
Letters From New England

October 10, 2009

Stowe – On the Busiest Weekend of the Year



Cold Hollow Cider Mill

3600 Waterbury-Stowe Road

We didn't make it to the inn before dark. There was a two-mile long line of traffic waiting to exit Interstate 89 at the Waterbury exit. So we opted to drive to the next exit – about 15 minutes North – and make our way back along Route 2. It was very dark by the time we reached Waterbury again; the Garmin was in dark mode, but very friendly – chatting away about this and that turn, and illuminating the top of the dashboard like a Christmas tree.

Soon we were headed South on Route 100; we were on instrument landing. We knew the inn wasn't far from the interstate but it was pitch black except where the headlights illuminated the road. Every once in a while a giant fir reached out to grab us. The slippery road surface due to the rain and the steep embankments at points made for white-knuckle driving. We wended our way as carefully as possible around the dark curves – the only vehicle on the road. Agnes became ominously silent as if trying to figure out what to do next (Agnes is our term of endearment for the voice emanating from the Garmin). All of a sudden she cackled “Turn left on &HghOphj road in 0.8 miles.” Then a moment later “Turn left on UUtygH road in 0.2 miles.” Looking out the window was like looking out the porthole of a bathyscaphe at the bottom of a Pacific abyss. “Turn left on BBG%%\$ road” she commanded. We stopped the car, opened the window, and backed up a few feet. There was no road. We waited about 30 seconds for our eyes to dark adapt. There was a dirt path just wide enough for a single vehicle.

Following Yogi Berra's advice “When you come to a fork in the road...” We took it. Down down we went, you could hear the mud sucking at the tires. Up, up we went at a perilously steep angle. A sign appeared: “DO NOT STOP,” apparently written from experience. Were those lights blinking through the trees in the distance – far up the hill and in the opposite direction to which we were traveling? A 180 degree switchback turn on a steep incline (just like any normal Italian road) corrected our heading. A few minutes later we plopped into a clearing: a dimly lit building appeared just ahead. The mounds in front of us morphed into automobiles as we approached. The building looked like someone's house, although built for an Alpine existence. Maybe they would let us stay the night rather than have us retrace our steps.

The following morning the innkeeper told us that the sign was meant for winter guests, who had a habit of stopping at that moment of doubt (or fear): initiating a backwards slide down the hill into a snow-filled ditch. An auspicious beginning to any ski vacation. Thus began our two-night stay at the Grünberg Haus.

It must be said that the hospitality of Jeff and Linda Conner is in direct proportion to the difficulty we had in finding their inn at night. Our breakfasts alone were worth the price of the stay. And to our amazement, on the next eve-



Grünberg Haus 94 Pine Street, Waterbury Vermont

ning, a well-lighted sign advertised the entrance to the road up to the inn. For those travelers with a sense of adventure and an inclination towards the rustic – we highly recommend you the Grünberg haus.

On this day we headed North toward the Trapp Family Lodge hiking trails, but not before a few stops along the way. Our first was the Cold Hollow Cider Mill for a late-morning snack of fried donuts and hot cider in spite of the fact that we had just consumed a lion's share of homemade applesauce pancakes for breakfast. The Cider Mill is just that, and you can watch them press the apples through a large plate-glass window. Impressive, especially since the apples are hand-stacked rack-by-rack onto the press. Near the press in the viewing area is a tap where ice-cold, freshly-pressed cider is available to sample. Believe me, you have never tasted cider this good. We bought several gallons, along with a dozen donuts, and at least five jars of apple cider jelly.

Apple cider jelly is the essence of apple cider. It's made the same way that maple syrup is: by boiling down the liquid until only a concentrated form remains. In the case of the jelly, the liquid is boiled down to a smooth paste. I was immediately addicted when I tried it a couple of years ago when Ann and I stopped here after cross-country skiing at the Trapp Family Lodge.

On the road again, albeit briefly, as the Cabot cheese outlet beckoned. Their Vintage Cheddar is the *nonpareil* of cheddars. Sample a variety of their herb-seasoned cheddars, as well, from a wide selection and buy the sage. Be advised, however, that Lake Champlain Chocolates is right next door. You may want to wear blinders.

Instead of taking the Mountain Road to the “Lodge,” I knew a shortcut from having driven this way many times while living in Vermont. We seemed to be headed directly to our hiking destination when all of a sudden we were greeted by the most breathtaking of photo ops that one is



Barn **Stowe, Vermont**

likely to encounter – that is, if you like taking pictures of old barns.

