

How to Create a New Style of Class History

By Tom Whitney

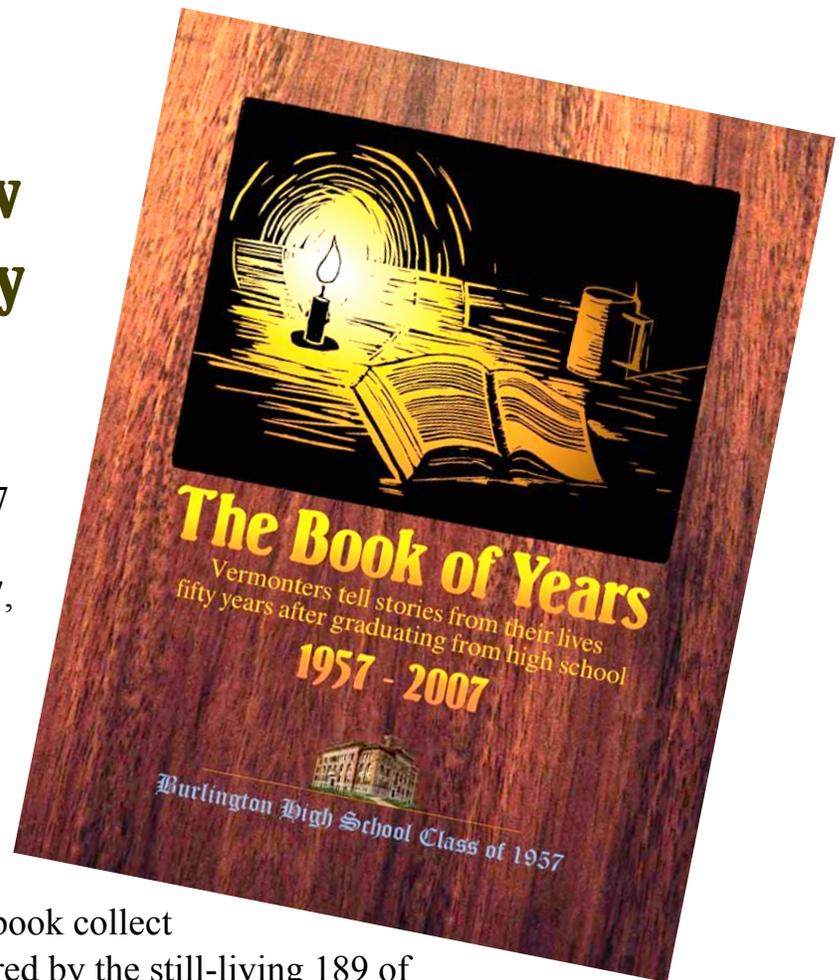
<www.tomwhitney.net>

Members of the Class of 1957 at Burlington High School assembled August 18, 2007, in Vermont for their fiftieth reunion. This one had an added dimension, a “Book of Years,” in which classmates told the stories from their lives including the 50 years after graduating from high school. Chapters in the 375-page book collect answers to thirty questions answered by the still-living 189 of the original 232 classmates, one-third of the living class.

The project could be an example of a new way for people as they are finishing their working lives to record the highlights of their unique histories and what they have learned and experienced for the benefit of young people just starting out.

With skills in editing, graphic design and photography, I came up with the idea and completely created it over a three year period on my Macintosh G4 using the Microsoft Word program after voluminous correspondence with my co-authors.

In 2007 I contracted with the BookSurge company to print it on demand. The print book is now available from Amazon.com for \$26.99. You can download the whole book free from my website at www.tomwhitney.net. Negotiations with BookSurge were simplicity itself. I created a camera-ready 8.5”x11” book document using Microsoft Word 2007, then I had to send them a PDF (portable document file) file for the 375-page text and a separate PDF for the color cover, plus about \$125. After this they set the retail price, that includes a 35% royalty to the author. Then they printed a proof copy and sent it to me. BookSurge has upped the initial processing price since I did



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this book. For those who don't have the design and production skills, they offer design packages that can be purchased. I had designed the book to be printed in color as is evident on the PDF file, but this would have been very expensive to print, so I settled for a black and white print version.

The Production Process

My retiree budget was limited. But I had good editorial, graphic design and photography skills and plenty of time available to use my Macintosh G4 computer. I decided to use low cost printed questionnaires to gather the information. I realized this method might limit my responses and be unrepresentative, but so be it. I was not doing science.

I sent out an initial letter and 50 questions in early 2005 – two and a half years before the reunion - and in late 2006 sent a reduced list of 30 questions and a shorter letter.

The Questions

I figured that not everyone could write stories, which is what I wanted, but almost everyone can answer questions. And if they wouldn't write answers I could call them up. Actually, it turned out I never called anyone for content. I'm just not a good telephone person, but I interact just fine on emails.

It took me about nine months to come up with good ones. I wanted thoughtful questions that people would find interesting to think about and answer. I hoped people might benefit from reading the answers to them because they provide useful information, are just plain fun to learn about, and because they provide the flavor of the times.

I knew there were some questions that might be difficult for people to relate to, or irritating for some to even read, but others would be happy to answer. A perfect example of that was Joyce Wagner Carlin's combined answer to Michele Kort's question about how we have handled the difficult times and one I nervously put in the list, number 17: "Tales of love in your life you care to share? Courtship? Marriage? Divorce? The "sexual revolution?" Civil unions? Views on the institution of marriage? Most romantic moments or places? Satisfaction of the single life?" Now, when I read question 17 it seems indelicate, perhaps asks too much. But I gave it my best shot with a naïve honesty and purity of intention because it is after all one the most important of activities humans engage in and a subject of universal fascination – but how do you easily talk about it?

Joyce Wagner wrote about her beloved Bill: "Bill's death was the hardest thing life has given me to handle. I mourned him from day one and keep very busy. If I stop it hits me that the man I knew from first grade who asked me to marry him – no actually told me at age seven: "Someday I'm going to marry you," and never asked me formally – is no longer in my life." And she told how she is recovering, besides visiting his graveside and praying in church every week, now she is going square dancing once a week two years later and on Thursday nights she drives home with a smile on her face. Finally. My heart

