

PREFACE

THE LONELINESS OF THE LONG DISTANCE DEMOCRAT

*There are several ways
Of crossing barbed-wire fences
According to your inner differences...*

—Frances Frost¹

It was the summer of 1972 when Jane Mansbridge called and we agreed to meet halfway. She was hard into the research for *Beyond Adversary Democracy*,² which contains the best treatment of town meeting democracy in one place ever published. In fact she was living in “Shelby,” the fictitious name of the Vermont town she was studying. I was living in an abandoned deer camp on Big Hollow Road in Starksboro. Since we shared an interest in town meeting, where could we meet and swap what we knew? It turns out there is no “halfway” meeting place in the hundred or so miles of green mountains between Shelby and Starksboro. But there is a covered bridge across a river along the highway. I suggested it as much as a test as anything else. That would do, she said without missing a beat.

¹ Frances Frost, “Advice to a Trespasser,” *Hemlock Wall* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1929), p. 32. Frances Frost, a Vermonter best known for her children’s stories, was no relation to Robert Frost, although she was a prize winning poet (The Yale Prize, the Golden Rose Award of the New England Poetry Club, and the Shelley Memorial Award). Margaret Edwards, “Frances Frost, 1905-1959 Sketch of a Vermont Poet,” *Vermont History* (Spring 1988): 102 – 111.

² Jane Mansbridge, *Beyond Adversary Democracy*, (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1980).

We had never met before we parked our cars on the roadside by the bridge that soft June afternoon and headed down to a shady spot in the cow pasture beside the river. But there is something in crossing a barbed wire fence together that breaks the ice. It was near the end of our conversation and the exchanging of ideas, data and various methodological conundrums that I made a mistake. I whined. Working grant-less, without graduate students with a huge teaching load (four classes per semester in a small college, Saint Michael's in Winooski, Vermont) how could I ever accomplish what it would take to write a definitive book on town meeting? The glint in her eyes danced between reproach and amusement. But she was kind. She patted my wrist quickly, "Then it will become your life's work, Frank" she said.

And so it has.

The Anthropology of Making Do

My mother raised me a Democrat. Vermont raised me a democrat. This book springs from a life of fighting the dissonance between the two. From my earliest recollections I witnessed real democracy work itself out in the little town of Newbury, high on the fall line of the Connecticut River. My interest in social science, however, began with a teacher named Scott Mahoney, who despite being a socialist, a Democrat and gay, managed to do passably well in a Republican, farming town of 1435 people and a high school with sixty students.³ In my freshman "civics" course he sent us to town meeting (most of us had been before of course) but he insisted we record *data* not just impressions. The next day in class was the first time I ever heard the term political science. When I became a college student, I noticed something. Nearly everyone who

³ My graduating class was quite small, seven students. I finished in the top ten.

said anything or wrote anything about small town life or town meeting got it wrong. They inflated the hell out of the positives or the negatives.

I'll tell you this up front. I am a passionate believer in real democracy, making decisions that matter, on the spot, in face-to-face assemblies that have (most importantly) the force of law.⁴ Before town meeting day the school has a kindergarten. The next day it doesn't.⁵ While I might not like it, I'll take it; not because town meeting is filled with "the chosen people of God" as Jefferson said. If it were I would probably be too bored to pay attention. I'll take it because it meets the standards of former American Congressman, Morris Udall: "Democracy is like sex. When it is good, it is very, very good. When it is bad, it is still better than anything else." In short I have learned to suspect that, truth be known, town meeting would come out ahead.⁶

⁴ Critics of town meeting often take a statement like this to mean that the author thinks town meeting ought to be immediately adopted all over America. They then go on to demonstrate how that would be impossible. It doesn't take long. But it would *not* be difficult (I claim) to demonstrate that town meetings can tell us more about the *nature* of democracy than any other institution of governance in America. With a little imagination and courage they could be used not to govern the nation but to govern parts of it. Critical parts. Steven Elkin's proposal for empowering neighborhood assemblies to enable citizens to "struggle and debate" on "day-to-day vital interests" for themselves and their locality comes close (if they were allowed to make binding decisions as well) to what I have in mind. Steven Elkin, *City and Regime in the American Republic* (Chicago, Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 1987): 152-154.

