

Voters in Rural New England Apathetic and Cynical

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CANTERBURY, N.H.—One day last week, the little bell tinkled over the door to Carl Peterson's grocery here and Dr. Hampton Moody walked in limping.

"Phlebitis again, Doc?" the store-keeper asked.

"Yep," said the aging physician.

"Going in the hospital?"

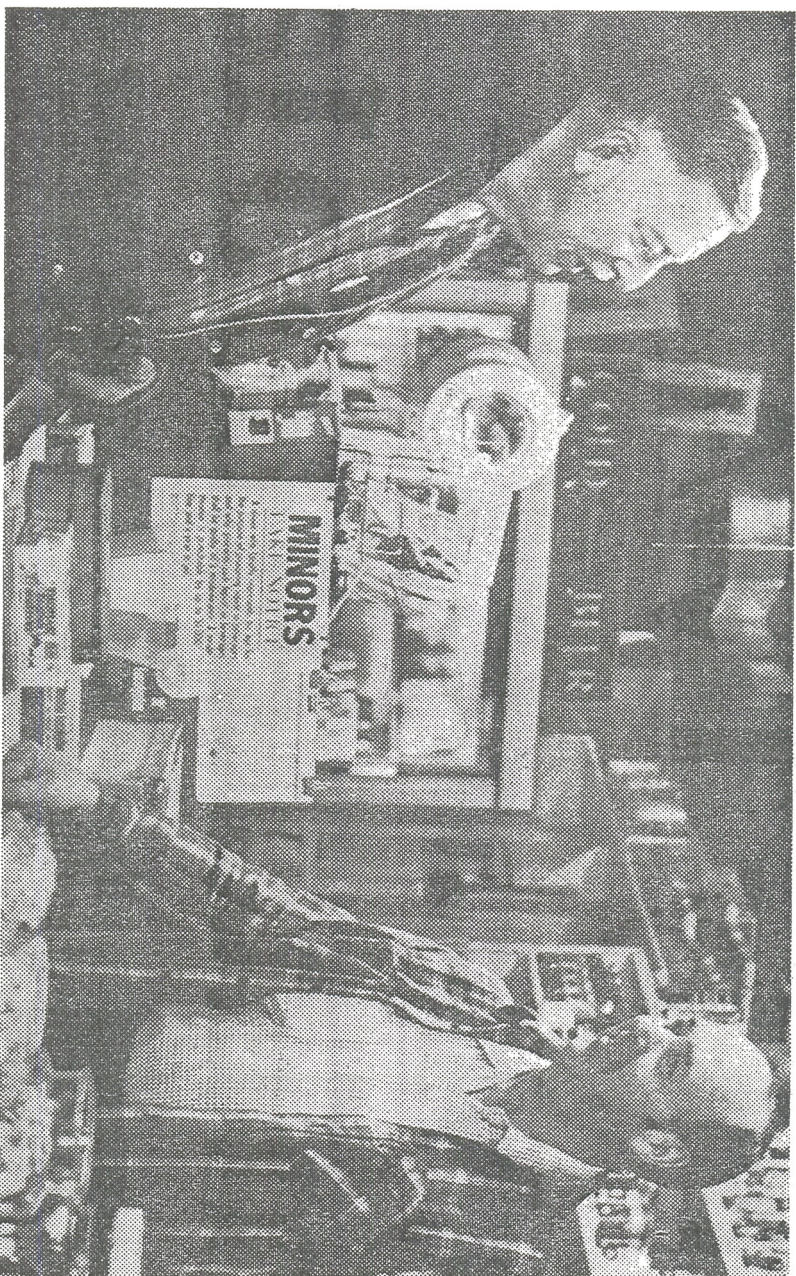
"Nope."

"Not, huh?"

"Don't need to," the doctor answered. "Don't have to testify."

It was a small joke, of course, and probably merited no larger response than the few chuckles it prompted—but Dr. Moody's grim bit of humor also expressed the sort of chilly cynicism that events of the last two years seem to have spawned in this tiny village and others like it all across New England.

