

From *A Rural Arts Sampler*
National Association of State Arts Agencies

2) Celebrating Village Life Through the Arts



Muralist Karen Becker, elementary school students and senior citizens joined together to create the *Rutland Bicentennial Mural*, 1991, for their town of Rutland, Vermont.
Photo courtesy of Chaffee Art Center

by Michael Levine

In Vermont and New Hampshire today villages and towns dot the hills and winding river valleys that separate ridges of weathered mountains. Having fewer than two million residents between them and no city with a population over 100,000, the two states are predominantly rural. For artists this has presented the dual problems of isolation and a lack of major cultural institutions and corporations that can provide support. Survival for many artists has meant pursuing careers in non-arts fields and focusing their creative energies on community theater, choruses, dance and exhibitions.

These community arts are the core of New England's artistic heritage and embody the commonly accepted "make do or do without" philosophy. Quilting bees, Saturday-night dances known as *kitchen tunks*, holiday parades, story telling and band concerts on the town green were the heart and soul of traditional village life. At the same time there has always been great interest in bringing visiting artists into the community. Well into this century, even the smallest villages supported opera houses, and an informal network of presenters ensured that quality performances would tour throughout the region.

Although populations have shifted and land use has changed dramatically over the past 50 years, the tradition of community arts still flourishes. In New Hampshire and Vermont, the state arts councils have recently funded two different approaches to strengthening that heritage.

In the fall of 1990, the Vermont Council on the Arts awarded 11 Community Arts Grants through a new program supported in part by the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). The awards were part of the council's efforts to demonstrate that the arts are as essential to town life as fire trucks and snowplows. Each project reflected the unique characteristics of the com-

munity involved. The program helped broaden citizens' understanding of what goes into creating original works, offered opportunities for community members to work with professional artists, and most importantly, created works that will have lasting significance.

At about the same time, the New Hampshire State Council on the Arts received similar funding from the NEA to "stimulate the creation of a new, interdisciplinary, collaborative work, using New Hampshire as its source and inspiration." The New Hampshire council selected a joint proposal from a composer and a writer to develop "The Village Store" project. "Due to limited resources, the council has never had the opportunity to commission a new work," explained Judy Rigmont, touring/community arts coordinator at the New Hampshire State Council on the Arts. "This grant allowed us to fund a project that would be portable, adaptable to different settings, collaborative and reflective of the fabric of rural community life in New Hampshire."

While the two state arts councils took very different approaches to serving their rural constituencies, both provided an opportunity for these underserved communities to achieve a voice through the arts.

› Village Life as Opera

It's turning cool quickly, but the threat of rain has passed on this mid-September evening. I'm driving on a twisting, two-lane road, climbing my way out of the Connecticut River Valley. Most of the open farmland remains behind me, the road is now lined with dense, second-growth forest broken by village centers every few miles. Gas station/video rental/general stores are about all that's still open, even though it's barely 7 p.m. I'm heading to a dot on the map with the unlikely name of East Westmoreland, looking for Mike's Auto Repair.

It's preview night for *The Village Store Verbatim*, and as promised its creators have returned to their source of inspiration for this debut performance. Fan belts, radiator hoses and assorted spare parts still hang from the walls, although the tool boxes have been pushed back from the two work bays to accommodate the 50 or so folding chairs. The overhead doors are open and 10 benches are outside to provide seating for the overflow crowd. Most of the audience has heard about this piece as it was developing over the course of the last nine months. Mike is here, as are friends and relatives of the cast and curious neighbors.

In the course of the hour-long production, rural New England comes to life. Writer/director Valeria Vasilevski developed the libretto based on actual conversations recorded at town meetings, folk dances, general stores, auto repair shops and diners. Composer/conductor Lawrence Siegel used these words to create an opera in five parts that incorporates traditional New England dance music, electronic minimalist music, jazz, gospel and hard-driving blues. The music is augmented by selected tapes of the original voices, including a town meeting moderator who reminds us not to block the fire exits and then invites us to join in the pledge of allegiance.