Burlington High School **Class of 1957**

50th Reunion Project



- 1. Who were your parents?** What was their story? And your more distant ancestors? What is the legacy of their lineage to you? Relatives in WWII or Korea?
- 2. Lasting memories of the 1940s and early 1950s?**
- 3. Were there any moments, experiences or involvements** in or out of school up to the time of high school graduation that were important? Activities, hobbies, jobs, hangouts, personal interests, challenges, fun things to do? People in the community who helped or inspired you? What experiences helped shape you into the person you became?
- 4. Thoughts on parenthood and the high school years – from being there and being a parent?** Things you thought were important when you were young that you later learned were not so important?
- 5. Did sports play a role in your life?** Most thrilling memories? Lesson learned that young athletes today might benefit from?
- 6. How important was college and military experience in shaping your life – if it was?**
- 7. Jobs during your life?** Make a generic list of them all. **What are you doing now?**
- 8. Any interesting job-seeking, job-creating, or getting-fired tales?**
- 9. What was your primary honorable occupation or role in life?** Was there a thread or threads of continuity through your life? Suggestions about good jobs?
- 10. Stories of entrepreneurship or any feats of negotiation or management in which you played a role?** Lessons learned?
- 11. What are you most proud of having accomplished at various stages of your life?**
- 12. Tales of ventures, adventures, or unusual, spooky, terrifying, or exhilarating experiences or life threatening times when you could have died?**
- 13. Participated in public life in some way? Town meetings? Politics? Run for office? Nonprofit groups?** How has your political perspective changed over the years?
- 14. Public issues you have worked for, or feel are important?**
- 15. Creative endeavors (defining “creative” in the broadest sense)?** Avocations or hobbies? Ever invented something? Made any original contributions to some aspect of knowledge? Preserved history?
- 16. Do you feel that being a Vermonter has given a useful perspective as you have lived your life?** Some examples? Any interesting items of Vermont history you didn't learn in high school?
- 17. Tales of love in your life you care to share?** Courtship? Marriage? Divorce? The “sexual revolution?” Civil unions? Views on the institution of marriage? Most romantic moments or places? Satisfaction of the single life?

18. **How have you turned the challenges and sadnesses of your life into growing experiences?**
19. **Advice you would give a young person – a nephew, grandchild – as they are going into the world from high school, knowing what you know now.**
20. **Words to the wise**, tricks of the trade, hard-won lessons you have learned through experience in your journey through life?
21. **Ever written articles or stories or had them written about you?**
22. **Ever won an award for professional or community activity?**
23. **Personal heroes? All-time-favorite movies, music or books?**
24. **Passions?** Any enduring puzzles, enigmas, fascinations, collections, hobbies, projects or missions that have intrigued and involved you through the years?
25. **Thoughts about growing older?**
26. **Thoughts about culture: how do you ethnically, racially or culturally identify yourself – or do you?** Have you explored your ethnic roots or genealogy? Do you personally observe any time-honored family traditions? Have you observed other cultures? Thoughts about non-ethnic cultures?
27. **Basic values and rules you live by?** Rules you used to live by, but gave up? How have your religious or spiritual values changed over time?
28. **Tell us about your family and your sweetheart.** What are your young ones up to?
29. **Things you like – or don't – about Burlington, or about Vermont.** Why did you leave or why did you stay?
30. **If you were a philanthropist, what would you support?**

What did we miss? I know some of you may laugh at this. I *have* cut the number of questions down from the initial 70 to “just” 30. We are a bunch of interesting and complex people who have had an amazing variety of experiences. This is our story.

Thoughts about answering

Some have come up with many stories about various incidents in their lives. Others have just put down a number for a question and start writing the answer; even a few words are fine. Some questions would take a book to answer: give us a hint. **Take the space you need to tell a good story.** Others have done a four or five page chronological story of their lives and observations. None of it is a competitive bragging contest. The point of it is just telling what our life experiences have been. The ups and the downs. The average. What we have learned. What's done is done. Each of us has had a different life. Now let us share our stories. Imagine we are sitting around a nice fire pit outside at night talking: that's the mood.

Some have written stuff out longhand, others type, and others use the Internet. Internet is easiest for me. But I will be happy to receive your responses in any form: talk into a tape recorder, or call me up, I'll attach my recorder to the phone. But please do not worry if you send ungrammatical thoughts – you should see mine when I do my first drafts. I will make your English teacher proud, without a hint that you didn't write perfectly, if he or she is still around.

thrilled to imagine her smiling when I read that. I was overwhelmed with happiness and amazement at what Joyce wrote. I knew there were stories out there! The Cinderella story still lives! And here was Bill Carlin, so prescient at age seven! Amazing. And the both of them later proving that you can live happily ever after – until a final passing. I was determined we had to get pictures of them. They appear on page 168 of the book.

I asked a Hawai‘i writer, Tom Peek, for his advice. He read my seventy initial questions and thought I had some good ones but I should organize them better, shorten the list and then pick ten classmates, send out the list to them and get feedback before rolling out the whole project. I did that.

One person, Lou Garcia, made a valiant attempt to answer them all for which I am very grateful. We had played on a church league basketball team together, and he was the best artist in high school. I respected him. He replied in three phases, and because he doesn’t use computers, he hand-wrote his answers. Those thick letters he sent me were wonderful to receive. They were the first affirmations after a year of working on the project that someone in the class took the project seriously. He helped me see that some questions were too general, too complicated, many were repetitive and some were too rhetorical. Chuck Eldred suggested that I had way too many questions; that if people took it seriously and answered them I would have a large number of books. He suggested that I just focus on people’s thoughts about Vermont. I never heard back from the other eight. So I cut the number of questions to fifty (from seventy) and focused them in three categories: early personal history; our working lives; and Vermont.

My focus was intended to be more on the lives we have led after high school – now we are adults, after all, and were just kids in high school. What have we done, how did we do it and what helpful advice do we have to share with young ones just starting out. I could not *just* focus on Vermont.

I am convinced that everyone has stories to tell. Lillian Hauke Venner agreed with me in her comment about working with elders: each person we meet has a lesson to teach, she said, but we’re often too much in a hurry to get on with the next project to wait to hear it.

Lillian herself has quite a few stories. One of the questions asks whether classmates have had any near-death experiences. So here is the surprising response from stay-at-

““Turning one’s life into memoir is inherently comic in the classic definition of comedy; it is redemptive. Memoir triumphs over the view that, because it ends in death, life is tragic. Memoir allows you to wrest meaning from life that outlasts the grave.” .”

home Lillian who has lived her adult life a few doors down the street from where she grew up in Burlington. “My scariest experience was having the small boat we were on in the Amazon River boarded at midnight by Columbian guerrillas and opening my door and facing a masked man with a machine gun.” Hmmm . . .

A few classmates underscored the resistance I might face. Lynn Dawson Shay sent very brief answers. “Note the brevity of the true northern New Englander,” she cautioned me after a verbose letter I had sent to her. Toni Franceschi Esteban sympathized: “I think it is going to be difficult for Vermonters to talk about themselves because a Vermonter is, above all, modest and humble.” (I thought about that one (– and how much I have to be modest and humble about, also).)

The Responses

I soon began receiving email replies and notes. Another early person to respond was Clare Adams Whitney, who married a nice guy named Ken who is no relation to me. She sent a two-page narrative of her life, hitting on some questions, ignoring many others. It was breezy and fun. I sent her some emails in response, particularly wanting to know more about her *18-year* trip around the world! Then she asked me what *my* story was. Gulp. I didn’t have a word. So I started pounding away on the keyboard and came up with about nine pages I sent to her, then I had twenty, and it has spiraled from there to about sixty. Claire finally did send a four-page story about “Four Years in the South Pacific.” I sent a half-dozen emails patiently cajoling the story out of her. I think she is typical of many people who have had some fascinating experiences in their lives, but down-play them.

