

News From The Vermont Folklife Center

Spring 1999, Vol. 9, No. 1



Celebrating the Traditions of Vermont

A New Chapter In A Building's Storied History; Folklife Center Prepares For Move To New Home

The opening of our new quarters at the Masonic Hall in late June will not only mark an important milestone in the history of the Vermont Folklife Center, but will also add another chapter to the story of a major Middlebury landmark.

The signage on the facade, though mysterious to the uninitiated, evidences that the 176-year-old building was constructed as a Masonic Hall rather than converted to that use. In fact, it is reported to be the oldest purpose-built fraternal hall in Vermont. "We're preserving the name and signage to document the building's history," says VFC Associate Director Meg Ostrum. "As new stewards of the building, along with the Vermont Community Foundation [which will occupy the second and third floors of the building], "we want to respect its past and its character."

The VFC's new home has experienced several incarnations over the past century in addition to its years as a Masonic Hall. Middlebury residents have seen the lower two floors — which comprise the Folklife Center's new space — serve a variety of commercial purposes. Dick Hubbard, a local historian who grew up down the street from the Hall, remembers when the first floor housed the town clerk and trea-



The "big dig" at the Masonic Hall involved carting away truckloads of brick from the interior demolition.

surer's offices, then sometime later was occupied by an insurance agency and a dentist. He also recalls that the ground floor was used for a while by the undertaker next door as a storage space for caskets.

But as interesting as the building's exterior decorations are, the most radical — and ambitious — change to the 1823 structure was on the inside. This came in the late 19th century, when the town offices took up occupancy. The town installed a massive brick vault on the first floor for storing town records, and it was apparently designed to endure the ages. The removal of the vault posed the biggest challenge for Naylor & Breen, the Brandon-based firm

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'Heritage Shop': A New Attraction Added To VFC Offerings

As the renovation of the Middlebury Masonic Hall has been progressing, so have plans for our new Heritage Shop. Located on the main floor, just inside the main (front) entrance to the Vermont Folklife Center, the specialty shop will offer a mix of merchandise emblematic of the cultural traditions of Vermont and the surrounding region: authentic, traditional crafts; "heirloom" food products (based on recipes passed down within families); and books, audiotapes, compact discs, and videotapes on Northern New England folklife and oral history.

Impetus to add a retail operation to our new facility came from the popularity of our annual December sale of traditional crafts, and from the year-round query of visitors to the Center about items for purchase. We have enlisted the services of Cathy Nief, a Middlebury resident and former retailer, to help us launch our specialty store. "It's very exciting to be working with such high-quality, hand-crafted products," Cathy has said. "And each item, including the books and tapes, provides a wonderful

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Whirligig by Russell Snow



PASSAGES:

VFC Loses Valuable Members Of Its Family

Documenting, preserving and celebrating the diverse folkways of Vermonters is the work we do at the Vermont Folklife Center, so it follows that we cherish not just the things people do, the talents they bring forth and the way they live their lives. We cherish people, too. Thus we are sad to report that the past several months have brought the passing of three very special people, all of whom contributed immeasurably to the work of the Folklife Center.

Martha Pellerin

Martha Pellerin, a musician and scholar but foremost a woman devoted to the preservation and exploration of French-Canadian culture in our region, passed away November 16, 1998, from cancer. Martha was born in Barre in 1961, to parents who had emigrated from Quebec. Her connections to Quebec remained vital, as her family traveled there frequently for boisterous reunions where, as Martha later recalled, "There was singing; there was always singing."

With her father's death, Martha realized that this heritage of song was a fragile thread, for no younger singers were coming forward to take up the cultural tradition. So Martha began documenting her mother's repertoire of songs, which were mostly unpublished and survived only in the oral tradition. In time, Martha broadened her research base, collecting French songs in Canada and Vermont. Many of these she performed with her group, Jeter le Pont, seeking not only to entertain but to create a bridge between the cultural heritage of French Canada and the lives of Franco-Americans like herself.

Over the years, Martha and the Folklife Center repeatedly found common cause. She was a stalwart of many of our outreach programs and in turn enlisted the VFC staff to help her with fieldwork and community education projects.

