



VERMONT TOWNS

Story by Karl Decker and Nancy Levine  
Photographs by Karl Decker

# Our Town

*In Peru, locals reflect on a quiet mountain village that once was and continues to be.*

**D**RIVING toward Manchester along Route 11, you can pass right through Peru and not even know it. Peru doesn't merit much in the way of highway signs, and its tiny village is an out-of-sight, by-the-wayside place. The old Route 11 used to creep right through the village, passing by the homes, the cemetery, the old school, the J.J. Hapgood General Store, the post office, the 1846 church and the Bromley House—a former inn that burned down years ago and is now only a foundation on a village green. But shortly after World War II, a wider, faster Route 11 was built to bypass the village. The new highway left things so quiet that today Lucy, storekeeper Sam Johnson's golden retriever, can stretch out by the side of the road and doze in the late summer sun.

In Thornton Wilder's play *Our Town*, set in the simpler times of a century ago, the Stage Manager recalls just such a moment in tranquil Grover's Corners, "when dogs used to sleep in the middle of the street all day..." And nearly 20 years ago, the folks of Peru took *Our Town* as their metaphor, enlisted a cast of townspeople, and produced it in the community church.

You recall the play: unpretentious, eternal, haunting. Howie Newsome delivers the morning milk, Joe Crowell delivers Editor Webb's paper, Doc Gibbs delivers the babies. Mrs. Soames, Mrs. Gibbs and Mrs. Webb go to evening choir practice, where Simon Stimson has them attempt "Blest Be



On September 26, the main drag will be jam-packed during the 28th "almost annual" Peru Fair. The festival was founded in 1979 as a community tag sale; these days, it's a street fair with craft booths, games, food and live music.

the Tie that Binds" for yet a third time. George and Emily fall in love and marry; Emily dies in childbirth. In Act III she is allowed to return from the grave to revisit one very ordinary day from her past. She learns how little we really look at each other in our daily life and "how life goes by all too fast."

"I remember those very ordinary days so clearly," says Kelen LaPan, a fourth-generation resident of Peru. "They were days of homemade pies, potluck suppers, rides with horse and carriage. From my window today, I see the old family farm and remember the barn dances. And we all knew each other very, very well..."

"*Our Town* was Peru. It was about the Peru we had known in the past," says Edna Meyer, who handled the wardrobe for the play and has lived in

town, minus four years in California, since 1976.

The late Bob Myhrum directed the local production and wrote in his written reflections that maybe with this play, residents could see "a Peru Town that once was and might even be again." So what was Peru once? And what might it be again?

**P**ERU WAS CHARTERED in 1773 as Bromley, a name familiar today as the ski resort named for the 3,200-foot mountain just two miles west of the Hapgood Store. Early residents saw no future with a name like that, and in 1804 chose the more exotic Peru in hopes of luring a little prosperity to this poor, undeveloped hill village. It must have worked, for in 1830 one J.J. Hapgood "commenced a mercantile



**Kermit Reilly played the Stage Manager in *Our Town*. He drove the mail route for many years; he's also a lay preacher and a justice of the peace.**



**James Daley is the local road commissioner. "Big changes here? Oh, yes," he says. "We've become the suburbs...That's just the economics of things."**

business" that still bears his name.

His son Marshall established an inn, started a logging business, stocked the woods with white-tail deer from Virginia and made himself a fair fortune. He later donated extensive virgin woodlands to the Green Mountain National Forest. A Forest Service history says that in the 1930s, the Civilian Conservation Corps cleared away his lumber camp and built a pond and recreation area—Hapgood Pond. But the village has remained pretty much the same over the years, and some of the *Our Town* cast members still live in town.

Bill Reed, who played the tragic character of Simon Stimson, lived for years in the Lace Paper House, a gingerbread-style home across from the Hapgood store. "It was a simpler time," he says. "The community was cohesive. We did so many things together—lots of visiting, lots of time to talk. Seems to me that the newly arriving second homeowners were a real part of the community, too." Bill

and his wife, Lynne, own Misty Valley Books in Chester, and they spend plenty of time in Peru to see his son, Willie.

