

**“The History and Future of Vermont’s Landscape”  
by Darby Bradley, President, Vermont Land Trust  
The University of Vermont’s George Aiken Lecture Series**



Delivered following an Address by Jan Albers, author of  
*“Hands on the Land: A History of the Vermont Landscape”*

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Two years ago, my wife Liisa and I spent ten weeks roaming the country, visiting land trusts, seeing what they were doing and finding out what was working and what was not. One of our stops was in Gunnison, Colorado, where we met with a group of ranchers that had started a land trust. We could see from their maps that they had already protected an impressive amount of land.

“You must be very proud of all you have accomplished in such a short time,” I said to a rancher who had been one of the founders of the organization. His reply was almost angry, “No,” he said. “I’m not. We started the land trust not just to preserve the land, but to preserve ranching.” He could see that culture eroding, in a flood of money from Denver and Los Angeles, in the surge of second home buying that was making it difficult for his neighbors’ children to afford homes near Gunnison, and by newcomers who preferred to raise horses rather than pasture cattle. Despite the land trust’s success, he felt they were losing the soul of their community.

Which caused me to reflect on Vermont. In the past 35 years, we can point to many accomplishments that have helped preserve our natural and cultural landscape: Act 250; Act 200; laws regulating water pollution and clearcutting; the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board; half a million acres of conserved land; 8,000 affordable homes; education equity through a statewide property tax; health care for children; and civil unions, just the latest step in Vermont’s long march for civil rights that early on had opposed slavery and McCarthyism and supported a woman’s right to vote.

But is this enough? Will our grandchildren and their grandchildren find the essence of Vermont that we have known? The late *Boston Globe* editor Tom Winship once asked: “Can Vermont survive prosperity?” Can Vermont survive globalization? As we reap the benefits of prosperity and globalization, will we be able to hold on to what is so special about Vermont, special enough that the National Geographic Society ranked the state as sixth among the world’s most desirable, unspoiled destinations?

What is it that makes Vermont special? Its physical appearance is not so spectacular. Other places have higher mountains, more lakes, bigger trees, better soils. A friend recently remarked, “Vermont doesn’t make your jaw drop; it just makes you smile.”

Yet, when we return to Vermont after a trip away, we feel a difference. Others sense it too. My wife grew up in Finland. Some years ago, a childhood friend of hers came for a visit. The friend had never been to America before. After spending a few days in Boston, she took the bus north. Practically as soon as she stepped off in Montpelier, she asked, “Is Vermont different from the rest of America? What is the difference I am seeing?” Even before she had walked around the city or talked to any people, she sensed that somehow this place was not the same.

For the past few months, I've been asking people what they find special about Vermont, and have received a variety of answers. One is that people here are close to nature. Over half our population lives in towns with fewer than 2,500 residents, which makes Vermont the most rural state in the nation. Even city dwellers can usually find a wild place within ten or fifteen minutes of their door. For the vast majority of Americans, people and wild things live in separate places. One travels to find nature, and leaves it to go home. Here, nature is part of our everyday lives.

Others said it is the working landscape that makes Vermont special. I particularly value the fact that Vermont still has farmers, loggers and foresters (including a son) who make their living from the land. Others turn the raw production into cheese, furniture, and manufactured products here in the state. This is part of the first run of green-certified hardwood flooring that we harvested off conserved land in Vermont. A local mill sawed out the logs, but we had to truck the boards to Canada to turn them into flooring. Perhaps someday we'll be able to produce the flooring here in the state. Many Vermonters participate in our natural resource economy, perhaps not as a primary occupation, but as part-time sugarmakers, Christmas tree growers, livestock raisers, and woodlot managers. They all have their hands on the land.

But the value of the working landscape is not just economic or aesthetic; it is also cultural. Jan noted that our landscape reflects our history. Communities with working farms and forests retain a part of that history. They are different culturally than places where agriculture and forest industries have essentially disappeared. Some years ago, when I attended a conference on sprawl in Bar Harbor, the head of the Maine State Planning Office observed: "Rural communities are organized for production. Suburban communities are organized for consumption." I remembered his statement a few years later, when some of my Calais neighbors fought a proposal by a local farmer who wanted to open a small quarry on his land. The quarry was to provide stone for patios and stone walls and crushed rock for town roads. I'm happy to report that my neighbor got his permit, and that Calais, at that time at least, was still a rural community. There is something ethical about relying upon our own resources to meet our needs. Wood energy has always appealed to me for this reason. If we burn coal and oil, most of the environmental costs accrue somewhere else. With wood energy, we must deal with the consequences of our demand.

