

LILACS AND HOMELAND

BY FRANK BRYAN

Home," said Vermont's poet laureate Robert Frost, is the place that "when you go there, they have to take you in." But for most of its history, Vermont has been more a place for leaving than a place for taking in.

Vermont's daughters and sons did begin to leave after the Civil War and few came to take their place. Meadows vanished. Fences crumbled. Stone walls disappeared under sumac and thorn apple. Buildings rotted and fell. Cellar holes grew to burdock. Ever so slowly most of Vermont grew quiet.

But the lilacs persisted. Often they marked a corner bedroom where a window had stood open to the fragrance of early June. They could be seen from across a brush-pocked pasture, swaying lovely in the benign breezes of the upland springtime; fighting against the shadows closing in from fir and maple. They carried soft-scented memories of children's laughter in the dusk of summer or the curses of men locked in a struggle with the land. Old memories. Rural memories. Vermont memories.

The Great Depression came and went. The War ended. Then a nation that had lost its moorings in the soot and concrete of its own adolescence, lifted its eyes to the north and saw the lilacs. Suddenly Vermont became a homeland once more.

The resettling of the Vermont hills has pulsed from a drive to return to something lost along the way. They came to stretch out. Live slower. Go to town meeting. Breathe the clean air. Raise kids. Leave the car unlocked in the yard. What a compliment; to be sought out as homeland, as a light on the front porch for a nation darkened by its exuberance for economic progress. They came to Vermont with hope and enthusiasm. They brought a vision of the good life precisely in sync with the one Vermonters claimed as their own. It detracts neither from the glory of their dream nor their wisdom in seeking after it to cry warning: they themselves may destroy it.

Why? Too many Vermonters are trying to live urban in the country.

Listen to the words of a Vermonter returning from a year in Bloomington, Indiana: "We did more in one year there than we did in ten years in Vermont." Their house in Vermont, according to a press article entitled "Back to the City," had been built on a "grassy knoll surrounded by 13 acres of woods." There was a "view of Camel's Hump — and no other houses." Then reality set in and they began to "find the isolation overwhelming." The ice froze on the pond and the dog killed the ducks. They complained that "the children learned how to ride bikes and then had nowhere to ride, for only hilly dirt roads surround them." Finally, they gave up saying "we realize the family needs can be met more easily in the city. That's what is important to us, not 13 acres or a view of Camel's Hump." Another family that found the country unsatisfying complained "it was a major project to take the children to swimming lessons." And "one member of the family truly has to be a taxi driver."

But these people were honest. In Burlington they "attend more concerts and plays and take the children swimming every Friday night." They moved back to the city. They stopped trying to change rural Vermont into urban Vermont. They will not be voting at town meeting to pave more roads so they can swish their families here and there to provide them with the options of urban living.

Rural life is no "better" than urban life. But it is different with fully as many options. Anyone who can do more in Bloomington, Indiana, in one year than he could in a rural Vermont community in 10 years either doesn't like the country or doesn't understand it.

We live on a country road. The town is straightening it so we can drive faster to expand our "options." Before they began work there was nowhere on it one could not travel safely at 30 mph. Then we "improved" it so it will handle cars at 40 mph. Next came little white signs that read "Speed limit 30." I don't dare let my kids ride their bikes on it for fear

they'll be wiped out by option seekers in their "family cabs" traveling at 45 mph.

My children are deprived in many ways. They've never had a swimming lesson. They don't go to plays. Their friends are limited and don't live close by. I don't spend my time orchestrating options for them. Once when they had been over in the pasture for a couple of hours (they were 6 and 7) and I went to see what they were doing, I found them busily engaged in establishing a grasshopper ranch. Grasshoppers, they were finding out, are hard to corral. Watching closely (I suspect bemusedly) were two cats and a dog. The kid's voices were intense, their concentration complete. It was late afternoon — a dusty, warm August afternoon in the country. I went back to the house. Plays? Swimming lessons? Grasshoppers? I don't know which is best, but I do know they are different.

Rural means living with the earth. It means understanding a few things well. It means knowing a few people completely. It means patience with nature. Trying to understand the complexities of the unfolding seasons. It means, most of all, *involvement* with the planet. One lives in the country to be with the mountains not to look at them. You cannot hear a performance at Burlington's Flynn Theater out on Big Hollow Road in Starksboro. But now and then in the dusk of a June evening you can hear a great horned owl bounce its fearsome hunting cry off the flanks of Shaker Mountain. It is a lonely sound — lonely and real. It is a rural sound, a Vermont sound.

These are the options we seem to be closing out for ourselves. This is the way of life that drew a generation to Vermont. Must we destroy it hurrying here and there in quest of pastimes that are more easily found in the cities? Let the country be. It is spring and we are home and the lilacs are still with us. □