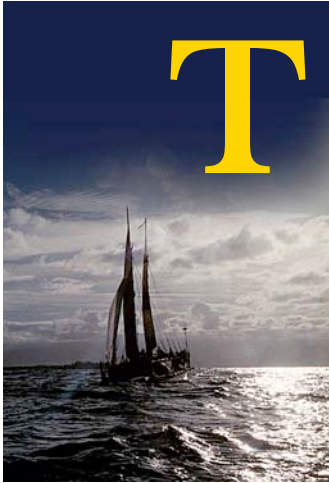


My Journey to Hawaii

- where I Found My Vermont & American Roots

By Tom Whitney



The Hokule'a is a Hawaiian double-hulled canoe similar to those that traversed the Pacific Ocean a thousand years before the explorers I read about in the second grade. Here it leaves Hilo on the last leg of its journey to Rapa Nui, Easter Island, in 1993 to complete the Polynesian triangle, thus proving to doubters that Hawaii's Polynesian ancestors were Masters of the Pacific Ocean long before it occurred to Europeans to give it a try.

he world began to open up to me in the second grade. Our Converse School class in Burlington, Vermont, walked to the Fletcher Free Library on College Street one momentous day in 1946. It was my first visit. The librarian showed me a special shelf and told me in dramatic hushed tones that I could find books about explorers there. Ohhhh. I returned often to takeout books about Magellan, Francis Drake, Columbus, Marco Polo, Amerigo Vespucci and other famous explorers. I imagined myself on those ships as an earnest young seaman.

My lifetime's journey sixty years later has taken me to Hilo, Hawaii, the rainiest city in the nation in the most ethnically diverse county in the United States out in the middle of the Pacific Ocean 5,000 miles from Vermont.

I have a tale to tell. I had to leave to appreciate what I left behind.

When I arrived in Hawai'i I had escaped from car-mad California where – while keeping my day job - for ten years I had been working very hard with friends in the Sierra Club and the Environmental Council in Sacramento, California, to achieve more rational land use planning to tame the auto-monster that has devoured Los Angeles. Environmentalists were respected in Sacramento and we made important contributions to improve the community. But it was exhausting.

I moved to Hawai'i for love, to re-unite with my sweetheart Betsy. We had been married for ten years but split up in 1989. We realized almost ten years later that we still



Fletcher Free Library in Burlington, Vermont, built with funds provided by Andrew Carnegie, who became one of the richest men in America in steel and railroads. He was a penniless Scottish immigrant who provided \$40 million that paid for construction of 1,679 new libraries in communities across the United States.

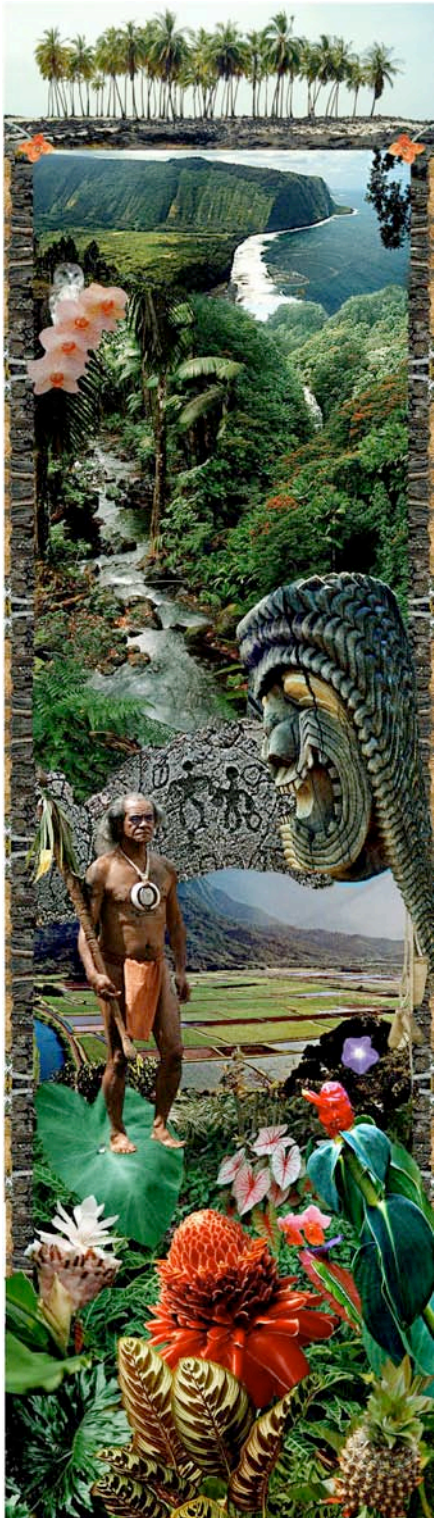
deeply loved each other after Betsy called to wish me happy birthday in 1998. We re-awakened our loving history together

Burned out from the demands of the environmental work in Sacramento, I had retired and buried myself in reading novels and some history for the first six months. I gave myself permission to mentally recuperate and allow a new sense of direction to arise within me.

