The graceful accommodation of opposites—red brick and white clapboards, river and pasture—reflects Newbury's enduring vitality.

Not even Mark Twain could have created a better place to be young—or old, for that matter

By Frank Bryan
HOME is the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in. —Robert Frost

"Death of the Hired Man"

It was long and black, and it stilled up through the valley like a snare with fins. It took a long time coming—years—but finally it leaked through the town itself, destroying everything in its path. It left Newbury village at once both more and less Island than before—in the wrong way in both instances.

I saw it coming from a woodlot in the summer of 1979.

Looking south toward Bradford, you could see huge billows of black smoke where bulldozers had pushed hundreds of green trees together. Men then poured oil on them and put their torch. Later that summer you could hear the constant grind and rumble of the giant earthmovers as they came nearer and nearer.

I managed to round fifty-two cords of firewood from what was to become the southwood lane that summer with a chainsaw and a pair of Brown Swiss oxen (Boots and Hob). My toss (Charlie Cole) gave me $13 a cord, my room and board, and the company of a great family. He was a wise man.

Before the energy crisis hit in 1973 he said things like: "Too had to see all that wood go to waste."

In about half a froenoon, Interstate 91 covered over 3 field Charrie and I and others had spent weeks clearing by hand. They wiped out "Grandma's half" of his sugarbush after lunch.

In a week the highway builders had so changed the face of the land that, standing by the fence beside the road this spring with one of my sons (he's eleven), I couldn't answer the question: "But where did you cut the wood, Dad?" Three months of work over five acres of land and I couldn't even judge the lay of it any more. One of the best summers of my life in Newbury has been bulldozed—not only from the face of the earth—but also from the heartland of my memory.

Interstate 91 cut Newbury Town in half. There is an interchange in Bradford and one on the northern edge of town west of Wells River. This means buses no longer go through the village. It also means you can live in the village, drive to Bradford or north to Wells River and then on to work in St. Johnsbury or White River.

Culture leak. They say that nothing has had more impact on twentieth-century social structure than the automobile. It's hard to disagree when you measure the impact Interstate 91 has had on Newbury: It's not all bad, of course. There is less traffic through town. But even that traffic, while sometimes a pain in the summer months, brings a presence to the village that is now lacking.

The village shows none of the damage Interstate 91 caused, but there is no missing its effects. There seems to be a loneliness in the air, a certain ambiance of isolation, a subliminal residue of estrangement from the pulse of the planet, a sorrow like the warm, soft wind that sometimes touches the back of your neck on a late August afternoon when the lacs are cry.

On the other hand, Newbury survived the Revolution as the northernmost outpost of colonists on the Connecticut riv--
er. It gritted out the winter of "eighteen hundred and forty-two, and a half" and the hundred year "dark age" of Vermont history when the scarred scarlet oak (as historic as Stephen Douglas said between debates with Abe Lincoln) "the most glorious spot on the face of the globe" became "an engine when he is very young."


Newbury survives the flood of '27 and the hurricane of '38. Hell, it'll lick that black topover too.

Newbury is the quintessential Connecticut River town, a long row of farms on either side and the village in between. There is a hill in back, also called Mount Pulaski after the Revolutionary War hero, and a long contour of land holding the houses up from the river and its verdant flood plain. From the "summer house" on the top of Pulaski you can see—trust me—the most beautiful pastoral scene in Northern New England.

I arrived in Newbury in 1943, having come downstream from Canaan (the northeasternmost town in Vermont) at the age of two. With Dad in North America, Mom was in charge of the move.

Smart lady. As it turned out, Dad didn't come back (no, it was a divorce), and as I might, I can't conjure up a picture of what he looked like when I was little enough to be cuddled. But I can still conjure up the Coos.

In fact I can still remember the first night we arrived there on November 8, 1943—I was actually two and a half—Florence Carper came over with two fresh-baked pies. Florence still lives in Newbury next door to Mom. At eighty-five, Florence doesn't bake much anymore, but she can still tell you how.

On the other side of the house lives Ida Scott. She made the best doughnuts in town. You could count them every Saturday. It was Ida who invented "musselshells," and when they come hot out of her oven on a June morning, the aroma wafted much more than five or six houses in either direction. At ninety, Ida doesn't make them anymore. But she's still there in the same house. That'll tell you about Newbury.

Being raised between the best pie maker and best doughnut maker in town wasn't half bad. The other half was the valley itself, the cluster of houses on the Coos—"the land the Abnaki called the "place of the white pines."" Mark Twain could not have imagined a better setting in which to be young. Tom Sawyer had nothing on us.

