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Notes from editor (not for publication):

Nice, Fran! You can come out of retirement anytime you want.

HEADLINE ELEMENTS:

####BEGIN HED####

90 years of Vermont observations

####END HED####

####BEGIN SUBHED####

Charles Fish's photos of farms, rivers, and fairs reflect
changes over the decades as he's seen them through his
viewfinder

####END SUBHED####

TEXT BODY:

####BEGIN TEXT####

Charles Fish — “Chuck” to his many friends — is
celebrating his 90th birthday with “Chronicles of Vermont Life:
Farm, Rivers and Fairs,” a photo exhibition at the Dummerston
Historical Society’s Schoolhouse Museum.
The opening, which also features an author talk, will take
place Thursday, July 16, at 7 p.m.

12 The exhibition will present more than 100 photographs
13 taken by Fish, of Dummerston Center, who organized them
14 around the three topics in the title.

15 “Always having had a sincere interest in photography, I
16 got back into it in a serious way,” Fish says.

17 These photos, he notes, “aren’t works of art; they are
18 documents.”

19 **((subhed))**

20 “The farm photos are from a pastoral farm from Rutland,
21 established by my great-great-grandfather, Henry Lester, in 1846.
22 The farmhouse, built not long after, is still there,” says Fish with
23 familial pride.

24 “A great hay barn, built in 1882, is no longer on the
25 property, but I have pictures of it,” he continues. “On the door of
26 the barn, in nail heads, are the initials of Henry’s son, William.
27 Those stayed as long as the barn stayed.”

28 Fish spent a perfect boyhood summer on the farm in
29 1944.

30 “I stayed on the farm the summer I turned 8,” he recalls
31 with a nostalgic smile. “I had the run of the farm, [I had] jobs to
32 do, and I earned money.”

33 He described the farm as “a great place for a boy” that
34 offered “fishing in East Creek and hunting woodchucks with
35 Muggsie, the family dog.”

36 Fish’s first book, *In Good Hands: The Keeping of a Family*
37 *Farm*, published in 1995, details stories from six generations on
38 that farm. *Publishers Weekly* called it “a nostalgic yet clear-eyed
39 piece of Americana that honors traditional rural virtues and the
40 dignity of manual labor.” The book was also [reviewed favorably](#)
41 in *The New York Times*.

42 He also spent two summers during high school doing
43 “man’s work” on that farm and has firsthand experience milking
44 cows, driving tractors, and getting the hay put by, among many
45 other farm-related responsibilities.

The photos in this portion of the exhibit celebrate the farm.

“Vermont has been a place where people have looked back at the old days and is a good subject matter. The pictures help tell the story of interesting characters, how a farm works, and the historical information of the people involved in farm operation — what they grew and how they grew it,” Fish says.

((subhed))

Another part of the exhibit features photographs Fish used in the making of his second book, *Blue Ribbons and Burlesque: A Book of Country Fairs*, published in 1998.

The photos were taken soon after Fish and his wife, Eleanor, bought their home in Dummerston Center and he began teaching English at Windham College.

“I took thousands of photographs as I attended almost every fair in the state,” he says. “The negatives stayed in the attic for 30 years.”

“I wanted to get to know the people involved with these fairs. What was their purpose? All these entertainments and competitions must have skill. Behind all this entertainment is a lot of calculation, study, practice and so forth.”

Fish suggests that the fair photos are visually interesting, as there are “strippers, freaks, horse pulling — all kinds of thought-provoking things.” The photos in this collection are matted and mounted, as they have previously been on display at the Vermont Historical Society’s Vermont History Museum in Montpelier.

His favorite picture in that section of the exhibit? “It became the cover photo of the book,” he says. “It’s a photograph of a team of draft horses just about to make the tie to the hitch. The driver is having a hard time backing the animals up to make the connection with the stone boat.”

And the burlesque? Fish reminds that the Tunbridge, Rutland, and Champlain Valley Fairs, along with many smaller

80 fairs, had strippers and what then were called “freak shows,”
81 derogatory and exploitative displays of people with unusual
82 bodies or extreme bodily feats.

83 “The bigger the fair, the bigger the budget for the carnival
84 shows,” Fish recalls. “That meant better barkers, bigger tents,
85 more exotic women. A barker who is trying to work up the crowd
86 builds a pitch. He has a pattern. It’s a composition saying the
87 same things for the 1,000th time.”

88 Fish will also be telling a few stories about how that
89 chapter of Vermont history ended. Still, he says, “I love people
90 and interesting characters. A fair is humanity spreading itself out
91 and having a good time.”

92 The river sequence of photos is based on his third book,
93 *In the Land of the Wild Onion: Travels Along Vermont’s Winooski*
94 *River*, published in 2006.

95 The Winooski is the river of Fish’s childhood. To write the
96 book, he paddled the length of the river from beginning to end —
97 three times. Fish also interviewed Vermont geologists, trappers,
98 deer hunters, farmers, hydropower engineers, and plant officers.

99 “In the exhibit, 30 or 40 photos are offered in two
100 categories. One is stream dynamics, pictures that illustrate how
101 rivers work, and then there is a second category about rivers as
102 human habitat. My adventures paddling helped me learn about
103 the river, and I interviewed people affected by the river.”

104 A guide to these photos will offer expanded comments
105 for people who wish to learn more.

106 Three of Fish’s four books will be on display at the event,
107 along with vintage posters from some of the fairs held in
108 Vermont, many over 50 years old.

109 Soon, people can find his fifth book — *Attic Archeology,*
110 *Village and Family in Another Vermont* — a story about his
111 experiences growing up in Essex Junction.

112 “It’s a memoir, set in mid-20th-century Vermont, mainly
113 the 1940s and ’50s,” Fish says. “It’s a personal and family story
114 but is also a village story. Along the way, the family experiences

115 interlock with the customs, habits, and attitudes of the time.
116 Implicit, of course, is the contrast to today's Vermont."

117 **((subhed))**

118 What does it take to be able to celebrate 90 years? Fish
119 has one answer: "Luck!"
120 "I have lived happily into old age with my lovely wife
121 Eleanor and 66 years of marriage," Fish says. "I continue to learn,
122 study, think, and investigate.
123 "I am a fortunate man," he says.

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BIO/COATTAIL:

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LAST ISSUE IN WHICH THIS FILE CAN BE RUN:

####BEGIN MAXISSUE####

125

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LINKS:

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126

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VIDEO:

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127

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LOGLINE (SOCIAL MEDIA):

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