

# Arts Alive!

## A cultural renaissance in the hills

BY ARANKA MATOLCSY

the seeds of arts and culture have been sown and cultivated in the fertile landscape of the Oxford Hills for more than 200 years. countless charismatic and creative thinkers hailed from every corner of the cultural map—artists, painters, sculptors, writers, poets, dancers, actors, mimes, jewelers, musicians, naturalists, mineralogists, scientists. their rich legacy is alive and well in the many galleries, theaters, performing arts centers and creative enterprises scattered throughout a region on the verge of defining itself as a cultural hub.

In the early 19th century people began to flee the hubbub of northeastern cities as the railroad enabled their access into the refuge, beauty and peace of the rural lands to the north and west. Many brought their urban-influenced arts and ideas with them to the Oxford Hills. Summer theaters like the **Deertrees Theater** in Harrison and musical events, such as the **Sebago-Long Lake Music Festival**, became favorites for visitors. Aside from supporting local arts, some of these visitors further inspired and promoted community-based arts endeavors.

Clyde Holt, an annual summer visitor to Waterford in the early 1950s, brought his passion for choral work as a director at the Westminster Choir College in Princeton, New Jersey. Holt organized a huge, annual community choir production and also encouraged some of its youth to be trained at his college. Jeanie Stone was one of those who studied choral arts at Holt's encouragement 50 years ago, and has since become a leader in the musical and theater community by supporting and performing for the much-celebrated **Oxford Hills Performing Arts Association (OHMPAA)**.

Long before Holt's time, Norway-born artist George "Shavey" Noyes (1863–1945) and fellow creative thinker/naturalist-mineralogist-teacher George Howe (1860–1950) started the "Young Boy Scientists," infusing notions of creativity into area youth, many who would become highly influential within the community. A young Vivian Milner Akers

(1886–1966)—a fine artist known for his woodcarvings, oil paintings and photographs—was one of the first to take advantage of these two mentors. Akers went on to work as a model and assistant for Boston-educated Norway photographer Minnie Libby (1863–1947). He then studied fine arts in Paris, France before bringing his skills, passion and influence back to the Oxford Hills. It is this type of mentor-student relationship that is at the roots of today's vital Oxford Hills arts and culture scene.

The 1950s and 1960s saw a major migration to rural lands, in part as a reaction against urban and industrial culture. The Hungarian fine arts professor Lajos Matolcsy (1905–1982) and his wife Claire (1926–1989), a modern dancer originally from Maine, fled their arts pursuits in New York City to live, work and raise their children in a place which offered a high quality of life—the Oxford Hills. Lajos Matolcsy founded the **Western Maine Art Group (WMAG)** in 1962 with his students Ellie Viles and Lee Bean and built a loyal following. Many of his students are currently art teachers and mentors planting the seeds of tomorrow's cultural community.

In 1965 the WMAG obtained the Arts Center gallery and teaching facility housed in the historic Upper Primary School building in Norway. It opens for its 43rd exhibit season in May. In 1967, the WMAG established the Norway Sidewalk Art Show, which will celebrate its 41st anniversary during the 2008 Norway Arts Festival.



Clockwise from left: The Art Moves Dance Troupe performing in Erika Lindstrom's (far left) senior project at the Oxford Hills Comprehensive High School; Lajos Matolcsy at the easel; A performance of "Something's Afoot" by OHMPAA

The Norway Arts Festival, now a community-wide, collaborative effort, has grown to encompass a juried fine arts show, dance, theater, music, poetry, puppetry, and demonstrations in fiber arts, ceramics, oil painting, yoga, dance, mime, juggling and more. It is a testament to the strength and vitality of the cultural fabric of the Oxford Hills. The Moore Park Art Show in neighboring South Paris, which comes later in the season, further exemplifies this community's support of the arts.

