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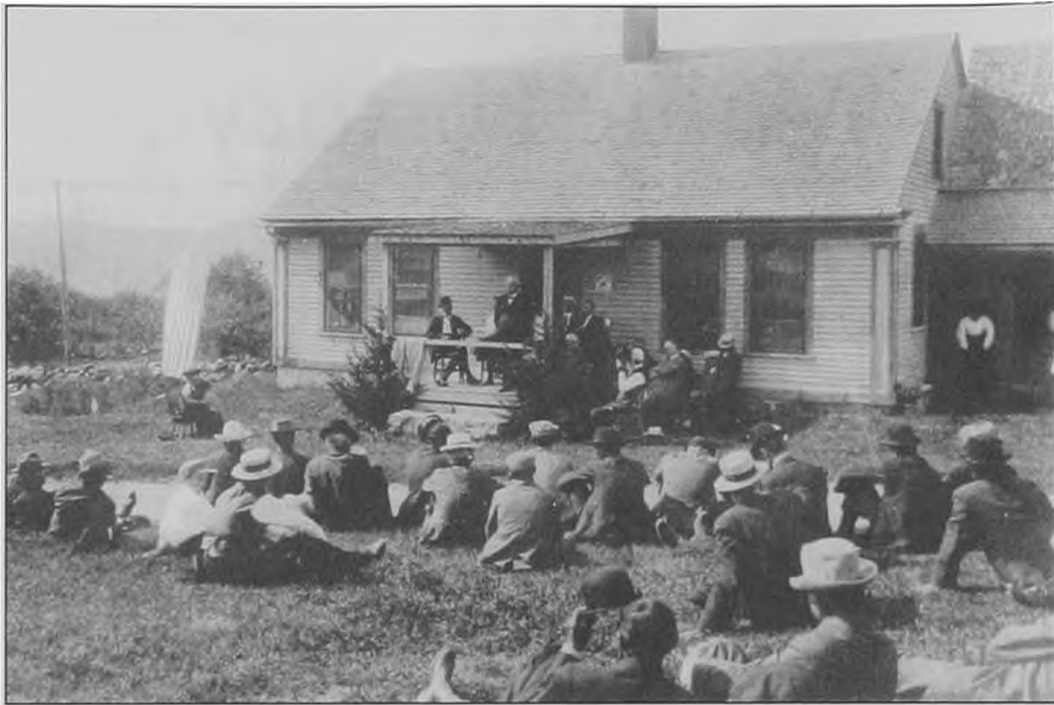
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The bear was a perfect symbol of regional identity in frontier Oxford County. Launched as a political standard, the bear later became a rallying figure for social, cultural, and even commercial events and developments. Above, John D. Long addresses the Oxford Bears' Fruit Growers Association at the Chase Farm in Buckfield in 1913. Below, the Conant Brothers and their spouses, founders of the Oxford Bears' Fruit Growers Association, pose proudly at the Hebron Railroad Station around 1920. *Paris Cape Historical Society photo courtesy of the author.*

THE CENTURY OF THE OXFORD BEAR: PARTY POLITICS, PATRONAGE, AND THE POPULAR PRESS IN CREATING MAINE COUNTY IDENTITY, 1820-1920

BY LARRY GLATZ

Oxford County, Maine, gained an early reputation as a bastion of Jeffersonian-Jacksonian Democracy in the otherwise Whiggish Commonwealth of Massachusetts, and accordingly political foes disparaged the county as a land of “backwoods bears.” Residents, ironically, adopted the image, and this early political labeling became a symbol of a shared culture and heritage. This article examines the “Oxford Bear” as an example of county history and the dynamics of local identity. Author Larry Glatz received an A.B. from Dartmouth and a M.A.T. from Harvard. He became involved in computer technology as an educator, and this eventually led him to a career as director of management information services for Stephens Memorial Hospital in Norway and later for a national healthcare rights organization. Mr. Glatz has been involved in numerous activities related to history, including a 1994 seminar devoted to Norway writer Charles A. Stephens, several works relating to Stephens and his circle, and a computerized compilation of Maine’s 1850 federal census. His transcriptions of six counties are accessible at the MHS website.

ALTHOUGH THE county remains a focus of local identity west of the Hudson River, its political and social relevance in New England is now slight and continues to fade. Rhode Island never had county government, Connecticut eliminated its county governments in 1960, and seven of the fourteen county governments in Massachusetts were phased out between 1998 and 2002. In Maine, there have been a number of initiatives over the years to reduce the governmental role of counties, or to eliminate them altogether; only Aroostook—known simply as the County—retains a significant county identity. New

England's remaining counties provide limited services and have little influence on social or political cohesion or the creation of popular identity. This, however, has not always been the case, and indeed in the early and mid-nineteenth century, organizations at the county level often held sway over local and even state affairs. As a result, the citizenry readily acknowledged and responded to appeals to county identity. Oxford County, although certainly not unique, provides a colorful example of the rise and demise of "countyism" in the region.

