



# The Barnard Bulletin

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## A VERMONT WRITER

by Margaret Edwards

*This column is an offering of The Danforth Library in Barnard and a chance to introduce a Vermont writer who deserves wider renown.*

**David Budbill**

**1940 – 2016**



David Budbill in his cabin in Wolcott, Vermont, 1977

If you visited David Budbill at his small cabin, which was just outside the village of Wolcott, Vermont, you encountered a man dressed in work boots, well-worn jeans, flannel shirt and heavy jacket—the uniform of rural Americans everywhere. His looks could deceive you, along with his evident skills in carpentry and woodcutting that seemed to mark him as a native. But his presence radiated an outsider’s intensity. He seemed “as if” from Vermont, yet was in crucial ways as alien to it as an anthropologist. He was a “Vermont writer” because his chief subject was Vermonters. The actual people of Wolcott became the lifeblood of his artistic accomplishments.

Budbill was born in Cleveland, Ohio, to a father who was a streetcar driver and to a housewife mother, daugh-

ter of a minister. Perhaps that maternal grandfather had something to do with Budbill’s choice to major in theology at Muskingum College in Ohio, and later to attend Union Theological Seminary in New York City. He did not pursue a career in the church, but throughout his life, he moved through the world as if he had a divine calling.

To sit and talk with David Budbill was to become convinced would have made a compelling priest, a popular politician, or a charismatic psychiatrist. The man’s life-long calling, however, was poetry. He taught it, and he declaimed it in public readings, and he invoked it in his private conversations; but mostly he sequestered himself and wrote it.

With his move to rural Vermont in 1969, Budbill and his wife, Lois Eby, were leaders in the onrush of back-to-the-land-ers, those who flocked from urban settings to this state, especially during the 1970s. In his writing, Budbill soon rechristened Wolcott, calling it Judevine. The *Chain Saw Dance*, published in 1977, was Budbill’s first Judevine collection.

Poetical portraits of one’s neighbors, with their actual identities only vaguely disguised, has a precedent in American literature. Edgar Lee Masters published his famous *Spoon River Anthology* in 1915. That collection of free verse evokes a citizenry, all neatly tucked into their graves, in restrained and decorous language. Masters never loosened up enough to allow himself the lavish details that Budbill uses. And Budbill’s characters are very much alive.

The characters that fascinated Budbill multiplied in his next two books: *From Down to the Village* (1981) and *Why I Came to Judevine* (1987). Then came *Judevine: The Complete Poems*, first published in 1991 (later in 1999), which he later adapted for the stage. And Budbill himself enjoyed performing this work. He gave performances “everywhere, from small town schools and prisons to big city spaces in two dozen states” according to Kevin O’Connor in *Vermont Digger* (2016).

At first the citizens of Wolcott were not at all pleased to find themselves as well as their friends and fellow townspeople portrayed in verse. Here was a publication for the world to see in which they were all too truthfully revealed. Even though the characters were often composite figures and even though everyone’s name had been changed, the individuals who’d inspired the poems re-

*Cont. next page - Budbill*

*Budbill - Cont. from front page*

sented finding themselves on display. They hadn't been warned. This was a nasty surprise, and perhaps a betrayal.

At the time, Budbill grieved about the townsfolk's distress and questioned himself. He described to his close friends and fellow writers how tense the town's pick-up baseball games had become whenever he joined them as he'd been doing ever since he'd moved to the town. But then, over time, as Budbill became much better known in the wider world of literature, the citizens of Wolcott relented. They began to sense they'd been neither mocked nor demeaned by what he'd written, but... immortalized.

Picking a sample from Budbill's many portraits is difficult. But here's one. It's a long poem entitled "The Buddhas of Judevine" that begins with a quotation: "Life is suffering"—attributed to Siddhartha Gautama. Then the poem opens and goes on at length, in four parts, describing a local couple, Mr. and Mrs. Hines:

### I.

When it was clear he couldn't keep on going,  
Sam Hines quit the farming he had known his entire life—  
and his father had know before him—and Sam Hines  
turned his hand to carpentry and spent his life  
until the age of fifty at that trade.

