Thetford and chairperson of the local Democratic committee, Jacqueline Lucy had gone to work to gather the necessary signatures together to require the selectmen to put the following on the Warning for the March town meeting:

That the citizens of the Town of Thetford, Vermont hereby vote Yea or Nay by secret Australian ballot to ask that the House of Representatives of the United States, and Vermont's Congressman, Richard W. Mallary in particular, impeach Richard M. Nixon, 37th President of these United States of America, so that he can answer charges in trial before the United States Senate so that if he is found innocent he can govern effectively, but if found guilty by a two-thirds majority of the Senate, be removed from office, as so stated in the Constitution of the Federal Government of the United States of America.¹³¹

¹³⁰ Do not think it odd that 31 percent did not consider impeachment important enough to hang around for until midnight. Many were working people over fifty out on a weekday when they have to be in the barn at 5:00 a.m. or warming up the dozer or starting the day shift at Mary Hitchcock Hospital at 7:00 a.m. If you've ever been a working person you know that about 11 p.m. one is apt to conclude that either way, in or out, Nixon isn't worth it. Since it took so long to get to Article 14, Thetford was actually not the first town to vote to impeach Nixon. Earlier that evening down the Connecticut River about forty-five miles a similar resolution was approved, 135 to 108, in the town of Springfield, Vermont. Note for future reference that this was a much bigger town but had a much lower town meeting turnout.

¹³¹ Town of Thetford, *Town Report*, (Year ending December 31, 1973): 6-7. It is odd that the impeachment petition asked for a "secret Australian ballot" since all Australian ballots are by definition secret. Moreover, for strategic reasons the organizers would not have wanted the vote taken by a real Australian ballot. This is simply a paper ballot available all day so there is no need to actually attend town meeting to cast one. For instance in Thetford the town meeting was held Monday night while voting for town officers was done by Australian ballot on Tuesday. A daylong ballot would surely have increased the opposition to impeachment. My suspicion is that the impeachment organizers being newer to the system didn't fully understand how "Australian ballots" were used and how very easy it is to make any vote in town meeting a secret one. If seven voters request a secret ballot a secret ballot it must be. Three points: (1) This is no criticism of the organizers. Very few people in Vermont know exactly how the "Australian ballot" system works. When you modify the noun "ballot" with an adjective from "down under" it is no wonder most people simply look puzzled and say nothing. (2) The ease by which a secret ballot may be had demonstrates that New Englanders have always been aware of and sympathetic to one of the standard liberal critiques of town meeting; voting in public (for instance in a "company town") can often bring unfair pressure to bear on working class people. (3) I suspect there was little need to make the vote secret anyway. Yet one can see why impeachment supporters might have thought otherwise. After reading thousands of minutes from town meetings one achieves an ability to translate subtexts. Note for instance that in the minutes of the meeting Emily Hood (the town clerk) in her very short report on Article 14 (That's OK. It is a Yankee tradition.) did point out that "of the 903 on the check list" the vote was 160 to 130. Reminding history that only 33 percent of the voters had participated may have been a reminder that the town officers were not altogether pleased with Lucy's article. Or not. Anyway, to assume that anyone *feared* the town officers or would be embarrassed to have it known they wanted to impeach Nixon was (in my mind) to misread the culture of small town politics in Vermont – and especially in Thetford. Lucy with whom I became friends later in the 1970's moved to Washington and took a job with conservative political scientist (yes, the term is a mild oxymoron) and future United States Ambassador to the United Nations, Jeanne Kirkpatrick. If I ever see her again, I'm going to ask her how that went.

Now is as good a time as any to get familiar with what really happens at a town meeting.

To do this read the minutes as they deal with Articles 9 through 12:

Article 9. Martha Wiencke spoke on the Rice's Mills Community Assn., Inc., the uses of the building and rise taxes from \$25 to \$80. The article was amended to stabilize the taxes at \$30 for one year, thus giving the Association time to rewrite the By Laws of the Association.

Article 10. Rev. Sullivan asked permission to speak, request granted. He and Mrs. George Sowell spoke on the function of the Grange and value to members. An amendment was made to stabilize the Grange taxes for one year. This was lost by a voice vote. The motion was then made to stabilize the Grange taxes for five years at \$150.00. This was carried by a voice vote.

Article 11. It was voted by voice vote to raise \$86,900.00 for the General Fund and \$25,000.00 for the Highway Fund for a total of \$111,900.00 with all taxes payable on or before October 25, 1975 with interest of 1 percent per month, thereafter.

Article 14.^[132] This article could not be voted on by Australian ballot on Tuesday. Robert White, Helen Hopkins and Edward Kirkland spoke against the issue, while Bernard Benn, A. James Thorburn, Jacqueline Lucy and Robert Franzoni spoke in favor of the impeachment issue. The ballot box closed at 11:55 PM. Of the 903 on the checklist 294 cast their ballot, with 160 yes, in favor of impeachment, 130 no, against, 1 spoiled and 3 blank.

Article 12. The motion was made and passed that the clerk send Robert Vaughn, Sr., who has served faithfully as Selectman since 1969, a letter of appreciation.

Bernard Benn made the following resolution to Senator George D. Aiken:

Resolved that the voters of the Town of Thetford assembled at their Town Meeting of March 4, 1974, wish to express their appreciation to Senator George D. Aiken for his years of service, his moral leadership, and his lucid expression of matters important to mankind. This was a unanimous vote.

¹³² Article 13 was voted on the next day by Australian ballot. At the request of the moderator Article 14, the impeachment article, was taken up prior to Article 12, which was the "New Business" article.

The fact that the Thetford Academy Alumni Assn. was not listed as a Town Organization was brought to light and hoped that it would be corrected in 1975.

At 12:15 the motion was made to recess until 10:00 AM Tuesday March 5, 1974 for the balloting on Town Officers by Australian ballot from 10 AM to 7 PM at the Town Hall, Thetford Center, Vermont.

Attest: Emily E. Hood, Clerk¹³³

There amid a series of votes on local matters a little Vermont town had the audacity to ask for the impeachment of the President of the United States.¹³⁴

Several other Vermont towns voted on impeachment as well. In Norwich, next door to Thetford, more upscale and closer to Dartmouth the vote at the traditional day town meeting held on Tuesday was even more lopsided 154 to 39.¹³⁵ In still more upscale Woodstock, which is upland in the foothills (about thirty miles southwest of Dartmouth – but 500 miles away in

¹³³ Town of Thetford, “Minutes of the 1974 Town Meeting,” 66.

