

# News From The Vermont Folklife Center

Fall 1999, Vol. 9, No. 2



Celebrating the Traditions of Vermont

## Gingerbread House Contest Adds Spice to Holiday Offerings

This year the VFC is inaugurating an exciting new holiday event in our gallery: a gingerbread house competition open to both home bakers and professional chefs in Vermont. Entries will be on display from December 3 - 18, 1999.

Visitors to the Center will have the opportunity to vote for their favorite culinary confection. The winner of the "People's Choice Award" will receive a certificate, donated by Milne Travel/American Express, for a two-night weekend stay at the Sheraton Four Points in Montreal. In addition, Laureen Gauthier, pastry chef for the New England Culinary Institute (Montpelier) will judge the pieces, and make awards for "Best of Show" in both the amateur and professional categories. All prize winners will be announced December 18.

For sale in our Heritage Shop during the holiday season will be an expanded selection of hand-crafted ornaments, traditional crafts and foods, plus tapes, CDs and publications produced by the Folklife Center and other organizations. For the first time, the VFC will also have available for purchase a range of standard and custom Christmas



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## Storytelling Project Captures New England 'Sense Of Place'

Joe Rendo of Stonington, Connecticut, is still passionate about fishing — despite nearly losing his life and his boat in an accident at sea. Joe was a lobsterman who always went out alone. One afternoon, while he was on deck setting his pots, with the boat's engine set on automatic pilot, he became entangled and was dragged overboard. The lobsterpots pulled him deep below the surface, but he managed to pull out a knife and cut himself loose.

Now Joe slipped off his sodden clothes and started swimming, but in an improvised stroke. In hopes of attracting the attention of a friend whom he knew would be passing back through the area and had a fascination for swordfish, Joe stuck his arms in front of him and began plunging and breaching, plunging and breaching in the water. Though exhausted, he swam "swordfish-style" through the fishing grounds for three hours until he heard a distant boat that he recognized as belonging to his friend. The fisherman came to

investigate, and just when he realized the "fish" was a man, Joe went under. Acting quickly, his friend was able to bring him up and save his life.

But this miraculous story does not end here. Throughout Joe's swimming ordeal, his boat had been drifting on auto pilot through Long Island Sound. Tips from

other boaters alerted Joe and his friend to the dangerous course of the vessel. Just before it was about to crash on Montauk Breakwater, they arrived on the scene and rescued the wayward boat.

Joe has spent almost a half-century at sea, following in the footsteps of his Portuguese ancestors. His years at sea have also honed his storytelling skills. While his accident was certainly

ly the most dramatic event of his career as a fisherman, he has many tales to tell. These have been captured on audiotape as part of a New-England-wide project developed by the Vermont Folklife Center with



*Tiger White, a logger from Carthage, Maine, was one of the raconteurs interviewed for the "Old New England/New New England" Storytelling Project.*

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# VFC Wins Local Awards

We are pleased to announce that the Vermont Folklife Center was the recipient of two awards from the Addison County Chamber of Commerce. In September, at the Chamber's Annual Meeting, the VFC and

the Vermont Community Foundation were presented a Townscape Award for "preservation efforts to help maintain a vital downtown building." Board Chair Susan Bennett accepted the award on behalf of the Folklife Center.

Middlebury College administrator Clara Yu was the lucky winner of the "tramp art" frame offered in our recent raffle. Here, Clara (right) accepts her prize from Shop Manager Cathy Nief.



photo by Trent Campbell, courtesy of the Addison Independent

## Oral History Day Highlights Community Fieldwork Projects

More than 25 community scholars and fieldworkers from around the state gathered on November 6 at the Vermont Folklife Center for our Annual Oral History Day. In addition to an informal discussion of work in progress, there were three special presentations:

- **Julie Steedman** reviewed her experience completing an oral history project documenting the beginnings of Women Helping Battered Women, an organization founded 25 years ago in Burlington. Her interviews charted the evolution of WHBW from a radical movement in 1974 to an organization that is now an integral part of the community offering an essential service.

- Independent filmmaker **Mary Arbuckle** described how a series of video interviews about the disastrous flood in Lincoln in 1998 has evolved into a film portrait of a small Vermont town in an unusual time.
- Cabot Oral History Committee members **Barbara Carpenter** and **Amanda Legare** showcased their new publication, *Cabot Vermont: A Collection of Memories from the Century Past*, which was the result of hundreds of hours of interviews by a team of volunteer researchers.

VFC folklorist Gregory Sharrow, who organized the event, commented, "Vermonters all around the state are working on such interesting and important projects. Each year I leave this gathering full of energy and with renewed enthusiasm for oral history."