Wid the nicest village green in the valley, deep elms and a ball field. The green's still there. Houses surround it, and at the root is a white-striped church, the square brick appurtenance of a village north, east, and south is the great Coos, flowing meadows marked by hedgerows where rive maple snout in to replace the elm.

In the long, winding, Connecticut drizzling round and about in the form of two oxbows, called the "big" and "little" oxbow. From Nurse Pulaski you don't see much of the water, but you know the river's there by the trees along the bank.

It doesn't end there. From Pulaski you can see the other side of the river and more meadows in yes, New Hampshire's town of Haverhill, Newbury's historic done. But what's really important is the backstop of the White Mountains. It begins with a monadnock of perfect dimension, called, ironically, Black Mountain. Beyond that is the entire length of majestic Moosilauke, the largest mountain massif of the Rockies. To the north Kimball and Lafayette match off into the atmosphere.

Grown up in Newbury we didn't give a hoot about views, of course. Like besneckered kids growing up in small towns all over America, we wanted action, baby. What better place to find action than in a sleepy little one-store village on the upper Connecticut?

There was the river that led away to God knows where. Give a kid a raft and a little peck (forget about the logistical interruption of Wilder Dam, downriver in Hartford), and that deep-floating ribbon of dreams could bring an eleven-year-old enough adventure to last a lifetime. We never considered "running away" from home. Hell, we'd float for it.

One morning in August of the year 1956 at 8:00 a.m. Newbury's fire alarm went off. Men and women rushed to the fire station to be told that Mickey Blodgett and "Boozer" Bryan had headed down the Connecticut on a raft. They'd have to be rescued before they fell off or went over the dam some thirty miles south. False alarms. In fact, we'd been
camping out behind the Octrow Antique Shop all night.

There was a railroad, too. The Boston and Maine. We all have memories that establish our own positioning on the stage of history. Mine is when diesel replaced steam on the Boston and Maine.

With the track running beside the river down across "Pop" Green's meadows—about a quarter-mile from our house—I could feel the mighty trains late at night. The house quivered, and the cry of the wheel down at Nelson's crossing brought goose bumps to the arms of restless little boys awash in the dim with visions of flashing steel and steam rumbling south along the river.

Because there was a train there I could explore freight cars at will and a station where passenger trains stopped twice a day. It was a perfect place for hanging out and watching the passengers watch you—many with pity in their eyes at the sight of ragged kids without the brains to know how unhappy they were. I met many of them later in life.

They still don't get it.

But most of all the trains brought danger. When you were young, the trains were big. You couldn't negotiate with trains. They were, therefore, a perfect test of manhood for little boys. Like the day we played hobo with a slow freight that was inching past the Newbury dump where we'd gone to stone cars. Jump on, we would, and then off. Climbing the ladder higher! Sit on top! Never notice the train was gathering speed. Then comes that awful moment that can be for even the silliest of kids a metaphor for decisions throughout a lifetime: jump now. With every passing second the consequences become even more terrifying. Jump now or end up in White River Junction. Jump. Now!

On the time "Pokey Smith" (I've lied about his last name because, knowing Pokey, I'm sure he wouldn't see me for this—even though he's gone to God knows where and I haven't seen him for thirty years) and I "borrowed" a Model-T Ford from the American Legion building with the intent of holding up the Boston and Maine. Our punishment was immediate—dragging the monster through the pickerbrush a quarter mile to the tracks. It took half a day.

There I was, cut and bruised and netted to death, crouched behind the tripodded gun under the old German helmet Dasl had sent home from Frankfurt in 1945—Moors had screamed when she opened the box, expecting, I now understand, some kind of present from the man who had not yet come home to help raise their kids, one of whom only a few years later would attempt to heist 50 freight cars, two engines, a caboose, and five crew members from the Boston and Maine Railroad Company.

There was Pokey standing erect, a cartridge holder draped over his uncle's
of gun. We stood south under the hot sun, waiting the first tremble in the ground that would announce the tilt was at hand.

We abandoned our design to some haste at about the quarter-mile mark. Gee the gun off, too, but it was close, as the engine crashed by never even notionising the entanglement of boys and steel and belts and goldened dirt and terror lying in a pile in the guilty beside the tracks.

Memory. There was a cemetery, too, a long pretty case just above the river north of town. The horse-pouring was always good down behind it. But you fish for horseracemound (some call them hilltops) at night by lantern. Then you have on walk home—through the country. There was a post office, a general store named Jim's, and Harley Slack's Garage that was always dark and cool in summer and the men there moved slowly about in their cavern of oily tools and off-limits wall calendars.

