



# The Barnard Bulletin

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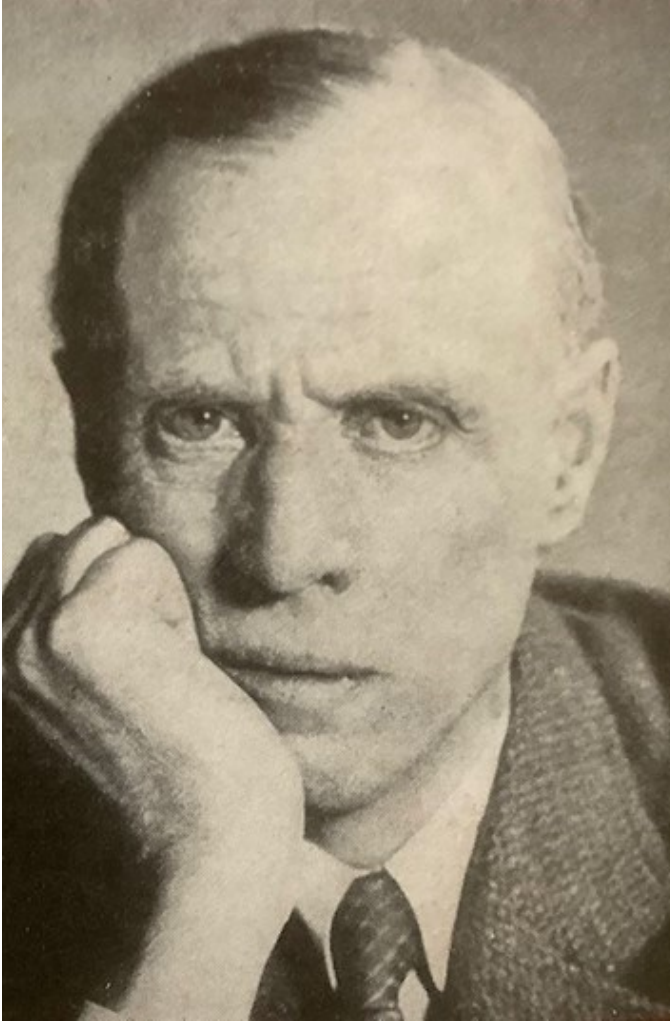
## A VERMONT WRITER

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.*

**Sinclair Lewis**

**1885 – 1951**



Sinclair Lewis in an undated photo by Eric Schaal-Pix

The novelist most associated with Midwestern values and small town pride in twentieth century America is Sinclair Lewis. His novel *Main Street*, published in 1920, was at once enormously successful. He was both praised and damned for his focus on provincialism. Then, in 1922, he introduced a self-congratulatory huckster whose name, *Babbit*, became a synonym for a typical small businessman. Again, Lewis's novel was a huge hit. Did the author mean to define America's emerging character on the world stage as small-minded and buffoonish?

The novels of Sinclair Lewis are no longer the latest word in stinging satirical social critique. Today's read-

ers confronting his portraits of middle-class Americans serenely sure of their ascendancy and virtue may consider such characters nostalgic figures whose blindness to their own folly is almost endearing. What was all the fuss about?

But Lewis's pinpointing of our society's anti-intellectual bias and casual racism and anti-semitism, his skewering of its fondness for blithe ignorance and its disrespect of other cultures beyond Christian Main Street, are recognizable traits still deplored. *Main Street* and *Babbit* continue to be read with interest. And his *Ann Vickers* (1933) is an early feminist novel tracing the history of the suffrage movement by describing the life of its complex heroine.

By what criteria, however, can Sinclair Lewis be thought of as "a Vermont writer?" It's a stretch, perhaps, but his growing up as a boy in Sauk Centre, Minnesota, gave him an early emotional grounding in a "countryside... beautiful and generous" that made him eager later in life to find some special rural place to call home. His biographer Mark Schorer describes "the once-hard prairie converted...into oceans of waving wheat that held over thirty lakes, like blue islands, within a ten-mile radius of the village" of Sauk Centre. There were quail, prairie hens, rabbits, squirrels. Its lakes were full of ducks and fish. "It was a country boy's paradise, this landscape."