I sought books on memoir writing on the Internet and was lucky to find “Your Life As Story,” by Tristine Ranier. Tristine, who has become a friend, has a doctorate in English Literature, but said she learned what she knew about story structure by working in television. Her chapter on story structure – not learned in college - is an essential text to read for *any* writer.

She has this observation at the end of her chapter on humor: “The comic view of life is not just a series of jokes; it is a philosophy, a form of wisdom. The comic spirit questions, is spontaneous, unpretentious, playful, and honest, all qualities you want in a memoir – and in life.” “Turning one’s life into memoir is inherently comic in the classic definition of comedy; it is redemptive. Memoir triumphs over the view that, because it ends in death, life is tragic. Memoir allows you to wrest meaning from life that outlasts the grave.” I liked that. And that touches me in a personal way. I may not have any grand children to carry my thoughts and my essence beyond the scattering of my ashes to the winds. What we record here is most of what I and some of my classmates will share with posterity.

Ranier talks about writing slices of your life; you don't have to tell your whole life story: that is perfect for answers to these questions. Fortunately I had a chance to take a course Tristine taught right here in Hilo, Hawaii. It was at the University of Hawai'i and its title was "The Movie in Your Backyard – Screenwriting and Digital Film-making." That she would appear in my town after I had just read her book and was recommending it to others seemed like destiny playing a hand in my life; I had to take the course. During it, I realized that this project could lend itself well to video treatment, but I have not pursued that. It would be a perfect Ken Burns-type project.

A few people started sending in their responses and this has continued ever since. Three classmates particularly, Jim Hale and his wife Rita, Joyce Wagner and Layne Prebor have understood the project perfectly.

Jim sent at least a dozen stories about various aspects of his early life. They all hung together and I devoted a chapter to his fascinating narrative of a

kid from a tough neighborhood who went into Golden Gloves boxing while in high school and 19 years later he had turned his life around, received a college degree and became a manager at General Electric. Layne sent a continuing series of colorful observations that are useful and interesting, plus answers to every question that are salted

Book of Years Contents



This linoleum block print was created by Dave Whitney, B.H.S. Class of 1960.

Introduction - extraordinary history: Vermonters talk about their lives ...		viii
Reunions - thanks to those who helped . . .		x
The Class Picture with names . . .		xi
In Memoriam - kind thoughts for those who have passed		xvi
	Hell is Empty All the Devils are Here	19
Who Our Ancestors Were		23
	What It Was Like in the 1940s & '50s	45
Learning about the World in School		65
Parenthood & High School		77
Tenacity • Jim Hale's neat story		79
	Sports	95
Importance of College - or not - in Our Lives		101
Serving Our Country		109
Four Years in the South Pacific		123
Entrepreneurship		129
We have Worked a Few Jobs		137
Job-Seeking & Getting Fired		165
	Tales of Love	167
Life-Threatening Moments		185
	We are having fun, yet Surviving a Flood	195
Tales of Adventure		217
	How We Have Dealt with Hardships	229
Giving Back		235
Heroes		247
Favorite Books & Authors		249
Movies		254
Music		257
Politics and the Class of 1957		259
Advice for a Young Person Just Starting Out		267
	Words to the Wise Tricks of Some Trades	273
We are proud of these things		283
	Vermont Attitude & Appreciation	291
Vermont Miscellany		297
	Religious Views Changed?	311
Growing Older		325
Basic Values		333
Our Families		339
Things Some Don't Like		349
If We were Philanthropists		351
Culture & Ethnicity		353
School Paper Bankrupt		357
On the CD - the story of this book plus 50th reunion pictures		
The Oread - the 1957 yearbook		

throughout the book. Joyce kept dropping gems, like when she described her father as “dark, handsome and the devil in disguise, just perfect for my shy mother.” The four of them have real writing talent. They have lived lives worth writing about.

I sent a third round of letters in mid-2005 to the forty people with email that contained thirty-three questions. I received a half-dozen more responses.

I got to a point of having a routine when I receive a response. I gave it my once-over light edit and placed it in its appropriate chapter or created a new chapter for it. Often I corresponded with a respondent and asked some more questions, checked some facts and send back drafts with my editing decisions, and asked for photographs. It became quite intense for a couple of weeks or months with many people. For me every spate of correspondence was fun. We have many nice and interesting people in our class.

In December 2006 I sent another letter with the thirty-three questions to the 140 remaining non-respondents.

By January 1, 2007 I had 230 pages of typeset text and pictures from about twenty-five people. By the first of May I had 382 pages from sixty-two people. With the introductory pages it was 386 finally.

Presentation format

Early on I envisioned that I would put together separate stories for each person who responded, in addition to collecting all the responses to a particular question. For the first person who responded in some detail, I sent back a complete typeset version of his story. He reacted negatively with some vigor. He could not imagine that people would like to read his story and said he would feel much better if his comments were included with other peoples’ in response to each question. And he did not in any way want to be a poster boy for the project. I proceeded to put all responses in his recommended format, which is the chapters that you see. And I never mentioned his name to a soul.

Some classmates had particular stories I felt deserved longer treatment and I asked them to write articles that averaged about four pages: Steve Berry about his genealogy hobby; Claire Adams Whitney about her “Four years in the South Pacific;” Betsy Samuelson Greer about her involvement with mental illness issues; Margo Thomas’s survival of a Lamoille River flood and her experiences working in prison; Joyce Wagner talking about her Catholic faith. I have a few longer treatments of two questions and my own journey story that I did not include. Jim and Rita Hale were prolific storywriters and I encouraged them to keep writing. I edited together half a dozen of Jim’s stories into his 16-page “Tenacity” piece. I kept pushing for pictures from everybody. I loved Rita’s piece about falling in love with the sailor from Vermont.

One day I received a response from Carl Loveday to whom I had sent a few chapters of the book. He replied: “When I read your questionnaire last year and again this year for

some reason I thought you were compiling a list of autobiographies laid out one after the other (alphabetically or whatever) So, I was somewhat surprised and amazed at the different approach you've used to present these stories." I thought about it then replied that I was going to keep with this chosen format for the print version.

I did compile everyone's responses so they can be accessed separately and everything they wrote is in one place on the CD for the project. (If any classmates want to see their stories, they can email me at whitneye001@hawaii.rr.com.)

How many responses are enough?

I finally decided to stop worrying about this. On the first of May 2007 I had had 61, an almost one-third response; that was good enough for me. We were not doing scientific polling.

The phrase that describes the contents: "**Vermonters tell stories from their lives fifty years after graduating from high school**" captures what it is about. It does not matter how many. *If it was two people person and well written it would be worth reading.* I felt that I have taken enough steps to tell people about the project and given them plenty of time to respond.

It is a new idea. I could not find other high school or college classes on the internet that have done anything quite like this. It takes quite a while – years – for new ideas to catch on. I think that the assistance of my son Julien helping me put it on the Internet will help me promote this concept.

Who is the audience?

Tom Hackett, a high school classmate I was aware of but not close with in high school, and his wife Colleen visited Hilo for two days near Thanksgiving, 2006. We did some sightseeing to Hawaii Volcanoes National Park and took a nice walk to hidden Green Lake.

