



No County for Young Men or Women. Or is it?

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By Michael Uhl

Oh very young what will you leave us this time?

- Cat Stevens.

When the county paper comes out each Thursday, I usually give it a ritual briefing. It's a broadsheet full of the humdrum town affairs and local doings. Selectmen's meetings get a lot of ink, and whose bid won the winter ploughing contract, that sort of thing. The culture vultures of every taste promote a steady stream of art openings and festivals, some highbrow, some low. The live music scene can vary, but for years now has been dominated week to week by a resident chamber ensemble, and a couple who perform Celtic songs and sea chanteys

Any *big* crime of the week merits a read; someone skipped off with the church funds, the break-in at the Dunkin' Donuts. Even with a murder or two each year, a lover betrayed, a small potatoes drug deal gone sour, no one would imagine we have a crime problem here. Communal conflict is mostly confined to the paper's lively, heavily polarized Letters-to-the-Editor section – my personal favorite – that sometimes spills its spicy provincial polemic over several pages.

The paper covers all eighteen towns of Lincoln County along Maine's Midcoast – some more than others – plus Monhegan Plantation – an island art colony, and Hibberts Gore – a gore being an unincorporated area that surveyors who first mapped Maine inadvertently ignored. With a population of one, Hibberts Gore occupies two square kilometers touching three counties, but belongs to ours, and is described in the 2010 Census as "Maine's only non-functioning legal entity."



Rural life and upscale life in Lincoln County (Photo left: Sheepscot General)

While I do find curiosities like Hibberts Gore of considerable interest, I have never seen an article about the place in the *Lincoln County News*, though I certainly would have read it if I had. There was, however, one census-related headline on the front page of a recent edition that riveted my eye: **“Lincoln County the oldest county in the nation’s oldest state.”**

Say what? I knew that Maine had gained statehood in 1820, and was far from being the “oldest state.” But the headline was misleading. “Oldest” referred, not to a chronological, but a demographic fact. It seems that the same 2010 U.S. Census that had recorded the solitary soul inhabiting Hibberts Gore – a “white woman” by the way – also revealed that the median age among Lincoln County’s 34,457 residents is 48.1, more than five years older than the state’s average of 42.7, which still makes Maine’s population the oldest in the nation.

“Far out!” I thought, as if I’d been treated to a particularly amusing bit of high grade trivia about my adopted domicile, a kind of offbeat resume line, like my having grown up in a town named Babylon. As I read further the special moment faded and my brain kicked in. Clearly there was deeper meaning here. Since 1990, the article reported, quoting a memo from Bob Faunce, the County Planner, Lincoln County’s median age, then 37.4, “had increased by 28%. In practical terms,” Faunce had written, “this is the difference between a parent with children in middle school and an empty nester.”

So, my first question was, where have all the young people gone, specifically the group in the child bearing years of 20 to 40? My own son, 32, is here, household of three, living in the county, mixing his work time between a home office and crisscrossing southern Maine selling high tech communications and servicing his accounts. His wife,

28, holds a teaching position in one of the county's best elementary schools. I knew that some of their childhood friends were still around, but a lot more had migrated out of state. Simon and Amanda, living in Lincoln County where they grew up, apparently represented a dwindling base for replacement tots to take up laptops at the local school, K through 8, in our own coastal town of South Bristol.

As a case in point, South Bristol is one of eight municipalities in the county where the median age, over 50, actually exceeds the county mean. These are the gold coast towns, strung out along estuaries and rivers that wash into the Atlantic. South Bristol's two hamlets stretch down the long narrow edge of the wider Pemaquid peninsula, forked up the middle fjord-like, placing much of the South Bristol strip between two rivers, the Johns and the Damariscotta. Bottom line: lots of waterfront property, less and less in the hands of South Bristol's fishing families, and increasingly showcasing the cottage-palazzi of summer residents from the 1% income bracket whose 56.6 % of the town's housing units outnumber those of our year round population.