The Folklife Center was also voted by the Chamber's Public Relations Committee as the Business of the Month for October. Charlotte Birchmore, membership director, cited the VFC's growing services, the addition of a retail shop, and the investment in an important building in the Middlebury "town square" as the key factors for our selection. "We applaud the important work and efforts to celebrate and preserve the powerful traditions of Vermont!" she said.

## Memorial Gift Fills Unmet Need

As we settle into our expanded quarters at the Masonic Hall, we have been taking stock of equipment we need to complete the furnishing of our new offices and public spaces. Even before we could get the word out, however, a generous local group stepped in to offer a missing item in our upstairs gallery area: a bench. After a visit in September to see our exhibit, "No Two Alike: Contemporary African-American Patchwork," the Addison County Retired Teachers' Association resolved to donate to the Folklife Center a beautiful, Vermont-made oak settee in honor of one of the association's late members, Ralph Eaton. (Mr. Eaton was the superintendent of Middlebury schools for many years).

We are extremely grateful for their thoughtfulness, a sentiment sure to be shared by weary gallery goers!

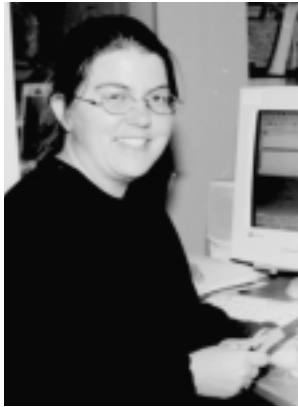


Mary Petrusich, member of the Addison County Retired Teachers' Association, tests out the memorial bench.



# New Personnel Adds Skills and Energy to VFC Staff

A duet of new voices and faces is another sign of the operational changes that the Folklife Center is undergoing since our recent move to the Masonic Hall. In late September, **Christina Barr** joined the VFC staff as our new archivist. While pursuing a master's degree in Folklore at Memorial University in Newfoundland, she worked for three years as a graduate intern at the university's Folklore and Language Archive.



Christina Barr

For the past two years, she has worked as a free-lance folklife consultant based out of Northampton, Massachusetts. Her experience with database management and web site develop-

ment and operation will be extremely useful for what she sees as her two biggest challenges:

preparing the VFC archive for full public use and putting the collection on line. "To work in a vibrant and important folklife center in New England and to apply my training and interest in folklife and archival work is a wonderful opportunity," Christina said.



Sarah Stahl

Longtime Middlebury-area resident **Sarah Stahl** took up the mantle of the

new VFC operations manager in mid-November. Sarah brings to the position almost two decades of retail and marketing experience—most recently as manager of the gift shop at Shelburne Farms—plus first-hand knowledge of non-profit administration through her recent service as president of the Board of Trustees of Frog Hollow Craft Centers. Sarah will be responsible for our merchandising program (through the operation of our Heritage Shop and mail order business) as well as

managing the VFC's fiscal affairs. In accepting the job, Sarah said, "I am really looking forward to working for greater recognition of VFC's resources and its new status as a 'main street' business. Working closely with such organizations as the Middlebury Business Association and the

Addison County Chamber of Commerce will be essential to strengthening our local base and market."

## CURRENT VFC WISH LIST

- Heavy-duty metal section shelves
- Vacuum cleaner
- Old VCRs
- Dustbuster
- Ladders

### VFC Board of Trustees

- Susan Bennett, New Haven, *Chair*
- Jane C. Beck, Ripton, *President*
- Jason Bacon, New Haven
- Bradley Benedict, Hyde Park
- Victoria Buffum, Shelburne
- Margery Bunker, Dummerston
- John Dwight, Charlotte
- Kay Henry, Waitsfield
- Isabella Martin, Jericho
- David A. Marsters, Lincoln
- William Polk, Panton
- Kate R. Schubart, Hinesburg
- David Sheldon, Shelburne

### VFC Staff

- Executive Director: Jane C. Beck
- Associate Director: Meg Ostrum
- Folklorist/Director of Education: Gregory Sharrow
- Archivist: Christina Barr
- Operations Manager: Sarah Stahl
- Event and Outreach Coordinator: Helen Freismuth
- Editorial Consultant: Will Lindner, Presskit



## JOIN THE VERMONT FOLKLIFE CENTER

*Celebrating the Voices of Vermont*

Help us preserve and present Vermont's traditional culture. Your participation makes a real difference to our program, and you'll enjoy the benefits of membership.

Name \_\_\_\_\_  
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 Town \_\_\_\_\_  
 State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_

Yes! I want to support the Vermont Folklife Center with my membership. Enclosed is my tax deductible contribution.

- \$1000 Founder
- \$500 Benefactor
- \$250 Patron
- \$100 Sponsor
- \$50 Family
- \$25 Individual
- \$10 Student
- Other \_\_\_\_\_



Vermont Folklife Center, Box 442, Middlebury, Vermont 05753



## Storytelling

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funding from the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund and the National Endowment for the Arts. The 1998 grant set the Folklife Center on a quest to find the best raconteurs in New England and take the pulse of the indigenous art of storytelling, here on the brink of the 21st century.

