



A VERMONT WRITER

BY MARGARET EDWARDS

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

Walter Merriam Pratt

1880 – 1973



Walter Merriam Pratt as a young man.

If you were born and brought up in Vermont, perhaps it's fair to say the state chose you; but many (if not most) of the state's current residents chose Vermont. Sometimes making that choice can feel like falling in love.

Walter Merriam Pratt and his wife, Irene, both of retirement age, drove up from Worcester, Massachusetts, and into Vermont for the first time on June 28 of 1941. An earlier visit from a banker and his wife who were Vermonters had made them curious. Walter had often entertained a vague idea of owning a farm, but such a far-fetched idea was—in words he would use—"a pipe dream." (Think *opium pipe*.) But the vague dream farm was about to become reality, for the banker had tipped him off to an available property in foreclosure near Brattleboro.

Walter and Irene were instantly impressed. In his 1943 memoir, *Adventure in Vermont*, he was eloquent in his praise:

It was gorgeous country, the place had absolute privacy and as diversified as forty acres could possibly be, beautiful woodland, fertile meadows, a brook crossing them. The house and ell were low and rambling. To the east sharply rose a wooded hill and, in the rear, hayfields. To the south, the carriage sheds and barn, and beyond, an embankment overlooking the West River, on whose far side Rt. 30 follows the river's windings to and through the boarded-up sides and shingled roof of the picturesque bridge at West Dummerston. The view left nothing to be desired.

But the farmhouse? In a word: "Terrible."

At all angles, a crumbling wall for a foundation, partly rotten sills, broken and sagging plates, sagging floors and partitions, broken windows, remains of a chimney. They looked awfully tired, and after one hundred and fifty years who could blame them for threatening to fall?

Walter hesitated. "What a headache this might turn out to be!"

But he knew he might never again find such a wonderful setting on the south side of a mountain. Should he buy it? He consulted Irene, who had no second thoughts—then bought it.

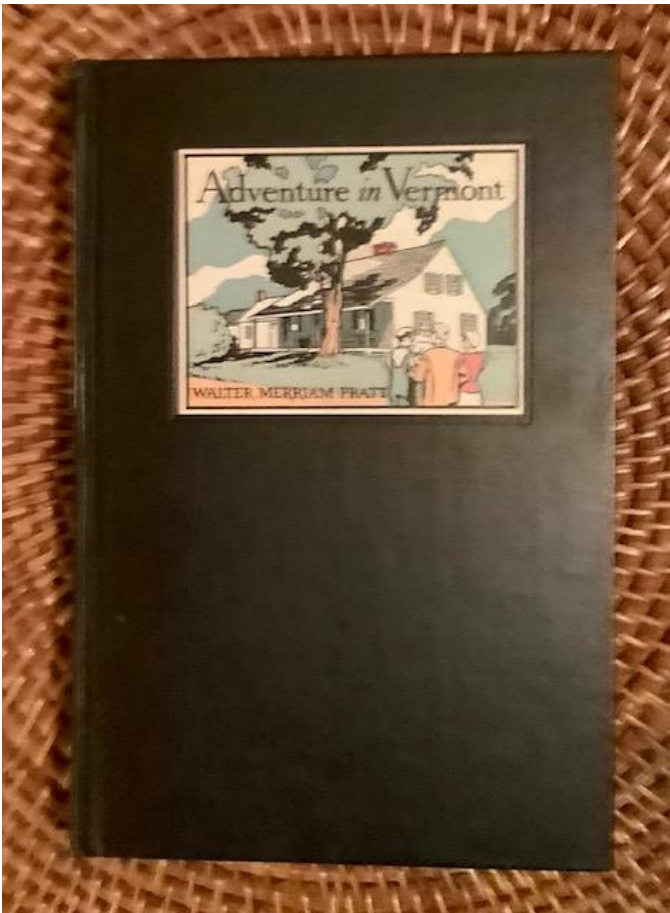
We'd dreamed of a Castle in Spain. What we got was an old, tumbled-down but picturesque farmhouse in Vermont, suitable when restored for a summer home, and it would give us an opportunity to express our personality to some extent.

