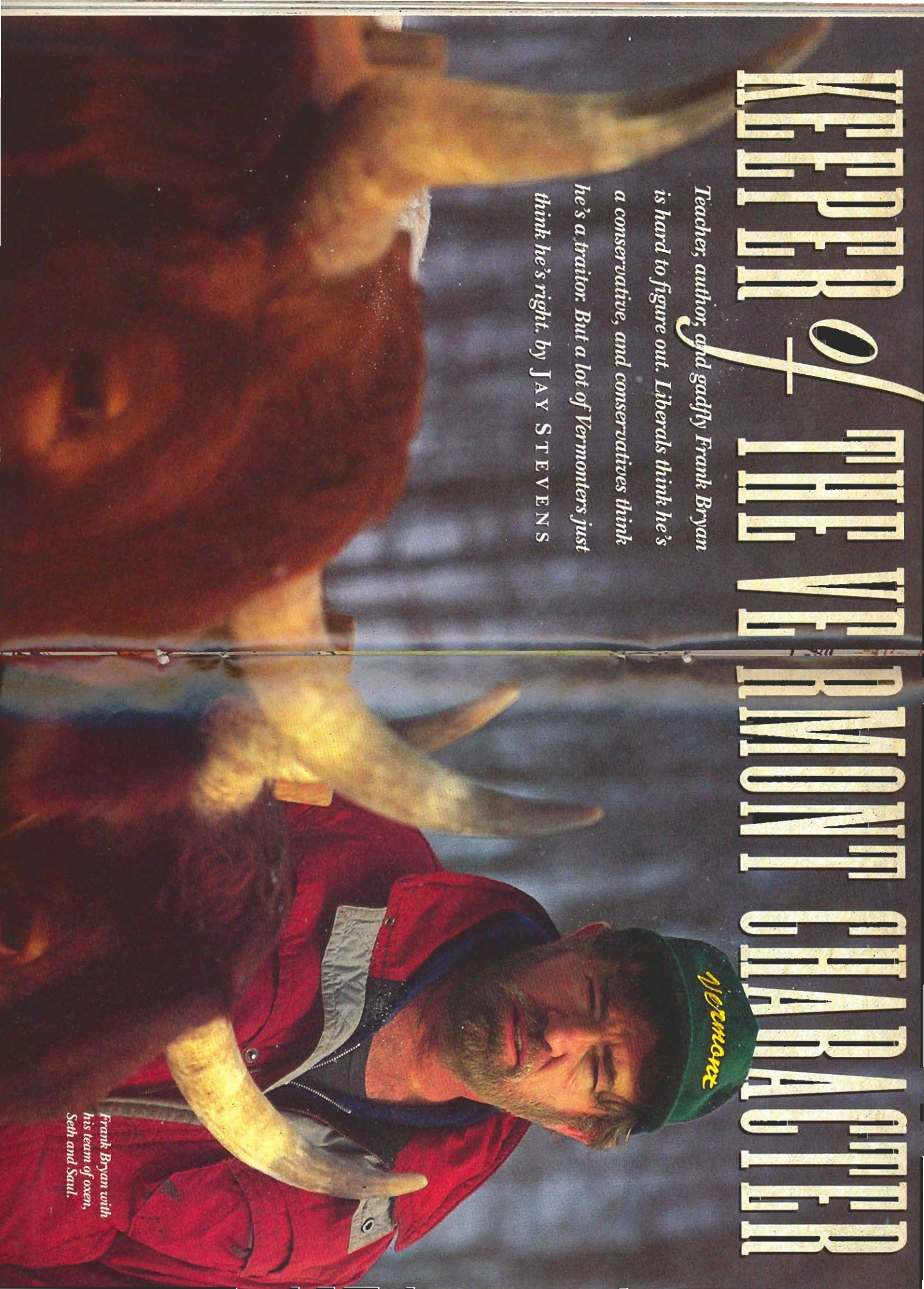


KEEPER of THE VERMONT CHARACTER

Teacher, author, and gaffly Frank Bryan is hard to figure out. Liberals think he's a conservative, and conservatives think he's a traitor. But a lot of Vermonters just think he's right. by JAY STEVENS



Frank Bryan with his team of oxen, Seth and Saul.