Other people spoke of "scale" as part of the essence of Vermont. Towns are small. Direct democracy still works here in town meetings where we decide issues that affect our daily lives. Even at the state level, political leaders and institutions are accessible.

I've often wondered how well Act 250, with its regionally-based district commissions, or the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board, with its seemingly opposite goals of housing and open space, would work in larger, more populous states. The current fight over building wind towers on ridgelines is mostly an argument over scale. Bigger wind turbines are more efficient, but many Vermonters are willing to sacrifice efficiency to keep development in scale with their landscape.

Vermont's small scale means that we know each other, that our reputation as somebody who can be trusted, or somebody who must be watched, follows us around. It also means that a person with limited political or financial capital, but with a good idea, can still make a difference in their community, if they are willing to spend the time. The *Burlington Free Press* recently lauded Sherry Belknap of Bloomfield, Vermont. Sherry comes from a long line of woods workers. He sold logging equipment for most of his career and, with his wife Darlene, makes the Walking Boss suspenders I am

wearing tonight. Many years ago, Sherry's grandfather was the legendary Walking Boss for the Connecticut River Lumber Company, which harvested timber throughout northeastern Vermont. Eight years ago, when Champion International put its Northeast Kingdom holdings on the market, Sherry became a local leader in the effort to conserve those 132,000 acres in public and private ownership. He later chaired the steering committee that helped develop the management plans for the State lands and for public recreation on the private lands. The debate over the Champion project became very highly charged at times, and Sherry's involvement came at some personal cost. Yet, by putting himself on the line, Sherry has made a difference in the lives of generations of Vermonters who will never even know his name.

But if there is one characteristic of Vermont that was mentioned more than any other, it is our sense of "community". Isn't it interesting that Vermont's State motto is "Freedom and Unity?" I was raised in New Hampshire, where it's "Live Free or Die." Vermont's motto portrays a sense of mutual dependence that must come from our agricultural heritage, small land ownerships, and the long period of economic isolation which most Vermonters endured during our early history.

A friend recently told me a story which epitomizes the sense of community one can find here. He was a young attorney, fresh out of the Army, new to Vermont, and with a wife and two young children. He was seeking a bank loan to buy a home in Rutland. The banker looked over the paperwork. Everything seemed to be in order, except that my friend was not earning enough money. After a moment's reflection, the banker picked up the phone and called the senior partner in the law firm. He told the partner what the problem was, and asked: "Can you swing an extra \$50 a week?" The result was that my friend had his first raise and his family had a new home.

Many factors contribute to a sense of community. It may be an historic building, the town hall, or a restored opera house. In my town of Calais, people gather at the Old West Church for Christmas Eve services, and at the Maple Corner Community Center, which was revived by funds raised from the sale of a risqué "Men of Maple Corner" calendar. In other communities, it is a traditional activity: a First Night, a Memorial Day parade, or a fall foliage celebration. Some of my grandchildren live in Vershire. Each year, the community sponsors a three-week, free summer camp for kids, paid for by fundraising events held in town throughout the year. In Underhill, it's a sledding hill; in Starksboro, it's a ball field; and in Brattleboro, it's a farmers market. Wherever the place is, people come together to play, work, talk, and share their lives.

This specialness of Vermont—this combination of geology, human activities on the land, proximity to nature, scale and sense of community—is it threatened? And if it is, what must we do to retain it?

Each of us will have to make up our own mind about the degree of the threat. For me, not only is the threat real, but we probably have less time to act than we think. In the past, change has come more slowly to Vermont than to southern New England or other states, for the reasons Jan explained. However, as Colorado, northern Maine and other rural places are now finding, change can also come very rapidly.