By contrast, Sauk Centre itself, according to Schorer, "was ugly—raw and bare and gawky." It held a population of 2,807 when Lewis was born. It was "bleached and parched and sweltering at 110 degrees in summer," then "gaunt and rutted and cruelly frozen in winter." The contrast to Vermont's graceful villages, with their architectural gems tucked among verdant hills, is stark. And in eerie prescience, before Lewis divorced his first wife to marry the famous American journalist Dorothy Thompson, he wrote to Dorothy conjuring for her "an image of a Vermont farm that, once she married him, would be their permanent *pied-a-terre*, a pastoral paradise that would always be theirs whenever they tired of the busy world, and the picture had its charms for her."

"Red" Lewis (he was known to everyone as Red) married Dorothy Thompson in London on Monday, May 14, 1928, with a select number of mutual friends in attendance. Between them, they had a wide circle of acquaintance who were, like them, talented, artistic, intellectual, and as equally prone to international travel. The low-key wedding was "bright with promise that gilded the future and glossed the ugly along with the willful."

The new couple spent the months of their honeymoon traveling in a camper through England, and briefly into Scotland and Wales, sleeping in pastures or visiting friends and being very much at leisure.

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Sinclair Lewis and Dorothy Thompson  
on their "caravan honeymoon" 1928

Red drank only wine and beer, his severe drinking habit held firmly in check. He had been virtually on the wagon from the moment he'd met Dorothy in Berlin and thrown himself into a campaign to woo and win her. The obstacles to their marriage had been several, one of them the matter of her ending *her* first marriage even as he was ending *his*.

Before they wed, Lewis had sent to his publisher the manuscript of his latest novel, *Dodsworth* (1929), which had a closing scene describing a loving couple:

*He sat for hours with [her]...staring at the miraculously involved branches of a cypress, discovering the myriad skyscrapers in a patch of moss. And he began to desire to have—with [her]—a farm, and not a gentleman's show-place to increase social credit, but an authentic farm, smelling of horses and cattle and chickens, with cornfields baking at noon...This simple-hearted ambition stirred him more, gave him more feeling that he had something secret and exciting to live for, than any of the business plans...But it must be with [her].*

Shortly after Mr. and Mrs. Lewis arrived in New York, they rented an apartment they found on West Tenth Street and, when they spoke of their impending search for a farm, the landlord mentioned his own property in Vermont, half way between the villages of Pomfret and Barnard. He invited them to come see it.

*There were two houses on three hundred acres, a farmhouse of 1796 and a larger house, and they knew at once that this was the property that they must have. The owner...still inhabited the farmhouse and he asked them to stay for dinner, and papers for the exchange of ownership were signed that night.*

Never for a moment did either Red or Dorothy regret the quick purchase. For Red, according to Schorer, "Twin Farms" was "to prove the only real home he would ever have," though after eight difficult years the marriage would end, and Red would leave the place forever.

But in the meantime, Lewis was elated. He urged Dorothy to continue her illustrious career, and through his

New York editors introduced her to new markets. He encouraged her to go on a lecture tour, for she was in demand by clubs and colleges throughout the U.S.

Lewis worked on the proofs of *Dodsworth* and saw to its publication, while the "big house" on the Twin Farms property was being remodeled. (The married couple would live in the "big house," and guests would reside in the "farm house.") When Red addressed the Rotary Club in Rutland on Ladies' Night, in September 1929, he expressed his feeling for the natural beauties of Vermont "and his belief that it was the obligation and the privilege of the citizenry to preserve those beauties and to prevent Vermont from being transformed into another Cape Cod or Florida."

A cause of concern for Lewis was his having no firm idea in mind what sort of novel would be his next. He flailed about until he lit upon the topic of organized labor, the U.S. labor movement, and labor unrest. October 1929 was the month of the stock market crash, and this event seemed to confirm the wisdom of his intention. He invited Carl Haessler, a reporter for a labor news service, to help him do the extensive research necessary for a novel with Eugene Debs as its hero.

Lewis never worked on a novel from an inside urge or feeling, but from an outside interest. To Haessler "he proposed a week or so" at Twin Farms, and then a week in New York, "then striking into the field, especially the Pittsburgh and Gary areas and also taking in various meetings and conferences of labor origin or significance." They would gather "material" and "color" as he was "elaborating a skeleton already in vague outline, working out single episodes and chapters."

