

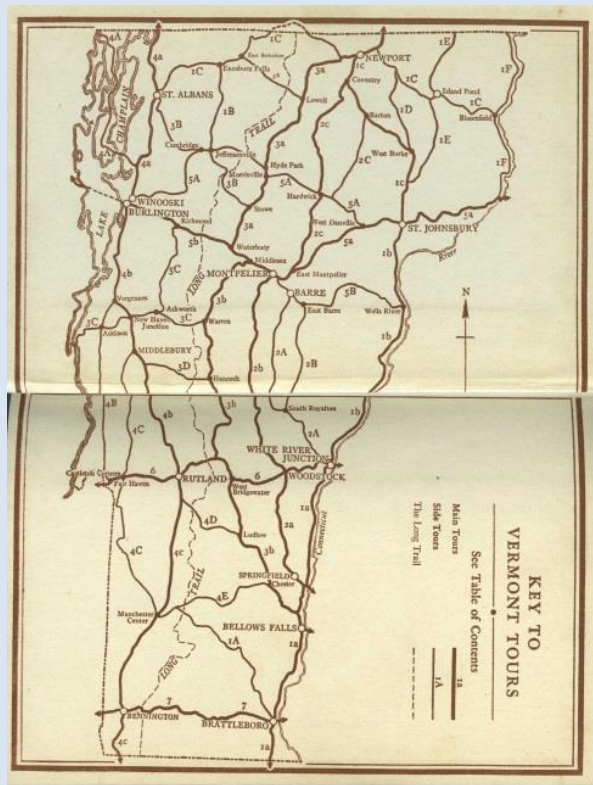
# PAST TIMES: STORIES FROM THE SHELDON'S PAST

## *Old Guide Gives Insight into Vermont*

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August is vacation time for many of us, and with gasoline costing what it does at present a fair number of Vermonters will probably stay closer to home this year. Vermont summers are so beautiful—and so short—that it always seems a shame to miss them by going somewhere else.



Vermont has been a popular destination for over a century, but travel here increased exponentially with the coming of the automobile. A few months ago, Tom Ward, a good friend of the Sheldon Museum and father of Associate Director, Mary Manley, was moving from Weybridge to Wake Robin, and kindly offered us a copy of the greatest Vermont guidebook of them all. Vermont: A Guide to the Green Mountain State, was published by the Federal Writers' Project (FWP), part of Roosevelt's New Deal to keep Americans working in the depths of the Depression. Starting in 1935, the FWP set out to produce tourist guides to all 48 states. The volumes of the American Guide Series became classics, providing a detailed overview of each state along with driving tours. The Vermont guide came out in 1937, and an afternoon spent reading it is like a

time machine trip in an old Packard. It makes you think about how we've changed and how we haven't.

The guide opens with introductory essays meant to help outsiders understand Vermont. In the Preface, State Director Dana Doten explains Vermont politics, saying that "in recent years ultra-conservatism has distinguished this region from other parts of the country where progressive tendencies have been, for a generation, on the increase."

(This has certainly changed.) Doten then bemoans the fact that, “Lacking large cities and the consequent opportunities for successful careers, Vermont has for three generations exported its most promising young people to urban centers outside its borders.” (This has not changed.)

Under General Information, we find that Depression-era Vermont was served by eleven railroad companies, sixteen bus lines and one airline, showing that rural areas can be well served by public transport. On the roads, the speed limit was 50 for ‘pleasure cars’ and 40 for ‘pleasure cars with trailers,’ proving that the annoyance of being behind a car pulling a trailer has a long history.

‘Vermonters’ are then introduced by the most famous Vermont writer of the period, Dorothy Canfield Fisher. Fisher did a lot of publicity for Vermont tourism in the 1930s, and was probably the single greatest promulgator of the state’s image as a ‘land that time forgot.’ She quotes her Vermont-born godfather, who suggested that they turn the ‘old State’ “into a National Park of a new kind—keep it just as it is, with Vermonters managing just as they do—so the rest of the country could come in to see how their grandparents lived.” As she put it, “We realize that we are laggards from the past century, still living in what Marx kindly calls ‘the idiocy of rural life,’ and we know that our rural life is like that of the past, not like that of much of the present.” Was she right about this? Are we still living in the past here, or have we caught up? Do we want the creeping sprawl and suburbanization that threaten to make us more like the rest of America in the 21st century?

The volume contains the expected sections on natural history, history, agriculture and industry. We are then surprised to see a chapter with the disturbing title, “Racial Elements.” As one might expect in a book on Vermont, these ‘racial elements’ prove to run the ‘gamut from A to B.’ The essay begins with the disconcerting statement that “The people of Vermont are, and always have been, predominantly of English stock.” That must have come as a surprise to the Abenaki reader. We then find that other ‘races,’ anyone designated as ‘foreign born,’ comprise 10-13% of the Vermont population, including ... the Irish, French-Canadians, Slavs, Welsh, Scots, Italians and Finns. The author concludes that, so far, these foreigners “have made no appreciable contribution to arts or manners and no changes in the ways of living—or of thinking—of Vermonters.” (Only Yankees are Vermonters?) Sounds like Vermont could use more real diversity. That hasn’t changed enough.

In an early nod to the new locomotion, the authors presume that their readers will be traveling by car. There is a sense of novelty and wonder about this, as when they describe one of the few paved roads in the state: “US7 is without doubt the most cosmopolitan highway in the State, with speed the custom, and license tags from all over

the land flashing vari-colored along the winding dipping ribbon of concrete.” (Does that guy honking behind me sport the ‘vari-colored’ license of Massachusetts?)

Read any drive in the book and you get a sharp picture of an earlier Vermont. Middlebury is “a charming college town ... the presence of Middlebury College ... has added a patina of intellectualism.” In the commercial district, “stores of the type common to a village of this size alternate with shops that cater to the more sophisticated tastes of town and gown.” The College itself has been plagued by “lack of funds, an inadequate plant, and subsequent small enrollment,” but seems to be on the upswing. Among the town’s sights, the ‘Sheldon Art Museum’ is said to have “an authentic restoration, even to a rum bottle, of the room of a Middlebury College student in the opening years of the nineteenth century.” (Must track this down.)

In other Addison County drives, we learn that New Haven is commonly called ‘New Haven Street.’ The new Crown Point Bridge is a marvel, and each car pays \$1 for the privilege of passing over it. East Middlebury is “Quiet and unassuming,” but one of its residents owns an American antique secretary “valued at \$35,000.” (Where is it now?) In Bristol, a description of how the earnest Joseph Greene erected the Lord’s Prayer Rock in the hope of cleaning up the language of the local workmen ends with the wry comment that this attempt at reformation probably “provided the tough old teamsters with a great deal more ribald amusement than fear.”

Reading the guide is addictive to anyone who knows these places well today. Mile after mile roll by, as you picture each landscape in your mind. The most surprising thing is the number of places that remain completely recognizable. How many parts of America could still say that? Maybe Dorothy Canfield Fisher was right, and Vermonters really are lucky enough to be living in the past.