¹³⁴ See also: John Kifner, “Vermont Town Favors Impeachment of Nixon,” *New York Times* (March 6, 1974): 23. Kifner reports the following exchange. Jacqueline Lucy, the leader of the impeachment forces, had wound up her remarks by appealing to the New England, democratic, town meeting tradition: “‘Democracy starts here.’” She concluded. Speaking for the opposition Robert White a high school vocational education teacher reminded Lucy that New England traditions were not always to be emulated. For instance “women believed to be possessed had the Devil burned out of them at the stake.” To which one Edward C. Kirkland, a “...stooped, white-haired, retired professor of American economic history stood up and said in an indignant voice: ‘If there is anything I dislike it’s a joke that isn’t true. No woman had the Devil burned out of her in New England – not ever.’ He sat down amid applause and cheers. ‘They hanged them.’ The professor later confided.”

¹³⁵ The Norwich meeting opened at 10:00 a.m. and adjourned at 4:00 p.m. The vote on impeachment was the last of three items considered on Article 29, new business. The Norwich meeting is a good indicator of why one must be *at* a town meeting in order to study it properly. There were three votes taken at Norwich that day. Just before lunch 200 people voted (on a count of hands) to approve an administrative assistant for the town. Later in the afternoon by secret ballot 239 voted not to use the Australian ballot system for all expenditures exceeding \$1,000. But only 193 remained to vote by secret ballot on the impeachment proposal. Town of Norwich, “Record of the Annual Town Meeting of the Town of Norwich, Vermont Tuesday, March 5, 1974,” *Town Report*, (Year ending December 1974): 10-17. The town warning with the actual wording of the impeachment resolution is on pages 6-9 of the 1973 town report published in February prior to the March 1974 town meeting. Norwich’s reports were more thorough than most towns for the period. We have an official record of the impeachment votes in neither Springfield nor Woodstock. Their minutes included no mention of them. The Vermont Press Bureau reported that eight of the eleven towns where impeachment related resolutions came up during the 1974 town meeting voted positively. Howard Coffin, “Eight Communities Pass Impeachment Resolutions,” *The Rutland Herald* (March 6, 1974): 1, 6.

politics), killed an impeachment resolution.¹³⁶ National press for Vermont is a heady business.¹³⁷ Statewide press for an individual town meeting (there are over 225 towns that hold at least one each year) is also rare. Add to this the fact that interest groups were exploding in number in Vermont about this time and that we were smack on the heels of the Vietnam inspired national revolution in electronic media coverage and you have the ingredients of a new phenomenon – the *exploitation* of town meeting.

Between 1975 and 1985 interest groups descended on town meetings like wolves on a downed caribou. Right to life organizations introduced ordinances to ban abortions in this town or that. The Vermont Public Interest Research Group (VIRPG) did the same to prohibit trucks from carrying nuclear waste through town. Opposers of the leg-hold trap, balancers of the federal budget, critics of Hydro Quebec Power, champions of guns, and limiters of legislative terms (to name but a few) organized to get ordinances or resolutions on the warnings of as many towns as possible. Then they worked to get their supporters to town meeting. Then made sure the press got the results, when they were positive. Although the left was better at it, movements came from across the political spectrum. No matter that the towns had no authority to enact such ordinances. The purpose was publicity not policy.

¹³⁶ In the 1972 presidential election Nixon got 68 percent of the vote in Woodstock, five points above the statewide average of 63 percent. Norwich was 13 points below the statewide average. In fact McGovern carried Norwich by three voters. Thetford voted for Nixon but was at 58 percent five points below the statewide average. Springfield exactly matched the state mean for Nixon. It is trying to untangle these kind of relationships for over 1435 meetings in 210 different towns over thirty years that 95 percent of Volume I of this study is all about.

¹³⁷ Here is how my friend, Howard Coffin, put it in his article for the Vermont Press Bureau: “The action [passage of the impeachment resolutions] was magnified by the presence of the national news media in Vermont. All three major television networks and the national wire services let the nation know beginning Monday evening that a cry was going up in traditionally staunch Republican Vermont for impeachment.” Coffin, “Eight Communities,” 1.

The newfound favor town meeting had obtained in America in mid century – the magnetism of the “small is beautiful” ethic among national opinion elite and the other forces discussed earlier – had meant a new legitimacy for its decisions. These movements (especially those from the left) confirmed it. Now what had often been cast as nests of Neanderthal Yankees hold up in their town meetings, fighting progress, skimping on public spending for good causes and worst of all doing all this to protect a scheming little cadre of businessmen and their cronies became founts of wisdom and legitimacy. A band of scruffy college students hanging from the fences of a nuclear power plant was one thing but a *town meeting* of farmers and loggers and teachers and owners of “mom and pop” stores voting to disallow a nuclear plant in their village was something else indeed. It was De Tocqueville and Jefferson and apple pie and common sense. (Dontchaknow.)

Murray Bookchin understood the new American appreciation for town meeting and the power it held. He wrote in 1987

Vermont’s town meetings like those of its New England neighbors are often more effective nationally than they truly realize, precisely because they are hallowed by moral traditions that give America its national identity. It is the enormous weight of this moral voice, this invocation of an ethically charged past that haunts the present with its ambiance and freedom that gives them enormous political power for social change.¹³⁸

In 1983 the nation’s leading popular print news outlet, *USA Today*, devoted a cover story to town meeting in Vermont entitled “Hands-on Democracy in Vermont.” It was a quintessential portrayal of the new national “take” on town meeting. The front-page picture featured an old Vermonter in work clothes talking with an attractive younger woman across a wood stove in a country store in Ripton. The caption: “Town meeting day is as traditional as Howard Murray’s

¹³⁸ Bookchin, *The Rise of Urbanization*, 270.

chat at a country store with owner Sue Collitt.” The article’s inaccuracies were forgivable in themselves (town meeting day is not a state holiday in Vermont and Vermont towns do not have home rule) but tended to support the central thesis; town meeting is still lively, crusty, down home democracy where quaint rural wisdom prevails. A mix of tall tales (mostly true at the core) local humor and optimism (including just enough critique) made for very good and not egregiously misleading reading. The message was summarized neatly (ingeniously) by *USA* reporter Judith Horstman who quoted Faire Edwards, a 71-year-old woman from Waterbury: “It’s a rite of spring. It comes the same day you tap the maples and plant your tomato seeds in a south window. Why you might as well say God is dead, or that all the maples have been struck by lightening as to say the town meeting is dead.”¹³⁹

