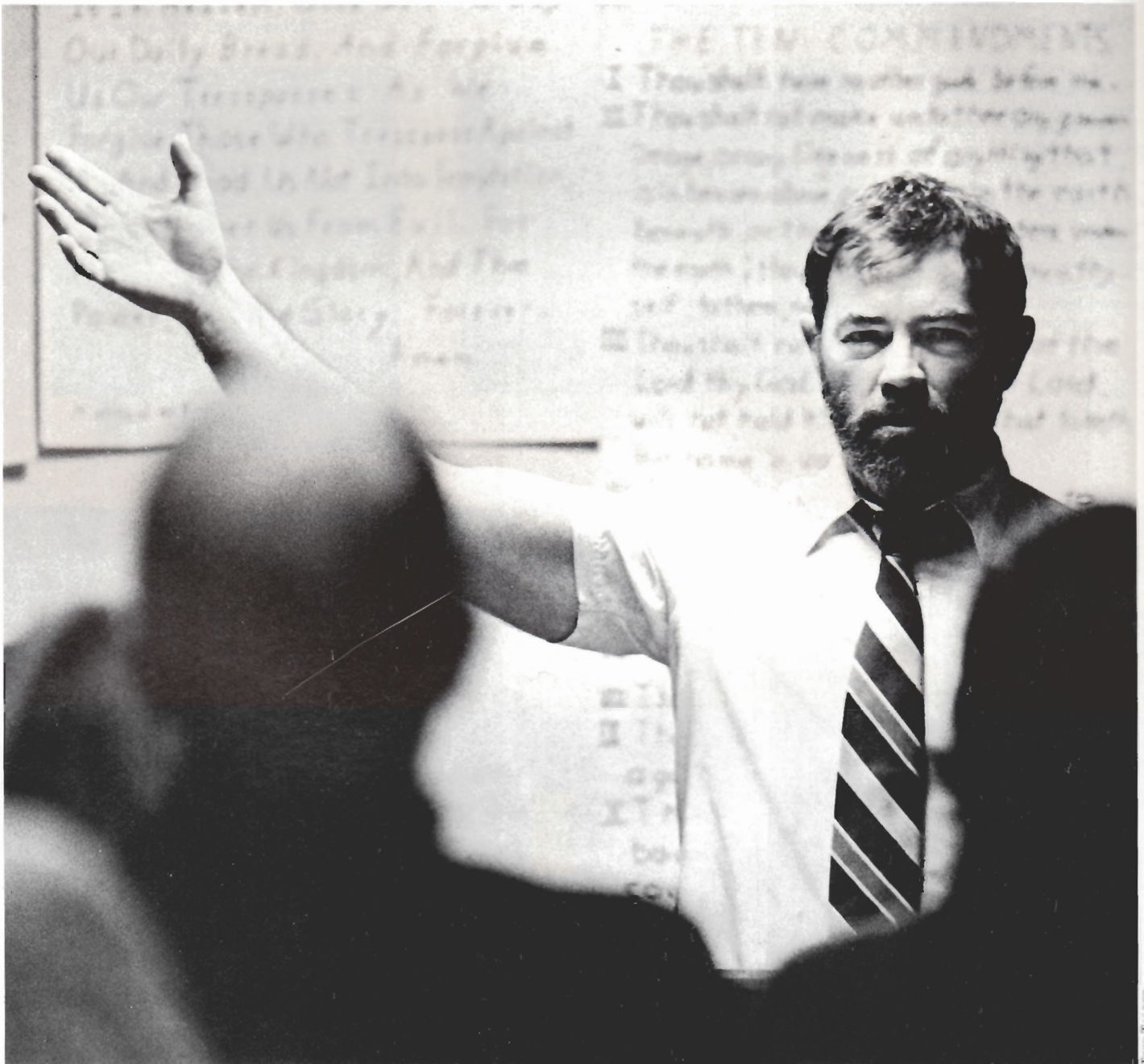


*Profile of a Polemicist*

# FRANK BRYAN

By DAN GILLMOR



*Gesturing like a country preacher, Bryan makes the rounds of the state's church basements — also its libraries and schools — expounding his conviction that Vermont's town meeting should be reserved for determining matters of local significance.*