WHEN HE WAS A BOY in Newbury, Vermont, Frank Bryan and one of his friends once borrowed a defunct 30-caliber machine gun from the American Legion building and legged it down to the railroad tracks

to ambush the afternoon freight train. "We knew that since we were lying in wait between the rails, the gun aimed — ominously, we hoped — down the tracks, the engineer could not help but see us, understand we meant business, and screech to a stop."

They barely managed to drag the gun off the tracks before the Boston and Maine crashed by, not even bothering to slow down.

Today, Frank Bryan — author, college professor, satirist, contrarian, political gadfly, ox drover, after-dinner speaker, and self-appointed keeper of the Vermont character — is trying to halt an even bigger freight train. Call it Big Government, call it the 21st century — call it the 20th century — it's barreling down the tracks toward Vermont. And he's hoping he can bluff or bluster it to a halt.

Bryan is one of the most engaging enigmas on the New England political scene. He's that rare bird, a political philosopher who actually has a philosophy, though whether it's as forward-looking as Bryan likes to think or merely a nostalgic reaction, as some of his critics maintain, is an open question.

Still, Bryan's star, if not his ideas, seems to be rising. Last year, to celebrate the 200th an-

niversary of Vermont's entry into the Union, the Vermont Bicentennial Commission held a series of what were supposed to be light-hearted public debates over whether the Vermont forefathers had done the right thing in giving up their status as an independent republic. John Dooley, a justice of the Vermont Supreme Court, was tapped to argue the affirmative, and Bryan was picked to argue the opposing side — which quickly became known as the case for secession.

With Bryan, dressed in work boots, blue jeans, and red suspenders, growling that the sooner Vermont extricated itself from the grasp of "brain-dead Washington" the better, secession swept the series, trouncing union by a margin of nearly two to one. Even in Montpelier, the state capital, before what was described as the largest gathering of politicians, bureaucrats, and lobbyists in recent memory, Bryan and the secession argument won handily, 326-215.

Of course, no one seriously thought Vermonters wanted to secede. One of the funnier moments of the debates came when a letter was read from a man in Georgia, called the Confederate States of America, "it began, "My state is a former member. As far as secession goes, forget it! We tried it, and it didn't work out well."

Most commentators attributed the results of the debates to the usual public dissatisfaction with the System. But these days, a ca-

"BIG Government is not so much irrelevant, but a nuisance. What everyone wants to know is, how can we get it out of our lives?"



pacety to ignite and embody the public's outrage is political gold, providing a way can be found to coin it. Was Professor Bryan about to throw his hat — a logger's cap, no doubt — into the political ring?

"He's building his own lit- the pulpit, and he's doing a great job of it," marveled a friend of mine who's a minor cog in the state Democratic party. "The thing about Frank Bryan is that people don't think of him as either a Democrat or a Republican, a liberal or a conservative. He's got none of that baggage. They just think he's right."

CONSERVATIVE, liberal — these distinctions are meaningless, but unfortunately that's the language we have to talk about it," Frank Bryan is saying. "The *Rutland Herald* two years ago called me an ultraconservative. The reason that's bad is because these days that means racist, sexist, all those things that, God willing, I'm not. But in political science we've been writing about the demise of the center for a long, long time. It's no big thing. I tell you, the feeling out there, and it's getting stronger all the time, is that Big Government is not so much irrelevant, but a nuisance. What everyone wants to know is, how can we get it out of our lives?"

