

TOWNSCAPE

NEWBURY



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

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

By Frank Bryan

Home is the place where,/when you have to go there,/They have to take you in. —Robert Frost
“Death of the Hired Man”

It was long and black, and it slithered up through the valley like a snake with fits. It took a long time coming—years—but finally it knifed through the town itself, destroying everything in its path. It left Newbury village at once both more and less isolated than before—in the wrong way in both instances.

I saw it coming from a woodlot in the summer of 1970. Looking south toward Bradford, you could see huge billows of black smoke where bulldozers had pushed hundreds of green trees together. Men then poured oil on them and put them to the torch. Later that summer you could hear the constant grind and rumble of the giant earthmovers as they came nearer and nearer.

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

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

In about half a forenoon, Interstate 91 covered over a field Charlie and I and others had spent weeks clearing by hand. They wiped out “Grandma’s half” of his sugarbush after lunch. In a week the highway builders had so changed the face of the land that, standing by the fence beside the road this spring with

one of my sons (he’s eleven), I couldn’t answer the question: “But where did you cut the wood, Dad?” Three months of work over five acres of land and I couldn’t even judge the lay of it any more. One of the best summers of my life in Newbury has been bulldozed—not only from the face of the earth—but also from the heartland of my memory.

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

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

The village shows none of the damage Interstate 91 caused, but there is no

missing its effects. There seems to be a loneliness in the air, a certain ambiance of isolation, a subliminal residue of estrangement from the pulse of the planet, a sorrow like the warm, soft wind that sometimes touches the back of your neck on a late August afternoon when the locusts cry.

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



Isabel Whitney—writer, farmer, businesswoman—came to Newbury from Ireland.

er. It gritted out the winter of “eighteen hundred and froze to death” and the hundred year “dark age” of Vermont history when the state became (as native son Stephen Douglas said between debates with Abe Lincoln) “the most glorious spot on the face of the globe for a man, provided he emigrates when he is very young.”

In 1913, fire wiped thirty buildings



Route 5, above, was a favorite for thumb-tripping by the author in his younger days.

out of the village. Thirty. When’s the last time you heard of that happening? But Newbury built back. Not Montpelier. Not Washington. Newbury.

Newbury survived the flood of ’27 and the hurricane of ’38. Hell, it’ll lick that black-top monster too.

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

I arrived in Newbury in 1943, having come downriver from Canaan (the northeasternmost town in Vermont) at the age of two. With Dad in North Africa, Mom was in charge of the move.

Smart lady. As it turned out, Dad didn’t come back (no, it was a divorce), and try as I might, I can’t conjure up a picture of what he looked like when I was little enough to be cuddled. But I can still conjure up the Coos.

In fact I can still remember the first night we arrived there on November 3, 1943—I was actually two and a half—Florence Carbee came over with

two fresh-baked pies. Florence still lives in Newbury next door to Mom. At eighty-five, Florence doesn’t bake much any more, but she can still tell you how.

On the other side of the house lives Ida Porter. She made the best doughnuts in town. You could count on them every Saturday. It was Ida who invented “munchkins,” and when they came hot out of her pot on a June morning, the aroma watered mouths for five or six houses in either direction. At ninety, Ida doesn’t make them any more. But she’s still there in the same house. That’ll tell you about Newbury.

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

We had the nicest village green in the

valley, deep elms and a ball field. The green’s still there. Houses surround it, and at the rear is a white-steeped church, the square brick schoolhouse, and the white town hall. Guarding the “common” in front is the granite memorial to Revolutionary War Hero General Jacob Bayley. Surrounding the village—north, east, and south is the great Coos, flowing meadows marked by hedgerows where river maple moved in to replace the elms.

Beyond that is the river, the long, winding Connecticut drifting round and about in the form of two oxbows, called the “big” and “little” oxbow. From Mount Pulaski you don’t see much of the water, but you know the river’s there by the trees along the bank.

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

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

There was the river that led away to God knows where. Give a kid a raft and a little pluck (forget about the logistical interruption of Wilder Dam downriver in Hartford), and that deep-flowing ribbon of dreams could bring an eleven-year-old enough adventure to last a lifetime. We never considered “running away” from home. Hell, we’d float for it.