Remembering the wonderful adventure photography had been in my teenage years, I took some nice photographic trips around the island - but mostly it was pretty scenery. There were the fascinating footprints of long-gone Hawaiians who had fled from heavy volcanic dust in the lava at the Ka'u desert. And there petroglyphs of Hawaiian warriors at Volcano National Park and other interesting shapes emerging. But where were the native Hawaiians?

One book in particular provided me with a grand awakening. Pamela Frierson, Hilo author of "The Burning Island,"¹ wrote that "mainland environmental groups have often been ignorant of or insensitive to local traditions . . . fighting small pitched battles to save specific resources or conserve certain lands, a style of defense that has allowed little time to consider larger issues of nature and culture . . . a real kinship with place, an acceptance of the land that is identical to an acceptance of one's ancestors. This is a wisdom that the twentieth-century nomad has - almost - forgotten: that the land itself can be law and revelation, that it can be, if you acknowledge its claim on you, the deepest part of yourself." Thus these environmental groups have not related very well with Hawaiians who still feel a deep connection to the land.

This got my attention. Perhaps we need to enlarge the scope of what it means to be an environmentalist with this insight, but how?



¹ **The Burning Island: A Journey Through Myth and History in Volcano Country, Hawaii**; 1991; by Pamela Frierson; Published by Sierra Club Books, San Francisco; 267p.

At about the same time in 1999 the annual Merrie Monarch Festival occurred. To me it was a revelation to see Hawaiian hula and dancers with green head leis reflecting a culture that honors the land.

In the parade that Saturday was a Hawaiian man in his malo (loin cloth) walking slowly along who looked like he had walked straight out of the ancient jungle and was thoughtfully examining all he saw around him. He was neither smiling nor frowning. He just looked like he had been deposited here by a time machine. Fascinating.

I took his picture and put it together in a composite with about 25 other pictures of this Hawaiian land. I tracked him down a month or so later to ask permission to use the photograph. That composite won a state-wide photography award.

Kimo Pihana was the man in the malo, and he has become my best friend over the years. He introduced me to his family and friends, and invited me to participate in ceremonies honoring Mauna Kea, the most sacred mountain in Hawai‘i.

Kimo said that the composite of photographs captured the way he saw himself in his mind’s eye as he pursues his own journey to recover his Hawaiian roots.

Many of the Hawaiians I met are moved with great intensity to recover the



Koa El



Harold Kāula



Calvin Kalavahea

culture in their lives. Koa El, on the left in the photograph above, was born in Panama, and like most people alive today has a number of genetic strains in her background. But Koa has returned to Hawaii and found jobs that honor her Hawaiian ancestry. Calvin Kalavahea, on the right, traces a tiny part of his ancestry back to the same family as Princess Diana, the Spencers, whose distant relatives came on early English sailing ships, but he is mostly Hawaiian and proud of it. Harold Kaula, in the center, has a deep

ancestral connection to the land he is walking on, Mauna Kea.

These activists I came to know are serious. Many are angry at the way their culture was taken over and shoved aside by the explorers and ship captains I was so interested in when I first started to read. I have matured in my understanding of the world, learned