"Expressing" his "personality" for Pratt meant describing in crisp, exact detail all the ins and outs of the sale, from his early dickering with the real estate agent, to his eventual ordering of a land survey, and on to his finally hiring a contractor, mason, plumber, and electrician. He tells the workmen they must hurry: "We've got to step on things before the government freezes everything."

The U. S. government at the time was busy with World War II, in particular with fine-tuning the country's economy to support its armed forces. That Pratt's vacation home project was happening in a wartime context meant that shortages of this and that crept into the memoir quite often, making *Adventure in Vermont* seem all the more aptly titled.

Throughout his account, Pratt savors the ways his country home differs from his routine city apartment. In his urban life, he works in an office and takes the subway. His out-the-window views are often of brick walls. But in

Vermont, he can stand before a wide open pastoral view that allows him to “see into three states.”



The memoir as it looked when published, first edition, 1943.

Moreover, this self-made Vermonter is fascinated by the state's wildlife. He lists the various, plentiful birds as if he were Adam giving them their original names. He relishes his new proximity to bobcat and lynx, as well as to bear, foxes, woodchucks, and skunks. He's particularly keen on deer:

[Two] stately bucks with two-foot antlers, and a doe, cantered gracefully across my meadow. I was to the lee and stood perfectly still; the bucks saw me and were curious. They stopped and looked while the doe went ahead and grazed. Finally, after fully two minutes, up went their white tails, and off they went into the woods as if to make up for lost time.

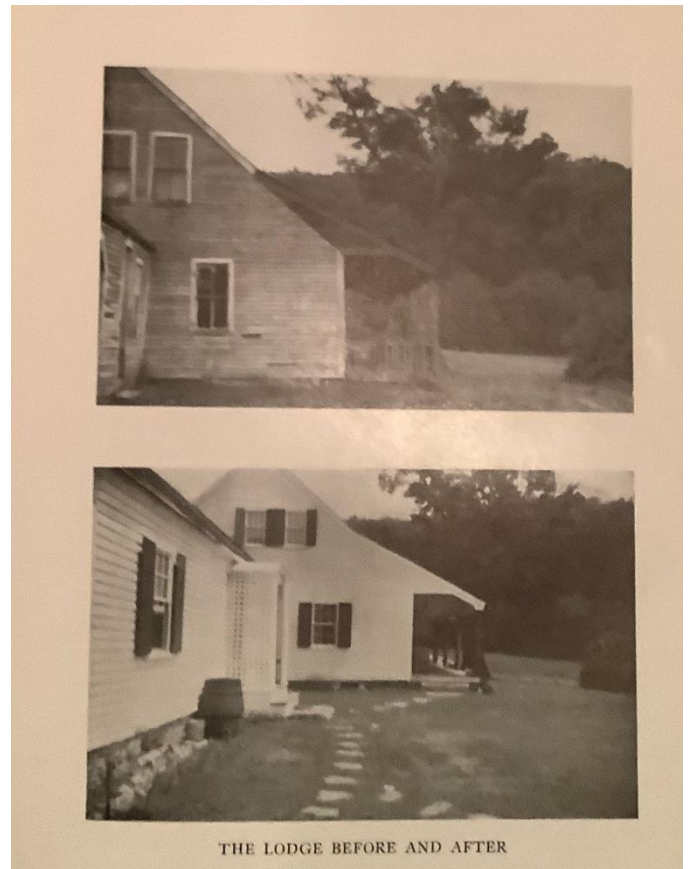
Inevitably Pratt becomes aware of the fragility of Vermont's wildlife, how unregulated hunting throughout the state puts pressure on deer and all species:

The deer became almost extinct as a result of indiscriminate slaughter; and in 1870 seventeen were purchased with private funds, and the [Vermont] legislature decreed a continuous closed season until 1899. Now about eleven thousand bucks are killed each year during the ten-day open season, [along with] some seventy thousand muskrats, twenty

thousand skunks, fifteen thousand raccoons, [and] six thousand mink.