One morning in August of the year 1956 at 8:00 a.m. Newbury’s fire alarm went off. Men and women rushed to the fire station to be told that Mickey Blodgett and “Bootsie” Bryan had headed down the Connecticut on a raft. They’d have to be rescued before they fell off or went over the dam some thirty miles south. False alarms. In fact, we’d been



Florence Carbee (left) and Ide Porter baked up a warm welcome when author Bryan arrived in Newbury.

camping out behind the Oxbow Antique Shop all night.

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

With the track running beside the river down across “Pop” Green’s meadows—about a quarter-mile from our house—you could feel the mighty trains late at night. The house quivered, and the cry of the whistle down at Nelson’s crossing brought goose bumps to the arms of restless little boys awonder in the dark with visions of flashing steel and steam rumbling south along the river.

Because there was a train there was a siding where one could explore freight cars at rest and a station where passenger trains stopped twice a day. It was a perfect place for hanging out and watching the passengers watch you—many with pity in their eyes at the sight of ragged

kids without the brains to know how unhappy they were. I met many of them later on in life.

They still don’t get it.

But most of all the trains brought danger. When you were ten, them trains were big. You couldn’t negotiate with trains. They were, therefore, a perfect test of manhood for little boys. Like the day we played hobo with a slow freight that was inching past the Newbury dump where we’d gone to stone rats. Jump on, we would, and then off. Climb the ladder higher! Sit on top! Never notice the train was gathering speed. Then comes that awful moment that can be for even the silliest of kids a metaphor for decisions throughout a lifetime: jump now. With every passing second the consequences become even more terrifying. Jump now or end up in White River Junction. Jump. Now!

Or the time “Pokey Smith” (I’ve lied about his last name because, knowing Pokey, I’m not sure he wouldn’t sue me

for this—even though he’s gone to God knows where and I haven’t seen him for thirty years) and I “borrowed” a .30-caliber machine gun from the American Legion building with the intent of holding up the Boston and Maine. Our punishment was immediate—dragging the monster through the puckerbrush a quarter mile to the tracks. It took half a day.

There I was, cut and bruised and nettled to death, crouched behind the tripodded gun under the old German helmet Dad had sent home from Frankfurt in 1945—Mom had screamed when she opened the box, expecting, I now understand, some kind of present from the man who had not yet come home to help raise three kids, one of whom only a few years later would attempt to heist 50 freight cars, two engines, a caboose, and five crew members from the Boston and Maine Railroad Company.

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

fatigue jacket as he pretended to feed a fake belt of ammo into the 30 caliber machine gun. What a figure of a kid!

We knew that since we were lying in wait between the rails, gun aimed (we felt, ominously) down the tracks, the engineer could not help but see us, understand we meant business, and screech to a stop. It was, after all, an obvious holdup by two guys with a lot

There was a tar road (that soon changed to dirt) that led beyond the village to "out back." There was a little pond called the fish pond about a mile through the woods on an old logging road north of town. There was "checkerberry mound," where mayflowers grew in abundance, and lady slippers, too. Florence can still tell you where to find them, but I doubt she will. There were

ers built south of town. (And they tried to tell us a few years ago that the reason the children of the '80s were nuts was because they were psychologically affected by fear of the bomb! Hell's bells, we invented that excuse in 1957!)

There were junior proms and basketball games and senior plays and March of Dimes drives and summer people that always could be shamed (very subtly, mind you) into a variety of bennies for poor, deprived country kids that had to live "up here" all year long and seemed to own only one pair of pants and no shirt. There were Town Meetings where we could go and watch pure democracy in action. As long as you kept your mouth shut and behaved, once in a while you got to see grownups sass each other in public. Often they got really mad. It was funny.

Still is.

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

NEWBURY HAS A HISTORY OF STIFFNESS; of conservative fiber in the best sense of the word. It is in Newbury that the fall line of the Connecticut established a natural barrier to river transportation and because of that, Newbury became one of the largest and most important towns in Vermont during the last century. And it has luck. In the Revolutionary War the British sent an expedition down from Canada to capture Jacob Bailey and destroy the town. They missed, and destroyed the town of Royalton instead, in 1780.