WITNESS

The meeting began, at ten o’clock, with a review of Cornwall’s General Fund Budget, of \$56,737 (it was passed with an amendment providing that a four-thousand-dollar surplus from the previous year should be used to reduce the amount that had to be raised by local taxes), proceeded to consider a seventy-nine-thousand-dollar Highway Budget (Ralph Payne, the Road Commissioner, a stocky, florid-faced man seated in the audience, announced that an unusually harsh winter had reduced the town’s sandpile to a third its normal size), and approved a nine-hundred-dollar grant to the public library and a two-thousand-dollar request for the purchase of two gas furnaces for the firehouse. (“The secondhand oil furnace we installed in 1950 is not reliable,” said the assistant fire chief, a burly, bearded man named Norman Cadoret. “We have too many thousands of dollars invested in those trucks to let the water in them freeze up.”) At eleven-thirty-five, Mr. Van Vleck read Article 9, which requested the President of the United States to propose to the Soviet Union a freeze on the production and deployment of nuclear weapons. There was a moment of contemplative silence as everyone in the room shifted gears mentally to accommodate the awesome prospect of a nuclear conflict. Then a lean, brown-haired man wearing an open-necked plaid sports shirt stood up and said, “My name is Gary Margolis. Over the past few years, I’ve become increasingly frightened by the escalating nuclear-arms race and its effects on our economy and our national morale. I’ve been equally frustrated trying to figure out what I, one citizen, in Cornwall, Vermont, could do to get my concerns known to our politicians. I want to encourage them to stop adding more weapons to those that the United States and the Soviet Union have stockpiled in their nuclear arsenals. It seems to me that these things are set on

¹³⁹ Judith Horstman, “Hands-on Democracy in Vermont,” *USA Today* (March 1, 1983): 1.

triggers, ready to go off. Giving myself a chance to speak out at this meeting is the best opportunity I have to send a message to our elected officials.”

Mr. Margolis was followed by Frank Somers, a short, voluble man in a natty sports jacket, who said that the meeting should go further than a simple resolution. “The country itself must put a tremendous amount of *moral* pressure, not only on our own government but on the U.S.S.R. as well, to promote a nuclear freeze,” he said. “We’ve been trying to do this for years, but we have to face the fact that we haven’t met with much success.”

Joan Landon, a library trustee, said she didn’t think that a town meeting was the proper forum for a discussion of nuclear disarmament, but Ann Ross, an elementary-school principal, replied that if enough resolutions were passed at the grass-roots level the politicians might start making a serious effort to contain the buildup of nuclear arms and delivery systems. “This, in turn, might lead to a rational bilateral treaty that would bring the situation under control,” she said. “Provided, of course, that there were adequate verification procedures.”

The final speaker was Gail Isenberg, a short, round-faced young woman, who said that she had moved up to Vermont from the Washington, D.C., area, because she didn’t want to live near a city that had a good chance of being turned into a nuclear crater. “I thought I was safe here until I realized there was a SAC base right across the lake,” she said. “Now I’m so relieved to find that somebody else is concerned about nuclear survival. We’ve got to start thinking about these issues, because our lives are at stake. I’m going to vote yes, because I’m terrified of what may happen if they don’t stop building nuclear bombs.”

Mr. Van Vleck called for a vote, and Article 9 passed by a unanimous chorus of “ayes”s. Then the meeting moved on to consider Article 10—a proposal to borrow seven thousand dollars for the purchase of a piece of land surrounding the town hall, in order to use part of it as a parking lot.¹⁴⁰

National attention paid to town meetings had reached its pinnacle in 1982 and the spotlight was beamed squarely at Vermont.¹⁴¹ This was the year that over 160 Vermont towns passed resolutions demanding a freeze in the expansion of nuclear armaments. With great portions of the national media still stunned and smarting over the election of Ronald Reagan the specter of the Vermont towns rising against Reagan’s bombs much as they had risen against Jefferson’s embargo was simply too sweet to resist. But make no mistake. These were legitimate

¹⁴⁰ “Town Meeting,” the *New Yorker* (March 15, 1982): 35-37.

¹⁴¹ Jere Danielle points out that New Hampshire led the way with national attention paid to town meeting as its first in the nation presidential primary gained importance in the 1960’s. “As early as 1964 *Yankee* editors noted, with obvious pleasure, “The eyes of the nation – the lens of television – and the voice of the press all focused on New Hampshire’s Big Town Meeting Day.” Danielle, “Town Meeting.”

votes cast (for the most part) by citizens who came to town meeting to vote on local budgets, repair roads, and in general maintain the civil order. While pro freeze activists were clearly extremely well organized at the state level and no one would deny that this outpouring of support would not have risen as it did without their involvement, still it was an event that in this century has never before or since been matched. Pro freeze advocates did not “pack” town meetings.¹⁴²

A few (including myself) had been opposing the use of town meetings as forums for special interest politics. The nuclear freeze vote took the wind out of our sails. It was hard to argue that the freeze organizers and what concerned them, nuclear holocaust, was just another special interest. In fact it was of such importance that it was the very thing towns *ought* to speak up about every now and then. My argument, expressed as a guest editorial (“My Turn”) in *Newsweek* held in part: “...What kind of logic suggests that communities that must be told how to bury their garbage or educate their kids are capable of advising presidents on foreign policy? Some of us hold they can *be trusted to do all three*. So we distrust those who would deny us the liberty to bury our garbage yet egg us on to advise on matters of foreign policy.”¹⁴³

When the *New Yorker* reported on the event on March 15, 1982, they called Pebble Brooks who lived at the dead end of a problematic dirt road on a hill across Big Hollow Road from me. Big Hollow Road isn’t a picnic either in mud season. Oddly, when the editor asked Pebble for a town meeting to attend to get the flavor of the debate, she sent them down to

¹⁴² I will discuss attendance rates and verbal participation scores on the freeze resolutions later in this volume. At this point suffice it to say that neither increased significantly in 1982 and matching towns with freeze resolutions against those without them produced little fluctuation either way.

¹⁴³ Frank Bryan, “Trouble in the Vermont Hills,” *Newsweek* 103 (March 5, 1984): 15. See also my *op ed* piece in the *New York Times*, “Town Meetings – a Relic,” *New York Times* (April 3, 1982): 25. Unfortunately one is not allowed to choose the title of an *op ed* piece. My point was that the town meeting might become a relic if the current trends of using it as a forum for special interests continued; not that it was one. This is the price one pays for publishing in newspapers, I suppose, even in America’s newspaper of record.

Cornwall instead of to Starksboro where we live. Perhaps she figured the Middlebury College influence (Middlebury borders Cornwall) would add a bit of decorum to the debate. As it turns out the Cornwall treatment of the issue was typical.