It is an apathy observed elsewhere in America as well and reflected in a Gallup poll released today showing a unprecedented lack of interest among registered voters in the upcoming elections. Only 42 per cent of 1,290 adults questioned nationally showed "a lot" or "some" interest. a



Carl Peterson, behind the counter of his grocery store in Canterbury, N. H., smiling over the mild, politically oriented joke Dr. Hampton Moody, left, made about his recurring phlebitis.

The New York Times/Arthur Grace

drop of seven points from the reply in 1970, when 43 per cent of the electorate voted for member of congress.

Whether the levels of that apathy here match those recorded in the nationwide survey is not known, but among a great number of rural Yankees, the disenchantment seems complete.

Like Dr. Moody, they are distressed by Washington scandals, disturbed by White House upheavals, depressed by economic uncertainties and running out of patience with politics and its current "You take this election next month," the doctor said that afternoon. "I think most of us just see it as another sorry act from an awfully bad play."

He and his neighbors find the cast uninspiring, the dialogue slightly hackneyed, and the directions of the drama distinctly unpromising—and on Nov. 5, many of them are planning to just stay at home.

"The city folks may be excited about it," Dr. Moody concluded, "but when you get out into the countryside, you find that most of us think it just doesn't matter. It's gone too damn far."

When you get out into the New England countryside these days, you also find autumn—a kaleidoscopic explosion that has transformed the rolling forests into a brilliant blend of reds and rusts and yellows.

The days are crisper now and the nights a bit more brisk, and in the mornings the farmer's breath is visible as he strides from his white house, opens a long low gate, and plods through the backlot toward his hulking barn.

Here has been snow already further north in the mountains and the women are busy canning corn and beans and cooking up kettles of applesauce while their husbands hack and stack the winter's firewood.

"It's a simple life and a hard one," Mrs. Marion Wheeler mused that afternoon. "And you know, I think that has something to do with how we feel about what's been going on in the country."

She was standing in front of her trim, 200-year-old house, a small woman with honest eyes and strong arms,

one of which she swept toward the long buildings where she and her husband once housed more than 10,000 chickens — feeding them every day, gathering their eggs and selling them on rambling routes through the surrounding hills.

"We were poor when we started," she said. "That was 36 years ago and we built this place up from nothing with our hands and we raised our daughter here and paid every cent of our taxes and when we look back on it we both think it was awfully hard but really quite simple. We just always tried to do the right thing."

"That's what's wrong with politicians. They don't even try," she said. "I just want them to go away and leave us alone. It's hard enough without them."

Mr. Peterson, a merchant rather than a farmer, still has his problems, and they translate for him into his own brand of disgust.

When he brought his wife and two daughters to this village 10 years ago, the paper bags for his little store cost \$8 per thousand. Now he buys 500 for \$12.

"It didn't just happen," he reasoned that afternoon as he checked over the dozens of credit slips in his cash register. "The Government let it happen and now it's out of control. They all say they want to solve the problem but so do I—and I can't do a thing about it and I don't think they can either."

Dr. Moody snorted an emphatic agreement. "They don't really want to solve it, Carl," he said. "They just want to line their own pockets, that's all. You know that as well as I do, don't you?"

Mr. Peterson started to reply, but the doctor wasn't finished. "You believe there's a little larceny in all of us, don't you, and so do I—but a damned if the politicians don't have a stomach full of it," he said. "It's like a thyroid problem with them. They just can't control it. The greed just keeps on growing."

Unlike the doctor's targets, Canterbury does not keep growing. Its 900 people, most of them fairly

solid Republicans, live in white houses on narrow roads that all seem to lead eventually to the village green, the community church, the ancient cemetery, the town hall and Mr. Peterson's store.

Like the New England stereotype, they are taciturn folks who prefer short questions and give short answers. Unlike the image, however, they are warm and open, even as their counterparts in

other rural areas of the country are generally friendly and gracious.

Because of their state's presidential primary, the first in the nation, they are not unacquainted with alien journalists, and they display a remarkably stoic patience in their dealings with them.

Still, here in Canterbury, there is a distinct preference for their own kind of reading, and when they unfolded

their copies of The Manchester Union-Leader earlier this week, most of them were not surprised to find a front-page editorial about the New Hampshire - United States Senate race.

William Loeb, the paper's outspoken and often irascible publisher, had written:

"We cannot honestly say that either of these candidates is worth supporting."

They really liked that here in Canterbury.