"Although the stories are very different [from each other], there is a sense of place that runs through them," said VFC Executive Director Jane Beck, head folklorist for the immense and ambitious six-state project. "People in New England are rooted here. If they leave, they tend to find their way back."

Work — as livelihood and way of life — is an integral part of these stories.

"People talked about place and occupation," said VFC Associate Director Meg Ostrum, who is coordinating the project. "That was a constant. These were the themes that seemed powerful to the tellers."

They are powerful to the listener, too, for they sketch people's connectedness to their trades — loggers, farmers, urban mill workers, trappers, boat builders, fishermen. When their working environments change they either leave or change with them. Thus, the stories of Skeet Davenport, who grew up in Rangely, Maine, hunting by necessity to put food on the family table, then later worked as a guide for sportsmen. Today, he guides families on nature walks, pointing out an endless variety of wildflowers and plants used traditionally as herbal remedies. Another hunter and guide, Ron Sargent, now spends his evenings feeding donuts to "Blackie," a bear who has been visiting him for ten years.

Like work, storytelling is changing. These are tales of personal experience

rather than fables or morality plays (which have become the fare of professional, theatrical storytellers). Yet Mara Williams, exhibit developer for the "Old New England/New New England Storytelling Project" noted that the modern stories neatly pick up the thread from earlier traditions.

"The stories get passed down through families as a way of keeping the images of a family bright," she said. "They provide lessons, and virtues to be aspired to. Some of our best stories are about incredibly funny pranks people played on each other as children.

"More than anything else," she said, "the stories convey the drama of what it is to be alive."

Coordinating this project confronted the Folklife Center with two sizable challenges. First was gathering the stories, for which the VFC engaged a network of folklorists to identify interview subjects.

The next challenge is to present these unassuming raconteurs to audiences attuned to stand-up comedy.

"Today, so much entertainment is in-your-face," said

Ostrum. "But storytelling is a quietist experience."

Working with a filmmaker, photographer, designer and audience consultant, Williams is planning a multimedia presentation of the recorded stories for a major show at the Shelburne Museum, which will open in early July 2000.

"We want to create a space and an atmosphere to help people slow down and settle into the environment that the stories happened in. There will be lighting changes, the sounds of lapping water or storms arising under the voices of the storytellers. When you're listening to a farm family you'll hear cicadas as if you were sitting on their porch, and you'll see shifts of sunlight."

Another, smaller gallery installation,

highlighting the family saga of Vermont storyteller Cora Bardwell, will premier in May 2000 at the Brattleboro Museum and Art Center. This show will grow into a touring exhibit, which will present six New England families and travel to other museums in 2001. Two radio series are also in the works, drawing on the rich collection of individual and family stories.

For the Folklife Center, leadership in the region-wide project brings abundant rewards. It further establishes the VFC's credentials in the field of cultural conservation; and the recordings provide an almost immeasurable expansion of the organization's archives.

As Mara Williams observed, these additions come at a poignant moment: the end of an era.

"The field recordings are tremendously important for the Folklife Center. An incredible amount of the folklife of the 20th century is represented there."



## WFAD Hosts New Weekly Radio Series

On September 30, Radio Station WFAD (1490 AM from Middlebury) launched "A Folklife Sampler," a new weekly program segment as part of "The Big Breakfast Show" hosted by Jerry Germain. The series highlights material from the VFC archives—stories, folk sayings and seasonal recipes— plus oral history research in progress. Current exhibits, public events and educational programs on folk culture in Vermont and beyond sponsored by the Center will also be featured. VFC staff and their guests provide the changing cast of personalities for this wide-ranging program.

"A Folklife Sampler" is aired every Thursday at 8:30 a.m. WFAD's broadcast signal reaches throughout Addison County and across Lake Champlain, so people who live or work in that geographic area can tune in for a weekly snapshot of the workings of the Vermont Folklife Center.



*Storyteller  
Cora Bardwell*

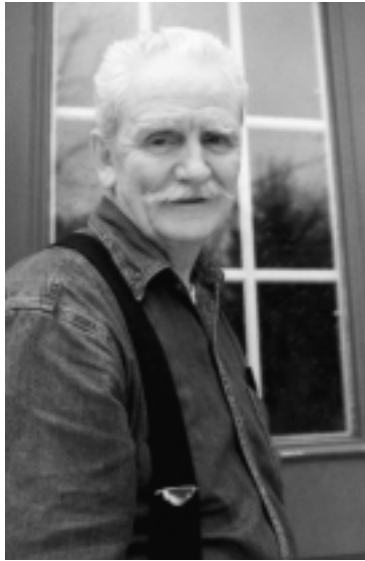


## Call for Cooks and Volunteers for Eighth Annual Benefit Game Supper

Mark your calendar for January 29, 2000, for our Eighth Annual Game Supper! We are pleased to announce that G. Stone Motors will again be our major sponsor for this important fundraising event, which will be held at the American Legion Hall, Post 27, Middlebury. Adirondack storyteller Bill Smith will be back by popular demand to provide the evening's entertainment. Tickets are \$18, and will go on sale in early December.