ASK FRANK BRYAN, Vermont's rough-hewn political scholar, about Vermont, its towns and town meeting, and he offers the kind of lecture a good parent gives an errant child: stern but fond. Bryan, an associate professor of political science at the University of Vermont, can recite a list of problems facing the state and its communities. Many of these problems, he says, center on what he calls the towns' loss of authority to the state government. On no date is that loss more apparent, he thinks, than the first Tuesday in March, when town voters gather to debate budgets, fire trucks and other matters of community concern.

Bryan has become a leading expert on the New England town meeting, the venerable annual ritual often termed the last bastion of grassroots democracy. Unfortunately, he thinks, the institution has developed a serious case of political crabgrass. He believes that the erosion of authority toward the state level and the profusion of special-interest votes that have no direct local impact — such as those on the nuclear freeze and aid to El Salvador — represent a general weakening of town meeting, an event that he would like to see reserved almost solely for local issues and decisions.

If town meeting may be having its troubles, however, Bryan is far from suffering a similar fate. In fact and somewhat to his own surprise, he is rapidly becoming a Vermont institution. Just in the past few months he has drawn new attention for being co-author of one of the state's recent, best-selling books, *Real Vermonters Don't Milk Goats*, a humor-filled, cantankerous elegy to the hardscrabble lives of the state's natives. It is characteristic of Bryan, who grew up in Newbury, a town of 1699 next to the Connecticut River just north of Bradford, to deny that he is a "Real Vermonter" simply because he was born across the river in West Stewartstown, New Hampshire. "It's on my birth certificate and I can't get it off," he laughs.

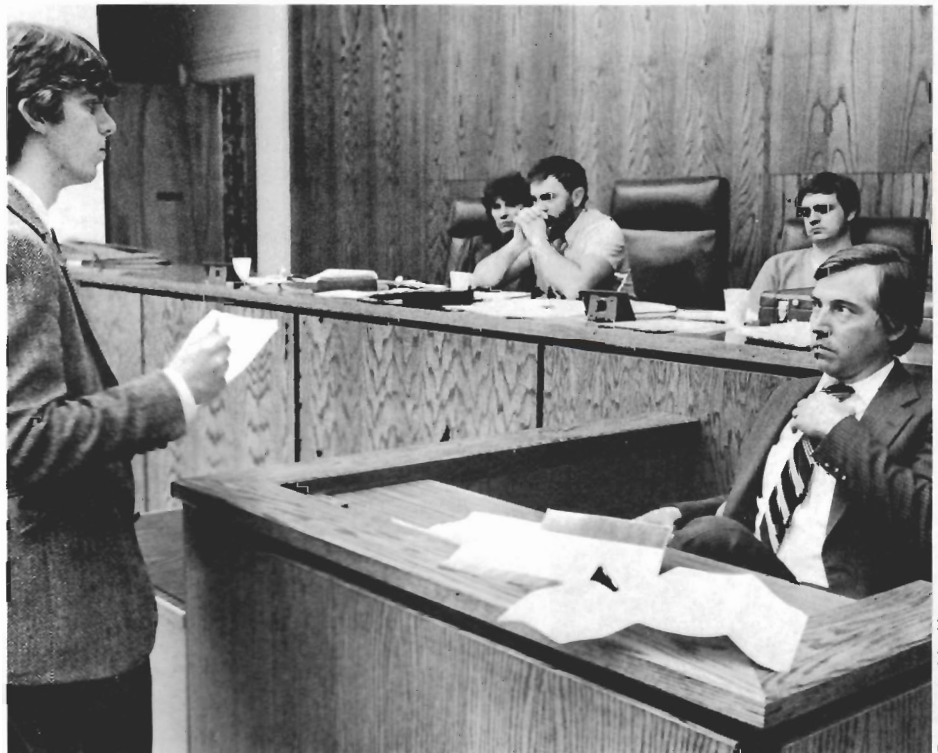
Nonetheless, the 42-year-old Bryan is one of the few scholars of Vermont who has roots in the state. They are deep roots, extending back five generations, and they hold him firmly to the ground in his work and his life outside of the university. To encounter Bryan in one of his many habitats is to encounter an apparently different person each time. However, intertwined with those roots is a fine but strong thread that binds all of Bryan's various characters into a coherent whole.