Martha was a dynamo, both a practical nuts-and-bolts person who got things done, and a visionary. For her, cultural heritage was an active resource for creating meaning. She drew on her heritage as a basis for creating new forms that were relevant to contemporary life, and envisioned tradition as a living entity evolving constantly in response to a changing world. Nearing the end, she asked VFC folklorist Greg Sharrow to assume responsibility for a last, unfinished project – the publication of the vast archive of songs she had documented. This in a sense is her magnum opus, and a project she was loath to leave unfinished. Working in cooperation with her husband, John Drury, and a network of her friends throughout New England, Greg will be part of a team that will ensure that these song traditions remain available to future generations. Martha is gone, and is sorely missed. Her legacy lives on.

Marge Prigo

With sadness, we report the recent death of staff member Marge Prigo. Marge was employed at the Vermont Folklife Center staff through the Vermont Associates Program, and worked for more than five years as a part-time receptionist and office assistant. Ever proud of her Vermont roots, she had left California in her later years to return to her home state, where her son Bob was a faculty member at Middlebury College.

Born in St. Albans in 1922 and raised in Caledonia County, Marge was a strong cheerleader of our efforts to record old-timers, and often shared her personal reminiscences of people who had been interviewed by folklorists Jane Beck and Greg Sharrow for projects in the Northeast Kingdom. She loved to read, and pored over each new issue of *Visit'n*.

Above all, we remember Marge's youthful spirit – curious, enthusiastic and

eager to pitch in, no matter what new task we assigned her. Sometimes she even was a step ahead, trying to help us keep order in our cramped quarters. How much we regret that she will not be with us in our long-awaited move to our ample new home at the Masonic Hall.

Aldie Gannett

The Folklife Center lost one of its first, most faithful and enthusiastic supporters on May 17, 1999, when Aldie Gannett died at her home in West Brattleboro after a long illness. She was on the scene at the Governor's Conference on the Future of Vermont's Heritage in 1982 when the resolution was first passed to establish such an organization as the Folklife Center, and she helped forge the Center's initial concept. She was our very first financial supporter, and helped twist arms to find members for our fledgling board as the VFC lurched into reality. Nobody could say "no" to her, and she proved a tireless teacher for Executive Director Jane Beck who had much to learn about the art of raising money for an important and worthy cause.

Among Aldie's most ardent interests, Jane recalls, was mountain climbing. Agile and steady, she scaled rocks and limbs in avid pursuit of the trailhead.

"One day I asked if she'd take me on a hike. She threw herself into the project with relish, and called me to say she had thought of a great trek – 28 miles, with breathtaking views. 'Twenty-eight miles?,' I stammered. I was 50. She was 70. When in my 20s, I had been a hiking counselor for campers in the Presidential Range, but my conditioning had faded and I was no longer in the best of shape. Could I keep up with her? I was dubious. But she had heard the panic in my voice, and when I met her that morning at 6:30 I learned she had made a concession to me, and we were only going 10 miles. She had thought I might find this particular hike equally interesting. Never a word that I might fade in her wake. That was her way. For the Folklife Center, for me, there is no other who will ever fill those hiking boots."



Summertime 'Tramp Art' Exhibit Explores Aesthetics From The Wastestream

There was a distinctive cultural tenor to the period stretching from the late 1800s to the early years of the 20th century. Industrialization was altering the world, and creating for many people a sense of displacement – whether physical displacement caused by homelessness, or emotional displacement as traditional skills and handicrafts lost their value in a bustling age of factories and smokestacks.

It was in this period that “tramp art” flourished.

“A byproduct of those times was a reaction among some people against industrialization, and a movement that stressed the continued value of hand work,” says John Sholl, who observes that the term “tramp art” is somewhat of a mis-

nomer. Though itinerant, Chaplinesque hoboes produced some of what we now call tramp art, it was really an Everyman’s avocation, a fascinating marriage of crude materials, stunning intricacy, and ornamentation almost to a fault.

At its core, surprisingly, was tobacco.

“The cigar industry,” Sholl says, “drove the craft.” Cigars were sold in fashionable wooden boxes (cedar, or even mahogany) that could be salvaged from the wastestream,

along with discarded packing crates and other reusable materials. From

this refuse, folks fashioned elaborate picture frames, wall pockets and gift boxes for keepsakes.

John and Linda Sholl’s collection will be featured in “Tramp Art: Green Mountains and Beyond,” the inaugural exhibit in our new gallery in the Masonic Hall. The show opens on June 26 and will run through September 4.