His life as a carpenter came abruptly to an end the day  
he fell from a scaffolding and hurt his back in a way  
which meant he'd never climb a ladder again. After that  
he spent his days, and tried to make a living, working wood  
inside his shop inside the barn which stands beside the house  
where years before he—and years before that his father—  
had milked cows.

His life as woodworker also came abruptly to an end  
the day the table saw took not only  
the piece of wood he was working with,  
but took also all the fingers and the thumb of his right hand.  
By the time he felt the pain all his fingers and his thumb  
were dangling like the relaxed talons of a hawk,  
his fingers and his thumb held on only by strips of skin.

He cradled his right hand in his left, got into his truck,  
put his right hand and its detached fingers in his lap and  
drove himself the fifteen miles to the hospital whereupon  
having gotten himself checked in, he fainted.

Five days later, after being transferred to Burlington,  
after having two ten-hour operations to reconnect  
bone, sinew, tendon, cartilage, nerve, muscle and skin,  
he left the hospital and upon his leaving, said  
to the surgeons who had put him back together again:

Well, boys, I just got to go. I know you need me awfully,  
which is why I want you all to know,  
I hate to have to leave you so shorthanded.

### II.

Because the surgeons were able to save only portions  
of each finger, now each finger is a different length  
and the entire hand so stiff, especially in cold weather,  
that it's really not prehensile anymore. It can't close around  
a hammer or a saw and it is hard, at the age of sixty,  
to learn to be left-handed.

Yet Sam goes on: inventing a gadget for planting seedling  
trees,  
repairing chairs, sugaring and, most importantly:  
I got enough left of this one here  
To hook it around and pull the trigger  
So I can still hunt deer.

### III.

Sam's wife, whose name is Beatrice and who is another  
vessel  
of kindness and long suffering sailing this sea of adversity,  
has diabetes and has had a leg removed just below her knee.  
She's confined to a wheelchair.  
  
She wears gloves, even in the house and even in the summer,  
because her hands are always cold. She wheels around the  
house  
and kitchen, helps Sam get the meals,  
does whatever else she can.

When I visit them in the kitchen, Beatrice in her wheelchair,  
Sam in his straight chair, his hands and forearms resting on  
the table,  
the two of them seated beside each other,  
it seems to me they are the giant Buddhas of Polonaruwa:  
their sad eyes simple, clear, straightforward,  
their smiles filled with every possibility, questioning nothing,  
rejecting nothing, accepting everything, their lives saying:  
everything is emptiness, everything is compassion.

I can hear The Bhagavad Gita say:

Whatever you do, make it an offering to ME  
The food you eat, the worship you perform  
The help you give, even your suffering.

It is awe-ful and wonder-ful to me  
how they carry their lives so nobly,  
with such beauty and grace, as if  
their suffering had become  
garlands of sweet flowers  
laid across their shoulders.

*Budbill - Cont. from previous page*

IV.

I saw Sam just last week coming home across the field  
toward his house, back from Pond Brook where he had  
taken his limit.

After we had visited awhile and I'd asked about fishing  
and then about his hand, he got to telling stories of the  
surgeons  
who worked on him and he concluded saying:

Well, they did the best they could, and half a hand  
is better than none. You'da liked them boys, David,  
they was awful nice: just as ordinary as you are.

\* \* \*

Before he died of a rare form of Parkinson's disease in 2016, David Budbill was admirably prolific. He authored ten books of poems, seven plays, two novels, a collection of short stories, two picture books for children, and the libretto for an opera.