The Bryan at work is an impressive po-

litical scientist. Armed with degrees from St. Michael's College in Winooski, the University of Vermont and the University of Connecticut, and motivated by the college professor's manifest destiny to publish frequently, he is a careful scholar who writes densely crafted treatises on subjects like town meetings and rural politics. He is also a ringleader of a group of Vermont citizens who are trying to compose a book of essays that define the state and where it should be headed in coming decades. Finally, the former Golden Gloves boxer, who still works out regularly at the

but a wrinkle sets these exercises apart from other student mock trials: Members of the losing team fail that half of the course. Bryan calls it his demonstration of a real-life unpleasantness: "They could fail despite the fact they may have worked harder and learned more [than the other team]." Fortunately, the student teams always have won one of the semester's trials, but the likelihood remains strong that someday a team will lose both trials and fail the course. Bryan calls this process "dodging the bullet."

It is primarily for his voluminous re-



Inside a hearing room at the Washington County Courthouse, Bryan's students grill Vermont House Speaker Stephan Morse as part of a mock trial that will determine half their grades.

RONALD C. MACNEIL

Burlington YMCA, remains the nostalgic researcher who heads back to Newbury each March to observe, but never to participate in, his hometown's town meeting.

At the University of Vermont (which ironically turned him down for admission when he graduated from high school), Bryan insists that his students gain more than a few memorized facts for their efforts. During one semester every other year he offers one of the Political Science Department's toughest — and surprisingly most sought-after — courses. Teams of students in the course oppose each other in two mock trials dealing with topical issues of local and state government,

search into the phenomenon of town meeting, however, that Bryan has become best known to many Vermonters. It is this research that is becoming increasingly well-known as Bryan grows increasingly critical of the object of his research. But if what he has found in his research causes him to be critical, it suggests to him that the failings have roots in the conditions of the towns themselves.

"The town meetings' teeth have been removed by the state, and the proclamations they make today will soon begin to sound like the gruff bluffs of a weary old hound waking from a summer's nap," he insists at a Burlington debate with

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## A BRYAN SAMPLER

... **Vermont is naturally rural.** It is a land of a thousand ups and downs. Charles Johnson in his splendid book, *The Nature of Vermont*, calls it "moderately grand, a softness over old ruggedness." Frank Smallwood of Dartmouth says it is "a patchwork quilt of pastures, meadows and small villages." This land of natural nooks and crannies provides the perfect environment for decentralized communal living.

Yet 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 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. Now one's friends need not even be in the same town, to say nothing of next door. We live in one town and work in another. One may shop here and politic there, join a health club here and send the kids to school there.

All of this is dehumanizing because it tends to deny

"complicated and dutiful" (as British author Jonathan Miller puts it) relationships. Linkages with other human beings only become human when they are multidimensional — complicated — not unidimensional and fragmented. When one parcels out one's relationships to a series of individuals — one to work with, another to play with, a third to buy from, a fourth to sell to, a fifth to educate the kids, a sixth to argue with — one dehumanizes existence. The best way to avoid this is to preserve small communities of neighbors in a relationship based on work and need.

And small communities of neighbors are natural to Vermont's topography. I contend, therefore, that our willingness to give up community life in favor of "system" life is a basic ecological insult, outdistancing in its implications for the countryside many more visible environmental travesties such as billboards or even dirty lakes or streams. What we are doing violates the essential character of the physical environment. Vermont's countryside spells "neighbor." Vermont's new society spells "system."