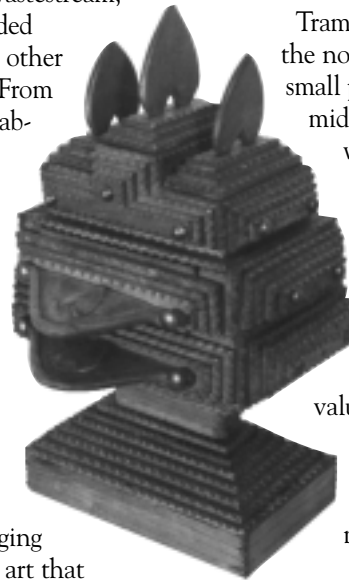
“We’re interested in bringing to the region exhibits of folk art that

might not be seen otherwise,” says VFC Associate Director Meg Ostrum, curator for the show. “Tramp art is particularly engaging, because it is an art based on recycling, a value important to people today. It takes simple, throwaway materials and fashions them into these very complex forms, with a fascination for embellishment. There’s a virtuosity and workmanship that speaks volumes about how people occupied their time in the days before television and all the distraction of the media.”

Tramp art is characterized by the notching and layering of small pieces of wood into pyramids and other shapes that, when glued to a frame or box, create patterns of elaborate relief. “It’s the one example of folk art where form really doesn’t follow function,” Sholl observes. “The objects have a utilitarian value, but the emphasis was on decoration.”

An ornate example is a large washstand, made by New York milk-

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photos courtesy of John and Linda Sholl

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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.

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

- \$1000 Founder
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Vermont Folklife Center, Box 442, Middlebury, Vermont 05753



A Moveable Feast: VFC's 1999 Fieldworker Grants

The Vermont Folklife Center has once again awarded a number of fieldworker grants. As in past years, the VFC received many applications for the relatively few grants the organization can offer, and some tough choices had to be made. In the end, the VFC awarded grants to seven applicants whose proposals showed exceptional promise.

These seven projects respond to two of the Folklife Center's primary goals and responsibilities: to capture what remaining testimony and experience exists of Vermont's receding past; and to document current social groups, customs and attitudes, both for our present understanding and for the benefit of those who will come after. One history-related project catches a last glimpse at the era of sawmills in Vermont, while another probes the changing role of a venerable Vermont country store. The VFC is the main repository for oral histories about Vermont's past, and these projects will contribute to that storehouse. The other projects address the VFC's continuing responsibility to record current Vermont experiences, with topics ranging from the effects of a summer flood on a small town, to an oral history of activists in the battered women's movement.

Mary Arbuckle of Lincoln will conduct video interviews with people from Lincoln who have stories to tell about the June 1998 flood in that town. Mary's project is a good example of immediate oral historical work. So often, interviews on a particular event take place many years afterward, when memories are no longer fresh. By capturing the memories of townspeople one year after the flood, Mary will be preserving accounts whose immediacy will add much to our understanding of how natural catastrophes affect small towns.

Michael Fournier of Lunenburg will investigate the logging and sawmill practices of a bygone era. Interviewing and videotaping two men who operated portable sawmills, and one man who was a lumbercamp worker, Michael will collect important information on the logging industry in the Northeast Kingdom. His plan includes driving two of these men to various former milling and logging sites in Lunenburg, Granby and Victory in order to jog their memories about this industry.

Cheryl Hooker of Rutland will document the stories of several women from the Rutland area who have been politically active. These women have been involved in everything from major political campaigns to local movements. What they have in common is lack of recognition, especially in the historical record. Cheryl's project will give a voice to these women who have played important roles in local, state and national politics.

Kimberly Krans of Bridport will interview Vermont home-birth midwives, women who have offered an alternative to hospital childbirth that is especially important to rural people. For several generations of Vermonters, midwives doubled as trusted family counselors. Kimberly will interview the older "granny" midwives as well as current practitioners as she explores the significance these women have had in the medical and social fabric of the state.

Susan Mason of Cornwall will document some of the poetic and musical traditions of Addison County. Her aim is to record the works of a local poet, a fiddler, a songwriter-musician, and a husband-and-wife team of gospel singers and choir directors. Each person represents a different aspect of local poetic and musical heritage, but taken togeth-

er they indicate the range of these traditional and artistic activities in Vermont.

Julie Steedman of Burlington will conduct an oral history project on the Women Helping Battered Women (WHBW) organization in Vermont, as part of the organization's 25th anniversary celebration. Julie will interview early participants in WHBW, and hopes also to broaden her fieldwork to include more recent members. The importance of organizations such as WHBW is unquestioned, but how often do these helpers have a chance to tell their story?