In anticipation of their visit I had printed out every page of every article, designed a cover, dedication page, title page, table of contents and gave the book its name.

They liked the idea of the book, but as Colleen observed, it was too long and there was too much of my own stuff in there and too much Hawaiian stuff, Tom felt. I explained to them that since I had more time to think about it I had done more, but I have been expecting my material to get swallowed up as others send in their pages which is starting to happen. I told them that whatever gets printed in a reduced-pages version there would not be more of my material than anyone else's. We did end up with 150 more pages of other peoples' material. On the compact disc, I figured I could include more of my stuff at the end of it because digital space costs virtually nothing. I thought that was reasonable.

“Who is the audience?” is a question that kept recurring in my conversation with Tom and Colleen. Hackett.

My answer is “posterity: all future generations and all of our descendants.”

For me the audience question relates to why I wrote some longer answers to questions that are not included in the BHS book. I perhaps naively think some of my narratives about how I lived my life may be of interest to students and teachers in the future. The Story of Nobody Famous. The Story of a Citizen, which role I have taken very seriously in my life. It perhaps can help make the real life people are going to lead as adults more understandable to young people.

My longer essays are available on my website at <www.tomwhitney.net> including my experience as a Citizen, which I have taken seriously throughout my life, in 16 pages: **A Vermont-born Citizen's History: from Republican to Democrat to waving the flag for a Communist to being elected to public office in Sacramento as a Democrat to a surprise in Hawai'i.**

A Vermont-born Citizen's History

From Republican to Democrat to waving the flag for a Communist to being elected office in Sacramento as a Democrat to a surprise in Hawai'i

By Tom Whitney

The Daughters of the American Revolution annually give Good Citizenship Medals to thousands of eighth graders even today in 2006. I received one when I left the eighth grade in 1954 at South Burlington Central School in Vermont.

At a young age I had taken an interest in politics. I wrote a little article in the fourth grade after responding to Mrs. McGrath's challenge to do one about the 1948 presidential election being held the next day.

I got up early on the morning after election day, ran to get the paper, listened to the radio and typed up a half a page. I closed with a note that Arthur Godfrey, a popular morning radio host, had received four votes. She had me read it to the class and also to a bunch of uninterested sixth graders. I didn't care that they didn't care. I was hooked.

In 1952 my father took me to the South Burlington Town Meeting where all the citizens debated the issues facing the town and voted on the budget for the next year. I remember especially well that Mrs. Shepard, our rather tall, portly and direct-spoken school bus driver stood up and said that those pollies on Spear Street need to be fixed because they were making her "hot all black and blue." Everyone laughed, and she got what she needed.

Then during the 1952 presidential election I suggested to a teacher that our junior high school should vote using the voting booths in the general election. This was easy to accomplish because the elections booths were set up in our auditorium that was the local polling place. So we did that.

I think it was this, being captain of the safety patrol, plus my good sportsmanship in not venting my frustration when I was nominated, but not seconded, for three class offices. Forty years later I would succeed in becoming elected to something. My good friend Frank Sinton was a more suitable candidate and became our eighth grade class president. He was much more personable, always. One other thing may have been a factor, I say with a smile. We had intramural basketball and I was the leader of a team that I had named the MRA after the Russian jet fighter. This was during Korean War time. Perhaps they were trying to head off an ironical, unpatriotic attitude. At graduation, at any rate, I received the medal.



My grade school bus driver gave me a lesson in democracy with her last "Hot all black and blue" speech at South Burlington Central School. Lots of kids from Vermont attended Central.

What can one person do?

By Tom Whitney



Older we get, some of us wonder what our lives will count for in the vast scheme of things outside of our personal lives. This is one guy's story of keeping his day job and working with others in Sacramento to create a tree foundation, fund public transit with a sales tax, join a mysterious environmental coalition called ECOS, combat urban sprawl, redesign a 14-square mile urban area where environmentalists and community people worked with landowners and developers and had substantial input in planning before construction started, protect rivers with a 50-organization coalition, become elected to public office, get defenses against flooding built, drive an electric vehicle named "Underdog," burn out, find love, "retire" to Hawai'i and come to the realization of a missing spiritual dimension in many environmental efforts.

There is my involvement as an environmentalist for a decade in Sacramento. It is 64 pages. We did some innovative things. **“What can one person do? Older we get, some of us wonder what our lives will count for in the vast scheme of things outside of our personal lives. What can we do that will make a difference? This is one guy's story of keeping his day job and working together with others in Sacramento to create a tree foundation, fund public transit with a sales tax, join the mysterious environmental coalition called ECOS, combat urban sprawl, redesign a 14-**

square mile urban area where environmentalists and community representatives had substantial input in planning before construction started, build defenses against flooding, protect rivers, create a wildlife refuge, become elected to public office, drive an electric vehicle named “Underdog,” burn out, find love, retire to Hawai'i and come to the realization of a missing spiritual dimension in many environmental efforts.”

My experience with religion is 7 pages: **“Looking for God: from the Baptist Church in Burlington, Vermont, to**

Looking for God

From the Baptist Church in Burlington, Vermont, to Mauna Kea with Native Hawaiians

By Tom Whitney

While in the Navy in Philadelphia a friend took me to the Unitarian Church there.

The Unitarians The minister was a former sociology professor and I liked his sermons that related to real world and social issues. They didn't tell me what I should believe, and I liked that. When a Jewish holiday came around they would have Jewish people and artists come and explain what their religion meant to them. They did the same with other religion's special days. Unitarians respect that people have a religious and spiritual part of themselves and support that notion without proscribing dogmas that they expect their members to express in some rote fashion.

The Baptists I had been brought up in the Baptist Church in Burlington, Northern Baptist, so we were not holy rollers probably because it was across the street from where we lived on Pine Street in Burlington. I went there all the way through high school, but I never did really take Jesus to my heart. My earliest impressions of the church was sitting upstairs and listening to white-haired Doctor Sisson roar on about Burma, where he had spent some time.

Foreign missions were part of the church's self-defined role in the world. Then mom would take us downstairs for Sunday school. Mostly I liked the discussion groups through high school, talking about big issues. I was interested in grappling with big issues, learning big lessons. During junior high time I loved Church League basketball, so that required some church involvement. I guess it became a habit.

My mother made sure we went, and at one time ran the Sunday School there, but I didn't ever remember hearing her mention God at home. She didn't seem particularly religious or spiritual. I asked my sister Mary recently if she had ever heard mom talk about religion. Mary said the only times were when she might say, “My God, are you girls ever going to clean up you rooms!” For my mother, getting her children involved in



The beautiful, classic, Unitarian Church built in 1826 that stands at the head of Church Street, the main thoroughfare of the largest city in Vermont. Not a young person had an idea what the colors of this church were about. They weren't very good in basketball - which is not relevant to anything important, but a young kid's opinion information like that, as an adult I come to realize that my relatives are really into Unitarianism. For some reason, young people don't get it deep around for a good church for them. They do what their parents want.

Mauna Kea with Native Hawaiians.” “**My Journey to Hawaii** - where I Found My Vermont & American Roots” traces my cultural roots and the awakening of the idea to do this book.

