

COMMUNITY EVENTS IN THE WESTERN OXFORD FOOTHILLS

By Jo Radner

Towns and villages of the Western Oxford Foothills are friendly places, setting immense store by neighborliness. Roberta Chandler, native of Lovell, notes that people move to this area looking for “a sense of belonging and being ‘part of’” — and they find it.

The region’s impressive number of community events and celebrations proclaim and maintain our relationships with one another. With these occasions we mark *yearly cycles*, see *the past in the present*, create and re-create *old and new traditions*, and find ourselves *making and remaking community*.

THE YEARLY CYCLES

How do you divide up the year? winter-spring-summer-fall? religious holidays? political holidays? the school year and summer vacation? the sports year, with football season, hunting season and baseball season? the arrival and departure of seasonal residents and visitors? No matter what your mental map of the seasons looks like, you will find it marked in the events of the Western Oxford Foothills.

Winter brings cozy suppers, craft fairs to supply holiday gifts, concerts and sing-alongs, tree lightings and Living Nativity performances, winter carnivals in Stoneham, Oxford, and Bethel, and then, as the stern Maine winter goes on and on and on, such cheerful distractions as West Paris’s Cabin Fever Countdown.

Spring — Maine’s elusive, tantalizing season of waning snow and deepening mud — brings the distraction of Mud Balls (Andover), March Madness and Casino Night (Harrison), and the Bryant Pond Mock Hee-Haw Show, but also celebrations of new growth with the Rhubarb Pie Sale (West Paris) and Plant Sale (Denmark). Town meetings, Easter festivities, and Memorial Day Parades mark the political, religious, and historical cycles.

And then it’s summer — season of homecoming, of community heritage festivals, of delicious meals from Strawberry Breakfast (Locke Mills) to bean hole bean suppers. Between the Fourth of July festivities and Stoneham Rescue Service’s Labor Day Weekend breakfast, outdoor concerts (Paris, Fryeburg), farmers’ markets (Norway, Bethel), and art shows (Lovell, Bethel, Norway) vie for attention with more active events: adult co-ed softball in Harrison, sailing regattas in Woodstock, the Fryeburg Rotary’s Bowl-a-thon, and even Bed Races in Oxford!

Agricultural Fairs (Oxford, Fryeburg) and harvest festivals and suppers usher in the fall, culminating in Thanksgiving (when dinner is free and open to the public at the Harrison Church). Hunters’ breakfasts and suppers, “turkey shoots” (raffles, not firearms events!) — Veterans Day Parades, and community dances bring us warm, once more, into winter.

THE PAST IN THE PRESENT

Heritage — history — is at the center of community identity in the Western Oxford Foothills. Old Home Days festivals in Andover, Lovell, Harrison, and West Paris hark back to

the days when emigrant sons and daughters would come back for summertime town reunions. Nowadays these gatherings — as well as Mollyockett Day in Bethel and Founders' Day on Paris Hill — embrace a wide range of entertainment. Parades feature floats by volunteer groups, politicians, and local businesses, weaving together those who share in the work of community-building. Booths give regional craftspeople a chance to show their products, and provide fundraising opportunities for local groups. Musical entertainment, dances, public luncheons and suppers, firemen's musters, games for children, and antique car shows share the days with playful frog-jumping contests, pie-eating competitions, women's skillet throws, men's couch potato races, dunk tanks, and cow chip bingo.

You'll notice many different views of history evoked in Western Oxford events. One vision of the colonial heritage celebrates early friendship with local Native Americans (Bethel's Mollyockett Day); others present old technologies (Heritage Day in Bethel; Back to the Past at Scribner's Mills in Harrison). More recent heritage is called forth by the frequent exhibitions of antique cars, tractors, and trucks. The agricultural past of the region is celebrated with horse, oxen, and antique tractor pulling competitions at the Fryeburg, Oxford, and Waterford fairs, and in demonstrations of early farming techniques. Former tools and methods of forestry — long a lifeline of this region — are revisited in demonstrations and competitions at Woodsmen's Day (the first Monday of Fryeburg Fair) and in the many regional suppers offering "bean hole beans," the old loggers' way of cooking in a subterranean fire pit. Every town's historical society welcomes visitors to its museum displays, and many offer special tours and programs. The Bethel Historical Society has developed a Regional History Center.