From "The Lonely Villagers: Vermont in the Post-Modern World," by Frank M. Bryan, in *Vermont*, a publication of the University of Vermont, Fall 1982.

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### Things Real Vermonters Are Born With

- A sense of where "north" is
- An inclination to say "no"
- Patience
- An ability to drive in the snow
- One leg shorter than the other
- A talent for telling time without a watch
- One thousand different ways to indicate the affirmative
- Knowledge about angles and leverage

- The guts to spank children when they are being little brats
- A taste for boiled greens of any kind
- An ability to tell New Hampshire from Vermont
- A dexterity for milking cows blindfolded
- No fear of the truth

"Things Real Vermonters Are Born With" from *Real Vermonters Don't Milk Goats*. Copyright © 1983 by Frank Bryan and William Mares. Reprinted by permission of The New England Press, Inc., Shelburne, VT.

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In sum, over the last two decades, the nature of legislative politics has been dramatically altered in rural Vermont's legislative system. The metamorphosis has involved a changing socioeconomic environment, reapportionment, and a minority-party breakthrough. The lower house has been transformed from a large, fluid, unstructured body, where neither party nor constituency served as loci for concerted political activity, into a less diffuse system, where cohesion is apt to be very strong in the minority party, especially when it holds the governorship.

The majority, while badly split in the early days of change, was capable of showing a united front. Vermont's small upper chamber, the Senate, has developed clustered voting patterns in a manner remarkably similar to that of the House, and although there were variations in party cohesion between the two houses before reapportionment, that act seems to have helped to synchronize interhouse party behavior.

It is of particular interest to note that political change in Vermont occurred coincidentally with alterations in the socioeconomic character of the state. Yet environmental changes were not profound, and we certainly find no reason to believe they were independently causal in nature. The changes in Vermont's communications and transportation systems and the decline of her family-farm culture coupled with parallel changes in legislative politics may provide a broad background from which to verify a frequently observed relationship between socioeconomic environments and legislative systems — namely, that structured legislatures are most often found in nonrural states. But it is well to remember that, although Vermont is undergoing certain kinds of socioeconomic changes, a move toward less intense ruralism is not one of them.

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James Douglas, Vermont's Secretary of State. The more often people bring non-local issues like aid to El Salvador to the fore, Bryan says, the less important town meeting becomes. However, that is not a blanket condemnation. Bryan believes the towns' nuclear freeze votes (Vermont gained fame across the nation in 1981 when 161 towns voted in favor of a nuclear freeze) represented the single outside issue that belongs on local ballots. "It's transcendent," he says of the nuclear war question.

In general, however, he believes that no matter how important other side issues might be in other contexts, "they take our minds off the real problem: loss of real power. Town meetings should be about decision making, not about sending messages. It's easy to give advice from the safety of town hall, but it's much more difficult to govern ourselves."

ACCORDING to Bryan, big government, both state and federal, is based on the assumption that local communities cannot be trusted to handle their own affairs properly. To make his point he cites the school standards that have been imposed by state and federal governments. Because that assumption leads to continued dilution of local power, he argues, no one should be surprised that town meetings, which have fewer and fewer real matters to consider, are used by outsiders to further their own purposes. On this subject Bryan can be passionate. During the debate with Douglas, he referred to the town of Weston's 1983 vote to stop all U.S. economic and military aid to El Salvador, and the subsequent visit to Weston by that Latin American country's ambassador. "They were using us. You know it and I know it," he said.

Only a sense of community and a restoration of community power can reverse the trend, he says. Then he adds, "If there is any criterion for political unity, it is community."

Bryan's cure for what ails town meeting is a somewhat radical suggestion from someone who calls himself a political conservative. "I'm a town socialist," he says. "I like big government, relative to the size of the community . . . If I can go to town meeting and vote the scoundrels out of office, then I'm willing to vote them in in the first place and give them substantial authority."

