



COMMUNISTS
OR NAZIS?

Bill and Laura's
Maine Legacy

“The Army Needs You!” Uncle Sam proclaimed from the billboards in the 1940s, but the truth was that young men in poor resource-rich communities, controlled from the outside, also needed the army.

Rural backwoods communities like those in northern Maine not only keep us warm and fed with the resources basic to our survival: lumber for the roofs over our heads, and potatoes for our tables. They also supply the nation with a disproportionate number of young men to fight our wars.



Sixty years ago, young men had few options for employment other than farming or forestry, i.e. planting and harvesting potatoes, on the one hand, or, on the other, chopping down trees, grinding them into pulp, driving long haulers from forest to lumber yard to paper mill.



The armed forces offered better pay, clean clothes, three solid meals, camaraderie and adventure, a chance to get out of the backwoods, and respect from the local townsfolk.

The price they paid for this respect, however, was either alienation from their roots and a sense of dislocation when they returned, or their very lives, in which case they returned in body bags and were buried in the local cemetery.



I peruse the gravestones now, in 2007, in the midst of yet another war:

Lewis Nevers, Sargeant U.S. Army, World War II
Robert Earle Goding, Private Corporal, 3 March
1969, Vietnam
Floyd E. "B.J." Burby, March 31, 1980 - Feb. 12,
2003, Iraq



Bill and Laura arrived in Ashland, Maine, to serve the Aroostook larger parish of five Congregational churches, in 1942, after World War II had begun. By the time the war ended in 1945, the year of my birth, the local newspaper filled two pages with the official portraits of the 200 Ashland men and women who were in the U.S. Armed "Services" (the elusive rhetoric of the day). For a town of nearly 2,000, this was significant number of young people, about 10% of the population.



If they had been only a few years younger, under the age of conscription, they might have been part of the youth groups started by Bill and Laura, and their memories of camp would not have been of military tents in the muddy fields of France or England, but of old army tents donated to the church camp on Oak Point on Portage Lake.



Instead of marching songs and bawdy ditties, they would have been singing “There’s a hole in the bottom of the sea” (“there’s a hair on the flea on the fly on the wart on the frog on the bump on the log in the hole in the bottom of the sea”) or “God who toucheth earth with beauty.”

As Oak Point was a Christian camp, Bible study and hymns were part of the daily program: morning watch at dawn gave campers a chance to sit quietly by themselves as the sun rose on one side of the point, while vespers at the day’s close offered a time for community worship framed by the sunset on the other side. But there was also swimming and camp craft, discussions and daily clean up activities. In fact, for once kids found setting the table and washing the dishes a kind of recreation rather than a dreaded chore imposed by nagging parents. Because this was communal work shared with friends, and accomplished all the more quickly by singing and joking together.





Even the women found themselves enjoying such mundane household tasks when they were ferried over to the camp by boat for a three-day camp experience. The women's retreats represented a major challenge to the accepted patriarchy, freeing housewives up for three days of Bible study and, of course, endless conversations among themselves. It was hard to convince their husbands to let them go, let alone to hold the household together while they were gone, and if it hadn't been church-related, they probably never would have stepped into the boat.

But once at the camp, these women experienced a rare sense of freedom, and broke the isolation of their endless days of domestic chores. It was the 1940s: clothes were sewn from scratch, washed in a wringer and hung out to dry (even in the winter, when they froze before they got pegged to the line!); meals often came from the

backyard garden (which also meant planting, pruning, and picking, then canning and preserving before the winter set in); kids were more plentiful (more hands to dig potatoes) and underfoot (no TV or video games). So the initiative by Bill and Laura to create a space and time for the women alone was radical, even unheard of and, while relished by the women, was viewed suspiciously by some men.

Gossip was an important form of communication (the word derives from the comforting murmuring sound that groups of women friends would make to ease the pain while a woman was giving birth, so it really originated with positive rather than negative connotations), and anytime you brought women together, they had a lot to say. If not at the camp in the summer, they might be meeting in the winter around a large wooden frame in the church basement one weekday afternoon, stitching squares of old clothes (as well as the stories they held) into a communal quilt, as they exchanged tales of the previous week. I wonder if they ever talked about the domestic violence that was also a constant presence, and either hidden from public view, ignored, or accepted as the way things are.





There could be a malicious side to gossip, of course, and Bill and Laura were not immune to sly remarks and innuendos. Marjorie Turner, for example, thought that Bill was crazy to buy the old Oak Point camp; even though it cost a mere \$300 for 50 acres of

land, she saw it as a white elephant comprised of seven dilapidated buildings and accessible only by boat.