The singers (two lead voices are effectively balanced by a nine-voice chorale) can barely fit up front amidst the floor jacks, grease guns and engine blocks. The tight quarters seem appropriate, reflecting the tiny communities that are squeezed in among the hills of New England. This work is about those places and the people who live in them. It starts with coffee and muffins at the Tumble Inn Diner. The wind is whipping snow through the door; corned beef hash with eggs, toast and coffee is the breakfast special; and the conversation is about pop music, the lottery, the Gulf War and taxes.

"The chance daily-meeting places in small towns everywhere spark conversations on topics great and small that are both local and universal," Siegel explained. "We tried to capture what people really talk about and let the audience eavesdrop. By listening to other people's lives and concerns we begin to see ourselves on the stage. In a way, this is about breaking down barriers between artist and audience."

In scene two of the opera, Maria and her mother wait on customers in their general store. Through their brief dialogue we learn an incredible amount about the economic life cycle of a New England mill town from its past boom to current bust. What's made particularly clear are the effects the economy has on the vitality of the townspeople. Between smiling at customers, Maria reveals her true thoughts:

"My father?

In those days, he had

Bushels full of produce on display outside.

He had local fruits and just-picked berries.

He had fresh-baked bread from Rutland and big pizzas, too!

He was the first to sell squares of homemade Sicilian pizza right here.

He had provolone and salami hanging from those bare hooks.

He had big stalks of bananas hanging up there.

He had a roaster for hot peanuts over there.

He had locally-made candy mints...handmade peppermints and wintergreen mints

Delicious! Absolutely wonderful!

Homemade, everything big and pipes and tobacco and fruit baskets too!"

Looking around at the audience I see heads nod. They understand all too well the changes Maria is

voicing. For many of them, the joys and difficulties of rural life were shared by a community that no longer exists. But this is not a romantic work rooted in nostalgia. By reaching deep into the social makeup of small towns, *The Village Store* reveals their many facets.

The Gulf War, murder and the school board are hot topics in scene three, set in Mike's Auto Repair Shop. As Mike and "the guys" are working and talking about the new benefits package for the teachers, their dialogue illustrates the social conflict in small communities. In his soliloquy, Mike says:

"So when they talk raises they just tell you what the pay raise is, they don't mention the benefits. Last year they said 6 percent—that's reasonable—but with the benefits it was 13 percent. Tell me the truth and let me decide, but don't lie to me or misinform me because I'm payin' for it! It stirs me up, I'll tell you that!"

The Village Store Verbatim breaks down barriers on many levels. In scene four, the singers trade leads with the band during a contradance, which features one of New England's finest fiddlers.

"Opera audiences are often accused of being highbrow," Siegel says. "My approach is to encourage audiences to leave their prejudices at the door and accept what is presented. Thus, within a music-theater piece I have incorporated opera, as well as folk music—actually juxtaposing the high and low art in the same scene."

No institution is as sacred or as symbolic to New Englanders as a town meeting. In scene five, Siegel combines dialogue from a town meeting with music evoking a gospel revival. The result is a sense that these annual forums are as much a spiritual renewal as they are an exercise in democracy. Babies cry; the moderator complains that it's very difficult for a town to operate without people running for key positions; voters argue over the cost of recycling, approve playing basketball in

the town hall and are generally unhappy that the state is making the town pay to fix a rusted bridge.

The show is over. The singers and musicians, all professionals, stand in their white jackets and black Mike's Auto Repair t-shirts receiving well-earned applause. There's a public debut tomorrow night at the Claremont Opera House and, if all goes as planned, the production will tour throughout New England. But at this moment, the line between art, artist, audience and community has dissolved. This musical snapshot has taken a slice of New England's contemporary rural life and exposed it for all to see from a new perspective.

