

# ADDISON COUNTY INDEPENDENT

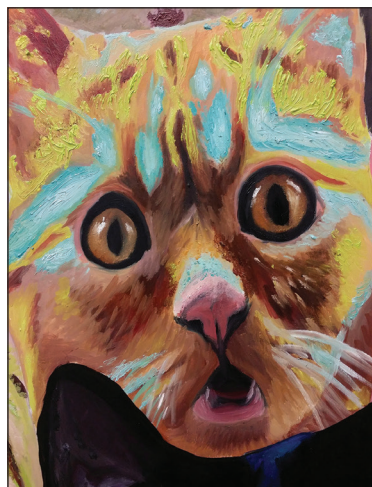
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32 Pages

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## Powerful paintings

• A show of Middlebury College student work portrays power on a large scale. See Arts Beat on Page 10.

## Local pleads in child porn case

• A Bristol man is facing federal charges that could net him 15 years in jail. See Page 3.

## Route 116 set for repaving project

• Road crews will update the highway from Starksboro to Route 7. See Page 21.

## Field hockey rivals face off

• An Eagle-Tiger game in Bristol highlighted a busy high school sports slate late last week. See Sports, Pages 18-20.



## State smoothing out RR crossings

• Two New Haven roads are getting safety enhancements. See Page 16.

## Rokeby head's legacy includes visitor center

Love of history marks Williamson's stay

By ANDY KIRKALDY

FERRISBURGH — After a 22-year tenure highlighted by the addition of a 5,000-square-foot visitor center, Rokeby Museum Executive Director Jane Williamson will step down at the end of 2017 from a job that she admits she wasn't at first sure she wanted.

Williamson, a 68-year-old Burlington resident and small-town Minnesota native, was a

dedicated Rokeby volunteer long before becoming its leader.

She remembered her first visit to the Route 7 site in Ferrisburgh, known for the Robinson family of farmers, writers, Quakers, artists and abolitionists and their connection to the Underground Railroad.

"History was my true and first love, and I came on a house tour in 1989," Williamson said. "I was (See Williamson, Page 14)

## It's all in a day's work for local VSP trooper

By JOHN FLOWERS

ADDISON COUNTY — The invitation to ride along with a Vermont State Police trooper got a little intimidating after reading the requisite consent form. The passenger — in this case, a reporter — shouldn't rule out the possibility of being whisked at a high rate of speed to a crime scene and the risk of injury, and yes, even death.

This scribe swallowed even harder when VSP Sgt. Blake Cushing of



GURWICZ

the New Haven barracks recommended close scrutiny of the location of the cruiser's radio in case the trooper were incapacitated and needed backup.

At age 55, weighing 155 pounds and armed with a just a pen, I had to balance my journalistic desire for a roadside "exclusive" with the

natural instinct for self-preservation.

In other words, let's hope for some excitement, but no flying lead.

(See Gurwicz, Page 7)



BRIDPORT FARMER BEN Gleason plans to retire and is working with the Vermont Land Trust to find a new owner for his farm and business. A pioneer in Vermont wheat production, Gleason has been growing organic wheat on his farm since 1982 — long before the explosion of the local foods movement some 20 years ago.

Independent photo/Trent Campbell

## Wheat pioneer looks back on food movement

By GAEN MURPHREE

BRIDPORT — Pioneering organic wheat farmer Ben Gleason is making plans to lay aside his plow. The 73-year-old Bridport resident is working with the Vermont Land Trust to conserve his farm's 75 acres and conduct a nationwide

search for a new farmer interested in Gleason's farm and flour business.

"I was gonna farm until I died," said Gleason. Instead he's decided just to find new owners.

But, until he finds them, Gleason says he plans to continue his seven-day-a-week, one-

man operation growing wheat, milling it into his Gleason Grains flour, packaging and delivering it, and conducting his own R&D and marketing.

Gleason began farming in 1973 on land that had been in the family since the 1600s, near (See Gleason, Page 31)



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# Gleason

(Continued from Page 1)

Old Saybrook, Conn. He came to Vermont, bought land in Addison County and started farming here in 1979.

In 1998 — after a quarter century of tilling the land — Gleason said his product suddenly exploded in popularity when the local foods movement really began to take off. In 2000, Red Hen Baking in Middlesex became a major customer and Gleason more than doubled production. But in the early days in the 1970s and 1980s, as described by Red Hen Baking founder Randy George, purveyors of locally grown and farm-milled wheat (in Vermont, just Gleason and Northeast Kingdom farmer Jack Lazor) were likelier to get a tepid “hunh?” as opposed to an enthusiastic yes to their product.