Eleanor Zue of Vershire will conduct an oral history of the Vershire General Store and Post Office. This store is now a cultural center, and Eleanor's project is coordinated with VerShare, the town's community development organization. In the past, the VFC has examined the important place of the general store in Vermont society. Eleanor's work will add to our understanding of these gathering places.

Calling All Ghosts!

Joe Citro, Vermont author and public radio commentator, is trying to develop a census of Vermont ghosts. His "Ghost Index" will be a town-by-town reference to haunted houses, spectral visitors and spooky spots.

He needs stories from all over the state: your stories, either first-person experiences, family tales or local legends. You can expect complete confidentiality if desired. Please contact him by letter, fax, phone or email. He can be reached at: Joseph A. Citro, Vermont Public Radio; 20 Troy Avenue, Colchester, VT 05446. Phone: 802-863-8751; Fax: 802-658-6499; or email: jacitro@vbimail.champlain.edu.



New Home

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overseeing the eight-month renovation for the Folklife Center. It took nearly three months to demolish and replace what was, in fact, a two-story masonry structure inside the building.

As Project Foreman Kerry Wetmore discovered, “The vault had two-foot-thick brick walls, covered by an arched ceiling that ranged from two to four feet high. On top of this were three-inch-thick marble slabs, which in turn were covered with mortar. The inside of the chamber was plastered and had a marble floor. There were huge boulders – including one that measured seven feet by three feet by 14 inches – supporting this whole thing from below.” Only the marble could be salvaged. It is being used in the rear vestibule and a few other places in the building. More than 60 cubic yards of brick, and 80 cubic yards of jackhammered stone, were carted away.

Ironically, renovations included disas-



A building within a building: the “Fort Knox-style” vault that was constructed in the Masonic Hall (in the 19th century) to house town records.

sembling one vault and creating another. Retrofitting the ground level as a research center with a state-of-the-art storage vault for the VFC collection of field recordings posed the second-biggest challenge for Naylor & Breen. It took almost a month to lower the existing floor by a foot for that purpose. According to Wetmore, “The trucks took away about 100 cubic yards of clay.”

The Folklife Center staff will be moving and readying the new exhibit gallery, shop, research center/archive, and offices through the month of June in preparation for our public opening on June 26, 1999. We hope you’ll make us a destination on a summer itinerary to the Champlain Valley!

Heritage Shop

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connection to an interesting personal or family story.”

Hooked and braided rugs, sweetgrass and brown ash baskets, carvings, models, decoys, fishing flies, ornaments, whirligigs and quilts are among the selection of time-tested goods, both unusual and everyday, that will be for sale.

Members of the Vermont Folklife Center will receive a 10-percent discount on all purchases. Whether you’re looking for a special souvenir or an heirloom gift, come browse our new shop.



Edmond Menard, Vermont’s “Birdman” creating a cedar, fan-tail bird.

NEW HOURS FOR THE VERMONT FOLKLIFE CENTER

Gallery and Shop Hours

May-December: Tuesday-Saturday, 11 a.m.-4 p.m.

Winter months: Saturday, 11 a.m.-4 p.m.

Research Center/Archives Hours

Monday-Friday, 10 a.m.-4 p.m., or by appointment

Fall Conference to Focus on Community-Building

Are you interested in broadening the basis of talk, thought and vision in the field of community development? Mark your calendar for “Deep Diversity: The Role of the Humanities in Building Community,” the Vermont Council on the Humanities’ 1999 annual conference, which will take place November 13-14 at the Sheraton in Burlington. Speakers, workshops and readings will explore the role of cultural programming—arts and humanities—in developing healthy, sustainable and sustaining communities.

The conference is being co-sponsored by a broad cross-section of Vermont agencies and organizations, including the Folklife Center. For registration information, e-mail vch@together.net or call Robin Castle at (802) 888-3183.



VFC Apprenticeship Grants Support Unique Intergenerational Learning Opportunities

The Vermont Traditional Arts Apprenticeship Program, now in its seventh year, has just awarded a new round of grants. Apprenticeships funded this year include:

Master artist Ron West of Richford working with 15-year-old Rachel Hayes of Enosburg to learn old-time fiddling.

Master artist George Kurjanowicz of Barre working with 23-year-old Heather Milne, also of Barre, to learn granite carving.