Tom and Colleen felt that it would be mostly our class and some of our relatives who would be interested in buying copies of the book. In 2009 a couple of years after our reunion, it looks like they were right, because we have only sold a couple hundred books. Perhaps by making it available on the website for free, and promoting the idea more vigorously, more people will read it.

A new kind of memoir

Is it possible that there might be college courses on “Contemporary History of the Common Man” or sections in current events or modern history classes focusing on this?

It is peoples’ history written by them. It is the history of citizens, not the leaders.

In my own life I have learned some important lessons, invented a graphic design concept or two, initiated some important environmentalist/developer/city staff negotiations that changed how twelve square miles of land has been developed in a more environmentally friendly way, documented some cultural history and been an Involved Citizen. I have not discovered a cure for cancer. I am not famous, but it is *not nothing*, what I have done and observed. I have some modest, useful and interesting accomplishments and observations, as is true of so many “ordinary” people – I am but one of millions out here but virtually nowhere is there a venue to collect this history that many historians ignore. One friend, Mikael Rothstein, a professor of religious studies at the University of Copenhagen in Denmark, read what I have collected and calls it “micro history,” and said it is a developing field.

I hope this effort opens a new venue for average people as they are finishing their working lives to record the highlights of their history and what they have learned for the benefit of young people just starting out. They don’t need to have enough to say to write a whole book, but most people have some significant thoughts and lessons in life they have learned to add grit and good sense to efforts like this one.

I am trying to create a new kind of memoir literature – the 50-year reunion memoir. Small or lengthy items from lifetimes of experience that might help young people as they start their journeys in life. Maybe high schools could collect them. It could become an item on the high schools’ web sites: 50-Year Memories.

Most of my classmates chose short replies, although I gave them every encouragement to write long replies, and have encouraged people to write more about particular incidents and experiences and obtained some lovely work. In the last letter to classmates I said, “Some questions would take a book to answer: give us a hint. Take the space you need

to tell a good story.” Perhaps the resistance on the part of many is that no one has done anything like this before, so they are unfamiliar with it. And of course many people are not writers.

Having the time over the year and a half of intensive preparation of the book, I took a few of the questions and tried to give a complete answer, the kind of answer I was hoping other people would also do. And I had given people plenty of time, starting the project in 2005, to write long pieces themselves. I took 16 pages to answer “How has your political

**“Being a
Vermonters means
being hard
working, honest,
and not afraid to
jump in when help
is needed.”**

– Bill Chittenden

perspective changed over the years? I took 12 pages to examine “How have your religious or spiritual values changed over time? It took me about 70 pages to describe my 20 years of experience as an environmentalist in Sacramento, which was like a full time job in addition to my day job as a graphic designer at Sacramento Regional Transit. I did this at the invitation of a magazine reporter and a long-time Sacramento activist who asked many questions about my experiences there. These and some other longer pieces are available on my website at <www.tomwhitney.net>..

The audience I have been aiming for is students and teachers so I wanted a low price so it is an affordable combined print and CD book or just the CD We would need hundreds of copies just to give one to all our children and grand children. To say nothing of a wide audience to test this concept of mine. Publishing it as a CD is a low-cost method.

Tom Hackett and Colleen figure it is a one-time shot with just our class.

Photocopying seemed at first to be the most inexpensive way for print versions. But I finally went with the BookSurge company that offered the lowest out-of-pocket cost for me.

Is there a wider audience? I do not know. The marketplace has the answer. I originally planned to write articles to promote it, but after the reunion never got around to it until my son decided to give me a web site design for my seventieth birthday. Now people can easily download this article, the whole book and the other writings I mentioned. This will make it easier to promote the idea of others doing this sort of thing.

I think there could be an audience among people planning 50th reunions – which happens every year for every high school that has been around for fifty years. At present there are more than 27,000 public and private high schools in the United States.

We will have to see what some publishers and teachers think.

In the weeks following Thanksgiving in 2006 Tom Hackett called about 30 classmates and most said they would respond. I guessed we would receive about 20 more responses adding to the 32 we had then. We finally ended up with 62 responses. I want to thank

Tom Hackett for making the calls. I'm not a telephone person. And he is an authentically busy man who said he would not be retiring for a few more years as he winds down and hands his financial management business off to the younger people.

Jumping in when help is needed

Tom Hackett bears out a fine Vermont trait that Bill Chittenden spoke about: "Being a Vermonter means being hard working, honest, and not afraid to jump in when help is needed." And he also manifests another saying that's out there: if you need help, ask a busy person. Tom jumped in and helped me substantially, answered many questions and was gone in a flash.

Beyond that, he sent me a \$300 check, prevailed on Eric Foster to send me \$300; Steve Berry sent \$100 and that all went to help buy ink, paper and stamps. Sue Minotti Ladue sent \$20. That all about equaled what my own out-of-pocket expenses had been up to that point – besides two years work. I had been following Michael Phillips "First Law of Money:" do the right thing and the money will come.¹ Thanks, Tom, Eric, Steve and Sue.

A Look at Today's Production Capability & Costs

I started as a small offset press operator in the early 1960s at the time when offset printing was just starting to come into the printing trades in a big way. At this time the Xerox 914, the first dry ink, plain paper copy machine was introduced, as well. Both were major technical breakthroughs in the field of print communication. I used them well and often.

I continued in printing and branched out into learning typesetting, at first with moveable lead type, then with the early Addressograph tabletop typesetters that were modified type-writers. For books and newspapers the old linotype machines were still in use. From the 1960s until the mid-1990s printing in color was a costly and complicated experience that few could afford. With the introduction of desktop computers in the early 1990s followed by the Pagemaker program, desktop publishing and graphic design became possible for me. The Photoshop program for processing photographs on a desktop computer was a dramatic invention as was the Freehand program for graphics. Then the Epson company came along with its fine inkjet printers and the golden age of graphic design and photography began in earnest.

¹ **Phillips, Michael:** *The Seven Laws of Money* (Random House, NY and Word Wheel Books, Menlo Park, CA; 1974). "My understanding of the First Law of Money [money will come when you are doing the right thing] is that a person's focus must be on his passion. He must be able to integrate who he is with what he is doing, see his project as a whole, and do his work systematically in order to legitimately expect the money to take on its secondary "helping" role."

Fast forward to 2007, ten years later. There I sat, retired, with professional skills in graphic design, photography, writing and editing. Using an Epson 3200 Photo Scanner, an Epson 2200 printer, a Macintosh G4 computer, Photoshop, Microsoft Word and the Macromedia Freehand program I was able to create a camera-ready book with multiple color-corrected photographs that is 378 pages long.

From my desktop in a corner of a small bedroom in my house in middle of the Pacific Ocean in Hawai‘i I sent the pages to a printing company, just as I recently sent a children’s book I designed for local author to a printer in Florida.

Completing my process of design on the Book of Years, I decided to make a two final copies of a clean print version of the book. The \$700 I had put in and the \$700 Tom, Eric and Steve put in had enabled me to make all the proofs needed to complete the book. Then I charged another \$274 for a supply of ink and paper and got started making the Final, perfect copies with page numbers correct on each page.