When the research was done, Lewis planned to settle down in Bermuda or Nassau in a hotel to "hammer out" a half million words or so, and then, with Haessler (as drinking companion rather than editor), to revise the manuscript to a more normal length. This prodigious amount of work was typical for Lewis, and it usually required a prodigious amount of drinking. He would type with two fingers and consume many bottles of scotch.

But plans for this extended effort with the labor novel were suddenly put on hold—first as plans developed for Dorothy and Red to go to Europe; and then again when the trip to Europe fell through at the very moment close friends offered Dorothy and Red the rental of their attractive home in Westport, Connecticut. Carl Haessler, disappointed, was summarily dismissed. (The "labor novel," though often alluded to, was never begun.) Dorothy went alone to get the Connecticut house ready, while Red stayed in Vermont to close up everything for winter.

Where the couple next met, days later, was Manhattan, as Dorothy settled down with a journalistic assignment. Red got up late in the morning and, while lounging in his pajamas, answered the phone. It was a crank call, he

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assumed. A woman with a phony Swedish accent told him he had won the Nobel Prize in Literature—the first American ever to do so.

Red assumed the caller was his friend Fred Reyher, who was a great mimic and loved to play jokes. Red said, “Your accent’s no good”—then repeated “*You haf de Nobel Brize!*” and went on with more mimicry. Finally the woman handed the phone to an American who repeated the announcement until it was understood. When Red recovered enough to telephone his wife, he said breathlessly, “Dorothy, I’ve got the Nobel Prize.” And she replied, “Oh, have you? How nice for you! Well, I have the Order of the Garter.”



A pen and ink sketch of Sinclair Lewis – artist unknown

Sinclair Lewis was a difficult person to live with. Socially he could be charming and playful, then all of a sudden outrageously rude. He would often hold forth at great length, monopolizing a dinner party—sometimes boring his guests, but more often amazing them with his stunning verbal high jinks. For instance, he would announce he could compose a sonnet in three minutes, please give him the fourteen rhymes for ending the lines. Then he would do it, his sonnet quite good despite the hurry, and always in perfect scansion.

There was not just classic mania but a good deal of alcohol behind Red Lewis’s monologues and his wild, frenetic actions. His friend A. S. Frere played the part of

valet when Red needed help before giving an address to a group in Washington, D.C., and he later reported to friends that Red was so drunk beforehand he had passed out cold in his hotel room in the late afternoon. Schorer writes:

*In due time, Frere got him up, got him into the shower, got him dressed, got him into a taxi, and all but propelled him onto the stage. Lewis had simulated notes out of scraps of paper and newspaper clippings, and as he moved across the stage, before an enormous audience, like a man in a trance, these drifted to the floor from his limp hand. He faced his audience, and, in a long silence, gaped out into the space before him as if he were trying to remember why he was there. Then suddenly the words poured out.*

And they were not random. He verbally attacked a British publisher sitting in the front row, and would return to the attack now and then, but the bulk of his speech was a discourse perfectly coherent, even brilliant, on a native tradition in American writing. America was a vast land of unexplored material for writers, he maintained.

After this amazingly successful lecture, Lewis was elated and insisted on taking Frere to Baltimore in a rented car. Arriving at the docks in the middle of the night, Red began to praise American shipping—saying, “There’s America!” as he rushed to board a ship, running up an unguarded gangway (with Frere refusing to follow). When Lewis suddenly came off the ship some time later, it was obvious he’d been roughed up. The “American” ship was Czechoslovakian.

When his sanity returned and Lewis was asked about his ferocious or outlandish behavior, he would shrug off “the scandalous affair” and say something like, “I’m just a country hick living on a farm, and every time I leave it, I get into trouble.”

In Vermont, these sorts of alcohol-fueled escapades were rare. When he was here, Lewis seemed to be able to keep himself focused, if not abstemious. Perhaps he was aware of being watched—or watched over—by the Vermonters in his employ. Schorer writes: “Lewis’s relations with the servants were not of the best. He was very much the grand signor; and still he was liked by most of them. Emily Walker remembered that, for all his boyishness, he was also the Master”—a country boy with a Yale degree. Walker addressed him always as “sir” and could not imagine doing otherwise.