Conservation of wildlife, according to Pratt, was the habit of local farmers:

You will find almost every farmer uses thoughtful care in protecting the homes of birds and mammals. As an illustration, I gave instructions to my contractor among other things to enlarge my grape trellis and tie up the vine, during a two weeks' absence; upon my return everything but the trellis had been attended to. Asking why that had not, I was told a robin had built a nest and laid eggs, and nothing could be done until they hatched. There are many instances on record where birds have suppressed local outbreaks of insect pests, and they are a steady aid to the farmer in keeping insects under control.



In deft and efficient prose, Pratt takes a reader through the process of restoring his rural property. There is the problem of having a spring as the sole water source, and the delving for a well; and there is the problem of inadequate heat during Vermont winters, which demands better insulation and the purchase of a furnace to help the fireplaces.

And again comes the intrusion of the war: “Just about the time we were ready to make use of the furnace, the Government rationed oil, so we could use it only on the very coldest days.”

Pratt describes fixing up the property's derelict sheds, making a snug garage and a fine carpenter shop. He collects and preserves "the curiosities of the past and present generations" on his property: old glass bottles and oak chests, handmade hay rakes, wooden yokes for oxen doing the plowing and yokes for men gathering maple sap. In the barn rafters, he discovers "an old-fashioned cutter and a two-seated pung"—in a word, sleighs.

Both Pratts take a keen interest in landscaping their country property. With help from hired workmen, they begin planting new trees while taking down the sick ones and dead ones, then putting in flowerbeds, designing a flagstone terrace, reseeding the lawn. All the while, they are mindful of the countryside:

The last of September, Nature got out her lipstick and did a great job on the maple and oak trees. A look at the hill to the east fairly made one gasp—it was a riot of color. But after the leaves had fallen, the hill resumed a solid green, and only then did we realize pine and hemlock made up eighty per cent of the forest.



THE BARN AND CARRIAGE SHED BEFORE AND AFTER

To the Pratts' surprise, their work crew declines to show up one fall weekend because of the Wilmington fair. There is nothing else to do but go to the fair themselves—and of course, they are charmed by the "festival of the rural neighborhood" with its low key entertainments—the greased pole, the wheelbarrow races, the sack races, and

the ball games. You can wield a rifle in the shooting gallery, you can play "Guess Your Weight" and you can listen to the local brass band.

We entered into the spirit, bought popcorn, threw the rings, got weighed, visited the stock judging ring where last year's champion usually bows to a new one each year. We watched the competition to see which team could pull the greatest load. We visited the agriculture hall where were displayed long rows of yellow corn, plates of apples, glasses of jelly, and exhibits of home-painted china. We bought ice cream cones, bottles of pop, and hot dogs, and marveled at the biggest pumpkin. It was all picturesque, colorful and fascinating. The exhibits were not professional exhibits from out-of-town cities, but local products made or raised by neighbors, a display of agricultural and domestic products, livestock, poultry, vegetables, canned goods, and sewing.



Walter Merriam Pratt as a young man

The Pratts' warm memories of attending the Fair ("the year's rural play day") in good weather are soon set against their winter's weekend trip to their now-completed farmhouse. A blizzard has made the trip from the city very taxing, and then, on reaching the farmhouse, they discover there is no water. A plumber is called, and he manages to come out and fix the problem, but a day

later—no water, again. This means Walter has to wade his way through a foot of snow down a steep embankment to the pump house, fix the switch (as the plumber has shown him), then return.

I'll never forget that night, as I partly walked and partly crawled back on all fours. A big yellow moon, as large as a wagon wheel, poked itself up from among the pine trees on the hill to the east, and lighted up the snow, causing shadows and intriguing silhouettes in the woods. The whole place was dumb under the snow; the moon was a sunflower in Night's buttonhole, and all the pine trees seemed to have little stars at the end of their branches. It was the kind of night when God seemed to have allowed even the smallest star out. My feet were so cold from crawling in the snow I only hobbled along from force of habit, with my heart knocking like a woodpecker inside a dead tree...