There was a tar road (that soon changed to dirt) that led beyond the village to "out back." There was a little pond called the fish pond about a mile thorough the woods, on an old logging road south of town. There was "cherryberry round," where mayflowers grew in abundance, and lady slippers, too. Florence can still tell you where to find them, but I doubt she will. There were eres built south of town. (And they tried to tell us a few years ago that the reed of the 50s were nuts but they were psychologically affected by "up there" all year. If it was bells, we invented that exist in 1957!)

There were junior peans and basketball games and senior plays and March of Dimes all year. It seemed to own only one pair of pants and no shirt. There were Town Meetings where we could sit and watch pure democracy in action. As long as you kept your mouth shut and behaved, once in a while you got to see grownups saw each other in public. Often they got really mad. It was funny.

Still is.

How could one blasted highway destroy an incubator of memories like that?

NEVER was a history of stiffness—of conservative filter in the rest of the world. It is in Newbury that the fall line of the Connecticut established a zonal barrier to river transportation and because of this, Newbury became one of the largest and most important towns in Vermont during the last century. And it has last. In the Revolutionary War the British were an expedition down from Canada to capture Jacob Bailey and destroy the town. They missed, and destroyed the town of Royalton instead, in 1780. Newbury went for history in. In the pages of the Newbury Historical Society's News Letter for June 1989, we find the following: "This is a year of cele-

beration! The 225th anniversary of the organization of the First Congregational Church of Newbury, 1804 for the daughter Church of Wells River, the 184th for the Town House and the 150th for the Newbury Methodist Semi-

nary. It was in Newbury where Boston University began when in 1829 an en-

ergetic woman, "Preceptor Miss Betsy Dow," began teaching religion and temperance.

Think of it this way: Here is a little place torn to page 107
river town of less than 2,000 people which published a history of itself in 1902—a 780 page volume by Frederick Wells, called by authorities "one of the best town histories in the state." In 1978 the people of Newbury published a second volume, History of Newbury, Vermont 1908 to 1977. It has 585 pages—small print pages—over 100 photographs, and several maps. The people of Newbury cherish their past, and his is the mark of true community. About the time I was ten years old, I began to discover this history, by reading Ralph Nading Hill and Earl Newton's wonderful book The Immigrant. Newbury began to take on new meaning. (Drat it—why didn't I recognize the symptoms! I was growing up—or is it down?) It was too late. Two years later I rediscovered my thumb. That's when Newbury really began to grow. It became for me a town and a less—a village.

I learned to walk across the front lawn, across the sidewalk, onto the edge of Route 5, and stick out my thumb. More never had a car, but I discovered that a thumb and a fine-tuned pedestrian gaze were reasonable substitutes. It wasn't long before I was in Wells River or South Newbury or "out to Hall's Pond" between West Newbury and Newbury Center. It befuddled those "from away," but it is important to understand that in Vermont towns one often finds incorporated villages. I grew up in Newbury "vicinity," on the oxbow. But Newbury is among the ten biggest Vermont towns in terms of acreage. There is also a "Wells River Village" in Newbury town and several smaller "places": Boltonville, Newbury Center, South Newbury, and West Newbury. And understand this, too. When Wells wrote his History of Newbury in 1902, there were four railroad stations for passengers and freight in Newbury, five U.S. post offices, and at last one store and creamery in each "place." There were two high schools. There were eighteen rural school districts, each with its schoolhouse. Today there are no passenger trains,
no buses through town. (Thus older people like Mom, who don't drive, are trapped. Before, they could catch a Vermont Transit to Brattleboro or White River Junction. There is no high school—that's junior prom and no senior play. The post office and train station are both in South Newbury, a two-mile walk. The store is gone from West Newbury, but the post office remains.

Yet the face of Newbury remains intact. We LEFT for fate's sake in 1959, there were three public buildings in the center of the village: Jim's store, the town clerk's office, and the Post Office. The town clerk and the Post Office now share one of them. The Bradford National Bank moved a teller and a window ("it's too small to be called a "branch") into the old town clerk's office. Three buildings in 1959. Same there in 1989.

Newbury, like all real places, has had some shame, too. Perhaps the worst event in the village's history, at least in this century, was the abduction and murder of farmer Orville Gilson in 1957. The Gilson killing has become probably the state's most infamous unsolved murder case. Newbury became the subject of many national stories on the case, including "One in a Life magazine. A novel, The Landing of the Newfound, was published based on the case. Press reports were fed by the mythologies of small-town life, and Newbury became the "beautiful little village" where white church steeples among the fims hide dark and sinister forces of evil. Most of that was boloney. But we did kill Orville Gilson.