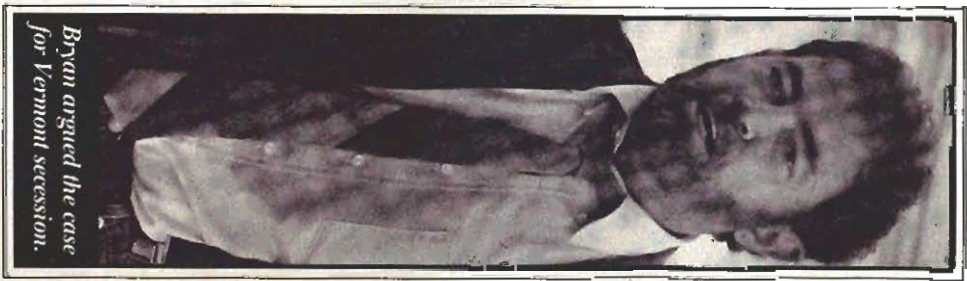
We're sitting in Bryan's office in one of the stately stone office buildings that line the University of Vermont green. It's a classic professor's cubicle, the walls obscured by floor-to-ceiling bookcases, the desk piled

with papers. The room was empty when I arrived, the door open. Then I heard a boom boom boom and Bryan appeared, bouncing a basketball. He was accompanied by a teenage boy, one of his seven children. "Go shoot some baskets," he said, tossing the boy the ball.

Frank Bryan looks like he's just hopped off a backhoe. That's the image he conveys in his book jacket photos, and it's even more vivid in person. He's got the thick muscled arms and sun-burned neck of an ox drover — which in fact he is. Yet he's also a tenured professor of political science, whose specialty is participatory democracy, and the author of numerous academic articles as well as several books; in short, an intellectual.

Over the years, Bryan has crafted a number of vignettes to explain how he got to be who he is. There's the day, for example, in the early 1960s, when he went hiking up New Hampshire's Mount Moosilauke with his older brother. On the way up, he says, he was a can-do Kennedy liberal who believed in a strong activist government committed to helping the little people. On the way down, he was a conservative Republican, having been convinced by his brother that the reign of the liberal experts spelled doom for the kind of small-town, decentralized democracy that Bryan valued.

"Once communities exceed a certain size, people tend to deal with each other in terms of roles," he explains. "This one you work



Bryan argued the case for Vermont secession.

with, that one you play with, that one you buy your food from, this one educates your kids. It's one-dimensional, not multidimensional and complicated. In a true community you are forced by size to get along with your neighbors, even if you don't like them. You have to be able to appreciate human failure, to realize that you're just as much of a jackass as everyone else seems to be.

"We have given up communal living in the name of perfection — a perfection specified by modern, urban imperatives and values. Our schools were 'too small.' We made them bigger. Our roads were 'too slow.' We made them faster. Our governments were 'too unwieldy.' We made them more efficient. The result is we are creating a life of administrative systems rather than human communities. We are destroying our neighborhoods and estranging ourselves from our neighbors."

Then there's the moment a few years later, in graduate school at the University of Connecticut, when Bryan was continually losing arguments with other political scientists over the merits of local government versus big government. They'd dismiss his arguments about community values with a sneer. *Where's your proof, Bryan? Cite your data!* And of course, he couldn't. There weren't any data because no one had ever bothered to gather any. People had been talking about democracy since fifth-century Athens, but no one had ever collected data about small-scale, person-to-person political interaction.

"It occurred to me that the town meetings in little Vermont towns are as close to decen-

tralized democracy as anyone has ever gotten. Oh, there was the commune system in 19th-century Russia, but who the hell knows about it? No one ever gathered the data!"

And so, for the last 20 years Bryan has been gathering the data. Chances are, if you're a student of Bryan's during the spring semester, you'll end up in some obscure Vermont town observing and recording what's going on at town meeting. At first, Bryan kept track of little more than how many citizens showed up and how many spoke. Today, he scans for 250 different variables and has sampled close to a thousand town meetings.

"TRUST
in assemblies of neighbors," he tells his audiences,

"is the ultimate compliment to the human race."