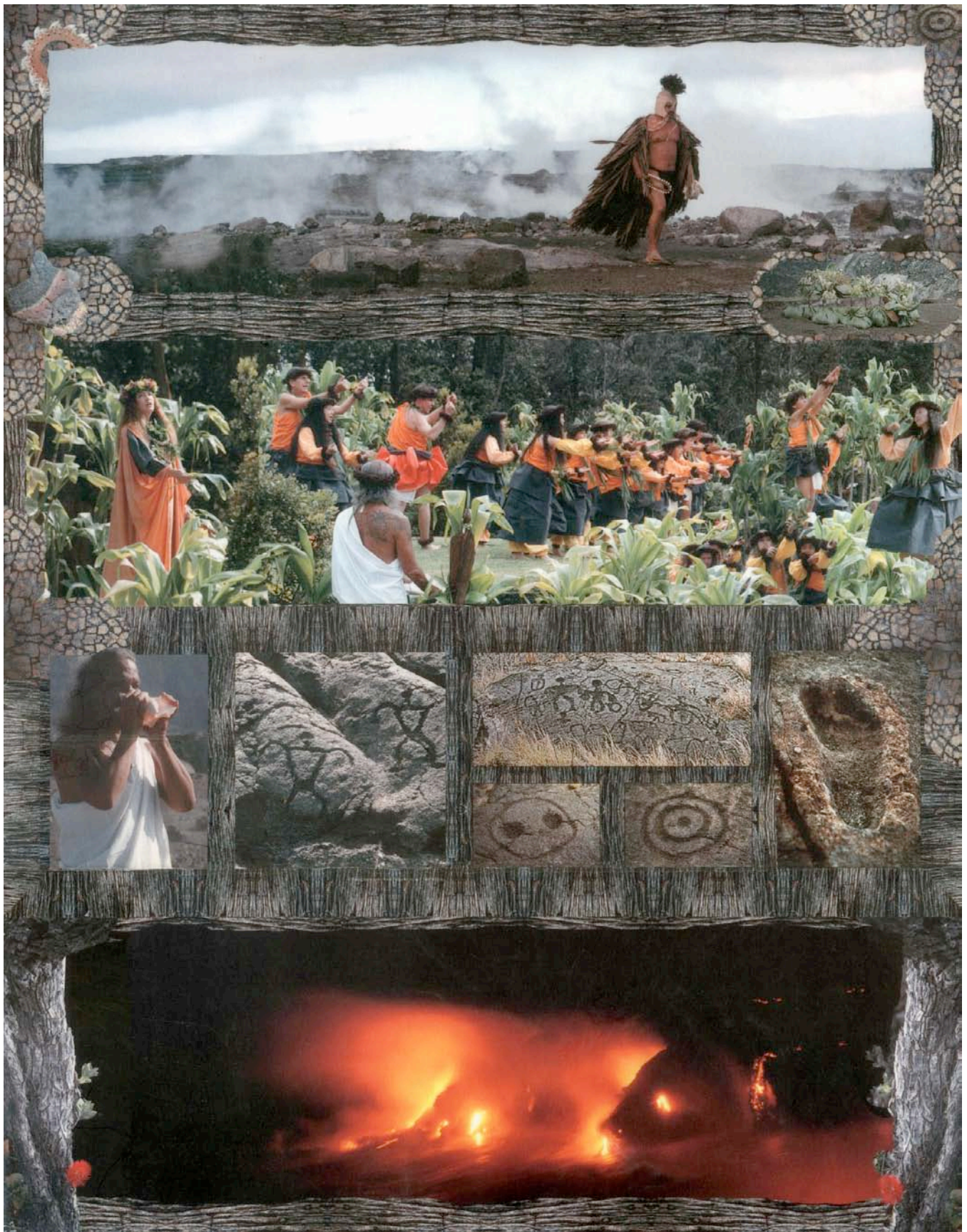
Many Hawaiians are concerned that there has been massive development of telescopes on Mauna Kea, Hawaiian sacred land, with little regard for the culture, as documented by the State's Auditor in 1998.

about the unanticipated consequences of actions. In the past 30 years in Hawai‘i there has been a big effort to teach the Hawaiian language. This “Renaissance” began with the construction of the Hokule‘a, a double-hulled canoe similar to those used a thousand years before Galileo invented the telescope. It has traveled the Pacific Ocean, its navigators guided by reading the stars without modern electronic navigation aids.

One of my high school classmates has spent his life in the theatre. I shared with him a photograph I took of a very dedicated Hawaiian named Keoni Choy who is a friend and is one of the greatest natural actors I have ever seen. But he does not act for an audience.

In the photograph at the top of the next page, he carries himself with great dignity as if he is striding out of the depths of ancient Hawaii. Here he is the forward warrior, assuring that no danger will befall the hula group that is following behind him. They will be performing a ceremony with chants at the edge of the Kilauea crater and will be making plant offerings called ho'okupu to the goddess Pele. They are paying their respects as a way of asking permission of the goddess to perform hula in a few hours.

