

The foundation walls for the houses were made by piling up the stones to line the cellar hole. Once they used up the rocks they had dug out, they found more and hauled them in by hand or, if they were lucky, with a horse.

They built the houses with lumber they sawed by hand and they pinned it all together with square nails that were hand-forged, one at a time. It had to be brutal work. But no more so than the work it took to clear this land for the apple orchards and fields to grow livestock feed. All those rocks had to be moved and the timber cut. Each tree left a stump that had to be dug out by hand, hauled off and burned. Then the holes left behind were filled in with dirt hauled from another location. They didn't have bulldozers or excavators. They had a crude shovel, a double bitted ax and the Yankee work ethic. But, that was enough. They built something important, created something from nothing.

I am sure, knowing the type of people they were, that it was not for themselves that they worked so hard, but because they thought they were planting the seeds for a better life for future generations. All they wanted from their toil was to be rewarded with something more, something better for their descendants to enjoy.

But, now that the future generations are here, look at this place: abandoned, tumbled down and rotted away. All that work, all that heartache, all the pain, for nothing more than a few old rock lined cellar holes and a weed infested cemetery on the hill beside them.

These people had epitomized what made the 14<sup>th</sup> state, the first to join the new nation after the thirteen original colonies, so unique. Brutal winters, short summers and a rocky land that fought back against attempts to tame it was about all the state offered. But, the stubborn residents took it as a challenge. If they could survive and thrive here, then they had nothing left to prove.

Vermont has a proud tradition of independence and self-reliance. It was an independent country before it became a state and it once was a place populated with hard and independent people. Vermont had one of the first written constitutions in North America and was the first place on this continent to ban slavery. Vermonters stood alone, asked for nothing, knew their word was their bond and believed in themselves. It was people with those qualities who built this place, who built Vermont; strong, self-reliant people with conservative values. The state didn't have a lot to offer the new country, but the people did. What Vermont brought to the newborn United States of America was a can-do spirit and a stubbornness to never give up.

"Make it do, use it up, wear it out." That was our motto. Self-reliance was our doctrine. Vermont was an inspiration for a new country and a role model

for all the tough minded people who built America into the greatest nation in the history of man.

But Vermont had taken a left turn, some say a wrong turn, late in the twentieth-century. The independent, self-reliant and free-thinking people that defined Vermont for nearly three hundred years were replaced by aging hippies, entitlement bums and socialist politicians. In some ways we were again ahead of our time. As it turned out the entire country was following the path we explored. I suppose, history was repeating as once again, our tiny state led the way. But I could take no pride in that. Not this time. Not the way it all ended.

There were several apple trees growing around the old homesteads. No doubt the offspring of the twenty acre orchard that was just over the hill. Some bird or animal had ingested the seeds and then shit them out here. They landed on a patch of dirt where they could take root and sprout in the open, sun-filled area that was once a little village. I figured there had to be a lesson in irony here someplace, about how we all are at the mercy of a random drop of shit, or something like that. But it escaped me today. As my mood grew blacker I was less inclined to humorous musings.

These people had worked hard, perhaps to an early grave; to create a village, a home, something of value. But now all that was left were a few cellar holes that were filling in so that in another couple of decades they would be hard to even find. When you look at the inevitable end, any sane man has to ask, "What's the point?" Why bother, it's all so hard and if this is how it ends, it's not worth it.

The reasons why it happens are always different at first glance, but when you dig deeper, perhaps not so much. It's always because of human greed. Not just for wealth, but a thirst for power. My guess is these homes emptied after the forest around them was laid to waste. In the early eighteen hundreds every tree on this mountain was cut so the wood could be used to make charcoal. After that, they brought in sheep to graze on the plants that grew in the open lands. Once the sheep ate what remained and there was nothing but dirt and rocks, everybody else left.

That didn't leave anything for the people in these houses to survive on. There were no more travelers to spend money. The woods were gone, so they had no firewood for heat or anyplace to hunt for food. The streams were so polluted with wood ash and runoff silt because of the overgrazing that all the fish died. The grazing was gone, turned to sheep shit, so their cattle starved. A