Vermont is on that cusp. This state is becoming increasingly attractive for second home buyers. In 2004, ten percent of the primary homes sold in Vermont were converted into vacation homes. The figure for Windham County was 24 percent. This puts added pressure on the supply and cost of homes for Vermonters and on our farms and forest land. Where and how will our need for housing be met?

Will it fit into Vermont's traditional settlement patterns or sprawl across the countryside? We don't have to look very far beyond our borders to see what change can bring, if we don't try to shape it.

The business of retailing is changing. Vermonters want and deserve access to quality goods at reasonable prices. Will retail stores be the heart of our downtowns, so that as in Rutland, smaller stores, restaurants and other businesses benefit from the traffic generated by Wal-Mart? Or will the big boxes cut the commercial heart out of our traditional centers, so that people who live downtown will have to travel to the suburbs to buy groceries and hardware items? We can affect the outcome, but only if we are willing to act.

And will Vermont continue to have working farms and forests? Will Vermont farms supply more of our food, at home and in schools? Will wood and wind keep more of our energy dollars circulating in Vermont? Will we have places to experience wild nature and reflect upon the beauty of our world? The answers we choose to these questions will decide the future landscape and character of Vermont.

So what can we do to preserve what is special about Vermont? Let me mention four areas where we can take action. They are not the whole answer, but they are a start. First, hold onto our traditional settlement patterns. Second, preserve our "gathering places". Third, learn the stories of our communities. And, finally, think about our private actions and public decisions in a "community" context.

Let me start with settlement patterns. Ever since Governor Hoff's Administration published the document "Vision and Choice" in 1968, Vermont's policy has been to promote a pattern of downtowns and village centers surrounded by rural countryside. This policy has been reflected repeatedly in legislation over the years, in Act 250 in 1970, Act 200 in 1988, the 2002 Downtown Bill. Coupled with this policy has been the goal of preserving, to the extent we can, our traditions of land use, including farming, logging, hunting, fishing, hiking, skiing and snowmobiling.

Part of what we must do is protect the land. Land conservation. My business. Conservation is an essential element – we won't have Vermont if the landscape is consumed by sprawl – but as the ranchers in Gunnison, Colorado have learned, it is only the beginning. We must also help create the conditions where farmers and forest workers can make a living and live a good life. We must invest in businesses that will add value to their products. We must promote their products. We must buy their products.

To preserve the countryside, we must also strengthen our downtowns and village centers, making them more attractive for private investment in housing and commercial development. If a family wants to live in an urban center, but can't find affordable housing there and they buy a house in the countryside, that removes a housing opportunity for a family who wants to live in the countryside and must build a new house instead. Part of the solution to sprawl is to give people the opportunity to live downtown if that is what they choose.

Vermont has a wonderful opportunity to strengthen its traditional settlement patterns by adopting growth center legislation this year. One of the problems with our current regulatory system is that we have never really decided, in a planning process, where we want development to take place and then made it easier to develop there. Act 250 says, in essence, if you can meet the criteria, you can develop anywhere. And because your neighbors may not like the result, you get legal challenges, appeals, delay, added cost, frustration, and sprawl.

The objective of a growth center policy is to identify areas where we want to encourage development. Once these growth centers have been designated, the regulatory barriers would be reduced, the financial incentives in the form of tax credits and grants would be increased, and public investments for sewage treatment, transportation, and other services would be enhanced.

For the past two years, a coalition of business and environmental interests have been focusing on this issue. With the work of a special legislative committee last fall and the Governor's recent endorsement of proposals along this line, Vermont has an historic opportunity, for the first time in thirty years, to fundamentally alter the pattern of growth and development in this state. We must take advantage of this opportunity. It may not come again for another thirty years.

The second action Vermonters must take is to preserve our "gathering places" and the places that give us our sense of history and heritage. There is a terrific new book entitled *Vermont Gathering Places*, photographed and written by Peter Miller with the support of the Preservation Trust of Vermont and others. It is a collection of photos and essays about country stores, churches, ball fields, fairgrounds, farmers markets, and other places where people come together to show, buy, share, exchange, and be part of each other's lives. How important a village store, an opera house, a swimming hole, a car race track, and similar places can be to the life and vitality of a community. The question which Paul Bruhn, Director of the Preservation Trust, raises in the book's Afterword is: Will Vermonters preserve their "gathering places" or in the future, will we too be bowling alone? Take a look at this book, and think about the importance of gathering places in your community.