A reader senses that the memoir Pratt is writing is a very important part of his mastery of a new life—a rural life. And Pratt wants to be thorough. He hurtles along through many topics familiar to anyone in love with Vermont who has bought and refurbished a dwelling here. He writes hilarious accounts of his urban cat Scooter's antic reaction to the untrammelled freedom of life in Vermont.

Pratt looks into the early history of the area where he's living—its indigenous people ("Indians"), Ethan Allan, its land grants and early settlements, General Lafayette's visit, and various important early families. He gives a biographical sketch of General Brattle, who sided with the British and fled to England after the American Revolution, but not before lending his name to the famous Brattle Street in Cambridge, next to Harvard, and to the author's adopted Vermont village, Brattleboro.

Pratt amuses himself with observing the area's other, more general form of wildlife—Vermonters. And here again, he proves himself an avid collector. He likes compiling country sayings, such as these:

Does this road go to Putney?

Dunno.

Where does it go?

Dunno.

You don't know much, do you?

Nope, but I ain't lost.

Lived here all your life?

Not yet, Mister.

How are the crops?

Not so large as a good year, but not so bad as a bad year.

You there, how do I get to Randolph?

If I was goin' to Randolph, I wouldn't start from here.

To the storekeeper:

"I'd like to buy some of that breakfast food I see advertised."

Storekeeper: "You can't. Don't carry it no more—it sells too fast."

How did you find your lost cow?

Thought if I was a cow where I'd go, I went, and she had.

What do you do when you get snowed in?

Sit and think. Mostly sit.

The city folks used to eat in the house and go to the bathroom outdoors; now they do the opposite.

I got a poor back that can't press its own pants.

She was the village belle but never tolled.

Pratt is generally fascinated by words and terms he keeps discovering that seem, to him, specific to Vermont:

A road only two people live on, which is ploughed out by the town in winter, but may be closed up by the mutual consent of both, is for some reason called a "pent road." A triangular piece of land is termed a "heater lot," because it resembles a flatiron. "More's the pity," "Maybe so," "Land sakes alive" and "just like" are common expressions. [Vermonters] refer to "farming" it...to "working up" the woodpile, "hailing" the doctor, "banking up" the house, to being "hopping mad," to "haying oats," and to "greasing boots."...Outside of farming there is water-witching, muskrat trapping, cow doctoring, cheese making, as [rural] occupations.

In his memoir's final pages, Pratt summarizes his ambition for this book:

The author has tried to tell, in an interesting way, the story of the restoration of an ancient house, rapidly being destroyed by the elements; to give such information as may be helpful to those who plan to do likewise. He has tried to pass on useful information regarding plants, shrubs, and the lawn which he has gleaned from talks with those who know, and from personal experience. Scattered items of interesting information regarding Vermont and of Brattleboro in particular have been included.

The writer is humbled by the thought of what he hasn't had time for and of what he hasn't included. He confesses his limitations:

There are many things of interest that further research would bring to light, but no attempt has been made to write a history, and, with the few salient facts I have included, it is best to make a safe landing rather than to soar on and on and risk a forced landing.

The prose throughout has been confident and relaxed. It's no surprise to learn that Vermont-besotted Walter Merriam Pratt came to writing his memoir as a seasoned journalist and author of five esteemed non-fiction books: *The Burning of Chelsea*, *Tin Soldiers*, *The Maritime Provinces as seen from an Automobile*, *Seven Generations*, and *A Study of Prattville and Chelsea*. With these well-researched publications, Pratt had made his mark in a professional literary world, but any reader can sense that in writing a first person account of an "adventure," the author is making himself dig deeper to mine a richer ore. He leaves us with a vivid domestic vision of an evening when the beloved cat Snoozer has eaten his dinner, and....

