



# Rendering Vermont People

## A LIFETIME OF VERMONT PEOPLE



PETER MILLER

*Peter Miller's latest book is a magnum opus on our state's most precious natural resources—its noteworthy people.*

IN THE SPRING OF 2012, more than two-dozen students from St. Johnsbury Academy were hanging on every word of Vermont photographer and writer Peter Miller as he talked to the young adults about book publishing. Peter was the visiting professional addressing the students in celebration of the publication of the Academy's annual literary chapbook of student-created fiction, nonfiction, and artwork. The students, all upperclassmen at this indepen-

dent boarding and day high school in the Northeast Kingdom, were transfixed by Peter's stories of his work with Canadian photographer Yousuf Karsh, his time at *LIFE* magazine in New York City, and skill in helping to capture the stories of Vermont's great natural resource—its memorable and noteworthy people.

Peter, after all, has built a career on melding words and photos for publication. His true gift is to convey a sense of place—the contemporary history of a re-

gion—through the people he profiles. His photographs of people are intimate; his writing is measured and economical and reflects careful research into his subjects' backgrounds.

Of his initial foray in the 1980s into book publishing, Peter (who grew up in Weston, Vermont, and attended Burr and Burton Academy and later the University of Toronto) says, "In 1988, I decided to write a book on Vermont, a book of black-and-white portraits and profiles of

the type of Vermonters I grew up with—hillside farmers and other people close to the soil and the pocket villages in the valley below. When this idea first took root I had just quit the best job in journalism at *LIFE* magazine and moved back to Vermont. All my life I had taken portraits of Vermonters, visited with them, and photographed them in their element. So I gave the book a go and showed it to 13 publishers who all turned it down.

“One Vermont publisher predicted that I wouldn’t sell 2,000 books over 10 years. I accepted the challenge, remortgaged my house, and for the next year I collected the photos I had taken since I was 17 years old. I discovered that I needed a lot more photos so I traveled throughout Vermont in search of subjects. I named that book *Vermont People* and hired a designer and editor and together we came out with a good-looking coffee-table book.”

Of course, self-publishing a book, without the editorial guidance and commercial assistance of a seasoned publishing company and their book-distribution network, caused quite a bit of trepidation: the business side of the equation was tenuous, at best.

“It was nerve-wracking—the fate of my home depended on this book selling—so I sent a bunch of press releases to the newspapers, telling them all about my David and Goliath story: me playing the role of David, while the publishers were cast as Goliath. I also mentioned that 13 publishers turned my book down, and that if I lost everything the book was my bicentennial gift to the state of Vermont,” Peter says.

Soon after *Vermont People* was published, he had an exhibition in Weston, at the Todd Gallery...and sold 50 books. “Within six weeks I sold the entire edition of 3,000 books, and by 2003 I had sold 15,000 copies and the book went out of print.”

*Vermont People* was indeed a gift to Vermont—it is a book of high artistic merit. Moreover, Peter experienced firsthand the benefits of self-publishing a book: the individual publisher (in Peter’s case, himself, the author) would keep the lion’s share of the profits, not merely an advance on sales or a small percentage of royalties that a commercial-publishing contract would stipulate. He says, “I put the money I earned back into more books. Keeping busy, I wrote *People of*

*the Great Plains, Vermont Farm Women, The First Time I Saw Paris, Nothing Hardly Ever Happens in Colbyville, Vermont,* and countless more articles for various magazines”—including *Vermont Magazine*, to which Peter contributed the “*Vermont People*” column for 10 or so years, which featured his photos and text about memorable Vermonters.

By 2011, Peter Miller was still fielding customer interest in *Vermont People*. “So at the age of 78, I started to put together *A Lifetime of Vermont People*—208 pages with 60 portraits and profiles of rural Vermonters. I expanded it to poets, writers, and artists, even a skiing governor (Howard Dean).”

Peter recognized that he was creating the living memory of a generation of Vermonters. “I realized that I was documenting the era I grew up in and its quick disappearance as Vermont became more homogenized and gentrified. So my legacy is Vermont’s legacy. This book is about the 60 years I spent writing and photographing the people in this state. Many of the Vermonters who I have written about in *Vermont People* and *Vermont Farm Women* are now icons of the independent, rural Vermonter whom one Los Angeles reviewer called ‘an endangered species.’”

The work has been a labor of love. “I spent the last part of 2011 and all of 2012 putting together this book. I took new portraits, interviewed these people, and re-wrote old stories. *A Lifetime of Vermont People* has 60 more pages than *Vermont People* and the text is longer, for there is more to say and the subjects are not shy. In the back of the book there is a short essay on the changes I have witnessed in Vermont during the past 50 years and a brief history of the book.”