⁵ The implications of this kind of thing for reestablishing a truly civic culture in America were perhaps best put (with Yankee subtlety) by writer-historian-columnist and New Hampshire loyalist Evan Hill: "New Hampshireites are certainly some of the most self-governed humans on earth. If they are not also the *best* governed, they know where to place the blame." Citizens who can locate blame, of course, can equally locate credit, something about which Americans at either the state or national levels cannot begin to conceptualize. In these notions of credit and blame reside the spring waters of citizenship. Hill's quote is found in Gardner Hayes, "Town Meeting," *New Hampshire Profiler* (March 1987): 32-35. Vermonters covet Hill and other New Hampshire writers like Donald Hall. But they will have no part of us. Too gentrified, they say. This may be for the best. New Hampshire needs their unique combination of wit, liberalism and humanity far more than we.

⁶ The harm done to town meeting by inflated, romanticized accounts of its workings is incalculable. Over the past 35 years I have noticed hundreds of accounts like the following. In 1977 the University of Vermont advertised itself as being in a state where "On the first Tuesday in March each year, residents gather at a town hall or school auditorium or church basement to vote on most of the matters of import affecting the town in the coming twelve months." Wrong. They vote on many matters of import. But most of the matters of import are decided somewhere else. "Being in Vermont," *The University of Vermont 1977*, (Burlington, Vermont: The University of Vermont, 1977): 2. In 1986 a major front-page piece in a leading New England newspaper, *The Hartford Current* led with the (correct) claim that a general store in Newfane, Vermont, was closed with a sign on the door that read: "Closed.

This plus a desire to put the record straight set the design of my work. More than anything else I was committed to the development of an evidential base. When Alan Wertheimer⁷ was chair of our department at the University of Vermont, his office was near mine. Once in the mid-1980's I was working in my office on this book and I heard Alan's response to a question from a visitor out in the hall: "Do you have anyone in the department who knows anything about town meeting?" Answered Wertheimer, "We have Frank Bryan and he can tell you more than any sensible person would ever want to know." I've always wondered if he knew I could hear him and was being mischievous. Or did he really mean it? Despite constant prodding over the years he has refused to say. In any event this book is my attempt to demonstrate he is absolutely correct.

When it comes to evidence needed to develop the study of real democracy thick description⁸ may be more fun, but thin is what's needed. Our laboratories are bulging with hypotheses based on dozens of excellent *deductive* inquiries and expositions on the salience of real democracy. But there is literally no data with which to test them. The theorists have done

Went to town meeting." Then followed a huge inaccuracy: "The owner, like most other residents, was at the one-story Grange Hall down the road, voting for three selectmen, a second sheriff and a new budget." Wrong. Not even a simple majority of the residents could *fit inside* the Grange Hall at Newfane. William Cockerham, "Small-Town Vermonters Cling to Town Meetings," *The Hartford Current* (March 9, 1986): 1. I will discuss town halls throughout the book. The fact is that very few of them will seat even half the town's registered voters. Robert Dahl, through the voice of his typical Athenian citizen, also points out the physical limits of size. "Yet if every citizen were to attend we would be too numerous. Our meeting place on the hill of Pnyx would not hold all..." Robert Dahl, *Democracy and Its Critics*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989): 16.

⁷ Alan Wertheimer, *Coercion*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987); and Alan Wertheimer, *Exploitation*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

⁸ This is Gilbert Ryle's term popularized by Clifford Geertz in his essay "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture" in Clifford Geertz's *The Interpretation of Culture* (New York: Basic Books, Inc. Publishers, 1973): 3-32.

their job. The empiricists have not.⁹ This imbalance has offered up a hundred questions that beg for answers. My bias is to dramatically increase the number of town meetings studied to permit legitimate quantitative comparative analysis. This is done at the expense of seeking to know everything possible about a few cases. We know more about the individual American states because we have only 50. But what the states can tell us about the relationship between governmental structure and public policy (for example) would be immeasurably enhanced if we had two thousand.

