

TOWN MEETING
By Nancy Brown Stump, 1949-2025

Betty Jane Norton and her husband Phil had just moved to the small town of Sagadahoc, Maine with their eight-year-old daughter, Rae. So far, they knew four people: First Selectman, Frank Lewis, who had delivered a booklet of ordinances then talked an hour about his boat; Pam Ridge who had sold the Nortons their building lot; Bob and Judy Conner who Phil had helped frame their barn.

Though Frank had been sure to mention Sagadahoc's Town Meeting, Betty and Phil had not been tempted to attend. They changed their minds, however, on Saturday morning when they saw the crowded town parking lot and both roadsides lined with cars except for one free place just beyond Barret's mailbox on the other side of Rt. 129.

"I'm going for it," Betty said, slowing and turning the car hard, never figuring on the huge pothole just off the edge of the tar. Folks had been complaining about that hole since the end of March when all the ice and snow had melted off. The road commission had filled it twice with crushed stones, and twice a pregnant snapping turtle had dug the stones back out.

Frank Lewis had heard the screeching tires, but had not registered any calls for help. He seemed to think the crisis confronting them was inside the hall, not out. Town Meeting had been in progress for over half an hour, but in that time only Louise Card had been elected to moderate, while Frank had won the uncontested bid for another three-year term as Selectman.

Louise focused on the greater assembly. "Now, as you all consider who you would nominate to do what job, be reminded that the state has training for this and all other jobs. The first offering is a three-day workshop in August that the town pays for, and there's another in October. I've heard these are informed sessions with lawyers and municipal officers ready to answer your questions. With this in mind, I will be taking nominations for town tax collector."

Not one hand went up, not one finger rose. But Frank sprang up and snapped his suspenders. “Good people of Sagadahoc, if we are going to give our kids a good education, if we’re going to have safe roads and a snowplow contract, or convince someone to haul our trash...” Frank could see his wife signaling him to keep an even keel like they had practiced. “But damn it,” Frank blurted. “If you want to keep taxes down then don’t vote for warrant items that you believe are too costly. Don’t not elect a tax collector. That’s like...that’s like...”

“Cutting off your nose to spite your mouth!” said the second selectman.

A few laughed.

Millicent, known to most as Penny, lifted her hand. “The town tax year starts July first if I am not mistaken.”

“Correct,” said Frank.

“And that is next week,” Millicent confirmed.

“Correct,” said Louise.

“So why have we waited until this Saturday forenoon, this late to try and find a tax collector?”

“If by “we” you mean the Selectmen,” Frank bristled, “we have been trying all year to find people to run for every position, but folks new to town say they aren’t ready, and those who have done it up to now, say they are burned out, which they must be, since no one ran against me, which is highly unusual.”

A few folks laughed at that, but most stared dead ahead and watched mosquitoes land on their neighbors’ necks and arms. It was all too familiar. Every year the same folks stepped to the plate, then after years of service they would tire and retire so someone would dust off their

personal agenda and get someone else all worked up, then each would nominate the other to office and both would decline the nomination and the hall would go silent like now.

Frank had argued last year for growth; he was excited by the promise of three new subdivisions, which he believed at the time, would translate into more taxable property. Only trouble was, both low and high-end properties took time to get built, especially given the wave of owner-builders that had entered Sagadahoc and towns around. Building one's own home it turned out, was hard on marriages, couples split up, dreams got deferred, and before you realized it, there were new residents wearing down the roads and sending their kids to school and having their trash hauled, but not really swelling the town's worth.

Frank suddenly yearned for nothing more than to be out on his boat. He knew folks would tolerate only about three more beats worth of his unpersuasive argumentation. "One," he counted to himself. "Two..." And then, lo and behold, the door opened and there they were, Betty and Phil Norton stepping into the back of the Sagadahoc Town Hall. Betty even gave her name; said she was a resident as of last night.

"Then let me register you," said Erlene Brown. "That is if you want to speak and vote."

"Right now?"

"Right now," Erlene told her and when they got that done, the Moderator signaled that Betty had the floor and could ask if it was at all possible to get some assistance dealing with the mess she had caused on the State Road when she had jammed her car into a pot hole guarded by an angry snapping turtle.

"Phil thinks I may have wrecked the tie rod," Betty moaned.

"Could be the shocks," Leon Boyd said, asking to be excused so he could check.