Lewis had a habit of dismissing servants out of hand, for no good reason. His wife would return to find someone gone; she’d have to track down and rehire the offended person, or begin interviews for the position all over again. But one cook refused to be dismissed, telling Mr. Lewis that no, he had not hired her, Mrs. Lewis had. And therefore it would have to be Mrs. Lewis who fired her. The cook stayed on, and Lewis admired her for it.

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“Sir” demanded that Emily Walker stay in the same room with him any evening that he was alone in the house. This meant she had to stay up until all hours, seated on her hassock, while Lewis said not a word to her, but read and listened to music. She was charged with refilling his whisky glass, and she made sure to water it down hour by hour.

Vermont entered Sinclair Lewis’s work in an interesting way with the novel he virtually dashed off in the summer of 1935. Alarming news was coming out of Germany, and the full extent of Hitler’s fascist takeover was a constant topic of discussion in America, where the rise of a charismatic demagogue like Huey Long made Dorothy and her politically astute friends very nervous. There were, it seemed, dozens of fanatical political groups springing up. *It Can’t Happen Here* (1935) is Lewis’s well-imagined idea of how suddenly Americans could find their democracy taken from them.

Choosing Vermont as the setting for this novel made good sense, because the small, fictitious village of Beulah limits the canvas on which portraits of the various actors are drawn. The main character is Doremus Jessup, the editor of a local newspaper. His Vermont roots are important, for in his stereotype he is the invincible, unwavering voice of truth and reason—the bedrock of democratic, civic life. Vermont character, therefore, is primary, even as Vermont as a landscape makes very few appearances. Here is one of them when Lewis sets the scene:

*It was a May night—late in May of 1936—with a three-quarter moon. Doremus’s house was a mile from the business center of Fort Beulah, on Pleasant Hill, which was a spur thrust like a reaching hand out from the dark rearing mass of Mount Terror. Upland meadows, moon-glistening, he could see, among the wildernesses of spruce and maple and poplar on the ridges far above him; and below, as his car climbed, was Ethan Creek flowing through the meadows.*

In the same paragraph, Lewis invokes “the serene clapboarded houses” that recall the War of 1812 as well as the admirable ancestors, the Revolutionaries, and Stephen A. Douglas, Hiram Powers, Thaddeus Stevens, Brigham Young, and President Chester Alan Arthur.

Doremus is a married man who loves the hoopla of family surrounding him, but often seeks the solace of his home office, crowded with memorabilia. Its wild catalog of furnishings suggest how much he is a man of learning while being also being a sentimentalist, a romantic, a lover of simple pleasures, an advocate of peace, an amateur naturalist, a local historian, a Liberal who voted for Franklin Delano Roosevelt, and a good father who longs at times to be a hermit.

When Doremus squints “through a dormer window at the bulk of mountains cutting the welter of stars,” he reflects that Vermont is “a kind country, cool and clear as a shaft

of light and...he loved it more every quiet year of his freedom from city towers and city clamor.”

The novel examines what happens when the naïve “proletariat,” who are townspeople well known to Doremus, decide to elect a con artist as their president. A wily politician named Berzelius Windrip tells everyone who is pulling their belts tighter during the Depression, that he will guarantee them a government outlay of \$5,000 per person. This false promise, never fulfilled, raises Windrip to the highest position in the land.

From that position, Windrip quickly assumes full powers, demolishes the free press, establishes a well-funded militia operating under his orders alone, does away with traditional courts, puts his cronies in critical administrative positions, and soon has Doremus and his friends operating fearfully “underground,” risking prison and death to restore their former government.

The novel’s scenes are so well-imagined and full of detail that the possibility “it” (fascism) can indeed happen here in America is convincing. Sinclair Lewis’s “Vermont novel” is a study of Americans in their complacency—who suddenly must face what Europe in the 1930s was facing. *It Can’t Happen Here* created a sensation and sold many copies when it was published. Furthermore, this Sinclair Lewis title has been reissued and is being reread with new interest in the light of today’s political developments.