When I make the claim that women are more apt to speak at town meeting in smaller towns than at town meeting in bigger towns, the first task is to know *for sure* how many speak at town meeting overall. To be safe this simple statistic, itself, ought to be based on hundreds of cases. To break the data down in order to see the relationship between town size and women's participation hundreds more must be added. This number must be increased in order to discover how variations in the social structure of the community affect the original relationship and then jacked up again to determine how variations in meeting structure conditions them both. With a limited number of cases multi-variant analysis of this kind is impossible. In short when it comes to final or even penultimate questions, I will reach no *sufficient* conclusions about real democracy. But I do intend hundreds of *necessary* conclusions—precursors in the causal chains that lead to certitude. And I will provide description that can be taken to the bank. For the first time we will know, in detail, what real democracy *looks* like.

⁹ The combination of good theory with good evidence *by a theorist* is rare, and it is what makes Mansbridge's work so special.

To do this I use what David Easton¹⁰ called “second gauge” hypothesis testing, the kind of formulations one finds in the scholarly journals. In answering the question, for instance, “If we held a democracy, would anyone come?” the goal is primarily to lay to rest a fundamental question about attendance levels. A secondary purpose is to shed some light on the factors associated with variations in attendance levels. This has two advantages. It provides conceptual pathways through the underbrush of a very complex empirical terrain and it greases the skids of descriptive/analytical exposition which, to be blunt can be deadly. Hypothesis testing on the other hand is exciting. The trouble is these very hypotheses spring from paradigms involving political operations that are vastly different from my interest, real democracy. Political participation in a polling booth is dramatically dissimilar from political participation on the floor of a town hall. Think of these hypotheticals, therefore, as guideposts—reference points to a more familiar time and place, the political science of representative democracy, which lays claim to nearly all our efforts over the last century. Informed description is probably the best way to describe the methodology. Accordingly do not expect definitive answers to fundamental questions. Expect answers to a thousand preliminary, basic questions which had they ever been treated before, would be considered rather mundane.

This is no apology. It is preface to admonition. For those of us who work at the science of governance (and is there a better calling beyond the cloth?) it is time to look inward toward the heart of the polity. It is time to leave the telescope and take up the microscope. It is time for us to return home to the towns, the villages, to turn from the great rivers and view again (as Frost said) the pasture springs—to wash the leaves away and “wait to watch the water clear” in the quiet

¹⁰ David Easton, *The Political System*, 2nd ed., (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1971).

pools of our common enterprise. Not all of us. Not most of us. But more of us. A lot more. For little springs in the high hills of home feed the steams that lead to the reservoirs of our national citizenship. These tiny places are both laboratories for the science of democracy and watersheds that sustain our liberal and continental politics.

In her presidential address before the American Political Science Association in 1997, Elinor Ostrom said as much:

Successive generations have added to the stock of everyday knowledge about how to instill productive norms of behavior in their children and to support collective action that produces public goods and avoids the “tragedy of the commons...” What our ancestors and contemporaries have learned about engaging in collective action...is not, however, explained by the extant theory of collective action. Yet the theory of collective action is *the* central subject of political science...If political scientists do not have an empirically grounded theory of collective action, then we are hand-waving at our central question. I am afraid that we do a lot of hand-waving.¹¹

What is needed she says are second-generation models of rationality in the quest of collective actions. What should they feature? Three “core” relationships, reciprocity, reputation and trust. And if we understand these relationships what will they tell us? They will tell us how face-to-face communication in the context of real decision making is at *least* the catalysis for the development *of* and perhaps the critical component in a workable structure *for* positive collective action outcomes. I know more about town meeting than anyone on the planet. Do I have anything even approaching a theory of collective action? Absolutely not. Will this book produce such a thing? No. But I’ll tell you what. If I wanted to *study* collective action problems in a real-life, democratic setting, a Vermont town meeting is the place I would go. For the New England town meeting is the only place in America where general-purpose governments render binding

¹¹ Elinor Ostrom, “A Behavioral Approach to the Rational Choice Theory of Collective Action—Presidential Address, American Political Science Association, 1997,” *American Political Science Review* 92 (March 1998): 2.

collective action decisions (laws) in face-to-face assemblies of common citizens. Vermont is the place in New England with enough *small* town meeting governments to make a long term, comparative town meeting study possible.