In the early 1980's a number of Vermont communities passed town meeting resolutions asking for an end to aid to the military regime in El Salvador. El Salvador's Ambassador to the United States was about to ask the Congress to give Ronald Reagan still *more* (\$110,000,000 more) in foreign aid for El Salvador. Vermonters were fair he figured so he requested equal time. They gave it and thus it came to be that one Rivas-Gallont appeared at a special town meeting in the town of Weston, Vermont (population 627)¹⁴⁴ to argue for the cash. Weston was one of the towns that had earlier voted against aid. After the second Weston town meeting, Jeffrey Good, who had spent four of his last six years as editor of the Ralph Nader founded magazine *Public Citizen* while living in Vermont had had enough. The event had turned into a circus he said, with TV crews and pack journalists and hot lights and "loudmouths who came from outside the town to grab the nationally televised soap box." Was Weston a "fluke or a portent?" he asked. "The burden of keeping the town meeting from becoming a sham," Goode argued in the *New York Times*, "lies partly with its would-be violators. Local and outside activists and network

¹⁴⁴ Just off the classic village green in Weston is Vermont's oldest and most famous summer playhouse. Weston is also known (as many small Vermont towns are) for an important citizen. Wrest Orton was at least a half century before his time making a good living through decentralized technology in Vermont. He created the *real* "Vermont Country Store" which is now famous throughout New England and in its way over a good part of America and beyond. He pioneered with "The Voice of the Mountains" a mail order catalogue and two small but for Vermont enormously important publishing houses. On his death in 1986 a foundation was formed in his name which as I write is engaged in fighting suburban sprawl. In Weston is also located a Benedictine monastery, the Weston Priory, which has been a haven for Latin American refugees. Besides the summer theater (at the time the El Salvador ambassador showed up) Weston had seven small manufactures (bowls, candy, toys etc.), six lodging establishments, six antique and gift shops, a library, a church, three restaurants, an active Grange, a Rod & Gun Club a Chamber of Commerce and a museum. Nearly one out of every ten registered voters held a public office. Six hundred twenty-seven women, men and children can get a lot done if they are *in fact* the town.

executives must recognize the fragility of this most stubbornly Yankee of traditions and resist the urge to dilute it, to create still more illusion.”¹⁴⁵

People like Jeffrey Goode and I feared the worst. We needn't have. Perhaps we underestimated the good sense of Vermonters or the sensitivity of the outside media people or¹⁴⁶ the miserable March weather in Vermont. Perhaps the misuse of town meetings simply dissipated with the decline of activism that came with Reagan, the end of the cold war, the changing generation and the hot economics of the 1990's. Perhaps important people read (and heeded) Goode's advice in the *New York Times* or mine in *Newsweek*. (But I doubt we mattered at all in the scheme of things.) Whatever the reason the incidence of using town meetings as democratically enshrouded public opinion polls began to slow after Weston and as the century closes has been reduced to now and then.¹⁴⁷

WITNESS

After graduating from UVM John Goodrow went on to work in the news department at WJOY radio in Burlington and now is a staff assistant to U.S. Senator Patrick Leahy.

The New England Town Meeting has often been called the last example of direct democracy left in the United States. For this reason, the Town Meeting attracts nationwide attention almost every year. This year, NBC's *Today Show* visited the Lincoln, Vermont, Town Meeting, one that I also attended. In watching the final edited product on the *Today Show*, I must say that what was on television was quite a bit different from what I saw.

¹⁴⁵ Jeffrey Goode, "Vermont Spoilers," *The New York Times* (March 26, 1983): 23.

¹⁴⁶ They can be sensitive. In fact on more than one occasion I've seen a heartwarming reluctance on their part when they walk through the doors of a town hall and are suddenly among, *really* among, common people doing real democracy. They somehow want to be careful.

¹⁴⁷ During this period Vermont towns began to re-express through their town meetings an international consciousness developed in their early years but dormant throughout most of this century. The town of Bridport in 1988, for example, passed the following resolution under Article 19, "new business." From the minutes: [The town moderator] "presented a document to be delivered to the residents of Bridport, Dorset, England to express their friendship and an invitation for them to visit their namesake Bridport, Vermont. This document signed by the Selectmen and will be delivered by Thomas Broughton to the Mayor of Bridport Dorset, England on March 22, 1988." Town of Bridport, Town Clerk, "Minutes of Town and School District Meeting March 1, 1988," *Town Report* (Year ending December 1988): 6.

The main problem with NBC's coverage was that it stereotyped Vermonters and the Town Meeting itself. NBC included brief coverage of the nuclear proliferation vote, and of course showed an intelligent immigrant from Connecticut talking about it. Although a couple of Vermonters spoke about the issue, it seems to me that the editors at NBC did not feel that the rest of the nation would believe that a real Vermonter knew anything about nuclear proliferation.

Although NBC did not spend much time on the nuclear proliferation vote, they did find time to spend on the issue of whether or not the Town of Lincoln would purchase a new dump truck. Of course, this time they were Vermont Yankee all the way. All three people featured in the coverage of this issue were Vermonters. First, they interviewed a truck driver, who was obviously awestruck by the camera, and did not have much to say, and as a result looked stupid. Then, NBC turned its cameras toward a fat man in a T-shirt, who spoke out against the purchase of the truck. This man was not really a good representation of the average person at the meeting, because he and his wife were the biggest nuisances at the meeting. Finally, NBC showed Moderator Bill Finger calling for a vote on whether to form a committee to study dump trucks. It was a humorous moment both on television, and at the actual meeting, but it really made a mockery of Finger's excellent work as moderator that night. Again, NBC portrayed Vermonters as the rest of the nation expects to see them, rather than including some very intelligent comments that were made throughout the meeting.

The presence of the cameras may have had some effect on actual participation at the Lincoln Town Meeting. Although I have no specifics, I was interested enough to ask a couple of the townspeople how they thought the cameras affected participation. The feeling was that some people who usually talk a lot did not speak up as much as usual, but it also worked the other way. Although I don't know the townspeople personally, I noticed a couple of citizens who I thought were performing for the camera.