The churches, however, had neither a boat nor \$300. In fact, despite the fact that Bill served five churches in the Aroostook County larger parish, the pay was not multiple; in fact it was barely existent (\$1,500 annual income, plus \$300 for travel). Laura remembers going to a church rummage sale, and not being able to afford to buy a dress for 25 cents that Marjorie Turner had brought especially for her. Sometimes the preacher was rewarded in produce from his parishioners, but one can only eat so many potatoes.

In any case, Bill was focused on the needs of the broader community (saving the world rather than the family), and his two-year General Electric training program in business management as well as his pure charisma stood him in good stead. He succeeded in raising the money to buy the camp, and got local businessmen to donate beds, sleeping bags, and dishes. Mattresses were created from muslin stuffed with straw.

The camp soon became the highlight of the year for many young people and parishioners, who knew to relish the very limited number of warm summer days in this northern clime, where the winters were harsh, even cruel; Bill would sometimes be snowed in at local farmhouses as he traveled the circuit of the five churches, and a vicious snow storm might create drifts 8-10 feet high.



Laura struggled to keep the house warm with coal or woodstove, and to bundle up the little ones if she had to go out to buy food or carry out other duties expected of the preacher's wife. The Oak Point Camp remained a bright and warm memory through the winter and over the years, for them and for many others.

And, in fact, 50 years later, the camp, long since abandoned by subsequent pastors as a central part of the ministry, also turned out to be a profitable investment. In the early 1990s, Marjorie's youngest son, Myke Turner, who was one of the youth who had ben-



efited from the camp in the 1940s and was now president of the Ashland church, negotiated the sale of the property to a private developer, which contributed significantly to the coffers of the five member churches. In an era when some were being boarded up (in the case of the Masardis church, Rodney and Frances Weeks, both

in their 90s and house-bound, were the last two members), and attendance was spotty in others, the unexpected infusion of funds actually saved those rural churches whose frames were in need of repair.



The gossip was not limited to Bill's financial acuity, however. It also spread to his politics. He had been educated at the liberal-minded University of Michigan, where he sharpened his skills as an organizer of church youth around social concerns. Then in Schenectady, where Bill met Laura while working at General Electric, they were both active in the ecumenical youth groups and broader movements in New York State. The energy of youth carried a generational optimism, but also an openness to other ways of thinking, and a willingness to question established values.

It was at Yale Divinity School, where Laura accompanied Bill in the late 1930s that their social consciousness was further broadened and deepened, with friends like Jean Harbison (not many women had a Goan scholar for a best friend), Ralph Woodward (committed to work with rural communities), and Paul Vieth. Bill was the youth secretary and Laura was the office staff for the New Haven Council of Churches; this ecumenical body included protestant and reformed Jewish populations. They initiated a youth program, Democracy in New Haven, which immersed young people in social issues in the community. After four weeks of research on one pressing issue, they reported back what they had learned to a gathering with other youth groups. Bill and Laura were part of a vibrant intellectual, socially conscious and engaged community.



The Nazi threat was gathering momentum in Europe and President Roosevelt was intimating the possibility of the United States joining other Allied troops on the continent to confront the Germans and protect the tenets of western democracy. Graduate school was a hotbed of debate during those years, with many of their friends active in the Fellowship of Reconciliation and proclaiming themselves pacifists. A favourite history professor, Roland Bainton, was a reknown pacifist; social justice leaders Richard Neibuhr and Listen Pope were also teaching at Yale at the time.

For Laura, it was a natural position to take, given that her mother, Laura (Ladybird), was a Quaker and an active pacifist. Socialist presidential candidate Norman Thomas and Fellowship of



Reconciliation (FOR) leader Bayard Rustin had been visitors at her family home in the 1930s. When entering the war became inevitable and conscription was legislated, Bill didn't have to face the draft, because graduate students and ministers were



exempt. Laura's brother, Ralph, and other friends such as Stan Harbison, however, were compelled to take a more drastic position, rejecting the call, declaring themselves conscientious objectors (COs) and being shuttled off to CO camps.

Once ordained, Bill took his first pastorate in Aroostook County, Maine, leaving behind a comfortable community of faith activists. The distance back to their home base was great, not only geographically (the roads were treacherous, the cars rudimentary), but also ideologically. Backwoods communities were isolated physically and politically, almost inevitably conservative. And in the case of World War II, as more and more men were removed from the potato fields and lumberyards and sent as uniformed envoys to Europe, a sweeping wave of patriotism protected families from the pain of the absences and helped justify the rising death toll. Churches were used more often for funerals than for baptisms, and American flags flew in front of the steeples.