Ending her address before the American Political Science Association in 1977 Ostrom said this:

For those of us who wish the 21st Century to be one of peace, we need to translate our research findings on collective action into materials written for high school and undergraduate students. All too many of our textbooks focus exclusively on leaders and, worse, on national-level leaders. Students completing an introductory course on American government, or political science more generally, will not learn that they play an essential role in sustaining democracy. Citizen participation is presented as contacting leaders, organizing interest groups and parties and voting. That citizens need additional skills and knowledge to resolve the social dilemmas they face is left unaddressed. Their moral decisions are not discussed. We are producing generations of cynical citizens with little trust in one another, much less in their governments. Given the central role of trust in solving social dilemmas, we may be creating the very conditions that undermine our own democratic ways of life.¹²

In my thirty years of sending thousands of students to attend town meetings, I have discovered this. Most students liked what they saw. Despite my best efforts not to raise expectations, those who did not like what they saw, who concluded that real democracy could never be, seemed I am somehow happy to report, angry—perhaps even *cheated*. In their essays they reacted as if they had discovered that God (about the existence of whom they had always had serious doubts) in fact and emphatically did not exist.

It doesn't take a de Tocqueville to figure out that Elinor Ostrom is right.

Yet something else is at stake as well. It floats in the back of my mind somewhere between a dark foreboding and a worrisome itch. What if real democracy in America were to die

¹² Ostrom, "A Behavioral Approach," 19.

with no detailed empirical record of its life in print? I have been struck (see Chapter I) by the heroic efforts of scholars over the centuries to piece together what went on in the city of Athens over 2500 years ago. Still, how little we know. Moreover, real democracy in the *dems*, the small towns that surrounded the great city, remains a complete mystery. Even so more is known about real democracy in ancient Greece than about real democracy as it has been practiced in America since the republic began. My insistence on data driven, “thin” analysis, therefore, is a hedge on my bet that real democracy will live on to sustain the republic in ways that may be surmised (if not clearly predicted) from the techno-driven¹³ unfolding of things in the here and now. Simply stated if the worst happens, history needs to know *precisely* what real democracy as practiced in the New England town meeting looked like and how it worked. My intention is to provide the record we all wished the Greeks had had the where-with-all to establish twenty-five hundred years ago. Given our advantages today, it seems little enough.

Students, Time, and Self: An Odyssey

Committed thus to a large database and a methodology of reasoned description fueled (but not bound) by hypotheses from the scientific literature how to generate the data? One axiomatic condition needs to be understood and, more, appreciated. The only way to know what happens at a town meeting is to be there. In the town of South Hero¹⁴ in 1999 the town meeting

¹³ The claim that third wave technology is friendly to real democracy was laid out in: Frank Bryan and John McClaughry, *The Vermont Papers: Recreating Democracy on a Human Scale* (Chelsea, Vermont: The Chelsea Green Press, 1989). In an otherwise sympathetic review of the book see Kirkpatrick Sale’s critique of this paradigm in: “As Vermont Goes” *The Nation* (October 9, 1989).

¹⁴ Katherine Krebs, Kevin Sigmund and Mike Hapwood were the students who actually did the counting in South Hero in 1999. At 9:40 they recorded 158 persons in attendance. Eighty-two were women and 76 were men. By 2:30 in the afternoon, when they counted for the fourth time there were only 43 men and 48 women remaining at the Folsom Educational and Community Center where town meeting was held. In the place for notes beside the attendance counts the students wrote “lots of kids.” The tradition of starting kids early in Vermont, whether it’s

lasted five hours and twelve minutes (not counting a short lunch break). In that time 51 different people spoke at least once. Twenty-three of these were women. The only way to get data like this is to take the day off and go to a town like South Hero on a Tuesday in March, stay at the town meeting until it ends and record what happens. Town meetings are almost always held only once a year most on the same day. Ninety-five percent are held within 24 hours of each other. How to obtain gavel to gavel data on 1500 of them? If one could get to 200 a year it would take over seven years. Of course attending more than three a year personally is usually impossible. Grants to hire it done (I quickly learned) were out of the question. But there were two things of which I had plenty, students (undergraduate) and time. And so I returned to an old formula¹⁵ – a different way of crossing barbed wire fences.