You would never see these luxury homes from the state route that travels down to the little fishing village of South Bristol and on to Christmas Cove, long a summer community of the well-heeled, and of some interest to colonial history, since John Smith made land there on Christmas Day in 1614, and the English attempted several early settlements in these parts, all of which failed. The family of the heavyweight champ Gene Tunney's socialite wife owned a home off Christmas Cove, and local folks from time to time still bring out their photographs and baseballs signed by Babe Ruth and Lou Gehrig who were fishing buddies of the famous boxer, and who sojourned on the Tunneys' island on at least one occasion. Tracy Kidder, the bestselling author, has a nice home here on a private cove. Even as a town resident for over thirty years, I only laid eyes on our finest waterfront homes because I worked on the 1990 Census.

Twenty years later it's not the summer resident community that has skewed the demographic spread in Lincoln Country – although this segment has grown – but folks like me said to be “aging in place,” and a healthy contingent who've come here to retire. In the water-seamed town of Southport bordering the county's best known tourist destination, Boothbay Harbor, the average age is 60; maybe the whole town will simply transition to assisted living over, say, the next two decades. But when you juxtapose the Maine lifestyle to the Florida or South Western retirement alternatives, only a tiny fraction choose the four seasons, to include an extended winter, and not least because often they can trade-up for a home with acreage that those with a decent nest egg, but not necessarily wealthy, would never have been able to afford in the places they've left behind.

Still, with plenty of rental units, it's not that housing here is beyond the reach of young people, according to the County Planner Bob Faunce. It's the lack of job opportunities that have sped their out-migration. A follow-up article appeared in the *News* reporting that the County Commissioners "weigh[ed] in on the census data" at their regular meeting. They took cognizance of the aging problem, but sounded optimistic about their job development plan, as did their County Development Director, Mary Ellen Barnes.

By appointment, I went to see Ms. Barnes at her office in the county seat, Wiscasset, a town I loathe and avoid with a vengeance. It's the great bottle neck along Coastal Route 1; in the tourist saturated months of July and August expect long delays crawling along for miles there in stop and go traffic. A plan for a bypass has been derailed. Debated for a decade, no one can decide whose ox will be gored by eminent domain: pristine landscape spoiled, property seized, homes of long standing moved or demolished. In the meantime, to spare the few the many suffer.

I found Mary Ellen Barnes in a waterfront building housing the Lincoln County Regional Planning Commission. The highly informed Ms. Barnes provided me an illuminating briefing. Barnes emphasized the country's "small business economy," the health of which was challenged by a dwindling labor force. The county planners aimed to attract entrepreneurs whose businesses could provide between 25-100 jobs, and to ensure there would be a qualified labor pool with the skills required to fill them. For example, a local laboratory for ocean sciences hopes to double its workforce to create "technology transfers" – marketable products – and an alternative energy company was also being courted to set up shop in the county.

Several "career centers" geared toward increasing productivity through training and adult education, Barnes told me, were already in place here and in contiguous coastal counties, one of which was oriented toward addressing a scarcity of homegrown nurses. According to a pair of research papers Barnes handed me on the economic implications of aging in Maine, and from which I will quote extensively, "the proportion of elderly residents is projected to almost double by 2030," whereas Maine expects "absolute declines" in its age 24-40 population over that same period.

The prescriptive thrust of this disturbing demographic is to go with the flow by "improving services for the elderly," nursing for instance, and "developing more elderly- friendly communities and workplaces [while] encouraging older workers to participate in the labor force longer by raising the retirement age to help ease the pressures of a shrinking labor pool." Or as one report put it ominously, "There is no longer a bright line between 'work' and 'retirement.'" Thus confronted with labor's

graying ranks, employers too will have to suck it up and "find ways to adjust to employing older workers."

Many in a population "aging in place," however, will not seek to reenter the workforce. Among those whose savings and pensions are inadequate, this will create "a growing number of dependents," not to mention a depleted tax base. Most of our towns have elementary schools supported by resident and non-resident taxes. The traditions that attach folks to their local schools in Lincoln County are powerful, often unyielding. No campaigns in the past have riven these towns more bitterly than school consolidations that were mandated from above.

Tiny South Bristol had its own high school into the sixties; in the final year, I was told, all seven boy students in grades 9 through 12 were on the basketball team, a source of enduring pride for the native community. It was folks "from away," immune to local tradition and wanting better educational opportunities for their own offspring, who led the battle for consolidation with the respected academy in our shire town ten miles upriver at the head tide, and who became targets of many threats just below the threshold of violence.