With that one book, Sinclair Lewis earned himself a place as “a Vermont writer.” But he didn’t stick around long enough to write any more fiction set in this “kind country, cool and clear.” Not even his having had a son—Michael Lewis—with Dorothy could keep their marriage together. And as the marriage came apart, so did Lewis’s association with Vermont. He walked out of the house that he was sharing with Dorothy in Bronxville, New York, on April 28, 1937, and never returned to live with her again. He soon dissolved her power of attorney and had a trust created for their son. Michael, by then, was seven years old.

In viewing the whole of his life, a reader sees clearly that Sinclair Lewis would never again achieve the literary and popular successes that he had accomplished by 1937. In the years to come, he was distracted by theater—even trying to become a professional actor—but he had little talent for writing plays. His relationships with women, mostly younger women, were fervent but never lasting. Alcohol destroyed his body. He died in Italy less than fourteen years after he had left Dorothy. His heart gave out in a hospital in Rome on the morning of January 10, 1951. Though a few friends had come to visit him there, he recognized no one.

The Danforth Library of Barnard, Vermont, owns a copy of Mark Schorer’s *Sinclair Lewis: An American Life* (published by McGraw-Hill, 1961). From this book much of the material in this profile has been taken. The

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Danforth Library also owns these novels by Sinclair Lewis, all in hardcover, most on the Classics shelf: *Main Street* (1920), *Babbitt* (1922), *Arrowsmith* (1925), *Dodsworth* (1929), *Ann Vickers* (1933), *It Can't Happen Here* (1935), *Bethel Merriday* (1940), *Gideon Planish* (1943), *Cass Timberlane: A Novel of Husbands and Wives* (1945), and *Kingsblood Royal* (1947).

**DANFORTH LIBRARY NEWS**

6208 RT. 12 BARNARD, VT, ACROSS FROM THE CHURCH

COMING SOON: STORY HOUR!!!

Thanks to volunteer Amanda Hull, we will be offering free monthly story hours for children of all ages. Each story hour will feature read-alouds plus a craft for all to enjoy.

SAVE THE DATE for our first story hour: October 17, 4-5 pm. and watch the listserv and this space for information on future dates.

Book Display:

Looking for a great read? This month's library display features National Book Award Winners. From John Cheever to Ha Jin to Ta-Nehisi Coates, you can't go wrong with one of these!

Free classes!

Fall is a great time to learn something new. Did you know that you can get FREE access to hundreds of classes, through

Universal Class and Learning Express?

Check out their offerings at:

<https://www.universalclass.com/vermontstate> and <https://www.learningexpresshub.com>

PLEASE NOTE: To register for free classes, you'll need a personal account that is connected to the Danforth Library.

BEFORE creating a personal account and to guarantee free class registration, please call us at 802-234-9408 or email us at [charlesdanforthlibrary@gmail.com](mailto:charlesdanforthlibrary@gmail.com)

We will give you a specific link to use for creating your personal account.

What else can you do at the library?

You can:

- Enjoy a quiet place to work or read for a while
- Use our high-speed internet
- Have something notarized (Mondays, with our volunteer Kassie)
- Get some tech help or advice on resumes and cover letters (Thursdays, with our volunteer Amy)
- Book our meeting/all purpose room – at no charge!

(contact Ellen Miles at [ellenmiles.vt@gmail.com](mailto:ellenmiles.vt@gmail.com) for details)

- And of course, we have books, books, and more books! (Plus DVDs and books on tape)

OUR HOURS:

Mon, Weds, and Thurs 3-5 p.m. & Sat. 10 a.m. – Noon\*

High-speed wi-fi available inside and in parking lot

Charles B. Danforth Library  
P.O. Box 204, Barnard, VT 05031

6208 Rt. 12, across from the church

Look for the OPEN flag

Phone: 802-234-9408  
Email: [charlesdanforthlibrary@gmail.com](mailto:charlesdanforthlibrary@gmail.com)

Trustees: Berna Donlon, Margaret Edwards, Judy Maynes, Susan McNulty, and Ellen Miles

**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 P=R. The solution is found by trial and error. The CRYPTOGRAM answer is on the last page.