"I can tell you what issues women speak on — education, primarily. My data from the seventies show that statistically the first ten speakers would all be men. It was way beyond probability. Women would jump in during the next ten. But nowadays, that's all changed. Women are participating up front on all kinds of issues, though the ratio of men to women participants is still about 60-40."

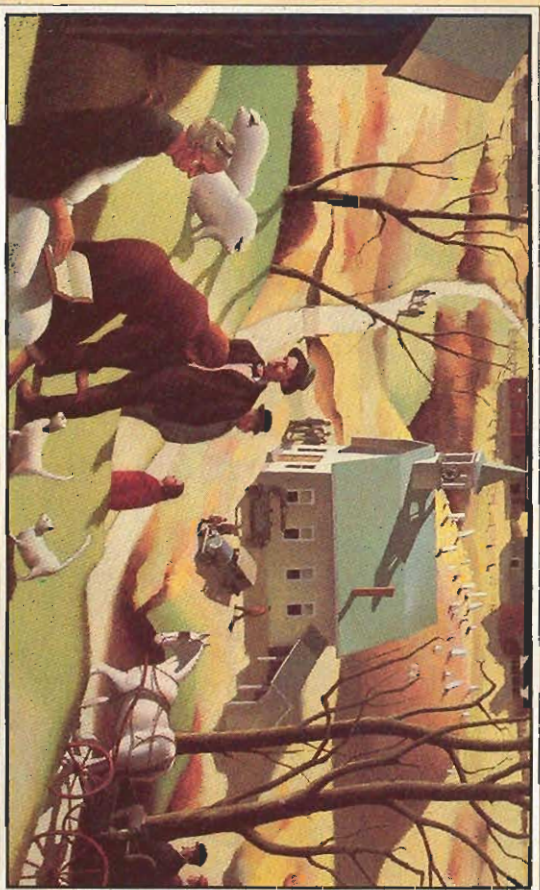
By 1976 the data Bryan was collecting suggested that the town meeting was on its way out. It portrayed a fundamental power shift that saw small communities, with scarcely a whimper of complaint, cede huge portions of their authority to Montpelier. Towns, for example, were no longer free to make their own decisions about education; they had to follow state guidelines or lose state aid. Same with land use. Same all across the board, as the state bureaucracy stepped in to manage larger areas of civic life.

Many towns adopted (continued on page 106)

THE ANATOMY OF A VERMONT TOWN MEETING

BETWEEN 1970 AND 1990,

Bryan and his students have analyzed 1,063 town meetings in Vermont (average town population: 1,141). Here are some of their findings.



	SMALLEST	LARGEST	AVERAGE
Total attendance (at highest point)	18	587	137
Men	9	337	74
Women	9	250	63
Length of meeting	30 min.	8 hrs., 20 min.	3 hrs., 30 min.
Standees	0	93	6
Empty seats	0	528	62
Total speakers (not counting town officers)	4	137	36
Men	4	97	23
Women	0	40	13
Number of times men spoke	6	312	88
Number of times women spoke	0	229	36

—above: "Beaver Meadow" by Paul Sample, Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College, Hanover, New Hampshire; gift of the artist

NEEPER OF THE VERMONT CHARACTER

(continued from page 89)

a town manager form of government just to cope with the paperwork flowing to and from Montpelier. The road commissioners, instead of being elected by the selectmen, were now appointed by the selectmen, assuring a higher level of professionalism perhaps, but denying the townspeople one of their most passionate electoral contests. The road commissioner was a true tribune of the people, and electoral banishment was not an uncommon fate of those who failed to repair potholes and keep the frost heaves under control.