“Tell me about this turtle,” said Robyn Cane as Betty walked past. “Were there red spots on its carapace?”

“Just some blood on the broken shell.”

Robyn tucked in the tails to her shirt and stepped out of the Hall.

“I’ll give you all fifteen minutes,” called Louise Card, pounding the gavel and allowing Leon time with the Norton’s car.

Leon returned fifteen minutes later all smiles. “We got the car out and pushed it to the fire station, but there was no sign of a turtle as far as we could tell.”

“Any beaver?” asked Irene.

Rawlings perked up. “You having trouble again with beavers?”

“Something about the culvert at the beginning of my drive,” Irene explained. “They don’t like to see it running...”

As soon as Phil returned, the place went quiet. Everyone was waiting and wondering what the couple would do or say. They said sorry and thanks and now we’ll be on our way. Only no one made much way for them to be on. The hall remained hushed. Betty felt some sort of disappointment in the air, but couldn’t pinpoint the cause. Then a gray-haired woman stood up.

“Is the break over?” the woman asked. “I would like to speak before these new people leave.”

Louise banged her gavel.

“My name is Lily,” she told the newcomers. “For the past ten years, I have been tax collector in this town. I have been glad to do the job. I’ve liked helping people. I’ve long believed we each owe the town some service, but it’s now someone else’s time.” The Nortons nodded their heads and smiled as if this had nothing to do with them. Lily let folks have some

time to do their own thinking, then she looked around at the whole crowd. “Ten years I’ve had folks coming to my house all hours of the day and night. And I’m not complaining; what I’m saying is if whoever takes the job wants help, then I’ll be glad to share what I know. I’m not leaving anyone high and dry here like I was done, but realize, too, things are always changing, so pretty soon I will not be much help, and maybe that’s okay, because then the next generation has the void to fill.” The citizens gave Lily a round of applause. She nodded then sat back down.

Amidst the dead silence, Betty thought she could hear an oven bird outside cooking up a song. She smiled at Millicent. “I’d think of being tax collector,” Betty told her. “In a couple of years.”

“Nope, nope, nope,” Frank sprang up, his head shaking like he was one of the Barret’s horses trying to shake away a horde of flies. “We don’t need you next year, cousin, we need you now, now, now!”

“Did he say cousin?” Penny asked Lily.

George Ford raised his hand, and the Moderator offered him the floor. “What if our tax collector worked out of the hall instead of her house. Maybe she could be here three hours a day, three days a week. That would not strike me as such an imposition as what we’ve had up to now.”

Betty stood dumbfounded. So did Phil. Betty’s mind turned over and over the arguments she could make. She had an eight-year-old daughter to attend to, there were logs to be sawn, a house to get built. She knew nothing about taxes or their collection. In fact, the term “tax collector” brought only one image to mind, a picture in the Bible she had gotten as a kid, one of the few pictures in her Bible, for that matter, of a man in a tree, a man despised by his neighbors, despised by his fellow man.

“Can I speak?” Phil asked as if testing his own voice while votes were quickly taken to let an outsider have his say. “We moved in yesterday, not even twenty hours ago, to a six by ten-foot camping trailer, or put another way, a seventy-two by one-hundred-and-twenty-inch space for three people, a dog, a cat, no electricity, no phone, or water...”

“Well, there you go. The hall has a phone if you need to make a few local calls,” said Penny’s husband. “I bet something could be arranged.”

“But not a pot to pee in,” someone added from by the door. “Ask them to show you the incinerator john before you agree to anything.”

Penny had her hand up. “Let’s get someone voted into this office,” she suggested when she was called on.

The moderator then recognized the town’s oldest resident, “How much do you suggest we pay our tax collector Gerty?”

Gertrude George was an active and well-spoken woman with a mid-sized cannon in her front yard. “A thousand is a good round number.”

Theo, the third selectman, raised his hand. “One thousand dollars, same as the First Selectman?”

No one seemed to object.

“Do I still have the floor?” asked Theo.

Louise nodded.

“Then I nominate Betty Jane Horton for Tax Collector working out of the Town Hall five hours a week for an annual salary of one thousand dollars.”

“Is it Horton or Norton,” Louise asked, her gavel raised and ready.

“It’s Norton,” shouted Frank.

“But...” stammered Betty.

“I second the motion,” said the Second Selectman without further comment.

“Discussion? Any other nominations?” asked the moderator, firing questions at the assembly like she was practicing for an auction. “Seeing none, all those in favor of Betty Norton for tax collector signify by raising your hand. The ayes have it.”

