

# Origins: Bill Jewell | The Road to Vermont

by Christine Jewell | September 7, 2023

There is no question that Vermont's allure is captivating. My early childhood was a wide open adventure. When I tell people that I grew up there, their immediate reaction is wistful, “awww ... I *love* Vermont!”

No. You don't get it. It was HARD.



We worked hard to live on the side of the biggest mountain in Vermont, Mt. Mansfield. Whatever romantic images are conjured in your mind of the peace, simplicity and tranquility of Vermont - it is true. But rolling hills, beautiful fields, and endless bounty takes WORK.

It was 1976. I remember the day that Dad brought us out to Harvey Road, the house that he designed and built with friend Paul Hitchcock. It was a small dirt road right off of Pleasant Valley Road. The property was next to a marsh and had a natural clearing. We camped nearby all summer while my parents worked on the house. I got to sleep in the Airstream in the tiny loft. I loved it. Diane and Lori were on a PLATFORM surrounded by an Army tent. You can ask them how they felt about that!

We were always spending hours on the weekends clearing out the woods around the house, or freezing green beans. “Clearing out” meant pulling out low-lying bushes and brush, putting them into piles to burn. We stacked endless amounts of wood to keep us warm during the winter. We picked unbelievably ridiculous amounts of green beans and put them in bags to freeze. Until recently, my sister Diane HATED peas. We must have had a bumper crop one year. I am terrible at growing vegetables. It was manual labor to me, and I often whined my way out of it, being the youngest.



Underhill Center was a magical place to grow up, but it was very isolated. When you looked out of the windows at night, it was PITCH BLACK. The middle of town had one stop sign, a country store, and a gas station. There was one Catholic church and our elementary school had four classrooms. At the school, older kids went cross-country skiing on most Fridays in the winter.

I am a first generation Vermonter, the children born from white flight. My parents, Bill and Doris, were pioneers, blazing a trail from Peekskill, New York to the cold North. The simple life lured my parents, but I think it called strongly to my father. They were way ahead of the hippies and would never identify or embrace that lifestyle. Yet we worked hard in the country, lived closely to the

land, and by the seasons. My parents forged a path out from Westchester – something different – but for different reasons. The life that they created, and subsequently my own, was removed from the busy-ness of New York.



I know that my father wanted to get away. He tells me about just starting out in his early 20s and being thrust into the daily grind; commuting by train to 14<sup>th</sup> Street in New York City and working in a cubicle. He does not talk about any other reasons. He grew up in Peekskill, New York. His father worked for the railroad and trapped animals. His kind and gentle mother, Helen, fulfilled her duties. My father met my mother in high school and soon began hanging out at her house in Mohegan Lake. There are photos of them on the front steps of the porch, with my mother's stoic German family nearby.

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### Beartown Road

What possessed my parents to move to a strange state in 1960? Not just anywhere, but in the boonies, far North towards Canada at the base of Vermont's tallest peak, Mt. Mansfield, at 4,393 feet. What did my parents know of living in the country and raising chickens? Somehow they figured it out, with Kufer family friends helping along the way.

Walter was German and a family friend of the Kufer's. His niece, Gusti (who married Mio/Mike) and Eleanor *loved* to ski. Gusti worked at a diner in Peekskill and became friends with a regular whose sister lived in Underhill, Vermont: Bessie O'Brian. An open invitation was extended to visit her anytime. Perfect! Gusti and Eleanor traveled to Vermont on many occasions. They must have told my parents about the beauty of Vermont. An invitation to come along and visit Bessie in Underhill was soon accepted by my parents.



On a random winter's day in the late 1950s, Gusti, Eleanor and my parents drove to Vermont in their Volkswagen Beetles. Easy! Back then there was no weather channel or early warning forecast. The northeast welcomed them with a classic Nor'easter snow storm, with howling winds and treacherous road conditions. By the time they reached Underhill, my dad says they could hardly see Bessie's house or make it up her driveway on Beartown Road. The VW Beetles were notorious for their lack of heat and defrosters, but they all made it. What an adventure it must have been for them! I can only imagine the feeling of making it to backwater Underhill after hours of driving in a relentless snowstorm through unfamiliar country roads.



Yet this was hardly enough to deter my dad. He fell in love with Underhill Center. A few years later they searched for a house in Vermont to settle down. Wouldn't you know a small Cape Cod was for sale barely a stone's throw from Bessie's house? The house sat close to Beartown Road and across the street was a giant field. Above that Mt. Mansfield stood proud above, always awash in a beautiful, dense swath of deep teal blue and the color of pine trees.