Newbury won't let its history die. In the pages of the Newbury Historical Society's News Letter for June 1989, we find the following: "This is a year of celebrations! The 225th anniversary of the organization of the First Congregational Church of Newbury, 150th for the daughter Church of Wells River, the 150th for the Town House and the 150th for the Newbury Methodist Seminary." It was in Newbury where Boston University began when in 1839 an energetic woman, "Preceptress Miss Betsy Dow," began teaching religious philosophy.

Think of it this way. Here is a little

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The Connecticut, "a deep-flowing ribbon of dreams" best floated on August nights.

of gun. We stared south under the hot sun awaiting the first tremble in the ground that would announce destiny was at hand.

We abandoned our destiny in some haste at about the quarter mile mark. Got the gun off, too, but it was close, as the engineer crashed by never even noticing the entanglement of boys and steel and belts and goldenrod and dirt and terror lying in a pile in the gully beside the tracks.

Memory. There was a cemetery, too, a long pretty one just above the river north of town. The hornpouting was always good down behind it. But you fish for hornpout (some call them bull heads) at night by lantern. Then you have to walk home—through the cemetery. There was a post office, a general store named Jim's, and Harley Slack's Garage that was always dark and cool in summer and the men there moved slowly about in their cavern of oily tools and off-limits wall calendars.

little, trout-filled brooks that flowed into the Connecticut. There were neat old buildings, a few abandoned barns, and even a rich person's beautiful house surrounded by a white picket fence. It was an exact square acre located next to the green in the middle of town. In fact there was a rock out front on which was painted the inscription "Dream Acre." The owner's name was Mrs. Charles Bailey.

As in: "Let's go down to Pop Green's, fill these bags with manure, and tonight we'll dump it all over Mrs. 'Chaaarles' Bailey's lawn!" Could it have been more perfect?

The wealthy will always be with us, thank God.

There was a grade school and a high school and a Sunday school. There was a little league team, and there was a barber shop until I was ten. Then it went down to Bradford. In the late '50s we watched out for Russian planes armed with nuclear bombs from the Ground Observers Corps building that Frank Cass and oth-

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river town of less than 2,000 people which published a history of itself in 1902—a 780-page volume by Fredrick Wells, called by authorities “one of the best town histories in the state.” In 1978 the people of Newbury published a second volume, *History of Newbury, Vermont 1900 to 1977*. It has 585 pages—small-print pages—over 100 photographs, and several maps. The people of Newbury cherish their past, and this is the mark of true community. About the time I was ten years old, I began to discover this history, by reading Ralph Nading Hill and Earl Newton’s wonderful book *The Vermont Story*. Newbury began to take on new meaning. (Drat it—why didn’t I recognize the symptoms? I was growing up—or is it down?) But it was too late. Two years later I rediscovered my thumb. That’s when Newbury really began to grow. It became for me more a town and less a village.

I learned to walk across the front lawn, across the sidewalk, onto the edge of Route 5, and stick out my thumb. Mom never had a car, but I discovered that a thumb and a fine-tuned plaintive gaze were reasonable substitutes. It wasn’t long before I was in Wells River or South Newbury or “out to Hall’s Pond” between West Newbury and Newbury Center. It befuddles those “from away,” but it is important to understand that in Vermont towns one often finds incorporated villages. I grew up in Newbury “village,” on the oxbow. But Newbury is among the ten biggest Vermont towns in terms of acreage. There is also a “Wells River Village” in Newbury town and several smaller “places”: Boltonville, Newbury Center, South Newbury, and West Newbury.

And understand this, too. When Wells wrote his history of Newbury in 1902, there were four railroad stations for passengers and freight in Newbury, five U.S. post offices, and at least one store and creamery in each “place.” There were two high schools. There were eighteen rural school districts, each with its little schoolhouse.

Today there are no passenger trains,

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

Yet the face of Newbury remains intact. When I left for college in 1959, there were three public buildings in the center of the village: Jim's store, the town clerk's office, and the Post Office. The town clerk and the Post Office now share one of them. The Bradford National Bank moved a teller and a window (it's too small to be called a "branch") into the old town clerk's office. Three buildings in 1959. Same three in 1989.