Today, he says, the state has taken over every important area of authority once held by local communities, and that

should change: "I would strengthen and maintain Vermont's 246 towns and cities by giving them something to do. We have to accept the inefficiency that democracy implies." Towns would certainly make mistakes, he concedes, "but you'd be surprised what an educational thing that would be . . . I believe that the people are a lot wiser and more progressive than the elites believe. Mistakes are painful, and we could do real harm to the system, but I'm willing to risk that at the town level. The higher the level of government, the greater the harm caused by government's mistakes. If you accept that people know what's good for them — and you have to accept that to support town government — then I would rather have the potential for imperfection than the certainty of mediocrity. Given a chance, people are wiser and less selfish than they're given credit for."

That philosophy has its roots in a 1963 conversation Bryan had with his brother, David, now a priest. "He had a profound influence on me," Bryan says. "We climbed a mountain one day. It took all day. Dave and I started talking about human-scale communities, and he convinced me that New Deal liberalism was going to destroy the fabric of the small towns. I went up the mountain a liberal. I came down what would be called a conservative."

Bryan's conservatism, however, is the old-fashioned kind. It makes him distrustful of anything centralized and large, like big federal and state governments or big corporations. "They're both dangerous," he says.

Not surprisingly, the decentralist point of view carries beyond the university and political contemplation. When Bryan heads home after a day of teaching, he goes not to a suburban ranch or colonial home but to a small house in a Starksboro hollow where he lives with his wife, Lee, and their two children. The place is so far from town that the telephone lines don't extend there. Electricity, however, has made it that far. So have two oxen, which Bryan teams to skid out logs for the winter's fuel.

On a Sunday afternoon Bryan is stacking an enormous pile of firewood. He stares at the winding stack and muses that it probably won't be enough. Inside the expanding, continually unfinished and mostly hand-constructed house, Bryan recalls some tough sledding in his earlier years when he lived in Newbury with his mother and brother, David. "I grew up working hard. I worked weekends on farms, and was logging by the time I was

16 or 17. In the summers — I was 16 when I started — I worked for the state geological survey. I lived away from home during the summer for the last three years of high school, and I got to see a lot of the state. I was lucky."

It was not enough, however, to finance the education he wanted. To attend St. Michael's College and then graduate school he needed to take out large loans. By the time he obtained his PhD from the University of Connecticut he owed so much that he only finished paying off the debt in 1980.

He went to work first teaching in a Vermont high school, and went from there to St. Michael's College. By 1974 he was chairman of the Political Science Department at Montana State University. In the fall of 1976, however, he gave it up to return to the state he missed. That year he taught one course at the University of Vermont and drove a school bus. "It was a heck of a risk," he says, but by the next year he was teaching three courses and before long he was appointed to the faculty. In 1983 he received tenure.

BRYAN's choice of life style reflects his belief that he must avoid some of the trap-pings of today's fast-paced world if he is to retain his rural soul. He calls himself a "rural romanticist."

"If anything is important, it is how much sacrifice you accept. You can't understand it if you have a lot of money and buy a technological cocoon to sustain yourself in a rural place," he says. "The reality is getting stuck again and again, no phone, no closets, using the oxen to get the wood, cutting your own fence posts. Look," he adds, "I can do a consulting job in Burlington and buy the new fence posts. But unless you do things yourself, you never understand how rural people live. Most don't have the safety net."

"I'm not against progress," he says, finally, to dispel any growing misimpressions about himself and his philosophy, "although I am against a phone. Of course, when they put lines through here we'll probably get a phone. And I do have electricity and a chain saw. But show me a Vermont farmer who milks by hand, and I'll show you a 'flatlander' who does it for fun. Living the real rural life is not fun. Sometimes it's like beating your head against a wall."

"Why do I do this? I don't know," he says. "It's a hard life, but worth the effort. You learn about your place in the universe."





SANDERS MILENS

*Bryan calls himself a "rural romanticist" and bemoans what he considers the undermining of ruralism by technology, but he has few illusions about life in the country. He heats his house with wood that he skids using a team of oxen, and lives without a telephone along a dirt road in a Starksboro hollow.*