In the 1970s, world-renowned mime Tony Montanaro (1927–2003) began coming to the Oxford Hills to visit his friend Lajos Matolcsy, who introduced him to the Stock Farm. The Paris-studied performer was inspired to build a teaching theater within its 100-foot long historic barn and in 1972 the Celebration Mime Theater was born. Montanaro developed a following of dedicated students—many of whom eventually settled in this area, bolstering the local arts. One such student, Amanda Houtari, is presently the owner and executive director of what is now called the **Celebration Barn Theater**, where Tony Montanaro's vision and dreams are alive and thriving.

Other locally-based students of Montanaro have continued the chain of knowledge, skills and ideas: Mike Miclon owns and operates the popular **Oddfellow Theater** in Buckfield; Fred Garbo has gained worldwide recognition with his Inflatable Theater Company; Dave Neufeld continues to pursue his

creative endeavors as a performing and exhibiting artist. Karen Montanaro carries on her husband's legacy of mentoring, teaching and performing in the Oxford Hills, and beyond.

As the creative energy of our predecessors flourishes through the generations, we see new seeds sprouting into the culture of tomorrow. Recently seven Norway- and South Paris-based arts enterprises have joined forces to transform the "First Friday" of each month into a stimulating evening of art events with exhibitions and receptions at each venue. In a single evening, viewers can enjoy a wide variety of art from contemporary and post-modern, to traditional and historical. Participating galleries include the **Commons Art Collective, Frost Farm Gallery, Norway Memorial Library, Painted Mermaid Gallery, McLaughlin Garden, Matolcsy Arts Center**, and the new **My Studio**.

A new gem on the gallery scene is Downtown Norway's **Café Nomad**, which in addition to serving Maine-roasted coffee and gourmet fare, houses an eclectic permanent art collection and a community gallery space managed by Diana Arcadipone, an Associate Dean at the Art Institute of Boston. Another new and unique art endeavor, My Studio, owned and operated by Judith Hayes, is also offering community gallery space for local artists in addition to a rental photographic studio.

Many individual artists and teachers are also responsible for sowing the cultural seeds of the future. Duncan Slade taught art in the local school system for many years, and now, entering his 90s, holds regular workshops for children in his **Studio 227** in downtown Norway. Local school art teacher Nikki Millonzi is another modern cultural propagator, not only as a beloved teacher, but as a longtime coordinator of the Norway Arts Festival and a founding member of the Commons Art Collective. Joel Babb, a contemporary realist painter from Hebron, exhibits across the country and has work in many notable private collections. Jeffrey Workman, Om Devi Reynolds, Patricia Chandler, Ron Hamilton and Virginia Valdes also surface among visual artists who are engendering cultural growth through exhibiting and teaching.

It is not only visual artists that find inspiration in the Oxford Hills. The art of dance also has a vital presence here. Three area studios offer everything from ballet, modern and ballroom to jazz, hip hop and tap. Building on a tradition of modern dance established by Claire Matolcsy in the 1960's, dancer and teacher Debi Irons founded the **Art Moves Dance Studio** in 1988 with a mission to build awareness and appreciation of self-expression and the creative process. Art Moves still offers classes for all ages at its Norway studio and is home to both amateur and professional troupes that perform around the state. Under the direction of Nan Brett, **The Ballroom** in Harrison offers an eclectic mix of classes from Latin and Ballroom, to Yoga, Bellydance, and Ecstatic Dance. Michelle Farrar-Keyes' **Northeast Academy of Dance** in South Paris complements the area's dance education opportunities with an emphasis on cutting-edge urban techniques and training for aspiring professional dancers as well as classes for the youngest of children.