*A Lifetime of Vermont People* will be introduced to Vermonters in June this year at Frog Hollow in Burlington. Peter will embark on a town-by-town reading tour of the state following the launch; go to silverprintpress.com for a list of dates, locations, and times. The book is hardcover, large format (9 x 12 inches), with 208 pages; 111 people will be depicted in 60 profiles of rural Vermonters taken between 1950 and 2012. One of the leading art printers in Italy is producing the book.

Peter had hoped to finance *A Lifetime of Vermont People* through his bank, but it turned him down. “I guess I’m too old, or that I am self-employed, but they wouldn’t give me zip,” he said. “So I moved to a credit union and they increased my mortgage by \$35,000. That has funded me, my assistant, and the designer for the year, but doesn’t pay the printer.” Peter raised almost \$30,000 through the website Kickstarter.com, at which people decide if projects merit independent funding. Donors were offered gifts for their assistance, ranging from reproduction photo enlargements from the book to the actual hardcover itself. He hit his funding mark in early December 2012, and the printing will be complete by the June 2013 deadline.

For his contributions to the culture of Vermont, Peter was named Vermonter of the Year in 2006 by the Vermont State Legislature and honored for his documentation of the residents of our state who make the Vermont way of life so familiar and accessible to so many.

Peter’s latest book is a collection of folk who live up to the independent Ver-



Self-portrait of the artist: Peter Miller began taking photographs more than a half-century ago and refined his craft at *LIFE* magazine. He is the author of nine books, the most popular of which have been self-published, including *Vermont People*, a book that set the standard for artistic renderings of the people of Vermont.



A memorable twosome in the Green Mountain State. (Left) Ken Squier of WDEV in Waterbury continues to provide homespun entertainment via the airwaves. He's also a well-known broadcast voice of the Daytona 500 and was elected into the NASCAR Hall of Fame. (Above) Howard Dean moved fast on the slopes and in the statehouse, overseeing the passage of important legislation during his time in the governor's office. Both are profiled in Peter Miller's latest book, *A Lifetime of Vermont People*.

monter way of going about a craft or a business, people such as Clem “Desperate” Despault, stock-car champion and junk-car dealer from Waterbury; Shaun Hill, a microbrewer from Hill Farmstead in Greensboro; the “Jack Jumpers” of Bromley Mountain, a group who raced ski-fitted contraptions at Bromley; and Ken Squier, owner of WDEV radio in Waterbury and Thunder Road raceway in Barre.

“Ken’s father, Lloyd, started the radio station. Ken’s first interview was when he was 14 at a stock-car race and all these guys were standing around talking and arguing and then a riot broke out between the factions and Ken was left hiding there under a wagon out of the way,” Peter says to me.

In the book, Peter goes on to detail Ken’s broadcast experiences. “What other station would have a program called *Music to Go to the Dump By*, one of radio’s most hilarious programs with the most aw-

ful music and jokes? *For the Birds* relates about sightings, bird-watching trips, and recordings of bird songs. *The Trading Post* is an online lawn sale where listeners buy and sell everything from rifles to used tires. And let’s not forget the birthday announcements, the early morning farm news and commodity prices, and the weather report from a local meteorologist,” Peter writes in the book about Ken’s radio station.

About motor-heads like Clem Despault, who are drawn to the New England pastime of stock-car racing, Peter writes, “That’s how young Vermonters moved into stock-car racing. Farm kids learned on the family tractors, then became junkyard scavengers as they repaired jalopies and hot-rodged them. They were tired of raking hayfields in a pokey tractor and liked the adrenalin and noise of fast moving flat head (named for the shape of the engine) coupes racing round and round on oval short tracks.”

Reading his latest opus calls to mind words Peter shared with me last fall in the form of a Navajo Indian prayer entitled “Walking in Beauty”:

*With beauty all around me may I walk.*

*In old age wandering on a trail of beauty, lively, may I walk.*

*In old age wandering on a trail of beauty, living again, may I walk.*

*My words will be beautiful....* ¶

**Joe Healy, a former editor-in-chief of *Vermont Magazine* and associate publisher of *Fly Rod & Reel* and other fly-fishing magazines, lives in Waterford in the Northeast Kingdom and works at St. Johnsbury Academy. His book, *Training a Young Pointer: How the Experts Developed My Bird Dog and Me*, was published by Stackpole Books.**