Although I realize that NBC has severe time restrictions where story length is concerned, I felt that they could have done a better job with what time they had. Their stereotypical portrayal of Lincoln was a real disservice to Vermont. Rather than being objective in their coverage, they let their subjective visions of what Vermont is supposed to be like cloud the story. If it's "the Beverly Hillbillies" that NBC wants, they can produce the series again.¹⁴⁸

But town meeting was not to escape the first mad gush of the media age unscathed. National news people began to leave us alone. But the politicians didn't. They knew that romantic silliness or not, the town meeting reached back into the deep corners of the soul and stirred sacred longings. And, of course, they put this to their own use. Vermont was not without

¹⁴⁸ John Goodrow, "NBC Visits Lincoln Vermont," (Burlington, Vermont: University of Vermont, March 1982). Another student who went to Lincoln that year reported on a humorous event early on in the meeting that gave him hope that "if nothing else, the night would be entertaining . . . a young man of about thirty-five stood up and loudly asked that the *Tomorrow Show* should not be allowed to film the meeting. The request was 'cordially' denied by the moderator who said that 'all were welcome' at the meeting." Steve Fuchs, "Impressions of the Lincoln Town Meeting," (Burlington, Vermont: University of Vermont, March 1982).

guilt. I remember well the first time I got snookered. One of our United States Senators, Patrick Leahy announced in the Burlington *Free Press* that he would be speaking at a “town meeting” in Hinesburg, Vermont, and bringing with him a cabinet member from the Carter administration. It seemed to be an opportunity for me to record data from an all too rare “special” town meeting. That is, a town meeting petitioned by the townspeople to deal with a special problem that had come up between annual meetings. Accordingly, Melissa and I gathered up the data sheets and clipboards after supper and headed for Hinesburg. What we found was a public gathering. Senator Leahy was there with his cabinet member and after they got done complimenting each other they settled down to an interesting presentation and question and answer session. I was without a clue as we sat pencils poised waiting for the moderator to call the meeting to order. Was it a useful evening for the attenders? Yes. Was it a town meeting? No. It was bait and switch.

It wasn't long before a paper company under fire from environmentalists held a “town meeting” in Burlington to explain itself and a statewide women's “town meeting” was held in Montpelier. As the 1980's unfolded “town meeting” became so popular it was displacing the term “public meeting” as the description of choice for groups left and right, politicians Democratic or Republican, businesses big and small, ideologues left and right.¹⁴⁹ The movement finally reached absurdity in Vermont when a few years later the Gannett Corporation caught the town meeting wave and amid much self-generated publicity held a “town meeting” at the *Radisson Hotel* (as God is my witness) in Burlington. As a publicity gimmick it was fine. As a

¹⁴⁹ There was a tendency, however, for groups and candidates on the left to use the term more often. This seems less egregious to me since most of these groups profess, at least, to believe in grass roots democracy. Their sin was only one of shallow thought and good intentions gone astray. Groups on the right (not the decentralist right, mind you) were guilty of bad intentions, shallow thought *and* hypocrisy.

real time focus group designed to further corporate profits it was even better. As a town meeting it was a farce.¹⁵⁰ What is most interesting, however, is that Gannet was using these “town meetings” anywhere one of their papers was competitive, which is just about everywhere in America.

But they were not the pathfinders. Jimmy Carter had already nationalized the new “town meeting”¹⁵¹ and inserted it into the parlance of public proceedings. He first attended one in Massachusetts. This worked so well he tried it in Mississippi. Then Japan. Soon wherever the President went a town meeting was waiting for him. Reagan slowed the process down at least at the presidential level. It was unlikely after 1982 (when his foreign policy was slapped around by town meetings) that either he or Bush could do little else even if they had had the inclination. But Jimmy Carter, who one suspects was honestly committed to the idea, had legitimized the practice. At all other levels of governance “town meeting” was a term used more and more as an alias for “come and listen to us explain and you can ask questions too.”

At the same time a small but active cadre of political scientists had also begun to find a collateral use for the term town meeting. Electrify them.¹⁵² Theodore Becker of Auburn

¹⁵⁰ Frank M. Bryan, “Does the Town Meeting Offer an Option for Urban America?” *National Civic Review* (December, 1978): 523-527; and Frank Bryan, “Town Meeting in Mass Society—What Role Remains?” (Paper delivered at the annual meeting of the New England Political Science Association, Durham, New Hampshire, April 6-7, 1979).

¹⁵¹ Actually there were historical precedents for using “town meeting” to mean public hearing. As early as 1954 in the city of Philadelphia the Citizens Council on City Planning held a series of “town meetings” which featured presentations by the Mayor and other municipal officials, followed by a question and answer session with citizens in attendance. Levine, “Town Meetings Come to Philadelphia,” 129.

¹⁵² For a concise description of what is meant by ETM’s see: Duane Elgin and Ann Niehaus, “Electronic Town Meetings: A Working Report for the Development of Pilot ETM’s,” *Choosing Our Future* (Menlo Park, California: Choosing Our Future, July, 1986).

University is credited with coining the phrase, “electronic town meeting,” in the late 1970’s.¹⁵³ Here the idea was to expand the benefits of face-to-face town meeting like deliberation by using (first) advanced models of telecommunications and then the internet.¹⁵⁴ This could be done at local, state and even federal levels of governance. From initiative and referendum to “chat rooms” and “usenet” more and more political scientists advanced possibilities for decision-making by national majorities throughout the 1980’s and 1990’s.¹⁵⁵ It was Madison’s worst nightmare.¹⁵⁶ Becker himself was sensitive to the definitional gap between genuine town meetings and what was being proposed and so made warning in 1993.¹⁵⁷ Nevertheless ETM’s (electronic town meetings) had become significant enough in the scholarly literature and journals

¹⁵³ Theodore Becker, “Teledemocracy: Gathering Momentum in State and Local Governance,” *Spectrum: The Journal of State Government* (Spring, 1993): 14-21.

¹⁵⁴ Jefferson is often quoted as a retrospective supporter of “electronic democracy” especially in terms of his faith in an “informed citizenry.” Says a leader of the field Matthew F. Wilson, “I think Jefferson would love it.” See: Matthew F. Wilson, “Remarks at the 1994 Nieman Foundation Conference: Can Journalists Shape the New Technologies?” in *Nieman Reports* (Summer, 1994): 53-57.

¹⁵⁵ For a discussion of “chat rooms” and “Usenet” see the careful analysis in Kevin A. Hill and John E. Hughes, *Cyberpolitics* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1998): 109-131. “Will political chat rooms make our democracy better? The answer is not simple, but in general we think they will have little effect and what they do have will probably be negative.” *Ibid*, 130. For an excellent summary of a good bit of the literature on internet sponsored virtual communities see: Richard Davis, *The Web of Politics*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999): 164-167.