"Our hope is to bring this to town halls, community centers and other places that don't usually host arts events," Rigmont explains, "and we are prepared to fund 60 percent of the production costs. Through our Rural Arts Program, we plan to support community residencies of up to five days, during which Mr. Siegel would use *The Village Store* as a model to guide participants in creating their own work, set in their own community. We also hope to promote discussions about New England folk life as an inspiration for literature, theater and music. A project like this, which so well reflects the lives of people in our smaller communities, will help further the arts council's goals of developing new audiences and presenters, as well as provide employment for our professional artists."

► Pieces of the Past Get a New Face

In Vermont, community arts projects have taken a grassroots approach. Murals, plays, oral histories, songs, mosaics and sculptures have been created that reflect the communities from which they have sprung. More importantly, these works have been generated through the cooperative efforts of artists and residents of all ages and levels of experience.

“The council encouraged new partnerships with these community arts projects,” explained Anne Sarcka, community arts officer at the Vermont Council on the Arts. “We limited each community to one proposal and encouraged groups to work together. Through informal discussions, notices in local newspapers and presentations at public meetings, ideas began to take shape. Some of the applications were inspired by Vermont’s bicentennial in 1991, but all were evaluated on their ability to involve a broad cross section of citizens in the wonderful process of creating art. For the council this is a way to encourage continued community funding of the arts and to make the arts a part of the everyday lives of all our citizens.”

› An Art Park in Hardwick

Hardwick is among Vermont’s poorest towns in terms of per capita income (the current median gross income is about \$13,000, compared to \$19,000 statewide), but is one of its richest when it comes to history. It’s located at the edge of the state’s “Northeast Kingdom,” an area of struggling dairy and vegetable farms, large timber holdings, abandoned quarries and few paved roads. Hardwick’s population peak was during the early 20th century when the nearby granite quarries kept thousands employed and brought many skilled workers from Italy and other European nations. The period of prosperity gave rise to a stunning library, an opera house and the establishment of one of Vermont’s longest-running weekly newspapers.

More recently, Hardwick has had a reputation as a rough town, but over the past few years the residents have been working hard to change that image. In the mid-1980s, most of the village center was designated a historic district on the Register of National Historic Places, and the entire streetscape was improved. When

the arts council’s call for proposals for Community Arts Grants was issued, it helped stimulate conversations around town that focused on the arts.

The result was a plan to develop an Art Park on Main Street located on the site of the former Idle Hours Theater, a building which had symbolized Hardwick’s decline. At one time the showplace for the region, the theater was turned into a soft porn venue during the 1970s. It burned in 1979, and all that remains on the empty lot is the stage, now at the mercy of the elements.

Plans for the Art Park include the creation of festive banners and wind socks, a schedule of family films to be shown outdoors, staging of local and visiting performers, and public readings. The centerpiece of the park will be a mosaic wall inset with glass masks cast from the faces of a dozen Hardwick residents. To encourage the involvement of a broad cross section of the community, the mosaic will be created from broken pieces of china contributed by residents. In addition, classes have been offered for those interested in helping complete the actual panels.

A new enthusiasm for Hardwick has emerged, symbolized by the broad base of cooperation for this project and fueled by the prospect for a permanent place for the arts in Hardwick’s future.

› Chelsea Composes a Musical History

Most of these arts projects involved community members of all ages in the creation of the works. For instance, the town of Chelsea, with about a 1,000 residents, succeeded in bringing professional artists, elementary school children and senior citizens together in a project that resulted in an original musical celebrating the town’s past and present. The material for the play, titled *Back When? A Child’s Eye View of Chelsea History*, was based on oral histories collected by the students during Vermont’s

bicentennial year. The final production, held in the packed town hall, included scenes depicting what Chelsea was like before European settlers arrived, farm life 200 years ago, and contemporary Chelsea.