I decided to go with very good paper and chose Hewlett Packard 32 lb Inkjet Presentation Paper at \$17.18 for 150 sheets, times five packages, equals \$85.90 for the paper.

I buy my ink at the Apple Store for \$10.95 per cartridge. Shipping is free, which is a huge savings if you live in Hawaii. It takes seven different color cartridges to load my printer. I used 19 cartridges to print two copies of our B.H.S. book and that equals \$208.05. This, plus the paper equals \$293.95. Divide that by two and each copy of the book costs \$146.97 – before binding and application of the cover. I am astonished. This gives the reader an idea about where the \$700 contributed by Tom, Rick and Steve went to help with ink and paper costs went.

My intention was to have one copy to show to a potential publisher, and another copy for use by a photocopy company to make copies for class members who want them.

All that effort to make a clean color copy was wasted, when I had finally made the connection with BookSurge. I could have had my color copy on the computer and made a black and white copy to proof.

**Those members of the
BHS Class of 1957 who
are co-authors of the Book
of Years include:**

Bob Badger
Dorothy Knight Barrios
Sandra Bassett Richards
Joyce Beaulieu Stannard
Carl Benvenuto

Al Bernardina
Steve Berry
Jim Bicknell
Joan Papin Bisailon
Sheldon Blauman
Steve Bradish
Bradley Butler
Joyce Wagner Carlin Sargent
Cathrall
Bill Chittenden
H. Robert Ciardelli

Phyllis Clark Turner
Gerritt Crowley
Sam Conant
Ida O’Neil Doran,
Chuck Eldred
Tim Fay
Georgia Buzzell Foltz Eric
Foster
Toni Franceschi
Debby Galbraith
Lou Garcia

Ellen Morris Goodhue
Betsy Samuelson Greer Tom
Hackett
Jim Hale
Jack Hedman
Marilyn Hendricks
Rose Samuelson Hirsch
Jerry Julson
Barbara McDonough
Susan Minotti Ladue
Jack Lamson
Carl Loveday

Louise Magram
Bob McBride
Jim McCarthy
Joyce Labelle Mead
Theresa Fortin Moore
Lynn Coburn Nack
Nancy Patrick Crowley
Ruth Pine Bonner
Ray Pecor
Gordon Perlmutter
Layne Prebor
Claire English Rae

Ruth Khoury
Lynn Dawson Shay
Louise
Schimmelpfennig Marsh
Bob Stannard
Margoj Thomas
Lillian Hauke Venner
Jim Viele
Susan Perlberg Weinstein
Clare Adams Whitney
Tom Whitney

Inspiration for the project

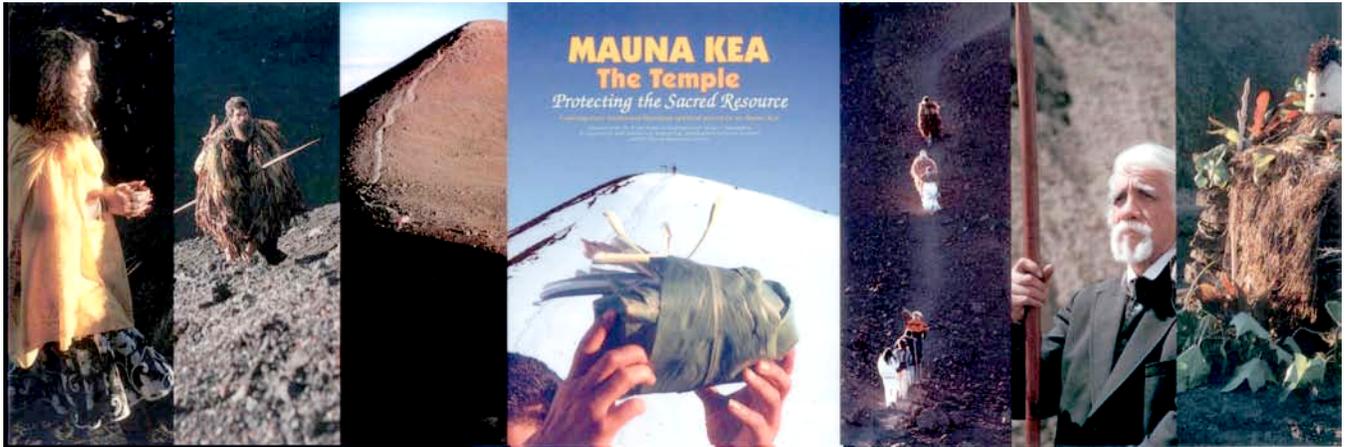
I am a member of the BHS class of 1957. I am a writer and graphic designer who moved to Hawai'i in 1999 and luckily happened to meet an interesting Native Hawaiian man named Kimo Pihana. He got me involved in photographically documenting a range of Hawaiian culture activities over the next five years to a point where I finally started asking some questions about my own life and created this project to help find some answers.

Through Pihana I became involved with Native Hawaiians who were striving to protect Hawaiian sacred land on the top of Mauna Kea, a barren wind-swept land above 13,000 feet that has been taken over by telescope operations of thirteen nations managed by the University of Hawai'i because it is one of the best sites on the planet for telescope operations. Amazingly the University has been insensitive to the Hawaiian culture in fostering astronomy operations up there.

Hawaiians I met through Kimo Pihana wanted to assert the Hawaiian cultural presence on the mountain and make the University act more responsibly. Unlikely as it may sound, I knew from successful experience as an environmentalist fighting developers in Sacramento for good community design that I could help them out.

My idea was to articulate in a memorable way the spiritual arguments the Hawaiians were making by photographically documenting Hawaiian spiritual sunrise ceremonies on Mauna Kea held on equinox and solstice days.

These photographs resulted in a museum exhibition that was displayed at the Lyman Museum in Hilo and at the Bishop Museum in Honolulu, home to the world's largest collection of Polynesian cultural and scientific artifacts. I interviewed all the people in the photographs, asking their own views on what they were doing and placed those with their words in the captions beside each photograph. The captions were as important as the



Poster and some photographs in the “Mauna Kea, the Temple” exhibition at the Bishop Museum.

photographs. I also obtained the work of other photographers and artists including Leila Pihana, Wendy Duke, and Gladys Suzuki. A review² of the exhibition contained this quote from a Hawaiian elder: “If you want to know what Hawaiians think, read our words on the wall of the exhibition.” For me I was indirectly repaying a debt to the Abenaki people who occupied the land where I grew up, but about whom I had learned virtually nothing while I lived in Vermont.

Eventually some of the political negotiations around future development on the mountain were conducted in the Lyman Museum where the exhibition was first displayed. Thousands of people saw the museum exhibitions. In Hawaii in 2009, the exhibition was open at the Pahoehoe Museum on Hawai‘I Island.

I had photographed hundreds of Hawaiians at all the events I had recorded. None were there because they were putting on a “Kodak Hula Show.” They were intense and very committed to their culture and their land, their sacred ‘aina. I was impressed by their sincerity and determination. They have a passion for their land, about which, you begin to realize, there is something magical – and is being celebrated by many individuals and groups today.