Wikipedia lays out Budbill's major honors and prizes in a crisp list: "An Honorary Doctor of Humane Letters from New England College, in Henniker, New Hampshire, in January 2009; a Guggenheim Fellowship in Poetry in 1981; a National Endowment for the Arts Play Writing Fellowship in 1991; The Dorothy Canfield Fisher Children's Book Award in 1980; The Vermont Arts Council's Walter Cerf Award for Lifetime Achievement in the Arts in 2002; [induction] as a Fellow of the Vermont Academy of Arts and Letters, 2009; [recipient of] the Kjell Meling Memorial Award for Distinction in the Arts & Humanities, presented by Pennsylvania State University in Altoona, 2011; [recipient of] a National Endowment for the Arts fellowship in playwriting, as well as a 1982 Guggenheim Fellowship in poetry and a Dorothy Canfield Fisher Award for fiction."

David Budbill impressed anyone who met him as someone extraordinarily alert. Though he deplored puffery, hypocrisy, and cant, nothing that was truthful bored him. His writings reflect his ability to record exquisite moments of feeling. (One of his books, in fact, is titled *Moment to Moment*.) His attention registered each seismic flutter of emotion, even the slightest tremor.

Budbill had a wide range of interests, and he didn't confine himself to writing only about Vermont's people. Like all good Vermont poets, he was appreciative of the natural world. Here he evokes the season we are currently experiencing:

*Stillness, O Stillness*

*Low clouds and gray, cold and spitting snow,  
more like the first of November than October first  
except for the geese going over low all morning.*

*Their frantic cries of leaving fill me with a quiet joy.  
The World gets emptier, more barren, and I more alone.  
Stillness, O stillness, this damp calm of autumn, this  
relinquishing, giving in, gray turning toward winter,  
sweet melancholy, welcoming, opening, acceptance,  
receiving, this embrace of the quiet and the dark.*

The Danforth Library has ordered a hardcover copy of *Judevine: The Complete Poems* by David Budbill. In it, beginning on page 147, is "The Buddhas of Judevine," the poem quoted in full in this essay.

**LOCAL CRYPTOGRAM**

A cryptogram is a code in which one letter is substituted for another. For example, the word "Church" could be written BWMSBW. The letter B would be the letter C and would be so throughout the entire message. In this message O = S. The solution is found by trial and error. The CRYPTOGRAM answer is on the last page.

"NEBNACH. BRGO GO NLC NW  
BRC MCEQXGYHXT VYLICHNQO  
PNLBRO BN OMCEQXYBC GL  
OBNEJO GL. BRC NBRCHO YHC  
KQXT, KYLQYHT, OCMBCPACH,  
YMHGX, LNDCPACH, PYT, PYHER,  
KQLC, VCECPACH, YQIQOB, YLV  
WCAHQYHT."  
-PYHJ BFYGL

**NEWS YOU CAN USE FROM THE THOMPSON SENIOR CENTER**

Do you or someone you care for need a wheelchair or other medical equipment, help with taxes or applying for Medicare, caregiver referrals, help with odd jobs around the house, have transportation needs? Just ask us or visit [www.thompsonsniorscenter.org/services/resources](http://www.thompsonsniorscenter.org/services/resources). We are here to help! 802-457-3277.

Pam Butler, Program Director, The Thompson Center.  
99 Senior Lane, Woodstock, Vermont 05091  
802-457-3277 ext. 6, [butler@thompsonsniorscenter.org](mailto:butler@thompsonsniorscenter.org)

THE PLANNING COMMISSION meets on the first Monday of the month at 7:00pm at the Town offices.

BARNARD CONSERVATION COMMISSION meets the second Monday of the month, 7:00pm, Town Hall.

BEES MEETINGS are held at 6:30pm on the 2nd Thursday of each month in the library at the school.

DANFORTH LIBRARY HOURS: Wednesdays 3:00 - 5:00 p.m., Saturdays 10:00 a.m. to Noon. ECFiber Wi-Fi access available .

SELECTBOARD meets the first and third Wednesday of the month at the Town offices at 7:00pm.

SELECTBOARD ASSISTANT, Rob Ramrath, [select-board@barnardvt.us](mailto:select-board@barnardvt.us), 234-2911 x 2, Cell 603-762-5280. By phone at any time, in person by appointment.