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

But, hey. That's August talk (the real Vermonter's least favorite month because it leaves nothing to look forward to). Let's talk January 20th! It's the best day of the year because it is within two weeks of Groundhog Day, which is within three more weeks (or so) of Town Meeting Day, which starts sugaring season (which ends—please always remember—because it's too warm for the trees to freeze), which puts us within a month of May Day, which is only two or three weeks from garden planting, which is within three weeks of June 21, the longest day of the year and the day which real Vermonters dread the most

because every day after that is shorter, and there is nothing to look forward to but August.

Let's talk January.

Let's talk people. The reason Newbury has survived Interstate 91 is because its people have. There are Newburyites all over the place. Rita Carlson still lives out on Jefferson Hill. As long as she does, Town Meeting is safe. She's only ninety-one now, so Town Meeting is secure for a long time to come. "Siggie" Carbee (who has held almost every local office imaginable) may work in Hanover, but she still lives in Newbury. Jimmy Wheeler's there—former star of the basketball team—and my old classmate Bruce Wheeler and his cousin Donald.

In South Newbury, Isabel Whitney at eighty still runs her Sleepers Meadows Cabins and writes for the newspaper *Behind the Times*. Born in Dublin, she came to Newbury via Jamaica married to a former World War I aviator. Sleepers Meadows is one of the oldest farms in Newbury. Isabel herself is fast becoming a legend in her own time. Up in Wells River, Al Stevens, who has made more motions and "seconds," and called more questions at Town Meeting than anybody in town, doesn't farm any more, but he still lives there. Rick Hausman, an awfully likable flatlander "from away," serves Newbury in the legislature so well he's been unbeatable so far. Burt Wheeler, who had the fastest car in town (a neat '56 Ford) when we were listening to Elvis Presley on WPTR in Albany, hasn't left yet, either. Carl Schwenke, who wrote *In a Pig's Eye* from Newbury, is still there, as is Sue Schwenke, master teacher. There's selectman Ken Alger, who's been in town all his life and can get through the toughest political problem like Brer Rabbit through a briar patch.

The point is obvious. There's a mixture of natives and newcomers in Newbury that has preserved the community—against (it often seems) all odds. Not that there isn't controversy—and often bitter debate. But the community is strong enough to contain it and survive it. There is no greater testimony to a

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community. Democracy is not the absence of conflict. It is the capacity to see it through and maintain the civil order. Newbury, like most Vermont towns, has proved it's good at that.

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

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

What to do in Newbury? Oh, no you don't. I'm not going to be tricked

into that! It would violate one of my most sacred hunches about being a Vermonter. We all have been asked the question by someone from down-state that goes something like this: "Vermont's a beautiful place, but what do you *do* up there?" I figure you're in trouble when you begin to get a handle on the answer. Vermont is a place to be. Newbury is Vermont. I can tell you what I'd like to do this summer if I get an evening off. I'd like to put the canoe in at Placey's farm about two miles above the village around 7:00 p.m. on the night of August's full moon and drift the oxbows down to the bridge below town, getting there at the new boat landing, say, about midnight.

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

The Newbury I grew up with is gone. No matter. The Coos remains. And there is much to hold on to. I can still return to the house of my childhood,

still fall asleep to the murmur of wind in the boughs of the great pine beside the house (that sound never changes), still hear the twilight whippoorwill from Pop Green's pasture across the road (is it related to those olden whippoorwills of the 1940s?), still feel the rumble of a freight train in the night. Automobiles still slip by the house on Route 5 with the same *swish* sound they always made. Mom, who would never move away, although she spent forty years threatening to, has given me the greatest gift a parent can ever give a kid: the gift of place—an honest-to-God time machine. Every time I go home, the number of strange faces has increased. I can handle that. The Coos remains. And so do enough old faces, and newer ones related to the old, to remind me of the security found in generational continuity.

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

Frank Bryan is co-author of Real Vermonters Don't Milk Goats and The Vermont Papers.

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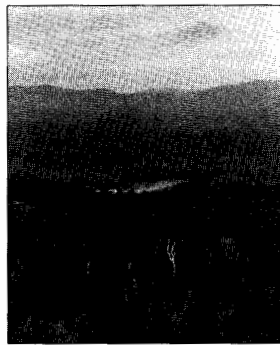
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