¹⁵⁶ Frank Bryan, “‘Three Chords and the Truth’: Town Meeting, Technology, and Democracy” (Paper delivered at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Atlanta Georgia, September, 1999). When the *scale* of governance is reduced the harm to the *nation* implied by potentially tyrannical electronically fashioned majorities is for the most part obviated. There still remains, of course, the problem of local factionalism. Much of the literature on electronic town meetings and teledemocracy generally is aimed at local governments. See Becker’s examples in: Theodore Becker, “Transforming Representative Democracy: Four Real-Life Experiments in Teledemocracy,” in Stephen Woolper, Christa Daryl Slaton, and Edward W. Schwerin (eds.) *Transformational Politics*, (New York: State University of New York Press, 1998).

¹⁵⁷ “Those who experiment with genuine ETM’s [electronic town meetings] emulate the New England town meeting—an entirely different breed of cat . . . thus those of us who have been testing electronic versions of traditional town meetings in the past decade agree that the generic ETM format needs to include an opinion tally following sufficient time for discussions, vigorous debate and deliberation.” Becker, “Transforming Representative Democracy.”

of opinion by the mid-1990's to earn a revisionist literature of their own.¹⁵⁸ Whatever the merits of the ETM it is clear that the term town meeting has assumed another new definition in the American conversation, one that further obfuscates the real thing.¹⁵⁹

Then came a final indignity: the use of "town meetings" as strategic devices in political campaigns. At this President Clinton was a master. A President of the United States standing before a crowd of ordinary people fielding questions in a seemingly ad hoc format is powerful imagery. It is also safer for the candidate. Citizen-delivered questions are easier to handle than those offered up by seasoned members of the press and the ebb and flow of the conversation is in the president's hands. In their textbook on American government one group of political scientists even went so far as to credit Clinton with ownership of staged town meetings as campaign devices, even though some would argue Ross Perot deserved a finder's fee. The authors include a picture of President Clinton under a huge sign that reads "Town Meeting" as he answers a question from a distant participant on a video screen before an audience in Providence, Rhode Island. The caption reads:

¹⁵⁸ See, for instance, the powerful case in: David Schenk, *Data Smog: Surviving the Information Glut*, (New York: Harper-Collins, 1997) where he says (page 137) "the electronic town hall allows for speedy communication and bad decision-making." See also John M. Streck, "Pulling the Plug on Electronic Town Meeting: Participatory Democracy and the Reality of the Usenet," in Chris Toulouse and Timothy W. Luke (ed.), *The Politics of Cyberspace*, (New York: Routledge, 1998): 18-47. One of the arguments that seems most persuasive is that mass electronic democracy aimed at the center will only strengthen and thus actually exacerbate the problem of special interests politics. One of the best ways to frame the issue is to read Mikey Kaus' take on Robert Wright's critique (in a *Time* cover story) of Alvin Toffler. See: Mickey Kaus, "Cyberpunk," *The New Republic* (February 27, 1995): 6. Perhaps the strongest countervailing notes of optimism in the 1990's was Richard Lanham's *The Electronic Word: Democracy, Technology, and the Arts*. In a review of the book David Wilson quotes him: "I think electronic expression has come not to destroy the Western arts and letters but to fulfill them." See: David L. Wilson, "Humanist Wins Praise for Book on the Role of New Technologies," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (October 5, 1994): 19-22.

¹⁵⁹ For a gentle caveat to the teledemocracy movement with special reference to town meeting see: Kevin Phillips, "Virtual Washington," *Time* (Spring, 1995): 60.

The town meeting of yesterday gave way to the electronic town meeting of today. Here Bill Clinton answers a question asked by a citizen in another location but whose image and voice were transmitted through video conferencing telecommunications equipment. As telecommunications that include video and voice become better and cheaper, politicians will be able to use Clinton's electronic town-meeting concept more and more.¹⁶⁰

Another important textbook features a picture with a group of citizens (a remarkably diverse group it appears by the first row at least) in closely packed chairs on a white floor on which is painted (in red and blue) "wsb-tv TOWN MEETING." Behind the group is a sign that reads: "Town Meeting with Bill Clinton." The caption is: "In recent years, candidates for office have sought out new means to reach the public. Town meetings have been a favorite media forum for Bill Clinton, because he, rather than a journalist or moderator, can control the agenda."¹⁶¹

Perhaps the most poignant example of the new town meeting consciousness is the changing references in the textbooks political scientists assign their students, especially in introductory level American government and politics courses. In the early days (prior to the mid-1960's) references to town meeting were limited, brief and structure bound. They began to increase in the 1960's and focus on politics and participation (or lack of it). In the 1970's and 1980's more positive notations were forthcoming. By the last half of the 1990's we were still saying very little to our students about town meeting, usually a sentence or two or a short

¹⁶⁰ George C. Edwards, III, Martin P. Wattenberg Robert L Lineberry, *Government in America People Politics and Policy*, 3rd ed. (New York: Longman, 1995): 328. The same photograph with the same caption also appear in: Steffen W. Schmidt, Mack C. Shelly, and Barbara A. Bardes, *American Politics and Government Today*, 1999-2000 ed. (Belmont, California: West/Wadsworth,1999): 351.

¹⁶¹ Benjamin Ginsberg, Theodore Lowi, and Margaret Weir, *We The People An Introduction to American Politics*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999): 303.

paragraph. In general, however the comments were neutral to positive.¹⁶² Throughout most of the post war period, however, these references were nearly always found in the “what is democracy?” section of the first chapter of the textbook. Beginning around 1990 they began to be found as often in the electoral politics chapter and more and more in the media chapter.¹⁶³ As the century closed some texts did not even mention town meeting *except* as a campaign device or public relations tool.¹⁶⁴ The Ginesberg, Lowi and Weir volume, for instance, cites it in three different chapters. In the *media* chapter town meeting is explained as a media-driven campaign technique, in *campaigns and elections* as the same thing and in *the presidency* as an example of