ZONING ADMINISTRATOR, Rob Ramrath, [zoning@barnardvt.us](mailto:zoning@barnardvt.us), 234-2911 x 2, Cell 603-762-5280. By phone at any time, in person by appointment.

TOWN CLERK office hours are Monday & Tuesday, 8:00am-3:30pm. Public access is restricted. Call 234-9211 for an appointment.

THE DEVELOPMENT REVIEW BOARD meets the third Thursday of the month at 7:00pm at the Barnard Town Hall as necessary.

THE BARNARD ENERGY COMMITTEE meets on the 2nd Tuesday of the month, 7:00pm at the Town Hall

YOGA CLASSES offered at Danforth Library, Mondays 9:00am - 10:30am with Amanda Anderson. Classes are by donation; for more information contact [Amanda@innerliftyoga.com](mailto:Amanda@innerliftyoga.com). Yoga Classes are also offered on Thursdays from 9-10:30 with Beth Umba. Contact Beth at: [bethumba@gmail.com](mailto:bethumba@gmail.com).

BARNARD GENERAL STORE, Monday-Saturday: 7am-7pm, Sundays: 8am-6pm.  
<https://www.facebook.com/barnardgeneralstore>

BARNARD LISTSERV: to subscribe please send an email to: [barnard-subscribe@lists.vitalcommunities.org](mailto:barnard-subscribe@lists.vitalcommunities.org)

RECYCLING Click [here](#) for Hours and Regulations

THE BARNARD INN is running a "Feeding Neighbors & Sustaining Community" campaign. Purchase an e-Gift Card and in turn the chefs will feed neighbors. Whole chicken dinners (serves 4-6) and individual sized meals to help feed Vermonters in need. Thank you and please stay safe. E-Gift Cards are available at [www.barnardinn.com](http://www.barnardinn.com).

ECFIBER Governing Board meets the 2nd Tuesday of the month at 7pm in 012 Oakes Hall, Vermont Law School. More information at <https://www.ecfiber.net/>

HISTORICAL SOCIETY Programs to be announced. Questions? Email: [historicalbarnard1761@gmail.com](mailto:historicalbarnard1761@gmail.com)

## BARNARTS EVENTS SCHEDULE

### Music On The Farm

September 23: Fiddle Witch

September 30: DJ Sean Mixkings

### Lakou Mizik Residency

Has been postponed due to visa scheduling challenges in Haiti, But stay tuned! We remain committed to bringing this wonderful band to our community soon!

### Haunted Village Theater

Auditions!

Seeking actors and storytellers to join BarnArts new creative project!

Auditions/meeting with other actors/directors

Sunday, Sept 19 or by appointment, 12-2pm

First Universalist Church and Society of Barnard

6211 Rt 12, Barnard

Rehearsal commitment light and flexible

Local actors will lead tours around Barnard Village, visiting five separate (mostly) outdoor locations, each with a small cast of actors telling ghost stories or a short play around a fire pit. This event will incorporate local lore and public spaces with our creative community, establishing a new cultural experience for all ages.

Performance Date: Saturday, October 23 (rain date Oct 24)

If you are interested in being involved, please fill out this [form](#) and attend our Auditions/Meeting on Sunday, if possible.

More information [here](#), or contact Linda at [info@barnarts.org](mailto:info@barnarts.org)

### CRYPTOGRAM ANSWER

"October. This is one of the peculiarly dangerous months to speculate in stocks in. The others are July, January, September, April, November, May, March, June, December, August, and February."

- Mark Twain

### EDITORS NOTE

Due to schedule conflicts, the Bulletin was delayed by a day. I apologize for any inconvenience that this may have caused.

## WCSU SCHOOL CALENDAR

Oct. 6 - Two hour delayed start.

Nov. 3 - Two hour delayed start.

Nov. 8 - Teacher In-Service Day, no classes.

Nov. 11 - Veterans' Day observed, school closed

Nov. 9 & 16 - Parent/Teacher conferences, 3:00 - 7:30