Frank Bryan

Professor, 45, Starksboro, Vermont. "He feels the guts of local government is the give-and-take at town meetings," Vermont state senator Bill Doyle says of the man who fights for grass-roots democracy as hard as he once fought as a Golden Gloves boxer.

FRANK BRYAN, who teaches political science at the University of Vermont, is arguably (and you can bet he'd enjoy arguing about it) the nation's leading scholar on town meeting democracy. What can't be argued is that he's its most passionate and eloquent promoter. 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 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 has lectured on the subject in such disparate places as Mississippi and California. And every year since 1969, on the first Tuesday in March, he has sent his students to monitor some fifty town meetings across Vermont.

What Bryan has concluded is that townspeople 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 that power from the citizens of a town, you've taken away the soul of their democracy." PHOTOGRAPH ♦ MARION ETTLINGER

TOWN MEETINGS

First One: Dorchester, Massachusetts, 1633.
How Many: More than 75 percent of New England's 1,773 municipalities still employ town meeting government.
Attendance: Between 21 percent and 25 percent of eligible voters regularly attend. Some 54 percent of attendees are men.
Duration: The average New England town meeting takes 3½ hours.
Words of the Wise: Urbanologist Lewis Mumford once wrote, "The failure [of the rest of the nation] to use the town meeting was one of the tragic oversights of post-Revolutionary development."