¹⁶² Pictures are often used—some even showing a crowded town meeting. In textbooks published after 1995 I found the best treatments of town meeting (in the sense they integrate the town meeting objectively into an account of real as opposed to direct or representative democracy) to be: James Eisenstein, Mark Kessler, Bruce A. Williams and Jacqueline Vaughn Switzer, *The Play of Power*, (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1996): 58-60; Edward S. Greenberg and Benjamin I. Page, *The Struggle for Democracy*, 4th ed. (New York: Addison Wesley Longman, Inc., 1999): 8-9; and Kenneth Janda, Jeffrey M. Berry, and Jerry Goldman, *The Challenge of Democracy*, 6th ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1999). The worst was: Morris P. Fiorina and Paul E. Peterson, *The New American Democracy*, 1st ed. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1998): 13-14. Here a picture is presented featuring nine or ten people scattered about in what looks like it might be a beat up old church, an old man wearing a hunting cap standing (he looks almost alone) and a wood stove complete with a stove pipe leading off into the foreground. The caption reads: “In towns like this one in rural New England, town meetings may be scheduled at unpredictable and rather unusual times, in order to obtain citizens’ votes on pressing budget issues. As a result turnout may be low.” This is a description (in picture and in print) of less than one half of one percent of Vermont’s town meetings. In the classic *Government by the People*, James MacGregor Burns, J. W. Pelterson and their colleagues include a balanced reference (about a page) to town meeting in the most recent edition of their national, state, and local version but do not mention it in their basic version. In the latter they conclude: “Today it is no longer possible, even if desirable, to assemble the citizens of any but the smallest towns to select their officers directly from among the citizenry.” James McGregor Burns, Thomas E. Cronin and David B. Magleby, *Government By the People: National, State, and Local Version*, 17th ed. (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1999): 696-698. See also: McGregor, *et al*, *Government By the People Basic Version* 18th ed. (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2000): 3.

¹⁶³ See for example: Walter E. Volkomer, *American Government*, 8th edition (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1988): 7, 87; Susan Welch, John Gruhl, John Comer, Susan M. Rigdon, and Jan Vermeer, *Understanding American Government*, 5th ed. (Belmont, California: West/Wadsworth, 1999): 16, 88; James Q. Wilson and John Dilulio, Jr., *American Government: The Essentials*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co. 1998): 6, 8, 12, 273.

¹⁶⁴ Milton C. Cummings, Jr. and David Wise, *Democracy Under Pressure*, (Fort Worth, Texas: Harcourt Brace, 1997): 224.

how a “town meeting” organized by a president to help sell a policy can have legitimate and positive effects.¹⁶⁵ Reference to town meeting as *democracy* is nowhere to be found.¹⁶⁶

It has come to this. The 20th Century’s final, most powerful contribution to the American conversation on town meeting was entitled “Ye Olde Town Gimmick.” It was published as an essay in *Time* in 1998 – a laser-guided bomb intending to further cripple the Clinton presidency with one more blast at the phoniness of it all. The target was Clinton’s use of “town meetings” and in particular the one that backfired (heckling and rudeness from the backbenchers) in Columbus Ohio when Clinton went forth to gain support for his foreign policy in Iraq. The event was carried by CNN and received broad coverage by the major television networks. Columnist Andrew Ferguson’s attack on fake town meetings was sound enough:

“... the pseudo town meeting, as developed by the President and his image-makers, is a ubiquitous political gimmick, practiced by candidates nationwide. Perfected in the President’s 1992 campaign, the format is familiar to anyone unlucky enough to own a TV. A television studio – or a hall outfitted like a TV studio – is filled with a carefully screened audience. A local television anchor, his hair perfectly in place, serves as master of ceremonies. The candidate, or President as the case may be, wanders the stage looking thoughtful, pensively wagging his wireless microphone. The people speak, the candidate listens. And then he responds with perfectly scripted spontaneity. Concerns are addressed, issues are aired, dialogue is facilitated. And the public is snowed.

... But in Ohio the trick got out of hand... After [this] rude awakening... the Clintonites may have a better understanding... With luck,

¹⁶⁵ Ginsberg, Lowi and Weir, *We the People*, 301-303, 380, 494.

¹⁶⁶ One text demonstrates the ambivalence we share about what to *say* about town meeting almost perfectly. It first pays lip service to the New England town meeting as an example of direct democracy where: “all town citizens gather in one hall to debate and decide important issues.” This is wrong. Only a very small percentage of the citizens attend town meeting. Following this, however, is an entire page on President Clinton’s *use* of “town meeting” to promote his agenda. The authors present this in “A Closer Look” section of the chapter. There is no distinction made between a real town meeting and a public hearing. Bruce Maroff, Raymond Seidelman, and Todd Swantrom, *The Democratic Debate: An Introduction to American Politics*, (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin Co., 1998): 5.

they'll be no more of that. They now know, if they didn't before, that those who live by the gimmick may perish by it too.¹⁶⁷

But there was collateral damage. Real town meetings. According to Ferguson they are “anachronisms today, surviving only in a few eccentric backwaters of Ye Olde New England.” (There is some truth there – about 25 percent.) Real town meeting has “fallen from favor” because it was “disorderly and unpredictable.” (The causation is totally false – although sometimes I wish it wasn't.) In real town meetings “the balance tends to tip toward the fellow with the loudest voice (Almost never the case.) – the crank with the thickest sheaf of mimeograph papers under his arm”¹⁶⁸ (This is about a quarter true. But the perpetrators are not “cranks” – and that's the trouble. Info-blackmail happens in town meeting, as it does every other decision-making arena on the planet.)

The piece is so well done it is hard not to smile on reading. The bomb dropped by the author on fake town meetings is perfectly appropriate.¹⁶⁹ But the shrapnel tore through the fabric of real town meetings as well, leaving the reader's perception of them shredded with gapping holes. Clearly articles like Ferguson's are useful if they help dissuade politicians from using the term “town meeting” in vain. It is also very unlikely that his easy, hackneyed and dismissive

¹⁶⁷ Andrew Ferguson, “Ye Olde Town Meeting Gimmick,” *Time* (March 2, 1998): 88.

¹⁶⁸ No. Believe it or not we gave up mimeograph and now possess copying machines—in fact state of the art models—even up here in the backwaters of Ye Olde New England (dontchaknow).

¹⁶⁹ At least three political scientists with enormous credibility in the discipline have a different interpretation of what happened at Ohio State University. In their textbook they say this. “During the town meeting, some heckling and shouts of protest were heard in the crowd, but the greatest influence on the issue came from the thoughtful and respectful questions posed by ordinary citizens in the audience, including some active-duty military personnel. ...President Clinton was so moved by these views that he held an emergency news conference the following morning and ordered his foreign policy advisors to reconvene in Washington. Ginesberg, Lowi and Weir, *We the People*, 494. As I re-edit this chapter (yet again) in the fall of 1999, Senator John McCain's honest and civil “town hall” campaign in New Hampshire is also a caveat to Ferguson's thesis.

inaccuracies have much influence on the American conversation about town meeting. But that is not the point. Whether it is about interest groups using town meetings for publicity, politicians using them for public hearings, democrats electrifying them for direct democracy, or candidates using them to get elected, the fact is that the more we have talked about town meetings in the last quarter decade of the 20th Century, the less we know about them. There is irony in this. Now when the term town meeting has for the first time in history achieved common day-by-day usage and taken a prominent position in the popular lexicon of politics its meaning in the American conversation is a counterfeit one.

