



## Part I: A Very New Idea

*Part I explores the roots from which the future state of Vermont grew. Samuel de Champlain steps into a canoe, paving the way for Yankee immersion into native culture. We look at early settlement, native peoples' resistance, and the little-known history of African American settlers. Pioneer rebel Ethan Allen leads the struggle for independence, resulting in Vermont's radical constitution- the first to outlaw slavery. Finally, Vermont's heroic role in the Civil War reminds us that, despite occasional missteps, Freedom & Unity—Vermont's state motto—continues to chart the state's course into the present.*

## Life On The Border

By Ernest Hebert

I grew up in Keene, New Hampshire, in a time when the NH/VT rivalry didn't exist, at least not in my mind. We were the twin states, no sarcasm about one or the other being upside down. I would like to reclaim at least the shadow of that unity by bringing attention to that great border town, White River Junction, Vermont. This village of a little more than 2,000 people on a bluff where the White River flows into the Connecticut is the hub of the two states, with its rail lines, phone lines, postal lines, bus lines and highways reaching out as spokes. For me WRJ is a personal energy center. Strange, inspiring, and beautiful things have happened to me in this town. It was also a Native American meeting spot, a place where paths converged and plans were made.

In some ways it hasn't changed much in the half century that I've known the place. It's heart and soul is a block of red brick buildings across the tracks from the railroad station with the Hotel Coolidge as the focal point. I still feel as if I've stepped into a black and white film noir movie. Bring on the night and add a little color and I'm looking at an early version of the Edward Hopper painting, Nighthawks.

My adventures started in WRJ in 1961. My first memory is of the telephone office, a row of fifty or so long distance operators wearing head sets and plugging into jacks on a board, clicks and hums and "number pleases." It all sounds like music to me. I am working on some of the cables behind the operator panels. I have to lie on my side to reach the wires and I glimpse the operators' dresses, legs, nylon stockings, high heel shoes. Quite a turn-on for a guy who has just turned twenty.

I have landed a job with the telephone company installing dial relay equipment in central offices. The wires—color-coded blue, orange, green, brown, slate—stir me like abstract sculptures. The unit I work with travels all over Maine, New Hampshire, Massachusetts and Vermont. My job is to put those beautiful telephone operators out of business.

A strange thing happens to me that first day in WRJ. I have just sold a used Ford and bought a used Plymouth. I am still daydreaming about the lovely telephone operators when I absentmindedly get into a car that looks just like my old Ford. The strange part of the adventure is that my key turns the ignition and I drive off. I get maybe five hundred feet when I realize I am an inadvertent car thief. I drive around the block, but the parking spot where the Ford had been is filled. I park the Ford in a different space, and take off in my new used Plymouth. I wish I could have seen the look on the Ford owner's face when he found his car relocated.

A week later I land a date with a telephone operator about my own age. I buy her a burger at the Polka Dot diner, and we go parking and smooch.

Even though the town was small, the telephone office was the biggest I worked in because WRJ was the toll-switching center for Northern New England. That knowledge was the first inkling I had that WRJ served as an energy center for more than me. I learned that Native Americans of old met at the mouth of the White River. The rail lines converged here. Later, Vermont's two main interstate highways 89 and 91 crossed only a mile or so up slope. Also, much of Vermont's mail finds its way to WRJ's central post office with its primo zip code—05001.

When I first arrived in WRJ the telephone company was on the rise but the railroad business was on the decline. Once, more than fifty trains a day stopped at WRJ, down to only a couple in the 1960s. Local people were talking about a way of reviving the town. I hear the same conversation today. WRJ is home to some fascinating places—The Center for Cartoon Studies, Vermont Salvage, The Main Street Museum, and Fancy Felix Theatrical (the brainchild of Robina D'Arcy-Fox, one of most dynamic people I have ever met), but the fact remains: WRJ's population declined 11 percent from 2000 to 2010.

It's two years later, Nov. 22, 1963. After stints all over Maine and New Hampshire towns, I'm back in the WRJ telephone office. The dial system has been installed. Most of the operators have lost their jobs. I'm on a cable rack eight feet off the floor. It's cramped up here. By now I'm a veteran telephone man. I do a thousand connections a day, but something is wrong. I am dissatisfied with my life.

I hear sounds below me, my fellow workers talking. The word is spreading. President Kennedy has been shot. All work stops and for a moment it's quiet. I feel my isolation. A week later I make a decision that I've been mulling over for months. I'm going to quit my good job and enroll in college. My President's life has ended. Mine has just begun.

In 1988, I took a job teaching at Dartmouth College and moved with my family to West Lebanon, N.H., only a mile from WRJ across the river in New Hampshire. One of my favorite places to go was the Hundredth Monkey bookshop in downtown WRJ. The owner, David Holtz, was an anti-quarian book collector with exquisite tastes. There were no junky books in the store, just the best stuff. Dave's dog often lay in the doorway so you had step over him to get into the retail space.

One day around 1995 I am in the Hundredth Monkey in a poor frame of mind. I have been fiddling for decades with an idea for a novel set in 1746, but I just don't know enough about the time period to write the book. In Holtz' store I find "Travels in North America" by Peter Kalm, a Swedish scientist who walked from Delaware to Quebec in 1747 and wrote down his observations. That book starts me off on a one-year reading binge that leads me to write my novel "The Old American," published in 2000 and winner of a literary prize. Thank you Dave Holtz. Thank you WRJ. At this writing, Holtz still lives in WRJ, but he's closed his retail store in the town and moved it to the Colonial Antiques Markets in West Lebanon.

One of my favorite WRJ stories revolves around Way Down East, the 1920 D. W. Griffith film classic starring Lillian Gish. The culminating scene takes place on ice floes that Griffith shot on the White River. There are no trick stage sets or photography tricks. Griffith filmed Gish live jumping from ice floe to ice floe. Even now, almost a century after the movie was made, that scene is scary.

It's ice that leaves me with my most exquisite image of WRJ. Back in the 1990s when my wife Medora and I are raising our two daughters, one of our rituals is Friday night pizza. I phone my order to the Greek man at the pizza parlor in WRJ, drive down, pick it up and bring it back to our house on Pearl Street in West Leb. This particular Friday is in the dead of winter, during a sudden thaw following a long spell of very cold weather.

Next day I read in the newspaper that only minutes after I had crossed the White River on the then rickety bridge, an ice jamb swept the bridge down stream into the Connecticut. A woman was trapped on the bridge. She managed to abandon her car and run to safety just before the bridge tore from its footings. She reported that she watched her car on the bridge floating down the river. It was night and she could see headlights of her car aimed at the sky.

That image—winter night scene, old bridge floating away on the ice, car lights pointing to the void—haunts me, thrills me, a septuagenarian, watching his youth and all his experiences about to be swallowed by time and the indifferent universe.

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