But hey, That's August talk (the real Vermonters' least favorite month because it raves nothing to look forward to). Let's talk January 206! It's the best day of the year because it is within two weeks of Groundhog Day, which is within three more weeks (or so) of Town Meeting Day, which starts sugaring season (which ends—please always remember—it's too warm for the trees to freeze), which puts us within a month of May Day, which is only two or three weeks from gaden planting, which is within three weeks of June 21, the longest day of the year and the day which real Vermonters dread the most because every day after that is shorter and there is nothing to look forward to but August.

Let's talk January! Let's talk people. The reason Newbury has survived Interstate 91 is because its people have. There are Newburyites all over the place. Rin, Carlson still lives out on Jefferson Hill. A long way as she does, Town Meeting is safe. She's only one eye now, so Town Meeting is not safe for long time for one. "Sig" Carter (who was held almost every local office imaginably) may work in Hanover, but she still lives in Newbury. Jimmy Wheeler's there—former varsity basketball star—and my old classmate Beau Wheeler and his cousin Don.

South Newbury, Isabel Whitney at eighty still runs their Sleepers Meadow Cabins and writes for the newspaper behind the Times. Born in Dublin, she came to Newbury via Jamaica married to a former World War II aviator. Sleepers Meadow is one of the oldest farms in Newbury. Isabel herself is fast becoming a legend in her own right. Up in Wells River, Al Stevens, who has made more motions and "seconds," and called more questions at Town Meeting than anybody in town, doesn't farm anymore, but he still lives there. Dick Frost, who moves around Newbury in the legislature as often as he can, is a Sue Schwenke, master teacher. There's selectmen Ken Alger, who's been in town all his life and can get through the toughest political problem like beer Rabbit through a briar patch.

The point is obvious. There's a mixture of natives and newcomers in Newbury that has preserved the community—against (it often seems) all odds. Not that there isn't controversy—and often bitter debate. But the community is strong enough to contain it and survive it. There is no greater testimonial to
community. Democracy is not the absence of conflict. It is the capacity to see it through and maintain the civil order. Newbury, like most Vermont towns, has proved it's good at that. So, we may survive Interstate '91. In fact I'd say it's a safe bet.

Meanwhile, the river flows on, and the planet spins through the galaxy. Because Newbury is halfway between White River and St. Johnsbury and it's a good commute to either, and because there are no large populations to the east or west, the town has not been dragged irreversibly into the magnetic influence of a metropolis, despite Interstate '91. It's still small. It's still beautiful. It's still quiet. Things change, as they must, but the people there hold on to their sense of place with fierce tenacious pride. Fundamental to it all is the river and the Coos is created, the great meadows of the outdoors.

What to do in Newbury? Oh, no you don't. I'm not going to be tricked into that! It would violate one of my most sacred hunches about being a Vermonter. We all have been asked the question by someone from down-state that goes something like this: "Vermont's a beautiful place, but what do you do up there?" I figure you're in trouble when you begin to get a handle on the answer. Vermont is a place to be. Newbury is Vermont. I can tell you what I'd like to do this summer if I get an evening off. I'd like to put the canoe in at Placey's farm about two miles above the village around 7:00 p.m. on the night of August's full moon and drift the outboard down to the bridge below town, getting there in the new boat landing, say, about midnight.

Or find a place to sit back and watch the sun rise over Mount Moosilauke. Hear the bell from the church strike nine. Watch the swallows swirl and turn in the heavens. Feel the centuries. Sense the peace. Newbury can give you that.

The Newbury's grew up with it gone. No matter. The Coos remains. And there is much to hold on to. I can still return to the house of my childhood, still fall asleep to the murmur of wind in the boughs of the great pine beside the house (that sound never changes), still hear the twinkle of whippoorwill from Top Green's pasture across the road (is it related to those olden whippoorwills of the 1940's), still feel the ruffle of a freight train in the night. Automobiles still slip by the house on Route 5 with the same soft sound they always made.

Meth, who would never move away, although she spent forty years threatening to. Bachelorsville near Greens are, the greatest gift a parent can ever give a kid: the gift of a place—an honest-to-God time machine. Every time I go home, the number of strange faces has decreased. I can handle that. The Coos remains. And so do enough old facts, and newer ones related to the old, so remitted of the security found in generational continuity.

So, far so good. Newbury is still the place where, when I go there, I know they'll gottake me in.

Frank Bryan, co-author of Real Vermonters Don't Milk Goats and The Vermont Papers.
In Newbury, the OISE curriculum aims to develop an instinctive knowledge of English. The presence of students aged 13 to 17 from all over the world and the courses limited to 8 students per class ensure an intense linguistic stay. The small size of the school, nestled in a Victorian building, and a safe environment in the heart of a country town, make Newbury the ideal destination for young people who want to take a language course in England. Preparation of exams.