Master artist Chansy Chareunsouk of Springfield working with Siphai Meksavan of Burlington to learn Lao weaving.

Master artist Manivanh Bolavong of Springfield working with a group of ten Lao-American young people (ages 4 to 17) from around the state as an apprentice dance troupe to learn ethnic Lao dances.

Master artist Patty Manning of Northfield working with 14-year-old Caity Brodeur of Waitsfield to learn Native American beading.

Master artist Jeanne Brink of Barre working with Louise Lampman-Larivee and Christine Barrett of Swanton to learn Abenaki ash splint and sweet grass basketry.

Master artist Janice Attean of Old Town, Maine, working with Mali Keating of Hardwick to learn brown ash and sweet grass basketry.

Master Artist Al Grayhawk Milano of Sherman, Maine, working with Greg Osowski of Derby to learn birchbark canoe making.

The apprenticeship program is made possible through a grant from the Heritage and Preservation Program of the National Endowment for the Arts.

Tramp Art

continued from page 3

man Erastus Hanor around 1910. The piece is unusual, both because tramp art seldom featured furniture, and because we know the craftsman. Although Sholl has identified the makers of many of his pieces, the producers of tramp art largely remain anonymous in the past.

That created a challenge for VFC Folklorist Greg Sharrow, who used such resources as town records, newspaper obituaries and the telephone book to delve into the origins of vintage Vermont-produced pieces. In doing so he learned about Fred Trombley of Rutland, William Roberts of Poultney, and Alberic Gentes, a Canadian who worked in Vermont lumber camps and filled his time with the intricate carving and laminating that defined the tramp art style.

Sharrow's research reveals the important folkloric connection to these blue collar *objets d'art*.

"Tramp art was made by everyday people, and derived from a very specific social and cultural context," says Sharrow, who believes that the term "tramp art" helps

explain an aesthetic style that sprang up simultaneously in far-flung settings.

"There's a tremendous stylistic consistency, so it makes sense that there was some sort of informal movement of ideas," he says. "It must be these guys who were moving around"

The Folklife Center's exhibit will also feature provocative, modern pieces whose construction reveals a direct lineage from the tramp art of a century ago. Sharrow is particularly excited about contributions

from a small collective of formerly homeless men in Troy, N.Y., called the Hermitage des Artistes.

"They use exactly the same techniques – notching and layering – so that the surface of their pieces has incredible depth. But they let their imaginations go wild. It's like Salvador Dali loose in the world of tramp art. They are working within this vocabulary to say new things."

Note: Our new gallery hours at the Masonic Hall are 11 a.m.-4 p.m., Tuesday through Saturday.



The Hermitage des Artistes: (left to right) Paul Cunningham, Jim Kennedy, Michael Lavery, Andy Stutter. Their work will be on view in the VFC gallery and for sale in the Heritage Shop.



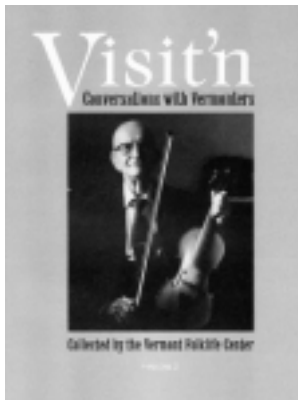
A Sampler of VFC Products

Available in our new Heritage Shop or by mail order

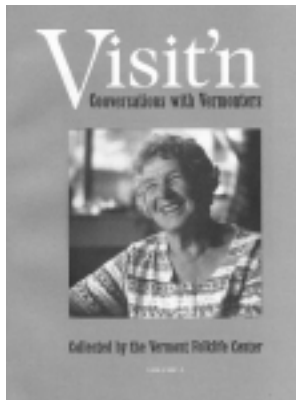
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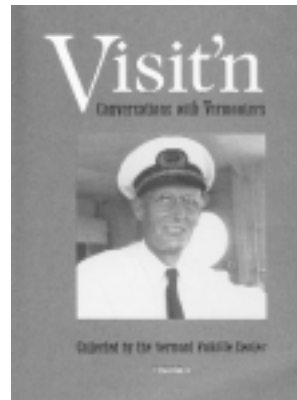
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Purchase Price: \$7.50
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"Who could resist its tales of 'lining bees', of 'The Not-So-Good Old Days' or of an elephant water skiing on Lake Fairlee!"