Lincoln County planners like Ms. Barnes would clearly like to avoid the school consolidation scenario, in part, by reversing the trend of the youth drain. But the reports I read are sketchy about how to do that, a task made more daunting by the fact that Maine's birth rate is 25% below the national average. Attracting young immigrants who "contribute disproportionately to population growth, because they have higher birth rates" would be a desirable option, except that "Maine is the whitest state in the nation, 97%," so immigrants, as well as youth in general, are apparently turned off by "a lack of diversity."

The statewide strategy to compensate for shrinkage of local tax bases needed to support schools and services for dependent seniors is most concretely articulated in the plan to attract, not the child bearing young, but more retirees. The idea is premised on the principle of "importation of wealth," and that the economic value of each retiree is the equivalent of 3.7 factory jobs. Indeed there seems scant impact of recession among the artisans and caretakers who cater to the carriage trade here in South Bristol, the class that bears the bulk of the town's tax burden.

It is believed that 'quality of place' and our 'elder-friendly' orientation are Maine's principal selling points. Since tens of thousands of empty nesters audition Maine year after years as visitors, the planners reason that extending the tourist season, presumably

through destination advertizing, will accelerate the stream of comfortable retirees who choose Maine over the Sun Belt for their declining years.

Toward the end of our interview, I mentioned to Ms. Barnes that I was aware of a handful of young people who had stayed in the county by taking up small scale specialty farming, and asked if this trend – which was definitely a bottom-up phenomenon – was on the radar of the professional planners? Barnes was well aware of the instances I cited, and ticked off the names of several non-profit entities, like the Real Food Institute – whose mission is to place local foods into our schools and hospitals – as examples of county support for these fledgling agriculturalists.

I told the Development Director that I was interested in these young people for reasons beyond the subject we had been discussing, feeling a measure of empathy for their generational struggle that went farther than what would be seen as a natural concern for my own son and my 29 year old stepson, James, who designs web sites out of Belfast, Maine. I'd had contact with a group of students in the last course I'd taught at the University of Maine in 2006 whose collective personae both perplexed and intrigued me.

They were respectfully interested in my course on the Vietnam War, but had not been politicized by their own wars as my generation was, and did not appear engaged generally in the world of current affairs. I sensed that their lack of organized opposition to Iraq and Afghanistan was only partially explained by the absence of a draft that would threaten many personally; there were more profound currents I couldn't fathom, a stubborn resistance and skepticism toward hierarchy perhaps. But maybe that was wishful projection on my part.

Writing gives one permission to talk with others you might not otherwise approach on the daily round. I was at the local food coop gathering signatures on a petition to reverse one of our Tea Party governor's many boneheaded "reforms," and made bold to ask a young man named Alex his opinion on the county census data. Alex had been out of state, but came back with his wife to homestead here, raise their family and as much food as possible to meet their needs. His generation, he said, was on its own. With no hope of long term support from social security or Medicare, he had grimly concluded that he must focus only on day-to-day survival.

I asked if he knew the other young farmers I'd mentioned to Mary Ellen Barnes, and Alex told me about a store called Sheepscoot General – the General for short – a gathering place for this new crop of tillers located in Whitefield, one of our rural inland townships. Barnes had mentioned the same store, and when I left her office, I made

directly for the General, and found it on the road I drive frequently to the VA Medical Center in the state's capital, Augusta. The enterprise was newly installed in an outbuilding of an old farm where I'd once come to pick strawberries, and behind the counter was a young woman, Taryn Hammer, whose wry smile, suggesting wisdom beyond her 24 years, was the default expression on a very sweet face.

Over a cup of French Roast and a day-old donut, I listened to Taryn's story, which potentially outlines the course that others of her generation may follow to remain in the county or who might come here by choice. Taryn's from Detroit, but took her bachelor's degree in food and agriculture at Evergreen College in Washington State. After farming in several exotic locales, like South Africa, she and her schoolmate/partner Ben were drawn to Whitefield by the availability of the family farm where Ben had grown up. They'd since moved up the road to the current location which they've rented because the soil was better and the infrastructure more suited to the needs of their store, which was stocked with local produce and shelves of foodstuff grown and processed in Maine. They also contribute from their own gardens, along with eight other organic farmers in the area, to provide veggies in season weekly for customers in a CSA – Community Supported Agriculture – network.