driving trucks, handling shotguns or doing democracy is still intact in many places. Katherine Krebs, Kevin Sigmund, and Mike Hapwood, “The 1999 Comparative Town Meeting Study: Town of South Hero,” (Burlington, Vermont: The University of Vermont, the Real Democracy Data Base in Progress, March, 1999). Here, in part, is what Katherine Krebs (who grew up in South Hero) wrote in her essay. “Town meeting day in South Hero felt like a homecoming for me. I remember vividly having the day off from school but being babysat at town meeting anyway as my parents participated in the meeting . . . I knew a great number of the people there and had formed impressions about them at a young age . . . It was interesting watching these people congregate and participate with such vigor in the events of the town. There were people who had had numerous children go through the school system who argued, nevertheless, against the school budget. There were people who argued against everything, and it made one wonder, surely these people enjoy roads to drive on, a sheriff and fire squad protection. After growing up in a household where my mom was a Sunday school teacher and school board member, and my dad was on the zoning board and rescue squad, the thought of accepting benefits without participation was unheard of. But I realized that for some people, attending Town Meeting is their form of involvement. It is their right . . . While many of the people who argued and debated seemed infuriatingly ignorant or uninformed, it simply validated the need for open forums and the democratic process.” Katherine Krebs, “South Hero Town Meeting Day 1999,” (Burlington, Vermont: The University of Vermont, March 1999). There you have it; lessons of tolerance and patience and respect for the commonweal learned at an early age. Fifteen years earlier here in part is what Tracy Fitzgerald had to say about town meeting in South Hero. “What I did realize was that the town meeting of South Hero, Vermont, isn’t that much different from my own town meeting in Marblehead, Massachusetts. The issues debated in South Hero such as school appropriations, computer education, cemetery funds, paving a new road, buying a new town truck are no different from what I have seen on the warrant in Marblehead. Granted, I did not hear one fight about who was going to put how many lobster pots where and my town does have more than 2500 people, but I was quite surprised at the modernness of a supposedly quintessential example of a real Vermont lifestyle.” Tracy Fitzgerald, “Town Meeting of South Hero,” (Burlington, Vermont: The University of Vermont, March 1984).

¹⁵ When I was at the University of Connecticut I took a seminar with comparativist, G. Lowell Field. He had been working on a book for years and continually involved his students in its development. After *Comparative Political Development, The Precedent of the West* (Ithaca: The Cornell University Press, 1967) came out I reviewed it from

I will describe in detail how this works later. For now a few notations. Some may surprise many of my colleagues. Undergraduates can, indeed, count. Moreover, they will go to strange places and count accurately if they are properly prepared. The best way to do this is to emphasize the *adventure* of it. Other things are needed. The first is a sense of mission. On the first day of any class I've ever taught over the past thirty-three years I have told my students that because they were in my class I would treat them as young *political scientists* and political science is more intellectually challenging and more important than *any* other science. I also worked hard (and shamelessly) to establish a persona: "Take Bryan's course and you'll end up in one of those hayseed conventions under a foot of snow one hundred miles from nowhere." The "field trip" was from the get go an integral part of the course. In short a heavy teaching load and the reputation I was able to develop became an advantage. In fact my unique situation was more than helpful. It is probably the *only* way the project could have happened.

Most importantly I made sure the *data* these students produced involved no judgments on their part.¹⁶ It required their attention only. Each component of information was remarkably simple. A junior high school student could understand and record it accurately. But in the aggregate and in the consistency and patience of thirty years these little bits of information have resulted in a data base (see Chapter I) that is quite frankly massive. Moreover, because I could do so many towns each year, I was able to exclude results that contained errors or were incomplete.

my first teaching job in Vermont (1969) precisely at the same time this project began. I wrote in part: "Field substituted for the 'committee-grant-staff' formula of scholarly research the nearly forgotten 'professor, student, time' approach once used extensively on the Continent." Such are we influenced by good professors. Frank Bryan, "Comparative Political Development, the Precedent of the West," *The Academic Reviewer* 3 (January, 1969): 37-39.