I stopped the car – a little too quickly for the remains of our cider and donuts – and just gazed. When I had regained my composure, I parked the car in front of the farmhouse and was heading for the door when it opened and the occupant/owner stepped onto the porch. I introduced myself and asked permission to park (*a fait accompli* not lost on her) and to take some pictures of the property.

She: Don't see why you asked. No one else does.

Me: (*pause*) Well I used to live around here. (hoping to indicate that familiarity breeds knowledge of the local protocols)

She: Well, go right ahead. (*walking away*)

So I shot about a hundred pictures of the barn and the surroundings, only one of which I have the space to show you here. Ann was busy with her camera, as well. She's not as compulsive with a camera, so she struck up a conversation with the farmer. With her customary graciousness, Ann soon had the farmer telling us about herself, and the history of the farm. It's a story that would fill a book, which she put into about 200 words. Vermonters have a knack for that. Turns out she's been working the farm ever since her husband died over thirty years ago.

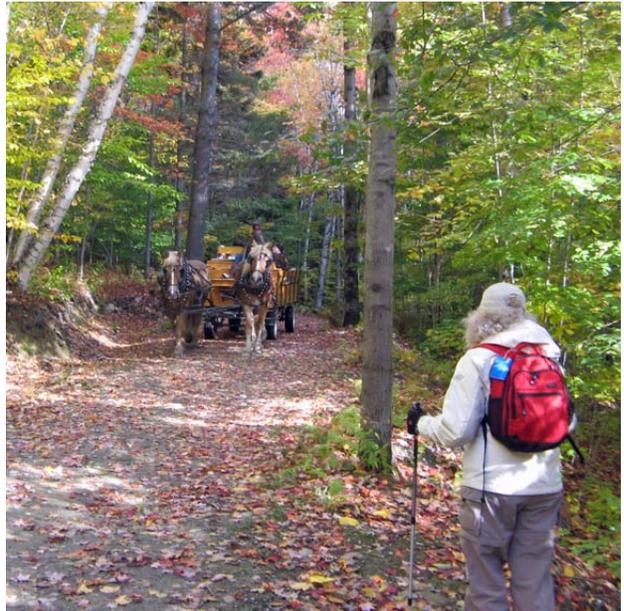
All-in-all it was a good half hour, a very good half hour, before we were on our way again, but not without promising our benefactress some prints from our photo shoot.

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It's six miles round-trip to the Slayton Pasture Cabin from the "Lodge" and even though the afternoon was well

underway I thought we could make it up and back before dark (Where have you heard that before?). After we had stopped in the Lodge office to buy our trail passes and pick up a trail map we headed out. I thought it would be interesting to go by way of the Chapel: so off we went without looking at the map. I'd been here many times before. This was Ann's first visit on foot.

We took the Sugar Road to Fox Track simply because – I hadn't looked at the map and it had been years since I'd been up to the Chapel and the Sugar Road was wide and the foliage was beautiful and – I hadn't looked at the map. When we intersected Fox Track we saw a sign for the Chapel and doubled back in that direction.



Traffic on Fox Track

Trapp Family Lodge

While on Fox Track we encountered our first serious traffic and were forced to stop until the traffic had cleared. We continued on our way and took the next trail up to the Chapel.



Chapel

Trapp Family Lodge

There were a hundred different angles from which to shoot. That plus the sun playing hide and seek in the clouds occupied us for the next fifteen or twenty minutes. But who's watching the clock?

When we decided to go, I thought we'd better take a look at the map – it might be simpler to continue on over the top of the knoll than to retrace our steps. I pulled the “map” from my pocket where I'd stuck it when the clerk at the counter had handed it to me. It was a map of the Lodge surroundings – not a trail map!

Now right away you are going to say “You should have looked at the map earlier.” I had! In the Lodge office when the clerk first handed a map to me. I looked at it and said, “This isn't a trail map.” She apologized, hunted around in a drawer and handed me what I was now holding, saying “This is what you are looking for.” I thanked her, and without looking at it folded it in half and stuck it in the big inner pocket of my cargo pants.

There is a lesson to be learned here somewhere.

I had both my eTrex GPS and the Nüvi 670 with me, but no topo map on either of them. But how difficult can it be to find your way around the Trapp Family Lodge trails? Even if you are not carrying a trail map! A lot more difficult, as we were soon to find out!