One factor that makes Oxford County an interesting study is its association with a specific image: the "Oxford Bear." The image of the Oxford frontier farmer as a huge-pawed, shaggy bear, unfit for a role in government, grew out of the political struggle between Federalists and later Whigs and their opponents, the Democratic back-countrymen in the early nineteenth century. Originally an insult thrown by partizan newspaper editors, it grew to become a popular identity claimed by citizens of Oxford County from all political camps. The identity of the Oxford Bear had its heyday in the decades after the Civil War, but as that generation passed, so too did its meaning. The Bear symbolism lingered into the early twentieth century, but is now all but forgotten in western Maine. A review of how this popular identity originated, thrived, and eventually disappeared provides a useful index against which histories of other New England regions can be considered. In addition, an examination of the Oxford Bear sheds light on the role that county affiliations played in the political development of Maine in its first century as a state.

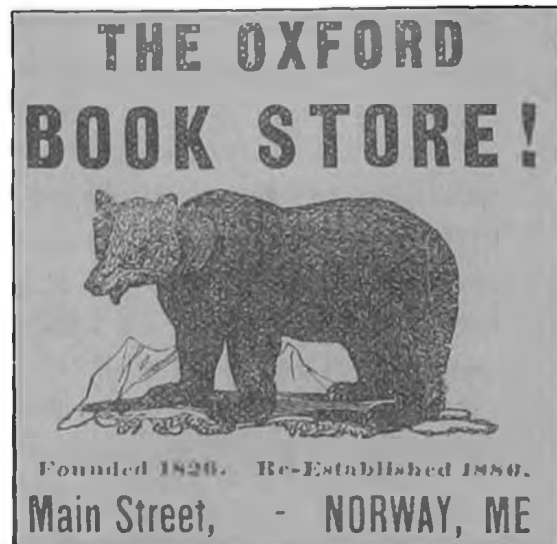
In this regard, the citizens of what would become Oxford County experienced almost a century of debate about who they were and how their geographical and political needs differed from those who lived around them. Defining the present boundaries of the county began with the petitions leading to the establishment of Fryeburg as a York half-shire town in 1799, and it did not conclude until 1893, when the commissioners ended this lengthy and often rancorous argument by relocating the county buildings down the road from Paris Hill to a site adjacent to the railroad station at South Paris. Between these two dates, northern and eastern portions of the original Oxford County were lost to Somerset County in 1809, to Franklin County in 1838, and to Androscoggin County in 1854, while on at least four other occasions there was agitation for the separation of the towns in the Fryeburg-Bridgton orbit into a new county, to be called Pequawket or perhaps Sebago.¹

Understandably, county identity could take hold only when and where a county had a distinctive image to purvey, and this is another fac-

tor where Oxford stands out. This identity derived from the political culture of early nineteenth-century New England, and from the unique individuals who articulated it in the rural uplands of northwestern Maine. State politics was critical to the development of Oxford countyism, and this identity was generated in the process of its separation as a county. In the birth of any new geopolitical entity there is an element of "us against them." Perhaps as a result of feelings of frustration or even hostility within and between the communities affected by the anticipated separations, those who wished to break away were required to justify their claims with reasons why the current circumstances were inconvenient or inequitable; the debates were hardly ever clear-cut or easy.

County identity also grew out of militia activities. In the years after statehood, enrollment was mandatory, and each town fielded one or more companies, which were grouped into regiments and finally into brigades at the county level. Company captains, regimental colonels, and brigadier generals were elected by the militia members. They wore their titles proudly, often using them in political campaigns years after their military meaning had passed. For example, in 1834 Oxford maintained two brigades, each comprised of three regiments of foot-soldiers and a cavalry battalion. This structure required the commissioning of a small legion of officers, ordinarily a *Who's Who* of the socially and politically prominent men of the area. Over the next two decades, the force of private soldiers dwindled significantly, leaving a top-heavy, socially and politically prominent officer corps. By 1852 the Oxford district still mustered two titular brigades with their two brigadier generals, but the first of these units was made up of only two companies of artillery, while the second held only a single company of riflemen. As long as the militia and its top-heavy officer corps-cum-politicians remained based in the counties, the military organization reinforced the sense of county identity.²

A more material contribution to the strength of county identity was the perennial issue of political patronage. Patronage was much more visible to Maine's citizens when it operated at the county level, with its myriad of appointive jobs. There were also numerous federal positions that were at least brokered, and often outrightly controlled, by congressmen whose nominations were secured at the county level. These included hundreds of postmasters, customs officials, census marshals, and even lighthouse keepers. In 1834 for example, patronage positions in Oxford County included the sheriff, nineteen deputies, forty-six postmasters, twenty-seven coroners, and eleven judges, along with clerks, registrars, and other officials in the county.³ In addition, the state's



The original Oxford Bear emerged out the perennial political scraps between Feralists, Whigs, and Democrats in the early nineteenth century. In the second half of the century the logo proved useful in a variety of other ways. *Illustrations courtesy of the author.*

newspapers depended to a large degree on government printing contracts, and these, too, were doled out to the most “supportive” editors of each shire town. The editors, in turn, understood and energetically executed their duty to keep the county’s voters in line.⁴