A young idealist preacher, with boundless energy and optimism, could rally the youth around recreational and social activities, worship and reflection. But Bill Barndt also riled some adults in the parish with his pacifist views, in the midst of a very popular war. Even if he tried to be cautious and subtle about exposing his own opinions, his radical friends from Yale days were not always so strategic or sensitive to the deep-seated beliefs in these soldier-producing villages. Bob, a friend of the associate pastor Chuck Knapp, for example, went AWOL from the Conscientious Objector camp in Big Lick, New York, in 1944, and came north for a visit. He joined the Oak Point camp activities and connected easily with the young campers, who were drawn to his humor and storytelling prowess, as he spun tales of young men who defied authority and, holding fast to their beliefs, were interned in work camps; he questioned how a government that disavowed the camps the Nazis set up in Europe could cordon off their own young citizens for refusing to fight in

what they considered an unjust war. Bob was a kind of hero to these Aroostook County youth, as he had escaped from the camp, and he kept in touch with them after he went back south, too. The letters he sent fomenting their anti-war sentiments were intercepted by their parents, who traced this uninvited influence back to the young parish pastors.

There were other outsiders like the Barndts; basically, you were an outsider if you didn't have at least three generations of family in the region. People who come 'from away' and are different, are always suspect, but these outsiders were particularly meddling and arousing rebellious attitudes in their kids. Young student seminarians like Harold seemed to be of the same ilk, charming and seductive, while questioning the way things were and had always been.



Vacation Bible School was perhaps just a cover, an entry point, for these subversives. And Bill's associate, Chuck, was also a co-conspirator. How could he afford to buy a new jeep, if he weren't receiving secret flows of cash for his surveillance job on the side? Also suspiciously, Bill himself would disappear for long periods of time...he was gone once for a month, claiming he was in Ohio at his dad's funeral, but some thought that should have only taken a few days. He was probably at some training camp, they surmised, along with the local doctor who was coincidentally out of town at the same time, perhaps meeting up with other spies to plot and coordinate their next activities?



There were other reasons to be suspicious of this couple, who spoke with a different accent and read magazines that promoted strange ideas. While they were perhaps the most educated people in the area, they also lived in relative

poverty, and socialized with uneducated farmers and other marginalized people. The doors of the parish churches were open to everyone, and this, too, ruffled the feathers of the established power brokers. As if it weren't enough to mix the social classes, Bill Barndt also publicly criticized those who owned large tracks of property. In one sermon, he suggested that it was immoral to own more than 300 acres. For the Anderson family in Oxbow, one of the few who actually profited from farming and forestry, hiring local labour during the harvest, this was not only a slap in the face, but a questioning of their hard work and well-earned status in the community. They had the support of the regional powers, the Bangor



and Aroostook Railroad that transported their potatoes and lumber to market, as well as the Bangor Daily News, which was the official word and always reinforced the values of their owners and other well-to-do families.

Surely this must be the influence of 'those communist ideas' which had been creeping into the country ever since the socialist immigrants started arriving in the 1920s. Links to the Soviet Union were inferred, as the cold war followed on the heels of the Great War.

Laura did not escape the harsh critiques either. She was seen to be complicit with her husband, her own family history linked to the well-known socialist Eugene Debs; her uncle Holly published *The Citizen*, a socialist newsletter, from his basement in Schenectady, New York. And, as if to confirm that the Barndts were not acceptable to the upper strata, Laura's housekeeping skills were denounced as far from adequate. Why she had even been seen reading a book while her dirty clothes piled up by the wringer washer!



Her child-rearing skills were also fodder for the fire; the kids, that is my brother Mike and I, were seen as poorly behaved, crawling under the pews on Sunday morning. The preacher's family was supposed to be a model of propriety and politeness.



There was one other thing that miffed people about Bill's messages from the pulpit. When soldiers started returning from the war and organized the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW), they licensed their legion halls as taverns and increased the flow of alcohol in all social gatherings. This could have a disastrous effect on the men especially, who would drown their memories of war in liquor, shirk their responsibilities and possibly become violent with their families.