Willie Reed—paperboy Joe Crowell in the play—was born in 1980 and spent years studying and traveling abroad. Now he works for a foam-insulation company and lives in Peru in a green house by a beaver pond. As a kid, "I used to sit on the front porch of our village house and wave at the cars. Knew everyone who was driving by," he says. "Then I went away and spent years in Africa, France, the Ukraine. Came back. Nothing like my hometown of Peru."

Tracy Black played Emily in *Our Town* and today she's Peru's town clerk. Raised in Montana, she has lived in town for 30 years. "Our population has remained small, probably just 410 of us, but eighty percent are second homeowners," she says. "They include retired folks, the summer folks and those who come for skiing in the winter."

Kermit Reilly played the Stage

Manager in *Our Town*. Kermit drove the mail route for many years; he's also a justice of the peace and a lay preacher at the local church, along with pastor Margaret Dawedeit. Reilly has married many of the folks in town. "Yes, over the years newcomers have changed the face of Peru, but the values have not changed," he says. "As the hymn Simon Stimson was rehearsing says, 'We share the fellowship of kindred minds.'"

**T**HE RURAL PAST and suburban present mingle along the town's back roads. One passes the remnants of an old camp here, an old farm there—then a new or restored house appears, complete with sculptured plantings, velvet green lawn and landscaped pond.

Native James Daley, who oversees the town's 29 miles of graded roads, was Grover's Corners milkman, Howie Newsome. His wife, Robin, played Mrs. Soames. "Big changes here? Oh, yes," he says. "There are hardly any Peru people left. Some died, some moved away. People from the cities,





Gardener and caretaker Hope Richardson with her dog, Mocha Boy: “We are a resourceful and imaginative community...We can meet these changes.”

Town clerk and 30-year resident Tracy Black played the female lead, Emily, in the long ago but fondly remembered production of *Our Town*.

especially right after 9/11, moved in, drove the price of land so high our young people can't afford to stay here. Both my daughter and my son wanted to stay, but we couldn't find an affordable plot for them. We've become the suburbs of Connecticut, New York and New Jersey. That's just the economics of things.”

Hope Richardson lives in a cedar clapboard Cape that she and her carpenter husband, Richard Rockwell, built together in the 1990s. A sudden heart attack took Richard's life a year ago. She has a son at the University of Vermont; a daughter lives in East Dorset. Hope works as a gardener, caretaker and housekeeper. Her clients are mostly the second homeowners.

“Jim Daley's right,” Hope says. She's sitting by her sunny garden with her friendly Doberman, Mr. Mocha Boy. Across from Hope's home are an old restored farmstead and several newer homes that belong to out-of-staters. “Those changes are coming

fast.” She appears thoughtful for a moment. “And I am concerned. Yes. Concerned. But I like to think that we are a resourceful, caring and imaginative community, that we can meet these changes, find ways for us all to live here. I know I always want to

be here, in my house in Peru...in *Our Town*.”

**Nancy Levine is a writer and nurse who lives in Shelburne. Karl Decker is a writer and photographer from Townshend. This is the 34th small town they've written about for Vermont Magazine.**

## Just the facts

- Years ago at an annual frog-leg feast, some kindred minds planned a town-wide tag sale as a way to raise enough money to pay their property taxes. “The world's largest tag sale” eventually evolved into the Peru Fair. On September 26<sup>th</sup> the road through the village will be closed and musicians, performance artists, and purveyors of food and crafts will line the road. Folks will line up for the pig roast and parade—most likely led by Kermit Reilly. The 28<sup>th</sup> annual event benefits local charities.
- *Tall Tales From Peru* is an illustrated history that includes a fine photo of the *Our Town* cast. To order a copy (\$12), call Jan Georgett at (802) 824-5945.
- Local lodging establishments include the Wiley Inn ([www.WileyInn.com](http://www.WileyInn.com)) and Johnny Seesaw's Lodge and Dining ([www.jseesaw.com](http://www.jseesaw.com)). For family-run cross-country skiing—and yoga—go to Wild Wings Ski Touring Center ([www.wildwingsski.com](http://www.wildwingsski.com)). For more on Bromley ski resort, go to [www.bromley.com](http://www.bromley.com).