Two Vermonts: Geography and Identity, 1865-1910

Reviewed by Tyler Resch

Vermonters are accustomed to living in a dichotomy, though they may refer to it by different names: native versus newcomer, Vermonter versus flatlander, traditionalist versus progressive. A young scholar who teaches at UVM and Lyndon State College has produced an insightful analysis of this duality but prefers his own labels: uphiller versus downhillier.

Throughout the scholarly paperback Two Vermonts: Geography and Identity, 1865-1910, Paul Searls distinguishes between the uphillers, those more rural, tradition-bound, and resistant to change, versus the folks who generally settled in the valleys, the downhillers, who tend to be more urban, more likely to press for change. Searls would surely acknowledge that his categories can be taken figuratively as well as literally. In fact, it’s been reported that he discovered that in the town of Chelsea, for example, some tradition-bound uphillers can now be found down in the valley in a trailer park while some classic downhillers have moved uphill with their progressive ideas into a new timber frame house.

Regardless of exceptions to his rule, Searls offers an important analysis of the social, economic, and political workings of Vermont during a specific time period: after the Civil War and into the very early years of the 20th century. The text of this book is only 162 pages long but it is accompanied by an extensive section of expanded footnotes and bibliography that goes on for another 86 pages. While the thesis Searls develops is inventive and persistent, he also provides a bountiful bibliography of Vermont sources, which he utilizes and cites with consummate skill.

If you focus on the history of Vermont’s population, it’s as-
tonishing to realize that the numbers of residents of this small state held so steady for something like 150 years. In 1830, Vermont’s population was 280,000, and it grew to 300,000 by 1850. Throughout the following decades it remained steady and as recently as 1960 had inched up only to 389,000. Not until the 1970 census, after the construction of Interstates 89 and 91, the blossoming of ski resorts, and the incipient phenomenon of second homes, did Vermont break into the 400,000 population bracket. So Searls is examining the very central core of this time of stagnation.

One fascinating chapter relates the experience of statewide temperance, the prohibition of the manufacture and sale of alcoholic beverages. To break the back of temperance, which had been brewing during the 1830s and 1840s and was locked into Vermont law in 1852, it took the ambitious publisher of the Rutland Herald, Percival W. Clement, to force the issue. In 1902 Clement made “local option” the keystone of his run for governor in a famous three-way race. This was at a time, of course, when Vermont elected only Republican governors. After he lost the Republican primary, a bitter Clement smashed tradition by going independent and forming his own Local Option Party. He didn’t win that election. Bennington’s John G. McCullough did. But Clement had broken a barrier and had persuaded politicians to agree at least to a statewide referendum on the matter, a procedure that would bypass the uphill-dominated legislature. When results were counted early in 1903, Vermonters adopted local option, meaning that at Town Meeting each year, every town would vote “wet” or “dry” in two categories: whether to allow the sale of beer and wine on the one hand, or “spirituous beverages” on the other. The uphillers of the smaller towns naturally resisted, while downhillers in larger towns, by and large, voted “wet.” This situation lasted well into the 1960s, and those of us of a certain age remember headlines that reported results of town meetings voting wet or dry. Those short words fit easily into tight headlines.

(After several more attempts, Clement, the owner-publisher of the Rutland Herald, was finally elected governor in 1918 following a primary victory over Frank E. “Ginger” Howe, the owner-publisher of the Bennington Banner, who had been lieutenant governor.)

Searls concludes with a revealing chapter on the extent to which downhillers sought to modernize Vermont during the years just before and after 1900. A magazine titled “Expansion” and a lively new organization called the Greater Vermont Association worked vigorously to counterbalance Vermont’s backward agricultural economy with some new industries that would usher in a “New Vermont.” They tried to lure immigrants; Swedes were especially desired because, except for language, they were thought most to resemble hardy Vermonters. Efforts were made to persuade out-of-staters to purchase

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abandoned hill farms at bargain prices. Tourism was encouraged and summer resorts were publicized. Progressive governors were repeatedly elected, but they could not overbalance the powerful uphill legislative influence of the small towns in a House of Representatives where each of the 246 members represented one town regardless of population. In 1910, to pick local examples, Glastenbury with a population of 29, and Searsburg, with 142, had the same vote in the Vermont House as Burlington, with 20,468, or Bennington, with 8,700 residents.

In the end, the effort to create a “new” modernized Vermont failed, as Searls explains. State population didn’t budge; in fact it declined between 1910 and 1920. “Expansion” magazine folded. Few Swedes took up farming in the Green Mountains. Industrialization would have to await the perfection of the horseless carriage. Republican governors kept being elected but turnover was constant because they held fast to a single two-year term tradition and also bizarrely heeded “the mountain rule” whereby governors alternated between west and east of the mountains.

(Not until John Weeks, who served two consecutive terms from 1927 to 1931, did a governor break the single-term tradition, and that was mostly because of consequences of the disastrous flood of 1927. Not until 1962 did Vermont elect its first Democratic governor since 1954. And not until 1965 was the House reapportioned down to 150 members from districts based strictly on population.)

While Searls’s exploration of “Two Vermonts” ends about 1910, the lessons learned contribute to an understanding of other issues and different times. Today’s Vermonters might even see some parallels in their state today.

Two Vermonts: Geography and Identity, 1865-1910
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