The growing sentiment against Bill and Laura Barndt thus came from various origins, but it all came to a head in 1947. Mr. and Mrs. Rafferd, a couple active in the larger parish, dropped by the parsonage one evening on their way

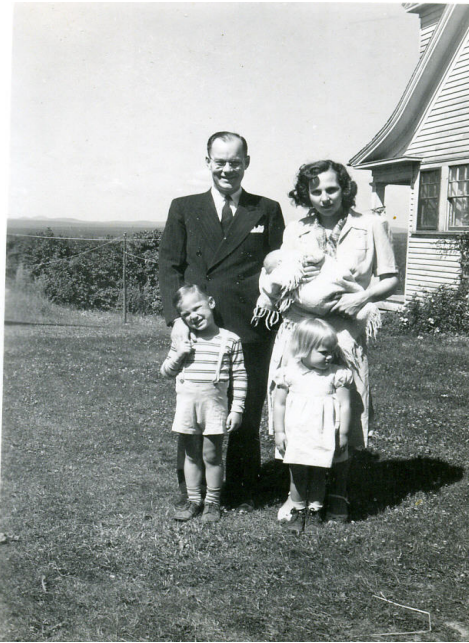


home from a gathering. with members of all five churches in the parish present. Called by the VFW, this meeting had provided a platform for all the anti-Barndt feelings to be expressed, and had served as a kind of strategy session of how they could get rid of this young preacher and his family, as well as the associate pastor. The charges were multiple, but mainly boiled down to a conclusion that the Barndts were either "communists" or "Nazis," they weren't quite sure which. Both were loaded monikers, rather like "terrorist" or "Muslim" today, and once someone was tagged with one of these labels, it stuck and spread like an invasive species.

The charges were emotionally devastating for the young couple trying to do good in the face of tremendous odds, of course, but Bill and Laura, true to form, decided to confront them head on. They called their own meeting of the parishioners from the five churches, inviting them to the Ashland Church to discuss their concerns openly. The effort was laudable, and a good number of people showed up, though the most vocal critics either didn't appear or censored themselves when the moment of truth was upon them. In any case, there was some attempt at honest dialogue that evening, and while it cleared the air temporarily, the pollution of bad feelings and distrust still hung over the parsonage and seeped into their daily interactions in palpable ways.

Charlie Brooks, the major powerbroker in Ashland (he owned the bank, the movie theatre, and other properties), offered his own advice to the young outsiders. Either settle this conflict, or high tail it out of town, he warned ominously. The two pastors, Bill and Chuck, along with their wives, Laura and Rita, made their own sober assessment that their effectiveness in these backwoods communities had probably dissipated with the mounting criticism and conflict. They slowly began to accept the inevitable and started to seek job options for themselves in other places. The Cold War was gaining momentum, and they could only expect more chilling breezes in frigid northern Maine.

For Bill, Ohio seemed like the best bet. It was his home state, and surely he would not be



considered a stranger there. Going back to safer and more familiar territory would be a relief and they would be closer to his mother and relatives. The move wasn't immediate, however, as it depended on two parallel processes.

The Congregational church had its own procedures for moving ministers into new assignments; congregations seeking pastors had in place a democratic process which involved a thorough investigation of the past of the candidate and a few days of visits by him and his family. Did the Austinburg church get whiff of the stories emanating from northern Maine about those communists (or was it Nazis)? Did they probe Laura's housekeeping and child-rearing capacities or Bill's tendency to mingle with the marginalized? Probably not, or perhaps they were just in another mindset. So the Barndts moved west and went on to spend nine productive years in that northeastern Ohio town, eventually being feted with an enormous farewell party, overflowing with

praises and tears. Quite a different send off than being run out of the town of Ashland, Maine.

The other delay in the move to friendlier terrain and a warmer climate was caused by another process, the gestation of yet another Barndt offspring. Laura was pregnant with Kathy, when the conflict was reaching a climax, and so they waited until she was born to move the growing brood to Ohio. And there they did find a solid home base, remaining for almost 60 years and counting. Kathy has perhaps sunk in the deepest roots, creating a family gathering place on an old farm south of Columbus, where we continue to converge annually and weave together these stories which have shaped us all in both similar and different ways.

This story was constructed based on interviews I conducted with Maine parishioners who remembered my parents 60 years later when I visited them in early August, 2007, and interviews with Bill and Laura themselves in late August, 2007. It was edited and embellished during a journey down memory lane, when six of the seven Barndts in the nuclear family returned to Jackson, Ohio, where we lived in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Bill nodded in confirmation as I read aloud my interpretation of these events, though he expressed a small doubt at the end: "I recognize that you can use the creative license of the writer, but you may be pushing some points a little too far."