And my friend Keoni's audience when he walked so magnificently here? Me alone, the trusted invisible documentary photographer, scrambling unobtrusively to stay ahead of him and memorialize this magic moment on the crest of the steaming Kilauea Crater in Hawaii so others could see the re-emergence of the Hawaiian. There is an almost vanished moment of instant history mystery recorded on film here showing a true Hawaiian ceremony not being performed for public display, but for a direct communion with the one of the elemental spirits that abound in Hawaii, the Goddess Pele.



What is God, you ask yourself here in Hawai‘i. According the World Council of Churches there are more than 30,000 Christian denominations and thousands more of other religions. But here two hundred years ago, Hawaiians had no written literature, no recorded history, nor any concern for the ideas of what people a half a world away in the Eastern Mediterranean were thinking about god. But they knew who Pele was down through the millennia, and Poliahu, the Snow Goddess, and Wakea and Papa, the father and mother of the human family.

Whatever name we can give to the creator of the elemental forces of nature, there is no question the creator’s work is manifest here. How can you doubt her living power? Her lava, flowing up hot and red from the center of the earth would sizzle us today, because it flows, today. The land here is elemental. You have to take time with it to feel it. The spirit connection can be strong. Aloha ‘Aina. Love the Land. Many Hawaiians know this about their ancestral homeland, but most others do not.

Hawaiians also honor their elders and beyond them their ancestors. Kimo Pihana



talked to me about this: “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?”

“Imua (move forward) – with humility. 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.”

Kimo is not attempting to recreate the past. He is a modern man, was in the merchant marine, wounded in Viet Nam, worked at a power company for twenty years, tried various businesses and is now a ranger on Mauna Kea. With his cultural activities he is honoring his culture, sharing and contributing to a rebirth of Hawaiian cultural consciousness.

My experiences over the past five years in Hawai‘i finally led me to ask what *my* culture is. Here there are so many people who are very earnest about reclaiming their culture and their land.

*Where is my homeland?
What is my culture?
Who am I?*

My love of the land in Vermont

Vermont is where I was conceived and raised until I was 17 when I left home to seek my fortune. The small farm on Shelburne Road three miles south of Burlington where we moved in 1947 sustained our family in the summer. Our family planted seeds in its ground. We learned to milk cows, separate the milk, churn butter and make ice cream. We fed the lamb, pigs and chickens and gathered their eggs. We worked to bale hay in the Spring so our cow Bessie and Hereford steer Duke could eat well and be comfy during the long Fall and Winters in Northern Vermont. We learned to harvest the vegetables, cherries, apples and rhubarb growing on our land.

There were some days sitting down to dinner in the summertime I would point out that we had planted, grown, milked, churned, gathered, sliced and chopped and Mom had cooked everything on our table except the salt and pepper. This was not something special as it became in later decades, it was just the way we lived.

Some of those times we also had a special treat. Dad would put a huge pot of water timed to boil vigorously when Mom was almost done cooking. We would spread newspapers outside the back door and walk to the far end of the garden. Then we would walk along the cornrows gathering the best ears and start shucking them on the way back to the house. We would drop the leaves on the newspapers, get the tassels completely off while on the move and drop the ears of corn in



Our little 15-acre farm.



the boiling water. In a few minutes we would lift them out, dry them off and walk to the table, sit down, slather them with butter, pop some salt on there and enjoy one of life's great pleasures, perfect tender corn cooked immediately after being picked.



Other times I would go with Dad to farms where he would help cows give birth to their calves, heal sick cows and horses, and help race horses run healthy. Ailing dogs and cats would come in the evenings. Those irritable pets that stayed over would have their kennels cleaned by me. Some would die. Some would be saved. We learned to work on our family's home land there on Shelburne Road.

Vermont and my ancestors

My childhood was an elemental experience connecting me to the land of my birth. I love Vermont. I have developed a kinship with the place, but not in Pamela Frierson's sense, also "an acceptance of the land that is identical with an acceptance of one's ancestors."

The closest I ever got to the native inhabitants of Vermont, the ancestors of that land, was Boy Scout Camp Abenaki – named but not staffed by the Abenaki tribe. In my family life there was never a mention of race or ethnicity. And none in my hearing at school or in the community.

Our family's ancestors were far away and almost never mentioned. Dad was English and Irish. Nothing special there, except on St. Patrick's day we were supposed to wear orange, but it was an indifferent thing that was never really explained, just that we were "Orange Irish." I later learned that many people died over these distinctions in Ireland, not evident in Burlington in the 1940s and 1950s.