Allen Myers had loaded the mammoth typewriter into his truck and headed from The City of Shaw, across the great bridge to the small town of Sagadahoc. He had turned right, then left and left again, then pulled off the state road and parked his truck. Lily’s front door was locked as usual, but the back was open wide, and Lily, standing in her side yard, was busy hanging her wash. “Oh dear,” she said when she saw Allen. “If I’d known you were intending to visit, I would have hung my laundry some other time.”

“I can come back later, or maybe you want me to wait out front.”

Lily laughed. Her laugh was so deep and boisterous, it was known to make small children cry.

Allen swatted a few mosquitoes, before pointing toward the road. “I’ve got the typewriter for you to borrow.”

“Oh, dear, no one told you,” said Lily. “I’m off that job. They’ve found my replacement; I may be asked to do a little advising, but mostly I’m free to have a life. My neighbor and I are thinking we might take the bus to Florida, wrestle a few alligators for some fun.”

“Seriously? You’re done? What about the Mammoth?”

“Ask Frank,” Lily smiled.

“This has nothing to do with Frank. This is tax office to tax office support.”

“Then talk to the new girl. She’s going to be fine. She lives on the Back Road about half way down, just after the turn off to Mill Pond. She and her husband and little daughter are building their own house using lumber from trees they’ve cut down.”

“They from around here?”

“No, he’s from New York; she’s from Lebanon and Lewiston and Portsmouth...”

“Military?”

“I’m guessing they took the Institute course on how to build your own home,” said Lily.

“So you think she’ll still need the typewriter?”

“How else is she going to do the job?”

“More and more folks are using computers, Lily. It’s just a matter of time.”

“I heard no talk of computers,” said Lily, “no mention in the Warrant or even around town.”

“No, but when they do switch over, which everyone is doing, then the Mammoth will be of no use to even Sagadahoc, unless Frank takes it to anchor his boat.”

Lily laughed and pinned a pink washcloth to her clothesline.

“Any other news you wish to apprise me of?”

Lill shook her head, and Allen tipped his hat to say, “Goodbye.”

He drove up and down the State Road, but never located the new tax collector’s lot. He then decided to stop at the Town Hall, to see if any news was posted near the door. He learned that the Tax Collector would be at the Hall on Wednesday from three to five-thirty and again on Friday from eight-thirty to eleven. The Town Clerk would have the same hours, but would still be working from her home, which was described as the old Winter Farm. The new Town Treasurer was listed as Savannah Richards, her hours by appointment.

Allen called Betty at the Town Hall on Wednesday during her hours, and she agreed to meet him Friday morning at eleven-o-five.

“Where do you want it?” he asked, testing the strength of the two tables, leaning on the center and then all four sides.

“I’ll be bringing it home,” Betty told him.

“Home? I thought you lived in a 72 inch by 120-inch trailer, not big enough to house a white footed mouse.”

“Where did you hear that?” Betty asked.

“I don’t know,” said Allen. “Shaw is just across the river and sound carries well over water.”

Betty could not figure whether Allen was teasing her or not, but she laughed, guessing that anything coming out at Sagadahoc Town Meeting was public knowledge by the time the next working day rolled around. “Just leave it on either table,” she said.

Allen opened the door to the Destroyolet, then peeked in the kitchen, saying, “Right there, inside those cabinets are the old Commitment Books. I’d have a look at them if I were you.”

Betty nodded.

“Are you a good typist?” asked Allen.

“No, I’m terrible.”

“Are you computer savvy?”

“No. And no one seemed to mind.”

“Okay, well, I think the most important things are to be honest with yourself and proceed

slow and steady. The Commitment Book comes with five copies to each page,” he warned her. “So, try hard to minimize mistakes. Erasing the copies is the last thing you want to have to do, because the carbons mark up the pages, and one page is the self-stick taxpayer’s info and address. Oh, and be careful of the carriage. As soon as you type up to the margin, it fires to the next line like a piston driving a train.”

Anything else?”

“No, I think that’s it for today,” said Allen.

“I did not exactly ask for this job,” said Betty. “And when Lily said it would be a good way to meet folks in town, I tried to tell her I was not qualified, but she was so sure I would do just fine. She said the town needed me.”

Allen smiled. “Well, Lily is known more for candor than flattery, so, could be she’s right.”