OK, “Over the top.” I said, and off we went. At the top, the way was intentionally barred with a jury-rigged set of branches, but it was easy to walk around. The trail narrowed until it was hardly visible and the granite rocks became extremely slippery: many were covered with wet leaves. No problem – we had our trekking poles.

We headed down until we came to another proverbial fork in the road like the one I mentioned earlier. The native

who always lies was standing at the fork. Having figured out the solution to this one years ago, I asked him the appropriately phrased question. He pointed in one direction; we took the other.

After an hour of incessant ups and downs, we ran into what looked like a mini sewage treatment plant. I did not think that they had installed this for the Slayton Pasture Cabin, even considering the amount of traffic headed up there at all times of the year, but these were environmentally conscious owners. A short distance away I spotted condos. Now why would they put condos way up here I thought, except for the view. Denial was the path of least resistance.

Ann suggested we might be lost. I pulled out my Nüvi 670. “No road here,” it indicated, despite the fact that I was standing on one.

Good thing it was the busiest weekend of the year, because the only other pair of hikers we saw that day came out of the woods. I hid the Nüvi and asked the way to the Lodge. They pointed in the direction they were going. We followed. About fifteen minutes later we were approaching the Lodge from the side opposite from which we had started. All's well...

It was about 5:00 PM. Sunset was about an hour away. If we moved really fast... we could make it up the Mountain Road, over Mount Mansfield and down the other side and on to Burlington before dark. “Let's get going,” I said. “I know a great restaurant on the waterfront in Burlington.” (The last time I'd eaten there was the year my daughter graduated from college – 1990).

We drove to the other side of the mountain – on the Mountain Road, of course – and headed for Burlington. It was just getting dark when we got to town; I drove right



The other side of the Mountain

Mount Mansfield Vermont

for the ferry dock, or what I thought was the ferry dock. The restaurant that I had in mind was just across the street. I remembered gourmet meals served with quiet dignity, a limitless wine cellar, cloth napkins and tablecloths, food served on fine china in a quiet nook where a couple could hold an intimate conversation.

I parked the car and there, across the street, was the familiar stone facade. But the name, the name above the entrance was simply wrong: “The Skinny Pancake.” The Skinny Pancake? The interior had all the atmosphere and fare of a college cafeteria – with cafeteria style seating. A noisy college crowd filled every available space. But after all, this was College Street, and the University of Vermont was just up the hill. The place had nothing to offer two tired and hungry leaf-peepers, who just wanted to enjoy a good meal and a glass of wine.

To tell the truth I didn’t remember the name of the restaurant I was seeking, but I was sure it was not the one we had just encountered. A moment of doubt flashed before my eyes - and then quickly faded. Things change after twenty years – restaurants change hands as quickly as the money used to pay for the meals. We would find another just up the street – “Leunig’s” was on the corner of College and Church Street – that I remembered.

We hiked up the hill in the dark. We still wore our field gear, so we fit right in with the crowd as we approached Church Street. The sky was clear and the cold nipped at any exposed skin. Our hunger provided the motivation for the climb. The line waiting to get in Leunig’s was about an hour long – outside. It appears that half the leaf peepers in Vermont were staying in Burlington this weekend – this the busiest weekend of the year – and that they had all descended on Church Street to find a place to eat – in direct competition with the Saturday night college crowd.

After an hour’s searching we were back in the car heading toward Shelburne on Route 7. There we couldn’t find the great little Mexican restaurant called “Amigo’s” that was just down the street from where I used to live. And we also couldn’t find the pasta restaurant where my daughter worked as a live manikin rolling out fresh pasta in an open window setting.

Desperate, we decided to stop at the first eatery we encountered as we headed back North on Route 7. “Buono’s Italian Restaurant” appeared below the roadway on our left. A quick U-turn put us in the filled parking lot. It was about 9:00 PM. We were running on fumes from our mid-afternoon Granola bars. Italian was good. We could do Italian. We had just been to Italy in August (see my “Letters from Italy”).

Between five and ten minutes later we were seated. About an hour later we were headed back to the Grünberg House

in Waterbury for a deserved night’s rest. If you’re looking for a “warm welcoming atmosphere with family tradition” in a pinch, late on a Saturday night, pay the Cartularo family restaurant a visit. *Meglio un uovo oggi che una gallina domani.*

Garrett (with Ann)

Afterword

My daughter tells me that the restaurant I was seeking was the *Ice House Restaurant*, and that we ate there after her high school graduation – not college. A quick look at a map of Burlington will show that this restaurant is located about two blocks south of the *Skinny Pancake*.