The geographic dispersal of my Finnish ancestors began in Central Asia. They spent time in the area of Hungary and moved to Finland taking their unusual language with them. Life was difficult for people there. The Finn's land was taken over by Sweden in the 12th century, then Russia in 1809 until it gained independence in 1917. Finns were being drafted into the Czar's army to enforce its



and Maria Westerinen, from Revonlahti, Finland in 1908. Adam immigrated to the U.S. and went to work in the iron mine region in Chisholm, Minnesota. Maria and her two sons came over on the S.S. Oceanic from Southhampton, England to Ellis Island in 1909. She was 20 and had \$12 when she arrived, on her way to Chisholm.

rule over other Finns. Most of the land was owned by the Lutheran Church. The custom for those who did own land was that it passed down to the first born son, leaving the rest to shift for themselves. There were many landless and unemployed. Times were tough. "Finland's cultural history accommodates barbarism and romance, both a backwoods mentality and a highly evolved culture. Finnish culture has its roots deep in the forests, deeper than any other European culture."² Perhaps trees are in my genes, along with other undisciplined behavior traits.

My Mother never taught us anything about the Finnish culture. We would do sauna and Mom and Grandmother would bake pulla, a delicious Finnish bread, when we visited her. I understand now after much reading and talking with people that she was the daughter of immigrants, who in her case were part of the large wave of more 300,000 Finnish immigrants who came to the United States between 1865 and 1914, part of twenty-three million immigrants from Europe who came into America between 1880 and 1920. Times were difficult in the old country and they came for a better life and wanted to succeed in the America. My Finnish Grandfather and Grandmother immigrated in 1908 and 1909.

My Finnish ancestors, as had my English and Irish forebears, were escaping from the land of their ancestors seeking a better life, a more fortunate destiny, in the United States., the melting pot.



A great place to grow up,
an American place
My Mother wanted to

succeed in this land of opportunity. She worked very hard to become a professional nurse, married my father, a farm boy from a good family who was in veterinary school at Cornell in Ithaca, New York. They moved to Burlington, Vermont, had a great life and raised a happy family, living the American dream. Why not?

² <http://virtual.finland.fi/netcomm/news/showarticle.asp?intNWSAID=25615>

Burlington, Vermont, *is* special place. It is a beautiful small city and home of the University of Vermont. It is on the shores of Lake Champlain with about 35,000 people. It was a Republican farm state in 1957 when our high school class graduated. In recent years it has become one of the most desirable places



to live in the nation: liberal attitudes, great health care, excellent environmental laws, unparalleled natural beauty that has been preserved; and it is good for business.³

³ **Bobos* in Paradise, (*Bourgeois Bohemians), The New Upper Class and how They Got There, 2000;** by David Brooks; Published by Simon & Schuster. 284p.

Everyone I grew up with in Burlington - my family, my teachers, friends, people in church, Scouts, sports teams, employers, girlfriends, schoolmates – all helped to shape the person I am today.

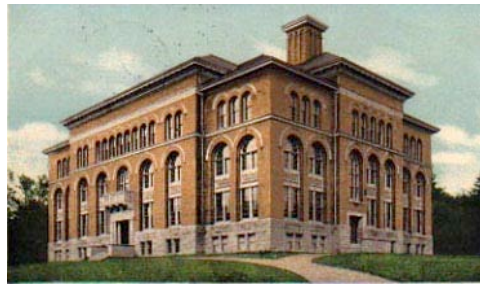
I realized about a year ago that in a few years my high school graduating class will have been out in the world for fifty years. That's a good round historical number.

With my new awareness of my Vermont roots, thanks to my experience in Hawai'i, I dreamed up a project to explore with my classmates this place we grew up in. There are one hundred eighty out of two hundred twenty of us still left.

By now we are elders and have a little time left to share with younger ones.

What was Burlington like in the '40s and '50s? We have learned a thing or two, had some adventures, done some things. **What is our story?** What have we learned? **Do we have any special perspectives because we were born Vermont?**

Tune in. The resulting effort is available at <www.tomwhitney.net>



The Burlington, Vermont, High School Class of 1957

All photographs by Tom Whitney except the canoe on the title page, which was taken by Gladys Suzuki. All © 2005. On this page the postcard view of Edmunds High School, later Burlington High School, and the view of the Carnegie Library on page 1 is from the Burlington Postcard Collection viewable at <http://presburl.tripod.com/preservationburlingtonpostcardarchive/index.html>. The class photograph was taken by L.L.Macallister,

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