Ferguson's opinion may have had little impact but major stories by the big time press do. They often find their way into the textbooks and are taken seriously by people who matter. I have great sympathy for reporters from the national press who come to write about Vermont town meetings. It is a difficult chore getting to know these cold, strange little towns in March. Still, this must be said. They often get it very wrong. When they do, serious damage to the national perspective on town meeting is wrought. Our paper "of record" for instance, the *New York Times* carried a major piece on the Shrewsbury town meeting in 1993. It is about Shrewsbury going to the Australian ballot system for all town issues. This means that discussion on the issues takes place on Monday night and all votes are done by secret ballot the next day. The reporter, Sara Rimer, got the fundamental point. Doing this would hurt the Shrewsbury town meeting.

But three important errors were made. The first was "Most towns have shifted to the secret ballot as Shrewsbury did last week." In fact only a couple of dozen of the more than 220 towns have done so. The second was "With all the new state and Federal regulations to take into account, meetings had turned into 8- and 10-hour marathons." Of the 1434 meetings that

comprise the data base of this book only three have lasted over eight hours. The average meeting lasted three hours and twenty-eight minutes. Worse, there is a strong *negative* relationship between increasing state and federal regulations and meeting length. Third was “Town meetings were a lot shorter when Shrewsbury was mostly farmers. It was easier to reach consensus.” Wrong again. Town meeting length has declined with the decline of farmers in town. This is a most egregious error for it reinforces a commonly held (and critically important notion held by political theorists from Rousseau to the present: real democracy can “work” (that is, consensual decisions are possible) only when homogeneity prevails.¹⁷⁰

Meantime academics (who should know better) write trash about town meeting with impunity. Hear the words penned by Professor Robert S. Lorch from his vantage point at the University of Colorado at Colorado Springs:

New England Towns are said to be the last remaining stronghold of direct democracy in the United States where citizens meet together as a deliberative body. The town’s great redeeming feature is said to be closeness to the people. However, direct democracy is apparently not as redeeming today as it once was – very few people show up for town meetings, unless, of course, something pertaining to liquor, sex, or vice is on the agenda. Town meetings normally take all day and sometimes all night if something exciting is under discussion. Most people don’t consider it worth taking a day off to attend. The vision of town halls packed wall to wall with alert citizens does not square with the reality very often. Sometimes nobody comes to a town meeting but the town officers and their families. They promptly reelect themselves, flip through the agenda, and go home, not to return for another year. Such is the frenzy for direct democracy.¹⁷¹

This is what a textbook popular enough to survive six printings by a major American publisher has to tell our students about town meeting. Lorch is right about attendance. But the

¹⁷⁰ Sara Rimer, “In Region of Its Birth, Town Meeting Cedes Tradition to the Television Age,” *The New York Times* (March 8, 1993): A7.

¹⁷¹ Robert S. Lorch, *State and Local Politics The Great Entanglement*, 2nd edition (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2001): 252. Lorch’s conclusions are undocumented.

rest is dead wrong and in its tone mean spirited. I have developed over 300 codes and sub-codes for issues discussed in Vermont town meetings from 1970 to the present. Only one involves liquor, sex or vice. This issue, whether or not a town will go “wet” or “dry” has turned up only a couple of dozen times in thirty years and nearly 1500 meetings. The thousands of student essays turned in over that same period dealt with hundreds of issues and decisions made by Vermont townspeople. Not one featured sex or vice. And believe me had these issues been prominent, they would have! Only a handful featured liquor. As for the clique of family members showing up, “flipping through the agenda,” and going home, this too is mythology established by over enthusiastic community power specialists decades ago (see above) and shamelessly exaggerated by people like Lorch.

Oh well. I look out my office window on this late November afternoon and I see the ice blue of Lake Champlain tossing white caps into the teeth of a brisk Canadian north wind. New York’s Adirondack range is ten miles west across the water and it looks to be a mile, so clear the mountain air. My office is at the top of the tallest building (four stories) on the highest hill near the lake. The flat November sun casts long shadows *northeast* this time of day, this time of year, sneaking under things from odd angles up and down the great valley through which Burgoyne sailed south to defeat at a place called Saratoga. It was from these waters he wrote in his diary: “Vermont abounds with the most rebellious race on the continent and hangs like a gathering storm on my left.” Indeed.

It will become cold soon. Very cold. The leaves are gone from the trees and the tourists have gone with them. Now is when the northland becomes quiet. It is time to hunker down for winter. There is no fighting it. But one month from now, thirty short days, in the dark of a

December afternoon the planet earth will pause for a moment, hesitate and then ever so slowly this end of it will begin to tip back towards the sun. The journey away from the cold and back to the light and to the life that follows will begin. About three weeks after this moment passes governments in over two hundred communities in Vermont will begin to plan the agendas for their springtime democracy, their town meetings. They have been doing this for two hundred years. It matters not what others may call it. It resides deep in our dearest dreams does this passion for place and the politics of peace. It is like the springtime. It is a longing.¹⁷²

What kind of place is it, this cradle of democracy, this Vermont?

¹⁷² I have always wondered about the relish with which most scholars and opinion elites in America feast upon the evidence (when it appears) of town meeting's weaknesses, that they are not all they are cracked up to be. As an example, I have watched carefully the responses to Mansbridge's work on Shelby. In fact, while critical of its limitations, Mansbridge issues some profoundly supportive declarations about town meeting. These claims, were they made for nearly any other political systems in the world today, would be considered remarkably positive. They are seldom if ever noted. Zimmerman, for instance, categorizes Mansbridge as a critic of town meeting and includes me in that category as well. Bryan agrees with Mansbridge because he concludes that "town meeting is dominated by middle class and professional people. In most towns the number of blue-collar and working-class people equals that of upscale professionals." True enough. But how many law-making bodies of the world are controlled by working people and middle-class professionals? Zimmerman, *The New England Town Meeting*, 809. Jennifer Tolbert Roberts writes about a tradition among students of Greek democracy that "was devoted to demonstrating the weaknesses of Athenian democracy with a passion that often bordered on obsession." Jennifer Tolbert Roberts, *Athens on Trial: The Anti-Democratic Tradition in Western Thought*, (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1994): 311. Could it be that we are afraid. What if it did work? What if it offered so much more than the alternatives that we were forced to deal with it. Seriously. What then?