¹⁶ Judgments were called for in the essays the students were also required to write. These ranged in length and quality depending on the course I was teaching. Over the years I have graded over 4000 of these and have them on record with the data file for the meeting the student attended.

For instance if the data sheets indicated the students got to the meeting late or left early I was able to give them credit for the exercise but not include these data in the findings. This happened two or three times a year but usually left me with over fifty complete cases each year. Finally as I will demonstrate later the nature of the activity plus my intimate familiarity with the towns and the people in them left no room for chicanery.

Thus I came to have my data. But still there was melancholy. It seemed to me that to describe town meeting outside the context of the Vermont story would be like describing love without describing passion – damned misleading. And so I hedged my bet on thin and tried to think like an anthropologist.¹⁷ The intention is to tell what life in Vermont’s small towns is *really* like. It is one thing to know that 21 percent of the voters attended town meeting in the town of Walden, Vermont. It is another to know this enwrapped in a feel for the place. There is no way I can competently prove its causal usefulness (I’ll leave that to real anthropologists) but I believe the value of thick, qualitative juxtaposition to proper quantitative assessment is highly underrated. Put it this way. If a test group of one hundred political scientists were to read this book after having studied Frost’s poems in *North of Boston* for a semester their knowledge of and appreciation (for or against) town meeting would be remarkably advanced over a control group of 100 who did not.

So I did three things. From time to time I interrupted the analysis with “Witnesses,” first-hand accounts of town meeting by people who were there, including myself. These range from Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s stunning farewell address to the people of Cavendish to excerpts from

¹⁷ Anthropological analysis is not (as Geertz says) simply an amalgam of ethnographical techniques. It is an “elaborate venture [in] thick description.” What I have done is hardly elaborate and far from a venture. It is more like a series of selected flirtations.

student essays. Included too were brief accounts of town meetings in process, narratives (some as detailed as minute by minute accounts) of the participation, voting and conflict. These are needed to set the contextual *dynamic* of real democracy especially in light of the media driven popular belief that town meetings are informal “public hearings” or (worse) staged campaign devices.

Finally I traced personal reminiscences, reflections and observations about Vermont, its towns and its people; flashbacks and mutterings from a boyhood growing up green and an adulthood of loving only one place, this feisty, cantankerous, liberal, cold, glorious little republic of Vermont. Taking my cue from the 18th Century French *philosophe* Denis Diderot I put most of this in notes and included the notes in the text.¹⁸ A fancy term for this scheme might be methodology as autobiography. But by any name it is chancy. Still, I suspect that if I were to have recently returned from some exotic and unknown society halfway around the world to report in detail my research on real democracy from *a lifetime* among its people, the reader would be interested in and benefit from these kinds of contextual observations.

It is one thing to report on the decline of the Vermont hill farm. It is another to have worked for years on Vermont farms, to still live more with farmers and loggers than with academics, to know the constant agony and special joy (both physical and social) that a life close to nature inevitably brings. This kind of reference will, I believe, tell you much about their politics than statistics could ever do alone. When Thomas Wolfe wrote *You Can't Go Home Again*¹⁹ he wasn't talking about those of us who never left. Neither was he talking about

¹⁸ Using notes for ulterior motives was first used effectively by Diderot as editor of *La Encyclopedie* when he tucked more controversial material away in the footnotes.

¹⁹ Thomas Wolfe, *You Can't Go Home Again*, (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1940). Actually *You Can't Go Home Again* was not intended to be the name of the book but *The Web and the Rock* turned out to be too long and a second book was edited and published posthumously along with *The Hills Beyond*. The phrase was given to Wolfe by Ella Winter, Lincoln Steffen's widow, as he was walking her home after a party at the Sherwood Anderson's.

Vermont, the place columnist and political scientist Neal Peirce called: “perhaps the only place in America a stranger can feel homesick for before he has even left it.”²⁰ It was in *You Can’t Go Home Again* that Wolfe said: “I think the true discovery of our own democracy is still before us.”²¹ In Vermont to believe this is to believe one can go home again. To believe in democracy is to believe we must go home again. At any rate beyond a most detailed account of town meeting, I am committed to tell you (post card romanticism and rhetoric aside) how it is live among the people who still practice America’s most sacred longing. Real democracy.