It became quickly clear to me that the economic vision Taryn described was grounded in the profit-driven business model, based not on capital so much as on labor. Culturally, this doesn't position these young farmers as back-to-the-landers like those of my generation, communards and counter-cultural drop-outs by choice, not necessity, and possessed of a radical political ideology that was at the core of their identities. These folks today are in it for the long haul, looking to build economies of scale that are much closer to the old family farm in contrast to the industrial agriculture that has predominated the food market since the dawn of petrochemical fertilizers. They want to make enough money to live decently, and have a plan on how to get there.

Creating 'value added' products is the essential ingredient of that plan, like the sauerkraut and kimchi one couple engaged primarily in organic pork husbandry produces from the six acre garden of their Thirty Acre Farm. Taryn sketched an historical context from Maine's past that was somewhat romantic, arguing that "the tradition of Maine's economy is different. Not long ago there wasn't a money economy here." Well, that's a bit overstated, but I took her point.

What have disappeared more recently, and are relevant to Taryn's business model, are the many processing plants and cannaries that were buyers of cash crops, harvested from land and sea, like squash and pumpkins for pie filling, sardines, dried and baked

beans and the like. Grand old chicken barns still dot the landscape of old family farms throughout the state from the boom era of chicken and egg production that had a healthy run in Maine before that sector was industrialized. This is the economy Taryn and her comrades aim to revitalize, but on the scale of small individual farms, not factories. To move their output around the state there already exists a network of alternative distributors supplying restaurants and co-ops, like the outfit with a post-feminist sobriquet, Northern Girl, proprietor Marada Cook, based along the Canadian border in the old *Republic* of Madawaska of *Evangeline* fame.

There's another ally, Taryn believes, that favors their success. They are banking that time is on their side, that "as the economy turns and California food becomes more expensive, local food production will become more competitive again." This may be a questionable hypothesis, since any race against time is a speculative proposition. But Taryn and her co-thinkers exhibit the true belief of those imbedded in a process to which they are deeply committed. To fulfill their aims they are very practically engaged in recruiting others to join them on the land, which is a resource Maine offers in abundance. In doing so they are filling the gap that seemed to have stumped our planners, helping by consequence not design to repopulate the country with the child bearing young.

They are, in many respects, refreshingly pragmatic, willing to dialog and negotiate with whatever community, institutional and political forces are available to help them succeed. Taryn and Ben have even joined the old Arlington Grange in Whitefield, virtually moribund but kept afloat on the sentimentality of an aging membership for whom the Grange movement was once a viable locus of rural cooperation. After some initial tension around the fare served at the Grange pot lucks, the old timers still comfortable with Campbell soup-based casseroles and such foods that locavores disdain, I'm told relations have smoothed around the obvious common ground of finding new blood to keep the old Grange movement, updated to modern values, preserved for the future.

Pragmatism aside, I was still struck as we talked by the lack of a strong political ideology attached to Taryn's economic vision, the inevitable fixation of a sixties' era radical. Their broad class, cultural and political lines all seemed disconcertingly blurred to me. Yet Taryn's comments went on to expose the same existential dilemma Alex spoke of that these young people are confronted with on a daily basis. I heard the heartfelt frustration as Taryn voiced a generational critique, that "we're so passive," a reference to the Iraq and Afghanistan wars in which, with visible anguish, she acknowledged having "lots of friends who've died." But it was an even bigger picture

that really haunted her, the fact that “the world is so crazy.” And what with the “information glut, we can’t take it all in.”

This brings to mind a line I read recently in the autobiography of Elia Kazan, who lived well into the digital age. “It’s not information we need,” he wrote, “but wonder.” Wonder is in short supply these days for a generation like Taryn’s, which has “been told since we were born,” she said, echoing Alex, “that we’re never going to get social security.” Security points elsewhere for these pioneers, and consolation. I was touched with sadness and admiration by the words Taryn spoke at the end of our interview. “To come back to a rural town like this and work with our hands is our therapy.”

Postscript: As I wrap this up, *mirabile dictu*, a front page article appears in the *Lincoln County News* on Hibberts Gore with a photo captioned, *Big Bog Bridge*, reporting that the ‘gore’s’ only bridge is badly in need of repair. It’s a visit long overdue, but I’m headed for Hibberts Gore right now.