With such rich traditions in both the visual and performing arts, it would be easy to overlook some of the artistic and cultural treasures tucked away behind the ancient stonewalls and towering maple trees of our rural farmland. Many fiber artists find in the Oxford Hills a perfect setting to explore the agriculture of their art by raising sheep, alpacas and llamas. **A Wrinkle in Thyme Farm** is one such creative homestead. In addition to producing beautiful and unique woven and knitted items, they also offer classes in shearing wool, felting, carding, spinning and dyeing. Naturally, Western Maine fiber artists need a place to sell their wares, find materials and share ideas. The Irish Ewe in downtown Norway is their one-stop shop. **Maine Balsam Fir** is another center for creativity tucked away at the end of long country drive in North Paris. They've sold over a million of their trademark balsam-filled pillows and have recently expanded to include natural fiber clothing, birch bark containers and other items. A visit to their store and factory is well worth the short drive off the beaten path.

Creative writing has a home here in the name of The Mountain Poets Society, which holds monthly readings at the Fare Share Commons in Norway. Organized by local poet and writer Lisa Moore, the "Poets on The Porch" component of the Norway Arts Festival showcases an array of talent, with over twenty local poets reading on the steps of the Norway Memorial Library. The gloried past of the area makes it

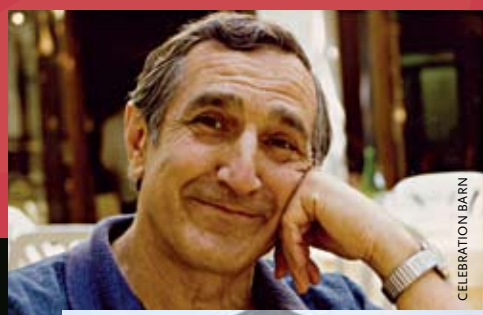
no surprise that historical writing has flourished here as well. David Sanderson's immeasurable fascination with local history colors his biographies of notable area figures whose stories and community impact may never have been documented otherwise. Peter Lenz's many self-published books chronicle a detailed history of the area that dates back to Native American settlements, and can be found at **Books N Things** in Norway and **Shoestring Books @ The Maine Bookhouse** on Route 26 in Oxford.

Music has always played a big role in the cultural richness of the Oxford Hills, harkening back to the choral extravaganzas staged by Clyde Holt, and of course, the consummate fiddling of Norway's own vaudeville star Mellie Dunham. Continuing the tradition, groups like the Parisiennes and Richard Felt Orchestra have been dazzling audiences with old time music as far back as the 1920s. Musicians of all kinds still find fertile ground here, from blues and bluegrass pickers to folk singers, jazz pianists, classical violinists, and of course, good old rock and roll bands.

When the call for musicians goes out, the musical artists of the Oxford Hills respond, like recording artist Nate Towne with his homespun guitar playing and lyrics, or Paul and Ellen Dubois of the Zingo Zango Generic Jug Band, or Sally Jones, Jeanie Stone and Bob Elliott of Act V, singing rock and roll from the 1950s and 1960s. Every Friday night in Norway,

**Creative Media** owners Anne and Al Mallory host an open-mic night, drawing musicians and spectators from throughout the area. Pianist and songwriter Heather Pierson also organizes an open-mic for local talent at the Unitarian Universalist Church in Norway on the last Friday of every month. The Summer Concert Series at Moore Park in South Paris and another at the Anderson-Staples American Legion Post 112 in Oxford are great ways to experience some local sounds on a hot summer night.

Throughout our history, artists and creative thinkers of all kinds have found myriad reasons and inspirations to pursue their crafts in the Oxford Hills. Our community and its visitors are the fortunate beneficiaries—enriched in countless ways, privileged to have access to a rich diversity of cultural expression. ■



Norway Librarian Ann Siekman with the Artwork of Robert Shetterly; An opening at Frost Farm Gallery; Painting of Minnie Libby by Vivian Akers; Artists Scott Curry, Mark Brandhorst, Don Best, and Greg Shattenberg celebrate an opening of Brandhorst's photographs at the Commons Art Collective Gallery; Bluesman Harry Peet at Open Mic Night in Norway; The Backstage Gallery at Deertrees Theatre; Iman Lizarazu performing at Celebration Barn Theater