WITNESS

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn Bids Farewell

(From) Minutes of the Cavendish Town Meeting—1994

Moderator led the assembly in the Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag of the United States of America.

The moderator asked those present to pause for a moment of silence in memory of the members of our community who died during the past year.

The phrase clearly meant (to Wolfe) you can’t go *back*. While most would guess he would have included Asheville, North Carolina, the hill country of his youth, he did not mention Asheville or even his “home town” in a list of fifteen things going back did mean in a letter to Edward Aswell of Harper’s Publishing Company which he never mailed. The topography surrounding Asheville, North Carolina, is very similar to that of Vermont. Wolfe visited Vermont in September of 1932 with Robert Reynolds after an exhaustive spasm of work on *Of Time and the River*. His biographer reports “... they drove and walked in the Green Mountains until Wolfe felt ‘better than I have . . . in months.’” Elizabeth Norwell, *Thomas Wolfe: A Biography*, (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1960): 219, 410-411. It is at least intriguing (it may be more, but I’ve never been able to nail it down) that Wolfe’s greatest critic was Bernard DeVoto, someone who truly believed that Vermont was the universal homeland. DeVoto lived in Vermont for much of the year. But of course by going to Vermont he had not gone home. If he had he would have lived in Utah. Too far from Harvard one guesses. See Bernard DeVoto’s attack on Wolfe, “Genius is Not Enough,” *Saturday Review of Literature*, (April 25, 1936).

²⁰ Neal R. Peirce, “Vermont: The Beloved State,” in Neal Peirce, *The New England States: People, Politics and Power*, (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1976).

²¹ Wolfe, *You Can’t Go Home Again*.

Moderator stated if there is no objection he would like to dispense with the rules for a moment and call a brief recess to allow a distinguished friend and resident address the group assembled. There was no objection.

The following speech was given by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn and interpreted by his son Stephan:

"Citizens of Cavendish, our dear neighbors,

At town meeting seventeen years ago I told you about my exile and explained the necessary steps which I took to ensure a calm working environment, without the burden of constant visitors.

You were very understanding; you forgave my unusual way of life, and even took it upon yourselves to protect my privacy. For this, I have been grateful throughout all these years and today, as my stay here comes to an end, I thank you. Your kindness and cooperation helped to create the best possible conditions for my work.

The eighteen years which I have spent here have been the most productive of my life. I have written absolutely everything I wanted to. I offer today those of my books that have been translated into English to the town library.

Our children grew up and went to school here, alongside your children. For them, Vermont is home. Indeed, our whole family has come to feel at home among you. Exile is always difficult, and yet I could not [have] imagined a better place to live, and wait, and wait for my return home than Cavendish, Vermont.

And so this spring in May, my wife and I are going back to Russia, which is going through one of the most difficult periods in its entire history—a period of rampant poverty, a period where standards of human decency have fallen, a period of lawlessness and economic chaos. That is the painful price we had to pay to rid ourselves of communism, during whose seventy-year reign of terror sixty million people died just from the regime's war on its own nation. I hope that I can be of at least some small help to my tortured nation, although it is impossible to predict how successful my efforts will be. Besides, I am not young.

I have observed here in Cavendish, and in the surrounding towns the sensible and sure process of grassroots democracy where the local population decides most of its problems on its own, not waiting for the decision of higher authorities. Alas, this we still do not have in Russia, and that is our greatest shortcoming.

Our sons will complete their education in America, and the house in Cavendish will remain their home.

Lately, while I have been walking on the nearby roads, taking in the surroundings with a farewell glance, I have found every meeting with many of you to be warm and friendly.

And so today, both to those of you whom I have met over these years, and to those whom I have not met I say: thank you and farewell. I wish all the very best to Cavendish and the area around it. God bless you all."²²

²² Town of Cavendish, "Minutes of the Cavendish Town Meeting—1994," *Town Report* (Year ending December 1994).