Hospitality to visitors — a tradition that shines through all the community events of the Western Oxford Foothills — is sometimes even celebrated explicitly as it was in 2002, when the theme of Andover Olde Home Days was "Andover, Hospitality Valley." Past and present are vitally connected.

OLD AND NEW TRADITIONS

Perhaps the oldest community events in Western Oxford County are those sociable fundraisers, *community meals*. Next oldest are the agricultural fairs — the Oxford County Fair, which marked its 157th anniversary as "The horse-powered fair" in 2002, the *Waterford World's Fair*, which began in 1850 and (despite its audacious name) is arguably the smallest agricultural fair in Maine, and Maine's largest exposition, the Fryeburg Fair, which also began in the mid-19th century. Still central in these events are the exhibitions of domestic animals, farm produce, and home crafts that defined them at the outset.

Other regional events also have deep roots, and some have changed little over time. The Oxford Hills Family Bean Hole Bean Festival, still cooking its beans in the manner its founders learned from northern Maine loggers, celebrated its fiftieth anniversary in July, 2002, with a free dinner for all.

Some festivals change name and sponsors, adapt to new conditions, but still persist. Bethel's Mollyockett Day began in the 1950s as the "Bethel Bazaar," organized by local women to raise money to help needy families. It soon gained the backing of the Bethel Health Council, and later, in the 1970s, the Bethel Lions Club, which gave it its present name to honor the

accomplishments of a local Pequawket woman who was most generous to the region's early European settlers. Recently it has come under the sponsorship of the Mahoosuc Arts Council.

The Brownfield Fire Department's Turkey Shoot originated as a fundraiser to help the town recover from the disastrous wildfire of 1947, which destroyed Brownfield's public buildings and more than three quarters of its houses. Today it sustains the Fire Department itself.

Creative adaptations to technological, social, and economic change keep community traditions strong. Snowmobile clubs — a phenomenon of recent decades — echo older customs in programs such as the summer Pig Roast of the Stoneham Knight Riders Club. Responding to increasing concern about alcohol, in 1998 Bethel initiated First Night Bethel, a chemical-free, town-wide New Year's Eve celebration. And on a lighter note, in 2002 the Andover Olde Home Days Committee noted that "due to the lack of cow chips (our farmers have all sold their cattle), we will have a 'Road Apple Roll'" instead of the traditional cow chip bingo.

MAKING AND REMAKING COMMUNITY

"Sociability" is the word people in the Western Oxford County use most often when they talk about the value of their community events.

These joyful moments let us see our communities whole. They cushion our differences. We applaud politicians of opposite parties as their parade floats go by. We may serve food at bean suppers elbow-to-elbow with the neighbor who has disputed our property line. Our celebrations flatten out social differences with good humor. The selectmen and the Lions Club president volunteer for the dunk tank at Old Home Days along with ordinary citizens, and we cheer with gusto as our children take aim and douse them.

And we delight in humor, irony, and eccentricity. With straight faces we name the smallest agricultural fair in Maine the Waterford World's Fair. The East Otisfield Free Baptist Church holds its annual Sunday School picnic in celebration of Joe Holden's theory that the sun moves around the earth. At fairs and festivals, citizens of all ages stand around the cow chip bingo field, energizing the waiting period with deadpan remarks about the absurdity of focusing so intently on a cow's digestive processes.

We celebrate those whose private achievements do not often gain public recognition — people skilled in the daily arts of cooking, textile work, farming, and domestic crafts. Exhibition halls at the fairs dazzle visitors with the sheer quantity of fine work and produce. With dedications and service award ceremonies we honor those whose behind-the-scenes work for the community has made a difference.

Our celebrations are joyous moments in the routines of yearly life, and we invite all to share in them.

For information about Annually Recurring Community Events, consult our data base at <http://www.westernmaineculture.org/WMCAFolk.html>