

# The Grange

*David Callaway & Sarah Rooker*

While you're escorting your children down Main Street to Marion Cross School or headed in the other direction to the library, have you noticed next to the lane that leads to the firehouse, the Upper Valley Grange? Maybe a few years ago you went there for a Saturday pancake breakfast or saw angels on the balcony during the Christmas Pageant. Today the building is quiet, but throughout its history, the Norwich Grange was a busy cornerstone of the community.

In 1867, the Grange, or the Order of the Patrons of Husbandry, was organized by Oliver Kelley, a farmer from Minnesota, who wanted an organization that advocated for farmers and enriched their social lives. As Nancy Osgood, pointed out in her 2001 article about the University Grange, "Just as the labor unions were becoming a voice for industrial workers, so could the Grange represent the voice of the scattered and independent farmer and respond to the need for more social interaction and community outreach."

By 1873, Grange membership had grown to nearly 700,000 members in 9,000 chapters across the nation. From the start, women took leadership positions and had a full vote within the Grange, long before women were able to vote nationally.

With 28 founding members, the Grange opened a chapter in Norwich in February of 1905. Named the "University Grange" in honor of Norwich University, the decision was made early on, according to the Grange Golden Anniversary speech of 1955, "to rent Morrison Hall [the current Grange hall] for \$1.25 a night, lighted and heated." In 1916, Morrison Hall owner J. L. Hazen offered the building for a rental fee of \$120 a year or a sale price of \$1,600 to be paid at the rate of \$100 a year. The members decided to purchase the building and soon thereafter the hall was wired for electricity. By 1924, the payments were completed and the mortgage was



*Before it was the Grange, it was a harness shop*



*Grange Christmas pageant in 1983*

burned at a ceremony on March 7, 1924.

At their meetings, Grange members tried to come to grips with matters of mutual concern. Through the years meeting topics reflected the issues of the day.

**1910:** "Which is better for the farmers' families, to take the city boarders or to be content with what the farm supplies?"

**1929:** "Is success on the farm due to location, the farm, or the farmer?"

**1941:** "Are taxes too high in Vermont? If so, what can we do about it?"

**1960:** "Better Understanding through Cooperation"

**1971:** "Is ceramic wear unsafe to use for food..."

The Grange Hall, with a kitchen and dining area that could feed a hungry gathering and an upstairs

that could seat 150 with a small stage, became the ideal home for various events that supported the organization's goal of contributing to the well-being of the town. For many years there was an annual September Grange Fair with hobby exhibits, arts and crafts, flowers, vegetables, canned goods, and a pet show. A ham supper followed with an auction in the evening.

As their Golden Anniversary program (1955) pointed out, "Our activities have not been limited to Ritualism and projects only – many hours of fun & fellowship have resulted from the preparation of programs for the public as well as Grange entertainment." Soon after the chapter was founded in 1905, Harvest Suppers were being held at Union Hall followed by a play, "adults 25 cents and children 15." Through the years the plays were a big attraction. In 1920, a 3-act play called "Aaron Slick from Punkin Crick" entertained audiences on the Grange stage. "Bimbo the Pirate" from 1930 was a hit, and a comedy in 1954, "Kill the Old Rooster," was also popular and revived for many years. In April 1955, the University Grange defeated dramatic entries from Wilder, Hartford, and Ascutney chapters with the one-act drama, "Oh, Doctor!" in an area play competition.

## In Service to the Community

In 1941, the University Grange and Hanover's Grafton Star Grange raised \$250 (\$5,250 in today's dollars) for Mary Hitchcock Memorial Hospital, which used the funds for the furnishings of the remodeled waiting rooms in the front of the hospital. During World War II, the Grange ran dances at Tracy Hall and members kept an eye out for enemy aircraft as plane spotters on Meeting House Hill.

The annual report from 1955 listed the year's projects, including "water testing, providing visual education equipment for the public school, marking streets & roads, actively participating with the Red

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Installing street signs in 1984

Cross Blood Bank, Community Halloween, and Christmas parties & Easter Sunrise services.”

According to the 1960 end-of-the-year meeting notes, “The most important activity of this year’s work was doing for others.” The list of achievements was endless: a blood bank was organized, vegetables were grown for the Haven, a Haunted House to support the UNICEF drive was organized, and the first

Christmas Pageant was held that year. Youth leadership training camps were organized with three guiding principles:

- Stop and think before you drive.
- Don’t let your parents down; they brought you up.
- Choose a date who would make a good mate.

In the early 1960s, the Grange installed street signs in town. By 1983, many were severely rusted and out of shape and the Grange took up the charge to replace the signs. By the fall of 1984, they had installed street signs on all the town roads – a total of 70 signs.

By the end of the 1960s, the Grange Hall, after 70 years of use, needed some structural attention. In 1980, it was suggested that the hall be sold and a new

one built on the outskirts of town. A special meeting, according to a 75th Anniversary Grange speech, “netted an almost unanimous vote to keep this hall and restore it. This single issue did more to strengthen and unite the members and the community than anything in a long while.”

### Building Community Through Food

The Grange members did more than town improvement projects. They also fed the citizens. In the early years, Harvest Suppers were served. More recently, there were Saturday pancake breakfasts and Lions Club suppers twice a month. Often on Easter Sunday, after the Sunrise Service, a breakfast of coffee, cocoa, and doughnuts was served. Grange food must have been tasty because it was reported after one supper “that in quantity and quality the meal more than supplied the wants and reached the highest expectations of everyone present.”

### A New Future for the Building

When the Covid pandemic hit in 2020, the Upper Valley Community Grange faced numerous challenges, as the social shutdown meant the end of pancake breakfasts, in-person meetings, and community projects. They had to close the building because income for operating the space disappeared.

This year, a small group, concerned by the deterioration of the building, reached out to Grange members to see what could be done. Grange leadership discussed the idea of turning over the building to a nonprofit organization that would be able to renovate and maintain it as a community center in the spirit of the Grange’s community focus and allow the Grange to hold meetings there in perpetuity.

In response, the Norwich Community Collaborative was formed as a nonprofit 501(c)3 organization to take on the building and work with the community to create a space that is responsive to community needs. The board has three committees working on building assessments, community visioning, and fundraising. Anyone who wishes to get involved in visioning for this space is welcome. Visit [norwichcommunitycollaborative.org](http://norwichcommunitycollaborative.org) for more information.

A strong, resilient community has opportunities for sustained interaction – opportunities to come together to grapple with issues, participate in community celebrations, and support community needs. Just as the Grange did in former times, the Norwich Community Collaborative wishes to provide opportunities for people to come together for engaged conversations, volunteerism, and celebrations. The neighborliness and community spirit that emanated from the Grange building will continue to shine forth. ■



Chicken supper at the Grange in 1971



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