I finally started asking myself:

What is *my* culture?

Where is *my* homeland?

Who am I?

Why don't I know the answers to these questions?

At first I focused on where I grew up, probably since that is such a big concern among Hawaiians. Where was my ‘aina, my sacred land?

² <http://the.honoluluadvertiser.com/article/2003/Jan/08/il/il01a.html>.

The land where I grew up in Vermont was not ancestral. Neither my mother nor her immigrant parents had done much to teach my brothers and sisters and I anything about the Finnish culture or that northern land between Sweden and Russia. The idea among great numbers of immigrants was to leave the troubles of old country behind and fit into the United States. My mother did that. Neither my English and Irish father and nor Grandfather Whitney ever shared an explicit thought about ethnicity, culture or ancestry with us, either, so far as I can recall, other than to tell us around St. Patrick's Day that it was not our holiday because we were "orange" Irish, meaning protestant.

As a kid, I and everyone around me was floating on the values and cultural elements that were "American" as experienced by most of the people in my home town of Burlington, Vermont like parades, radio dramas, Tom Swift books, those bloodthirsty "nursery rhymes," sports, hot dogs, the westerns, cartoons, dramas, and Movietone News at the movies, Norman Rockwell paintings – an endless list – music, baseball, A&W root beer, Arthur Godfrey on the radio, the farmers, automobiles, all electric homes, Rock 'n Roll, and Levittown (where my uncle and his family lived). There was almost nothing "ethnic" about it. It was all that "American" culture being created in the new media age that was dawning in the world. What is ethnic about "American," an "American" might ask? It was new to us when we were living through it and has been new and fascinating to the rest of the world as well. It all grew as the media of television and recordings and computers grew in ubiquity. The culture we grew up in – and jumped off into, has become a world culture. Ethnicity was just not talked about in my experience. I figure Howard Johnson's was our family's ethnic restaurant. As a family we never even went to an Italian restaurant. It was different after I left home for my sisters, particularly after my father died. Mother began express pride in her Finnish ancestry and shared it with my sisters who are fierce in expressing their cultural sensitivity and awareness. I felt I grew up with cultural blinders on. It is surprising to me how different can be the experiences of a person growing up in the same family.

If anything, the feeling there in Northern New England in my experience implicitly seemed to be, we are the real deal, all the rest that you see in National Geographic may be "culture" or whatever. As Layne Prebor, one of my classmates observed, what we read in the Weekly Reader in school may as well have been on Mars. This was *not* an idea that was expressed in any way, in my presence. There were other things to think about. It was probably the homogenous culture that made race and ethnicity a non issue for the dominant white people. My experience doing the book lead me to realize that many immigrant families wanted their children to forget the old country, learn English and fit in to this new country. So I figure I grew up in a corner of thrifty, hearty Northern New England where all these children and grandchildren of immigrants were on their best behavior learning to become Americans.



If you would not be forgotten as soon as you are dead & rotten, either write things worth reading, or do things worth the writing.

Experience keeps a dear school, yet fools will learn in no other.

Well done is better than well said.

He that falls in love with himself will have no rivals.

Keep your eyes wide open before marriage, half shut afterwards.

A good conscience is a continual Christmas.

*– Benjamin Franklin from
“Poor Richard’s Almanac”*

The answer to my questions seemed to be:

My culture is what I grew up with in Burlington, Vermont, U.S.A., and the unrelenting media that was creating a new world culture. My homeland is the area around Burlington, Vermont. I am an “American” – not English or Finnish or Irish.

In 2004 I decided to find out more about my American cultural roots in Vermont. I realized that in three years my high school class would be having its 50th reunion in 2007 so I decided to do a little history project focused on that date. 50 is a good historical round number.

I am aware that in recent years there has been much activity to record oral history, with audio and video interviews with elders about their experience growing up and living in various areas. I became aware of a project here in Hawai‘i to use audio and videotape to record oral histories about Mauna Kea. It cost tens of thousands of dollars for hour-long quality video interviews with just 30 people.

I have long been a fan of Benjamin Franklin’s Autobiography and his “Poor Richard’s Almanac.” Both were full of good practical advice for living. I thought this project could convey to young people just starting out some good advice from fifty years of experience by 180 people who had been out there for fifty years. You see some comparative results on this and the next page. So I asked

Another part of the inspiration for the project was suggested by my friend Michele Kort. We had worked together at the Grantsmanship Center News in Los Angeles 25 years ago and she had produced a nice book called “Friends” with a photograph and paragraph about each friend on separate pages. It was a sweet book by a sweet person. Now Michele is Senior Editor at Ms. Magazine. I told her about this project and sent her the list of possible questions. She said she liked the idea, but there was one area I had not really covered: how do people deal with hardships in their lives and how do they turn them into



Some Practical Advice

The Burlington High School

Class of 1957

Don't get into a pissing contest with a skunk. – Jim Bicknell

Don't be forward, overbearing, aggressive or flamboyant in any new situation. Lay back and observe until you understand the dynamics.

– Lou Garcia

Generally speaking, in this day and age, a high school education is only a start.

– Lynn Dawson Shay

It never hurts to ask, once. This applies to fund-raising ideas, planning ideas, possible marriage partners, girlfriends, you name it. – Tom Whitney

It is important that you understand that life will not always be good to you. But to get through it well, you have to keep a positive attitude.

– Bill Chittenden

Surround yourself with people smarter than you. – Ray Pecor

growing experiences. She had had some tough times and would like to know how others had dealt with their own. I thought it was a great question, the best one, and asked her permission to use it, which she graciously gave.

Once the project was underway the validity of it as an enterprise was found in the words of another person from – where else in the nation but – Burlington, Vermont! George Perkins Marsh wrote the words in 1847. While I was working at Jerry Brown's California Governor's Office of Appropriate Technology (OAT) in Sacramento, getting paid to assist in the effort to save the country from energy disaster in the early 1980s (remember those long lines at the gas pumps) I became aware of this great man from my home state of Vermont. His book was in the OAT library. In 1864 he published "Man and Nature, Or, Physical Geography as Modified by Human Action."³ Lewis Mumford, the famous writer and critic of the 1940s and 1950s called the book the fountainhead of the conservation movement.

After a closer reading of his book not long after starting this project I was fascinated to read Marsh's suggestion that we need a new kind of history. In his introduction to the Harvard University Press reprint of "Man and Nature" in 1974, editor David Lowenthal tells us Marsh felt that a nation must understand its past to realize its potential. To Marsh, "The traditional annals of wars and kings seemed to him trivial and useless; history in a democracy should be about the people themselves, not just about their rulers. Marsh urged historians to inquire into 'the fortunes of the mass, their opinions, their characters,

³ "Man and Nature: Or, Physical Geography as Modified by Human Action," by George Perkins Marsh, John Harvard Library, Belknap Press

their leading impulses, their ruling hopes and fears, their arts and industry and commerce; we must see them at their daily occupations in the field, the workshop, and the market.⁴”

So it was fun in 2006 working on a project like that suggested by a man who walked the same Burlington streets I had a hundred years earlier.