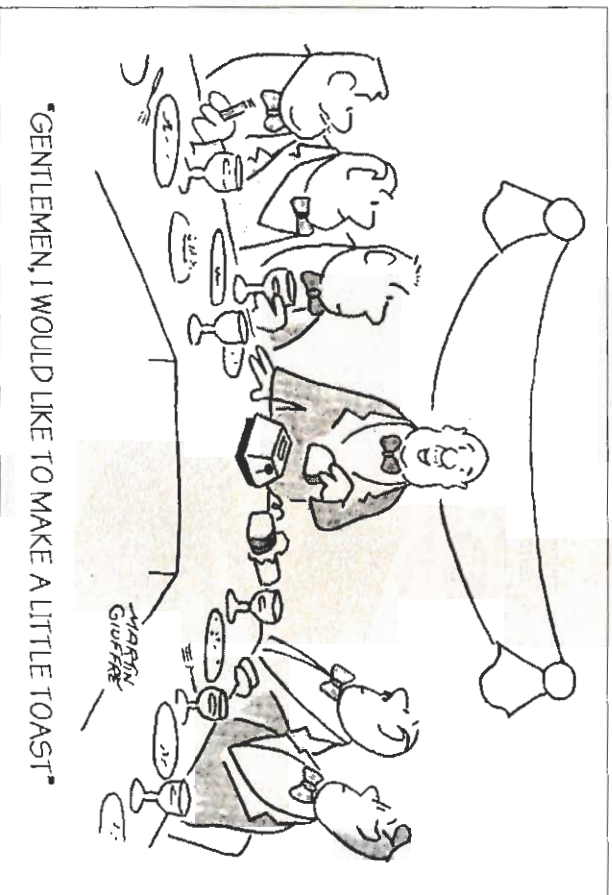
Adding to the erosion of town meeting was the new tendency of many towns to split the event up over two days, allowing one for debate and the next for voting by secret ballot. This had the effect of rendering the debate meaningless, for it was possible to participate fully in the governance of the town without having to sit down and thrash out the issues in public. And since the issues being thrashed out were increasingly marginal, the debate tended to get passionate only when some larger nonlocal issue,

like nuclear power or saving the whales, was on the agenda.

Though he admits to some signs of a renaissance of sentiment in favor of local control, Bryan is still ambivalent about the future of town meeting. Looking at the data that will eventually become his third scholarly book (his first two were *Yankee Politics in Rural Vermont* and *Politics in Rural States*), he says, "Fifty years from now, someone can take a look at these data and write a book called either *The Salvation of Democracy* or *The Death of Democracy*."

If it's the former, then one of the forces behind this salvation could well be Bryan. Starting in the late seventies, Bryan began to blur the line between academic and activist. He crisscrossed the state, speaking to historical societies, 4-H clubs, anyone who would have him, urging his listeners not to abandon town meeting, this unique "school for citizenship." "Trust in assemblies of neighbors," he told them, "is the ultimate compliment to the human race."

Ironically, newspapers began referring to him as an "outsoken critic of the Vermont town meeting," and labeling him an "ultraconservative," which may be the price one pays for casting "the liberals" as vil-



"GENTLEMEN, I WOULD LIKE TO MAKE A LITTLE TOAST"

those management-minded mean-wellers who try to do good within a centralized political structure, with their definition of what's good trickling down from the top. When he talks anecdotally about liberals, it's clear that he means "flatlanders."

It should be noted that Bryan separates flatlanders into two types. There are those — "the liberals" — typified by former Vermont governor Madeleine Kunin, who live "on the land, not with" it. Then there are the legions of leftist hippies who came to Vermont to farm and live communally, sparking a renewed belief in local control. "God bless 'em," says the "ultraconservative" professor.

But then, party discipline has never been one of Bryan's concerns. In 1985 he told the Weston Historical Society that he considered Burlington's Socialist mayor, Bernice Sanders, to be the state's biggest booster of local control. And last year, during Sanders's successful run for Congress, Bryan appeared in a Sanders campaign commercial, which infuriated conservative Republicans. "After that, a lot of people in the party think of Frank as a traitor," says John McClaughry, a conservative Republican who admires Bryan for his commitment to grass-roots democracy.