The wind outside comes in gusts and whistles about the house. Dead leaves turn somersaults about the lawn. A great fire roars in our fireplace and in front of it Irene is seated in a big armchair reading...The room is filled with the smell of autumn leaves and lingering flowers. Everything has been made snug for the night.

In due course, Pratt retired to what he called his "Mayfair Ranch" in Vermont, and eventually he died there and was buried in Brattleboro.

The Danforth Library owns a single hard-cover copy of Walter Merriam Pratt's *Adventure in Vermont* (University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1943).

Charles B. Danforth Library November 2026



Trick or Treat

Open Hours

2-4 p.m. Mondays
2-4 p.m. Wednesdays
10 a.m. – Noon – Saturdays

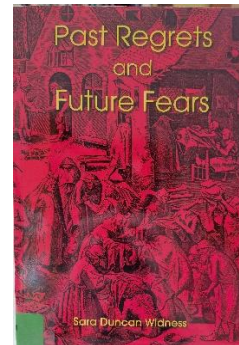
Join us
Sunday November 8, 2026

2:00 p.m. at the Danforth Library

**** Book Launch ****

Past Regrets and Future Fears

Poetry by Sara Duncan Widness



Light refreshments to follow

NEW BOOKS

FICTION

Pirate Queen, by Ariel Lawhon, author of *Frozen River*. Inspired by the life of Grace O'Malley, a legendary folk heroine who risked everything to defend her people.

Heather, by Caitlin Mullen (explores how far people will go to be seen)

And, from Vermont author Makenna Goodman:

The Shame (about a woman struggling from not making the art that she absolutely must make).

Helen of Nowhere (longlisted for the Booker Prize)

MEMOIR

The Irish Goodbye: Micro-Memoirs, by Beth Anne Fennelly

Charles B. Danforth Library,

P.O. Box 204, Barnard, VT 05031

6208 VT Route 12

Phone: 802-234-9408

Email: charlesdanforthlibrary@gmail.com

Trustees: Margaret Edwards, Judy Maynes, Adelaide McCracken, Cassidy Metcalf, and Kayla Thompson

Volunteers: Edythe Wright and Patricia Attkisson



THE PLANNING COMMISSION meets on the second Monday of every month at 7 PM in the Town Office.

BARNARD CONSERVATION COMMISSION meets the first 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.

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

DANFORTH LIBRARY HOURS: Monday & Wednesdays 2:00 – 4:00 p.m.; and Saturdays 10:00 a.m. to Noon. ECFiber Wi-Fi. Phone: 802-234-9408. Email: charlesdanforthlibrary@gmail.com.

TOWN ADMINISTRATOR, Kassie Hull, <mailto:selectboard@barnardvt.us>, 802-234-9211 x 4. Office hours: By chance or by appointment.

TOWN CLERK office hours are Monday and Tuesday, 8:30am - Noon. Call 234-9211 for an appointment.

ZONING ADMINISTRATOR, Robert Ramrath, <mailto:zoning@barnardvt.us>, 802-234-9211 x 2. Available by email and phone during business hours Monday through Friday. In person meetings at the Town Office available by appointment only.

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

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

ECFIBER Governing Board meets the 2nd Tuesday of the month at 7pm via. Zoom. Contact the clerk of the District. 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

DELECTABLE MOUNTAIN QUILTERS (DMQ) meet the 1st Tuesday of every month at the Bethel Library from 1-3pm. Contact: Mary Croft 802-763-7074

2026 is a midterm election year.

Please vote on or before November 3, 2026.

Mail-in ballots have been sent. If you have not received yours, please contact the Barnard Town Clerk.

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 I = L. The solution is found by trial and error. The CRYPTOGRAM answer is on the next page.

