

The Fourteenth State

Are you an uphiller or a downhiller?

By Tyler Resch

Many Vermonters are accustomed to think of their fellow citizens in one of two ways: newcomer versus native, long-time resident versus flatlander, traditionalist versus progressive. Scholar Paul Searls wrote a book a few years ago that analyzes this dichotomy but he focuses on a specific period of time in Vermont's history, after the Civil War but before World War I. The title tells it: "Two Vermonts: Geography and Identity 1865-1910."

Searls, who teaches at Lyndon State College and the University of Vermont, chooses to define his subjects as either uphillers, those more rural, tradition-bound and resistant to change, versus the downhillers, who tend to be more urban, progressive, more likely to press for change.

His work is an important analysis of the social, economic, and political workings of Vermont during a specific time period. The text of this book is only 162 pages long but also contains extensive footnotes and a bibliography that goes on for another 86 pages. This provides a bountiful cornucopia of Vermont sources, which he utilizes with great skill.

The selected time frame coincides with an era in which Vermont's population held amazingly steady at fewer than 400,000 souls, even declining a couple of times between decennial censuses.

Toward the end of the 19th century there was great concern about Vermont's failure to achieve the growth experienced by so many other American states. Searls devotes a chapter to the downhillers' attempt, just before and after 1900, to modernize. A magazine called "Expansion" and a lively Greater Vermont Association worked vigorously to counterbalance the state's backward agricultural economy with new industries that would usher in a "New Vermont." Efforts were made to lure immigrants, especially Swedes, to settle on abandoned hill farms. Tourism brochures advertised these farms at bargain prices. Progressive governors were elected but, alas, could not break the hold of the conservative or "uphill" domination of the legislature, where each town had one representative regardless of population.

One remarkable victory of the downhillers took place early in the 20th century when Percival W. Clement, running for governor in 1902, forced the issue of "local option" of the sale of alcoholic beverages. While the conservative legislature refused to abandon statewide temperance, Clement's

campaign leveraged a statewide referendum. Allowed to vote on this one issue, Vermonters in 1903 agreed to permit towns to decide whether to be “wet” or “dry.”

In the end, Searls explains that the effort to create a “new” Vermont failed. Population didn’t budge; in fact it declined between 1910 and 1920. “Expansion” magazine folded. Few Swedes took up farming in Vermont’s uplands. Industrialization would have to await the perfection of the horseless carriage.

While Searls’s exploration of “two Vermonts” ends about 1910, the lessons he draws can contribute an understanding of other issues and different times. If he had expanded his thesis into the 1960s, Searls could have observed the most significant transfer of political power in Vermont’s history. The 1965 reapportionment of the House of Representatives from 246 to 150 members also shifted considerable power away from the so-called uphillers and gave it to the downhillers in the larger cities and towns.

A persuasive argument can be made that the “New Vermont” was achieved in the half century since reapportionment.