There is magic that each of us carries

There are few ways to make the public aware of the accomplishments of average citizens. Occasionally newspaper articles are written about what people have done. Some of their friends know. But they soon forget. I recently had an opportunity to put together a written tribute of eight pages for one of the most effective environmentalists I have ever met, Vicki Lee, who used to live in and for close to thirty years was active in Sacramento in addition to her regular job with the State Department of Education. She was only moving away from Sacramento, not dying, I am happy to say. A few days after the event she wrote: “Thanks for the great illustrated tribute you sent for my Sacramento farewell party. It was sent around the Sierra Club Cal Activist listserv and some people had no idea about all the stuff you laid out for them. People in Sacramento didn’t really know about all that stuff either.”

Good knowledge is dying out and is being forgotten is the point.

Perhaps nonprofit and public agency and community groups of all kinds could ask their departing members to do a final paper or oral history of their experience with the group and share their lessons learned. I just feel that it is a waste that so much good, hard-won knowledge is lost.

I return to what my wise friend Kimo Pihana, here in Hawai‘i says: “We often talk with our kupuna, our wise elders. But our kupuna are dying, rapidly, and we don’t have enough answers yet. How do we deal with this?” The point here is that so often elders do not share what they know with younger people. We need some new ways to do this.

“Imua (move forward) – with humility,” Pihana urges. **“And expect you’re going to get criticism whatever you do. And expect the unexpected – you’ve gotta deal with it all. How?”**

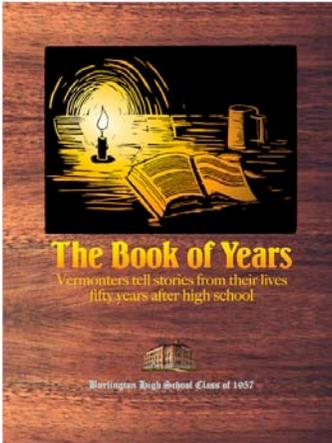
“Go back to the beginning, within: are you pure your heart and soul. Are you spiritually pono? Go to that spiritual fire that is deep inside. Romance that fire. Take time with it.

“There’s a magic that each of us carries.

“Let it come out.”

⁴ “The American Historical School;” a Discourse Delivered before the Literary Societies of Union College (Troy, N.Y., 1847, p. 10

Following is the article that Cathy Resmer wrote that appears in the print version of *Seven Days*, Vermont's alternative weekly newspaper.



BHS Class of '57 Alum Celebrates Reunion with a History Project

BOOKS (08.22.07)

Tom Whitney's self-published anthology about his high school classmates — *The Book of Years: Vermonters tell stories from their lives fifty years after high school* — is full of surprises. For starters, it was conceived on top of a volcano.

Whitney grew up in Burlington and graduated from [Burlington High School](#) in 1957. Two days after earning his diploma, he packed his suitcase and hitchhiked south on Route 7. He ended up in Florida, later moving to Louisiana and California. Eight years ago, he headed to Hawaii.

Whitney is a photographer and graphic designer. In 2000, he was shooting a native Hawaiian ceremony atop volcanic Mauna Kea when he began to wonder about his own roots. "I finally started asking myself, 'What's my culture? What's my sacred land?'" he recalls. His grandparents were Finnish, English and Irish, but he hadn't inherited their traditions. Vermont, he reasoned, was his true home. And if he wanted to learn more about it, he needed to go back to high school. Or back to his classmates, anyway.

"The person I am today is the person that I became in interacting with all these people I went to school with," says the bearded 68-year-old, who ties his hair back in a ponytail. "They were the people who helped shape me, besides my parents."

Three years ago, Whitney crafted a 70-question survey — later pared down to 30 questions — which he mailed to the 188 surviving members of his graduating class. This wasn't a typical alumni inquiry. Whitney asked about jobs and achievements, but also invited his classmates to share their "basic values" and "spooky, terrifying or exhilarating experiences." One question asked, "How have you turned the challenges and sadnesses of your life into growing experiences?"

Sixty-one people wrote back. Whitney compiles their responses in *The Book of*

Years. The weighty, 376-page tome is a bit unpolished and at times repetitious, but it's also a remarkably frank and engaging piece of populist American history.

Whitney organizes the book thematically, grouping tales of occupations or adventures with others of the same kind. Some of the stories he elicited from this nearly all-white group of Vermonters are exotic — one alum worked in the space program; another was robbed on the Amazon River by masked men who boarded her boat carrying machine guns. One woman spent four years as a Methodist missionary on the small Pacific island of Tonga.

But some of the book's most compelling stories were contributed by those who stuck around. **Joyce Wagner Carlin** of Jericho penned a moving account of her marriage to her husband, Bill — they met in first grade at Christ the King School in Burlington. He succumbed to cancer in 2003.

"Bill's death was the hardest thing life has given me to handle," writes Carlin. "I mourned him from day one and keep very busy. If I stop, it hits me that the man I knew from first grade who asked me to marry him — no, he actually told me at age seven: 'Someday I'm going to marry you' — is no longer in my life."

Margo Hathaway Thomas of Johnson writes about losing her home when the Lamoille River flooded in 1995. When the volunteer firefighter came to evacuate her, she stepped onto the top step of her porch and found that it was floating. "I sank to my waist in water," she writes.

Thomas and her husband lost nearly everything, but she managed to keep her sense of humor. "My stationary bike was salvageable," she writes. "[My friend] and I would sometimes hop on it in the yard just to work off some unproductive energy. We got to giggling about what we must look like pedaling away in the middle of all that destruction."

The books were on display — and for sale — last Saturday night at the Class of '57's 50th reunion, at the [Burlington Elks Lodge](#). Whitney says buyers will soon be able to order them on Amazon.com.

The contributors were eager to get a peek at the final product. "This is so exciting," remarked **Clare Adams Whitney** when she saw the book. She shared her experiences in Tonga.

Clare Whitney isn't related to Tom, and said she didn't even remember him when he contacted her. She sent him a few short answers to his questions, and he

wrote back, urging her to elaborate. Over two and a half years, he coaxed four pages out of her.

“My husband finally asked me, ‘Who is this Tom?’” she said with a laugh.

Tom Whitney confirms that he got much of his material by asking follow-up questions. It may have been pesky, but he insists that it was important work. Whitney hopes the book will inspire other high school classes to undertake similar 50th-anniversary projects. And he’d also like to see today’s youth take an interest.

“There’s so many people that we experience in life, like all those people in high school,” he says. “You go by them, and then you’re just amazed at what they become. Everybody’s got stories.”

The Book of Years: Vermonters tell stories from their lives fifty years after high school, edited by Tom Whitney, Dolphin Press, 376 pages. \$27.

On Amazon.com you may now order a print copy of the book.

When searching for the title on the Amazon website, type it in this way: **"The Book of Years" Whitney**. Adding the editor’s name to the search box will separate away many other books with almost similar titles. You may order the book and pay shipping on line in one transaction. The book sells for \$26.99.

Or, you can download the book for free from Tom Whitney’s Internet website: <www.tomwhitney.net>