“ATGM HTG HOGGY HTGCO

YPBBGO YUIGMZRO

NTWMEG HR OWCBGMH OGZ WMZ

ERIZ,

ATGM HTG YPBBGO BRRM HPOMY

BGIIRA,

WMZ HTG MCETHY WOG

EGHHCME NRIZ;

ATGM HTG YDPCOOGIY TCZG

HTGCO WNROMY,

WMZ HTG ARRZNTPNVY

ZCYWUUGWO;

HTGM AG VMRA HTWH CH CY

WPHPBM,

IRKGICGYH YGWYRM RJ HTG

SGWO.”

-NWORI L. OCYGO, WPHPBM

NEWS FROM BARNARTS

BarnArts Center for the Arts Building Community through Art, building Community through Art.

BarnArts is "Raising the Barn" on a home for art and community in Barnard. Find out more about our exciting capital campaign and consider joining us on this fun new adventure. Contact us if you are interested in getting involved with our Capital Campaign.

BarnArts 2026

Once Upon a Mattress

Director:
Linda Treash

Music Director:
Parker Eastman

Choreographer:
Lauren Mckeon

Starring:
Babs Mills
Kyle Huck
Jill Clough
April Lopez
Cady Taylor
Hillary Hunt
Evie Hackett
Killian White
Shu-nan Chu
Evan Landon
Kyra Monsam
Amelia Brame
Albert Falcone
Chelsea Cassady
Elizabeth Linsley
Christina Manero
Dylan Mroszczyk-McDonald

Production Dates
November 6-15

Location
Barnard Town Hall

Tickets available
in October

BARN ARTS

BarnArts Center for the Arts
Building Community Through Art

JOIN US FOR OUR FALL MUSICAL,
ONCE UPON A MATTRESS!

Director: Linda Treash
Music Director: Parker Eastman
Choreographer: Lauren Mckeon

Fridays & Saturdays: November 6-7 & 13-14-7:30pm

Sundays: November 8 & 15-2pm

Thursday: November 12-7:30pm

Barnard Town Hall, 115 North Rd, Barnard VT

Tickets: Adult - \$25, Student/Discount - \$18

Prince Dauntless cannot marry without his mother's approval. And she has MANY thoughts about who is good enough for her baby boy. Meanwhile, no one else in the kingdom is allowed to marry until Dauntless does, and Lady Larken and Prince Harry have a bit of a deadline coming up...! A desperate Prince Harry goes off on a princess quest and returns with moat-swimming Princess Winnifred! (She swam the moat?) Could a swamp princess be just what the kingdom has been waiting for?

This isn't your great-great grandmother's fairy tale, but it might be your Mother or Grandmother's! Once Upon a Mattress is full of puns, laughs, and heart, and it famously launched the dazzling career of comic Carol Burnett, as the strange but winsome Princess Winnifred!

Nine lead roles plus featured ensemble. Rolls for all ages and experience levels.

Oct/Nov, Fall Global Music Residency, Various schools & Venues (tba)

Dec 5, Holiday Cabaret music & dancing, Barnard Town Hall.

Dec 18, Winter Carols, First Universalist Church of Barnard

We couldn't build community through art without your support. Donations let us know you see and appreciate our work in making the performing arts thrive in our rural corner of the world. BarnArts is a 501(c)(3) non-profit and all donations are fully tax-deductible. You will receive a warm thank you and a receipt for your donation. [Online donations](https://barnarts.org/work-with-us/), donations by check (PO Box 41, Barnard, VT 05031), and securities are all welcome and appreciated!

BarnArts is hiring a year-round, part-time, Music Program Manager. See our website for more detailed info: <https://barnarts.org/work-with-us/>

BarnArts Center for the Arts

PO Box 41

Barnard, VT 05031

www.barnarts.org

info@barnarts.org

802-234-1645 (voicemail)

CRYPTOGRAM ANSWER

"When the trees their summer splendor
Change to raiment red and gold,
When the summer moon turns mellow,
And the nights are getting cold;
When the squirrels hide their acorns,
And the woodchucks disappear;
Then we know that it is autumn,
Loveliest season of the year."

- Carol L. Riser, Autumn