FRANK BRYAN, who teaches political science at the University of Vermont, is arguably the one who can be expected to enjoy arguing about the town meeting system of town meeting democracy. What can't be argued is that he's one of the most passionate and eloquent proponents of the system. Bryan has defended the town meeting in The New York Times, Newsweek, and countless other publications. He has debated Vermont's secretary of state, telling him, "The town meetings' teeth have been removed by the state, and the goings-on they take today will seem nothing compared with the graft and bluffs of a weary old honest working from a sunburned cap." He has lectured on the subject in many diverse places as Mississippi and California. And today, exactly since 1869, on the first Tuesday in March, he has seen his students monitor some fifty town meetings across Vermont.

What Bryan has concluded is that town meetings have less and less opportunity to decide the matters affecting their lives. "Town meetings do good things and they do bad things, just like people," he says. "They make mistakes. But if you want real democracy, you have to accept the mistakes. When you take away the power from the citizens of a town, you've taken away the soul of their democracy."