The third step is to teach ourselves and our children the stories of our communities. For at least a decade, we have seen a resurgence of place-based education: Young people interviewing old-timers and creating community videos of the conversations. The Vermont Institute of Natural Science and Keeping Track teaching children and landowners about the plants and animals with whom they share space. Schools using Jan's book as a classroom curriculum. Students mapping their towns using GIS technology. The University of Vermont's PLACE program inspiring local residents to explore the geology, natural history, and cultural history of their town. By learning where we are, how we got here, and what we share with others in our community, we find our roots and build on our common ground.

We should learn the stories of the food we eat and the products we use. When you buy cheese from a national company, the milk could have been produced anywhere and the cheese manufactured anywhere. When you buy Taylor Farm Gouda, you are buying an entire story of Vermont: of generations of families clearing and working the land in Londonderry; of John and Kate Wright, a young couple with a dream of starting their own farm business but without the resources to do so; of the Kohler family and an entire community pulling together to conserve the farm and help the Wrights make their dream a reality. It is a story that, in different ways, is repeated over and over across the landscape of Vermont.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, we must learn to think like a community. We must do those things, individually and collectively, that will strengthen our sense of community. We must ask ourselves, as consumers and public policy makers, whether our decisions will strengthen or weaken the Vermont community.

Part of the task is to look at our actions and our jobs in a community context. For my organization, the Vermont Land Trust, we must constantly ask ourselves, and seek the community's opinion about, whether a particular parcel should be conserved as open space, or whether it is better suited for future growth and development. If a housing development is proposed in our neighborhood, we must ask ourselves whether this is an appropriate location to meet the community's housing needs, even if it means we may lose some of our personal open space. If we are buying books and beer, we must decide whether to make our purchase on line and at the supermarket or pay a little more and patronize the local bookshop and village store. If we are government officials facing a decision on whether to locate the new school or a post office or a big box store in town or in a corn field outside of town, we must ask ourselves not just which location will be cheaper to build in, but which location will best serve and strengthen the community. By evaluating our actions and decisions not merely on the basis of self interest or lowest cost, but on the basis of the entire community of interests, we help insure that our sense of community will survive.

Coming back to the question of whether Vermont can survive prosperity, no one wants to go back to the days when, so it has been said, Vermonters were so poor that they didn't even notice there was a Great Depression. We want all Vermonters to prosper. We don't want a Vermont frozen in time. But as things change, as we become more prosperous, let us hold on to the qualities that make this state special. Left to their own devices, the forces of the marketplace, globalization, and population growth, coupled with money and technology, will turn Vermont into a landscape no different than so many other places in America.

Almost eighty years ago, President Calvin Coolidge said this about Vermont: *“Vermont is the state I love. I could not look upon the peaks of Ascutney, Killington, Mansfield and Equinox without being moved in a way that no other scene could move me. It was here that I first saw the light of day; here I received my bride; here my dead lie pillowed on the loving breast of our everlasting hills. I love Vermont because of her hills and valleys, but most of all, because of her indomitable people. They are a race of pioneers who have almost beggared themselves to serve others. If the spirit of liberty should vanish in other parts of the union and support of our institutions should languish, it could all be replenished from the generous store held by the people of this brave little state of Vermont.”*

Land and people. Hands on the land. We may not be a race of pioneers anymore, but we can still have that indomitable spirit in the face of new global challenges. If Coolidge looked for the spirit of liberty and service today, he would find it in the compassion with which Vermonters handled the issue of civil unions, in the sacrifices our soldiers have made in Iraq and Afghanistan, and in our continuing efforts to preserve Vermont's natural and human landscape.

As you ponder the future of this place and its people, consider these words, in a somewhat mangled form, with apologies to Robert Frost: *“Somewhere ages and ages hence, our grandchildren will be telling this with a sigh: Two roads diverged in a Vermont wood, and the road we took and the road we left behind, that has made all the difference.”*

Thank you.