From *The Shire Town*, a song written by second graders for *Back When?*:

“Birds, trees and mountains of green
Running rivers and bubbling streams,
The sunlight floods us with marvelous beams
In the wondrous village of Chelsea.”

“The words and ideas came from a year of collaboration between teachers, students, visiting artists and town residents both old and new,” poet and playwright Cora Brooks says as she describes the process. “I worked closely with a handful of students and we used these elements as a quilter would a pile of cloth scraps. We pieced them together in many combinations, until they exhibited the Chelsea that had been revealed through everyone’s eyes. It was a wonderful way for the kids in our community to see where they came from and where we are headed.”

› Generations Join to Paint Memories

In Vermont’s capital city of Montpelier (the smallest capital city of the 50 states with a population of 8,000), and neighboring Barre, a project brought elementary school students to two nursing homes for joint art classes with the seniors. Joy Spontak, a professional artist and teacher, worked with the groups in weekly sessions for about six months, helping them create paintings from images of their lives in Vermont. For the seniors (ranging up to age 103), these paintings reflected the history of their towns, while the students concentrated on familiar landscape features that hold special meaning for them.

The project succeeded in bringing people together who otherwise have too few chances to interact, given the divisions present in modern society. It helped transform the image of the nursing home by opening it up to community members of all ages, and promoted cooperative relationships that erased the psychological barriers that existed between people. Everyone involved, regardless of prior experience, was encouraged to express his or her self by creating at least one painting. Throughout the fall and winter students and seniors worked side by side bringing to the canvas their images of homes, barns, fields, mountains, community buildings and the changing seasons.

“I don’t look for talent in my students,” Spontak summarized, “I look for interest. We are all creative, and can be as long as we are alive.”

“One of my elder students did a painting of a place she had lived. In it, she had painted New Hampshire’s Twin Mountain with Vermont’s Camel’s Hump adjacent to it. These peaks are more than 50 miles apart. When I asked her about it, she said at different times in her life she had lived near both places. I told her that was proof that artists are very powerful. They can move mountains!”

The project resulted in *Visual Memories*, an exhibition that opened at the Vermont Historical Society and toured the region’s town and city halls, schools and senior centers. The interpretations and memories it contains will provide a treasure trove for generations to come.

› Rutland’s Bicentennial Mural

In Rutland, Vermont’s second largest city with a population of 18,000, seniors and students were again linked through a community arts project. Celebrating the city’s past and present, the *Rutland Bicentennial Mural* was cre-

ated from four four-by-eight-foot panels. The hands-on project brought together professional muralist Karen Becker, about 20 of Rutland's senior population and many of its eight-, nine- and ten-year-olds to conceive, design and paint the panels. Giving all the participants artistic license, regardless of their training or ability, was the project's strength. Their personal expression of how they view where they live makes it a wonderfully varied and vibrant work.

The project coordinators are dedicated to bringing this artwork to where people live and work. The opening display at city hall was a festive event and the mural continues to tour throughout the region to hospitals, shopping malls, nursing homes, schools, the library and downtown businesses. "There was such wonderful cooperation and enthusiasm for this undertaking," explained Susan Farrow, director of Rutland's largest gallery. "Our supplies were donated, the city helped pay our expenses and the recreation department provided the space. This is art, it is culture and it is what helps tie a community together."

› Linking Past and Future

While the peaceful tree-lined New England village remains an American archetype, the communities beneath that veneer display the stress cracks of continuous change. The traditions of past generations are often anachronisms in the context of today's society. Yet, the values they represent are the heart and soul of rural life.

Each of these projects evolved in unique ways, yet all of them provided a link between their communities' past and present. They encouraged a wide variety of citizens to explore and interpret their cultural heritage and keep it meaningful for a new generation. These arts projects produced some remarkable visions of community life, but their most lasting impact will result from the tremendous enthusiasm and pride that was generated by community members joining together to help those visions take form. ○

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