Despite his unorthodox views, Bryan has been courted by the conservatives, and in 1984 he decided he would challenge liberal Republican Congressman James Jeffords, whose independence of mind was annoying the Reagan wing of the party. Two days after making the decision, Bryan changed his mind. "It really gets down to one's drive and ego and confidence that you can do it," he said at the time. These days, when the subject of running for office comes up, he walks around it like a farmer looking at a new pickup, admiring its possibilities but mindful of the sticker price. "It would be an honor, but I don't have the money," he says. "I've got a family to feed. Besides, I don't think I'd come across well in a 30-second spot. I get too outraged."

After years of this kind of fence-sitting, most politicians in Vermont have concluded that Bryan prefers sniping from the

KEEPER OF THE VERMONT CHARACTER

(continued)

ivory tower of tenure to the actual practice of bare-knuckles democracy. "Most of my colleagues dismiss him, if they think of him at all, as an academic," says one legislator. "He doesn't have to answer to anyone; they do. He doesn't have to solve the problems; they do."

Bryan's other handicap as a serious politician is his unfortunate habit of writing funny books like *Real Vermonters Don't Milk Goats* and *Oui!*—*The Vermont Secession Book*, both of which were coauthored by Democratic State Representative Bill Mares. "Sometimes he does get carried away with himself," says Mares, "but in private, at the Oasis diner, he's a delightful intellectual companion."

Bryan can be a pretty funny guy when he wants, particularly in the kind of sly, dry, self-deprecating commentary that makes up most of Vermont humor. One of his favorite stories is about a flatlander whose car is stuck in a very muddy road. Seeing an old Vermontor sitting on a porch on the other side of the morass, he yells out, "Say, how did you get over there?"

The response: "Born here."

Oui!—*The Vermont Secession Book*, which imagines an attempt to leave the Union, is a fairly silly effort—Al Haig is the 41st president, and Vermont insurgents cripple U.S. Army vehicles by pouring maple syrup into their fuel tanks—but even before he wrote it, he was thinking seriously about how Vermont could re-create politics on a human scale. The result was *The Vermont Papers*, written with his conservative friend John McClaughry. The key idea of *The Vermont Papers* is to let the state deal with environmental and human rights issues ("Obviously you can't let the town of Starksboro not let blacks into its school system"), but give control over everything else—education, welfare, development—back to local governments. To handle all this power, Bryan and McClaughry imagine an intermediate level of

government, bigger than a town but smaller than a county, called a shire. Each shire (average population 10,000) would be governed by a "moot," which would be like a big town meeting composed of representatives called "reeves," who would be elected at a ratio of one reeve for every 200 people in the shire.

At first, it sounds like something out of *The Hobbit*. Yet the blueprint contained in *The Vermont Papers* is as radical as any political proposal of the last 50 years. And some parts of it, particularly those dealing with Vermont's relationship to Washington, are, as Bryan cheerfully admits, "treasonable stuff. I mean, we're talking about the demise of the American republic." He expects that demise to occur over the next 500 years. Maybe sooner.

* * *

OUTSIDE BRYAN'S OFFICE, THE SUN HAS climbed toward its zenith and the green is filling with sunbathers. He wants to get over to the library to pick up some books before heading home—more research for the uncompleted opus on town meetings. "You know," he says as we stroll across the green, "I really love the science part of it. At night I'll spend hours making these little tables, dividing up the time spent on town budget versus school issues. I could tell you how many minutes were spent discussing the school budget in your town, and how many men and women talked, and about what..."

Students stream by, greeting him with "Hello, Dr. Bryan!" He smiles at them in response and then leaves me with this final curmudgeonly thought.

"You know what's really dispiriting to me? It's the fact that Americans are scared to death of themselves. They think James Madison was right! Public radio had a poll a while ago asking whether we should have a constitutional convention. And it was voted down something like a hundred to six. The right wing is afraid the lefties will take over and the left wing is afraid the Christian Right will take over. Now I happen to believe we can govern ourselves as well as our forefathers could. Maybe better. But we're scared to death to take the chance." □