Recent write-ups in the *New York Times*, *Seven Days*, and *Yankee Magazine* have made this annual occasion a drawing card for people

throughout the North Country, to the point that we are now getting calls several months in advance from people who would like to attend. "We could not produce this ambitious event without a corps



of dedicated volunteers, and we are very eager to expand the number of 'helping hands,'" said event coordinator Helen Freismuth. "We especially need more people to donate game and to help prepare dishes."

To purchase tickets or to volunteer for the event, please contact Helen (802-388-4964).

*Adirondack storyteller Bill Smith*

### *Gingerbread Houses* continued from page 1

gift baskets with a mix of products from our shop.

Whether you already have been to see our new headquarters in the Masonic Hall or have been waiting for an incentive to visit us in Middlebury, we hope you'll include a stop at the Folklife Center in your holiday plans!



### **Special Holiday Shop and Gallery Hours**

December 3 - 23, 1999:

Monday-Saturday, 10 a.m. - 5 p.m.

*Note: We will also be open on Sunday, December 5 from 2 - 5 p.m. as part of the annual downtown Middlebury stroll sponsored by the Sheldon Museum*


The VFC sends a round of applause to Vermont folk musicians Deb Flanders, Margaret MacArthur, Pete Sutherland and Karen Billings! On July 27, the four performed a selection of traditional ballads from the renowned ballad collection of Helen Hartness Flanders — Deb's great aunt — at a special candlelight concert held in the Old West Church in Maple Corner. (The Flanders Collection is housed at Middlebury College and encompasses more than 9,000 recordings done by Mrs. Flanders and her assistants from the 1930s through the 1950s). In recognition of the ongoing efforts of the Folklife Center to collect and preserve Vermont's oral traditions, the musicians donated part of the proceeds from the event to the Center. We sing their praises for a wonderful evening and a meaningful expression of support!



*Michiko Oishi and Victoria Lory participate in a dance workshop with Liz Lerman of the Liz Lerman Dance Exchange in preparation for the dance/narrative "Clearing Customs." This performance piece is based on an oral history project by Judith Chalmer (Montpelier) documenting the experiences of recent immigrants to Vermont which was funded by the Folklife Center.*



# Calendar of Folklife Events in Vermont and the Region

 Denotes a VFC event



**December 3** *Holiday Open House*, Masonic Hall, Middlebury, VT, 4 - 8 pm. Sampler of festive foods plus opening of annual traditional arts showcase/sale (which runs through December 23).



**December 3 - 18** *Gingerbread House Competition*, VFC Gallery, Masonic Hall, Middlebury. Display featuring entries by home bakers and professional chefs.

**December 5** *Merry Tuba Christmas*, Presbyterian Church on the Park, Canton, NY, 2 pm (315-386-4289). Community holiday concert featuring lower brass instruments sponsored by Traditional Arts of Upstate New York (TAUNY).



**January 20 - April 8, 2000** *Voices and Faces Project*, VFC Gallery, Masonic Hall, Middlebury. Exhibit produced by the Old Stone House Museum, Brownington, VT, showcasing a documentary student project.

**January 29** *Annual Ice Harvest Festival*, Brookfield, VT (802-276-3959). Ice sculpturing, demonstrations, and ice-cutting contests.



**January 29** *Eighth Annual Game Supper*, American Legion Hall, Middlebury, 6 -9 pm. Fundraiser/dinner, including all-you-can-eat buffet of wild game dishes. Tickets \$18.



**February 1** *Doing a Community Documentary with Youth*, Masonic Hall, Middlebury, 3:30-5:30 pm. Workshop for educators presented by John M. Miller in conjunction with the gallery showing of *Voices and Faces*.

**February 12** *Annual Pea Soup and Johnnycake Lunch*, TAUNY Gallery, Canton, NY (315-386-4289). A winter foodways event.



*Note: Winter hours, January - April: Gallery/shop: Saturdays, 10 - 4 pm. Office and research center: Monday - Friday, 9 am - 5 pm*

For further information, call 802-388-4964 or visit us on our website at [www.vermontfolklifecenter.org](http://www.vermontfolklifecenter.org)



**The Vermont Folklife Center**  
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