“Even in 2000 it was definitely a novel idea to actually buy flour from a farmer who milled it from grain that he grew,” said George. “Nowadays that’s not as unusual. It’s kind of neat to see how the whole world has caught up with Ben. He’s been doing this before anybody thought of it.”

Wheat remains a challenging crop in Vermont because damp conditions can lead to diseases that can render the grain unsalable, said University of Vermont Extension Agronomist Heather Darby. She called Gleason “a real pioneer in the field.”

“Ben’s been growing wheat in Vermont for quite a long time. He was doing it before it was cool,” Darby said. “Ben helped start the Northern Grain Growers Association. He’s helped UVM host research projects. He’s not only been a leader on his own farm but just extending that knowledge and collaboration to the rest of us. He’s really helped the industry grow.”

## COMPUTER PROGRAMMER TO HOMESTEADER

Though Gleason grew up on a farm — his father’s early death sent the family to live with an uncle who milked a small herd and grew seed potatoes — he didn’t start out to be a farmer.

In 1967, he graduated from New Haven College (now University of New Haven) with a business degree and landed a job at Kodak in Rochester, N.Y., as a computer programmer. It was a good-paying job that for many would have evolved into a lifetime career — not Gleason. He left after one year.

“They were very sad to see me go, and I was very happy,” Gleason said. “I didn’t like being cooped up in an office.”

For the next several years he pursued various kinds of work and then took off on an extended tour of Europe with his brother Joe. They found themselves living on an island



**BEN GLEASON MILLS stone-ground, whole wheat flour on his farm in Bridport. Gleason Grains has been a one-man business, with Gleason doing the growing, milling, packaging and delivery himself. Gleason plans to retire soon.**

Independent photo/Trent Campbell

in Greece, and Ben Gleason had an epiphany.

People there lived close to the land, pressing olive oil from centuries-old groves, making feta cheese, tending goats, living from their vegetable gardens. Much of the transportation was still by donkey.

“It seemed like an ideal lifestyle, where you’re not so tied to a rat race,” Gleason said.

The brothers decided to head home to Old Saybrook and farm what was left of the family’s land. Construction of I-95 in the 1950s had left fewer than 20 acres that were farmable,

Gleason said.

For the next several years, Gleason said the brothers were “basically homesteading.” They did everything by hand. They milked a cow and a few goats and made cheese. They raised some pigs. They cut firewood off the farm’s wooded acreage for a cash crop.

And Ben tried his hand at raising grain to feed his animals.

That went so well that he got a combine, so he could harvest by machine instead of by hand. And when he approached a local natural food store and they agreed to purchase his locally grown grain, he knew he’d found his crop.

In 1979, the brothers bought land in Bridport and moved to Vermont. (Gleason later bought out his brother in the 1990s.) They were seeking a better place to farm organically and needed more arable land. In 1982, Gleason planted his first five acres of wheat and began selling stone-milled flour to the Middlebury Natural Foods Coop, his first Vermont customer.

As his sales increased, Gleason upped production to about 25 acres.

But until the explosion in business of the late 1990s, Gleason said he made less than \$10,000 some years and that property taxes took a good chunk of that.

“Money has never been all that important to me,” he said.

Gleason has grown wheat on as many as 70 acres and now typically works around 50 acres. He’s also experimented with sideline crops, such as rye and black beans.

Farming organically has always been central to Gleason’s commitment to farming.

“I want to produce the best crop that I can,” he said. “I don’t want to use chemicals. I don’t think it’s good for the environment. I don’t think it’s good for humans. I don’t think it’s good for the soil.”

He smiles as he recalls that this commitment didn’t come from his first mentor, “Uncle Merritt,” who thought “DDT was the greatest thing there was.”

Looking back over his four-plus decades in farming has left him with a lot to celebrate, Gleason observed. The renewed emphasis in local foods over the past two decades has been a boon to farmers and consumers alike, he said. Farmers have better markets and people are not only eating more healthy food, they’re enjoying food more.

He’s concerned that some agribusiness producers, moving in on the organic market are circumventing

the rules. And he remains concerned about conventional agriculture’s use of chemical fertilizers, pesticides and herbicides.

“They’re using a lot more. It just continues to increase, the billions of tons of chemicals that are put onto our land by farmers,” Gleason said. “And it’s a pretty sad way of treating the earth.”

Reporter Gaen Murphree is at gaenm@addisonindependent.com.

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