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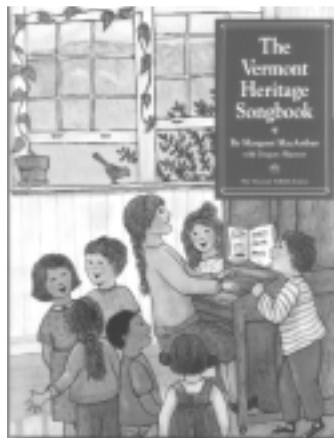
Ed Barna, The Valley Voice

THE VERMONT HERITAGE SONGBOOK

Paperback, 112 pages, illustrated

This anthology of songs was created by folk musician Margaret MacArthur working in collaboration with students from elementary schools throughout the state. Each song draws on interviews and research about local history done by students, and highlights memorable personalities, events, legends, and places, from the early days of settlement right up to the present. Helpful background information introduces each song. An audiocassette compact disc of 15 of the most popular tunes provides an additional resource.

Purchase Price: \$9.95



VERMONT HERITAGE SONGS

Songs about local history and legends created by folk musician Margaret MacArthur with school children statewide.

Purchase Price:
Compact Disc \$14.95,
Songbook & Disc \$22.00



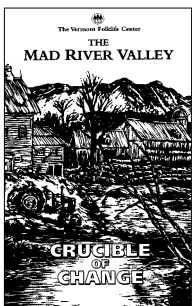
"The songbook is beautifully crafted and easy to use, and either... would be useful on its own — but so perfect together. Now if only every state would do a project like this."

Sing Out!

MAD RIVER VALLEY: CRUCIBLE OF CHANGE

Few places in Vermont experienced as dramatic a transformation after 1945 as the Mad River Valley. Mechanization, modern conveniences such as electricity and indoor plumbing, and most of all, the ski industry turned a rural mountain valley into a booming tourist resort. Personal anecdotes rich in emotion and humor told by natives and transplants will fascinate and surprise listeners. Originally broadcast as an eight-part series on Vermont Public Radio and now available as an audiotape.

"This program is a state treasure!" — A VPR listener
Purchase Price: \$9.95




MEMORIES OF THE TICONDEROGA

Listen to *Memories of the Ticonderoga* and take a journey back in time on the waters of Lake Champlain. Hear the recollections of passengers and those who worked aboard as they recount details of the daily operation of the great paddlewheel steamboat and also, describe some of the memorable incidents and disasters during a half-century of operation. An audiotape commissioned by the Shelburne Museum to celebrate the recent restoration of the Ti. Purchase Price: \$9.95





Calendar of Folklife Events in Vermont and the Region

 Denotes a VFC event



Through December *The Life of the St. Lawrence River*, Traditional Arts in Upstate New York, Canton, NY (1-315-386-4289). Photographic exhibit.



July 18-23 *Mohawk Culture of the St. Lawrence River Valley*, Traditional Arts of Upstate New York, Canton, NY (315-386-4289). Elderhostel session; commuters welcome.

June 19-20 *Vermont Heritage Weekend*, Cabot Creamery, Vermont Historical Society and local historical societies throughout central and northeastern Vermont (1-802-563-2231). Coordinated open house celebration with special exhibits and local tours.

July 31 - August 25 *14th Annual Quilt Exhibit*, Billings Farm and Museum, Woodstock, VT (802-457-2355). Juried exhibit of contemporary quilts plus display of historic quilts from the Vermont Historical Society.



June 26 - September 4 *Tramp Art: Green Mountains and Beyond*, VFC Gallery, Masonic Hall, Middlebury, VT (802-388-4964). Exhibit highlighting the history and revival of a whittling tradition.



August 19 *Tramp Art Reconsidered*, Masonic Hall, Middlebury, VT, 7:30 pm (802-388-4964). Panel discussion with folklorist and collectors.

July 4 *Old Vermont Fourth*, Billings Farm and Museum, Woodstock, VT 10 am- 5 pm (802-457-2355). Traditional observances and activities.



September 11 - November 20 *No Two Alike*, VFC Gallery, Masonic Hall, Middlebury, VT (802-388-4964). Loan exhibit of contemporary African-American quilts.



Note: Gallery hours for the Vermont Folklife Center: Tuesday-Saturday, 11:00 a.m. – 4:00 p.m.
Visit us on our website at www.vermontfolklifecenter.org



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