"E Q S Q C Z W M S B A A S A P Z E D  
 T K P P A T S W G A. W S W M  
 P W X A Z A M M E Z L T K D K P E Z L E  
 S W C A K Y C E S Q P W S V; H Q S W S  
 W M E D M K H P A E L S B, E Z L L A X S B,  
 E Z L L W M S E Z T A. I B E S C E Z T E Z  
 M S E Z L I W S B E Q S Q C Z K Z E  
 B W D D S K X E Z L Y E W D S K M A A  
 S B A M X E Z K Y B W M I K P D L E Z L  
 S B A C A E Z W Z F K Y S B A  
 P K D D W Z F B W D D M S B E S P A E T B  
 S K S B A Y E P B K P W N K Z?"  
 - B E D H K P D E Z

**TAX BILL REMINDER**

The second 2022 Barnard Property Tax Payment is due on  
**February 15th, 2023**

THE PLANNING COMMISSION meets on the Monday prior to the first Wednesday of every month at 7 PM in the Town Office.

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: Mondays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays, 3:00 - 5:00 pm, Saturdays 10:00 am to Noon. ECFiber Wi-Fi. Contact us: phone: 802-234-9408. Email: [charlesdanforthlibrary@gmail.com](mailto:charlesdanforthlibrary@gmail.com).

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

TOWN ADMINISTRATOR, Rob Ramrath, [selectboard@barnardvt.us](mailto:selectboard@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

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 via. Zoom. Contact the clerk of the District. [secretary@ecfiber.net](mailto:secretary@ecfiber.net), for meeting information or visit <https://www.ecfiber.net/virtual-meetings/>

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

## Happy Halloween

**Don't forget the Halloween event at the Barnard General Store on Monday, October 31st from 4-6pm.**

## BARNARTS PRESENTS

THE ADDAMS FAMILY

LYRICS AND MUSIC BY ANDREW LIPPA

DIRECTOR: LINDA TREASH

MUSIC DIRECTOR: CAROL CRONCE

CHOREOGRAPHER: CLAIRE SHILLEN

Barnard Town Hall

Fridays & Saturdays: October 21-22 & 28-29 – 7:30pm

Sundays: Oct 23 & 30 – 2pm

Wednesday Addams, the ultimate princess of daarkness, is all grown up and in love with a boy from a "normal" family. Lucas and his family are coming to dinner at the Addams estate (hidden in the haunted forest of New York City's Central Park) to meet Gomez, Morticia, Uncle Fester, Grandma, Pugsley & Lurch. Everything will change for both families on this fateful night!

Our Living Cast: Alden, Kristina Harrold, Tyler Harwell, Kyle Huck, Dakota Menard, Ashley Mello, Sara Norcross, Jesse Paige, Ryan Paige, Elyse DeNeige Robichaud

Our Dead Cast: Anna Alden, Kaetlyn Collins, Beth Damon, Marlena Farinas, Kai Snyder Hamalainen, Kory Hiram, Juliana Menard, Aura Paige, Maggie Ronan, Ceridwynn Young, Sally Zwain

Tickets: Adults, \$20; Students, \$15

More show and ticket information can be found at [www.barnarts.org](http://www.barnarts.org). You may also contact us at [info@barnarts.org](mailto:info@barnarts.org) or 802-234-1645 (BarnArts voice mail)

BarnArts Center for the Arts

PO Box 41

Barnard, VT 05031

## GLAD RAGS SALE DATES - FALL 2022

The next Glad Rags sale days will be: Friday, November 11, 2:00pm to 6:00pm; Saturday, November 12, 9:00am to 2:00pm; Sunday, November 13, 10:00am to 1:00pm. All prices on Sunday are reduced 50%. The sale is held at the Masonic Lodge located at 30 Pleasant St, Woodstock, Vermont.

Visit <https://www.gladrags.org/>, for more information.

### CRYPTOGRAM ANSWER

"Autumn is the eternal corrective. It is ripeness and color and a time of maturity; but it is also breadth, and depth, and distance. What man can stand with autumn on a hilltop and fail to see the span of his world and the meaning of the rolling hills that reach to the far horizon?"

- Hal Borland

*Upcoming National Holiday*

*Thanksgiving Day – November 25, 2022*