As a result, the political parties were often better organized at the county level than in the towns or the capital. It was generally the county caucuses that nominated delegates to state conventions and candidates for legislative and congressional seats; today local caucuses select state delegates. Since the parties vied most fervently for the control of candidates and votes on a county-by-county basis, it was inevitable that when a campaign was lost, these organizations were characterized as indolent or naive; likewise, when a county was won, partisan editors inevitably extolled the wisdom and energy of the county as a whole. Electoral exhortations such as “Old Cumberland O.K!,” “Old Kennebec—we look for a bumper in September,” and “Even Little Waldo claims a majority for Smith” were routine. Finally, the fact that gubernatorial and legislative elections were contested annually kept this county-driven political caldron at a constant boil.⁵ From the first gubernatorial administration of Hebron’s Albion K. Parris (1822) through the vice-presidency of Hannibal Hamlin (1861-1864), and even into the governorship of Sidney Perham (1871-1874), the county of Oxford maintained a forceful reputation. Hamlin, although transplanted to Penobscot County in 1833, always considered himself a “Son of Oxford,” and the support of his Oxford County associates was invaluable to him in a number of his early political contests.

NOT SURPRISINGLY, therefore, the original Oxford Bear emerged out of the dense undergrowth of New England party politics. Oxford County was the distant frontier of the more cultivated Federalist/Whig Commonwealth of Massachusetts. Indeed, one of the principal reasons that Maine’s bid for independent statehood succeeded in 1820 was that the Boston Federalist elite were happy to jettison that northern hoard of troublesome farmers, squatters, and backwoodsmen, even if it meant losing their few, but vocal allies in the larger coastal towns. As one influential Massachusetts politician noted at the prospect of Maine’s separation, “[then] we shall have a tidy little Whig state.”⁶

This, of course, oversimplifies a much more protracted and complicated series of events, but politicians of the day framed their arguments in reductionist and simplified ways. Between the presidencies of Jackson and Buchanan, the two major political parties each characterized their

own constituents as descendants of the clear-thinking and noble citizenry of 1776, while relentlessly portraying their adversaries as, alternatively, stupid yokels or snobbish aristocrats. The Democrats' side of this fairly mean dialectic is typified in the following toast offered at the party's Fourth of July celebration in Buckfield in 1834: "*The County of Oxford*.—Her sons 'who labor in the earth are the chosen people of God,' and will show themselves as ready to oppose the encroachment of a corrupt Monied Power, as they have been to defend their country against the invasions of a foreign foe."⁷ And from the other party: "General Jackson has gone to his Hermitage—and, if he would let his beard grow, and shave off some of his prejudices and rancors, a very pretty hermit he would make. May our Cincinnatus find in retirement, the peace that was denied him while Dictator! May he turn better furrows in Tennessee than he has cut swaths in Washington! May his hand be more familiar with the plough than the sceptre."⁸

Endless sloganeering like this characterized the press of the day, but this image of the plow took on a surprising and unanticipated life when, as in many such cases of political spin, matters were made even worse in the attempt to control it. Upon being criticized by a Jacksonian editor for disparaging the legislative aptitude of the yeoman farmer, the class whose votes were vital to both parties, the Boston *Courier* issued this clarification:

Country Matters. Some editors copy our Georgics with commendations—others visit them with censure. But we were born in the bush, and have therefore neither fear nor reverence for owls. One (not an owl but an editor) suggests that we underrate the mental capacities of the furrow-turners, because we praise their bodily prowess, and refers us to their feats of legislation as a proof of their sagacity. But it is a ticklish business to make laws; it is a trade or science, the complex of all trades and sciences. A legislator cannot have too much knowledge. He must know the past and the present, in foreign countries. A farmer never looks so well as when he has a hand upon the plough; with his huge paw upon the statutes what can he do? It is as proper for a blacksmith to attempt to repair watches, as a farmer, in general, to legislate. Our laws are monuments of sages; the yearly petty alterations, revisions, repeals and restorations, are the works of bunglers.⁹

In retrospect, it seems that “The Tennessee Farmer” article would probably have remained just another example of partisan editorial banter had the *Courier* not deigned to issue its clarification. However, the subsequent “huge paw” and “furrow-turner” epithets were catchy. At least they struck a note in the ears of several Democratic editors, and they echoed through the newspaper columns in all corners of New England. They soon became a convenient shorthand by which the Democrats reminded readers of the Whiggish “aristocracy’s” anti-agrarian sentiments.¹⁰

Within fifteen days of the *Courier*’s “Country Matters” item, the *Boston Statesman* opined that editors and writers “profess a great regard and respect for the mechanics and farmers, while they are doing all they can to destroy their influence, and to restrict all the honors and emolument of government to a self-created aristocracy.” The *Oxford Democrat* reprinted the *Statesman*’s commentary with various embellishments:

A farmer never looks so well, as when he has a hand upon the plough. With his HUGE PAW upon the statutes, what can he do: It is as proper for a *blacksmith* to attempt to repair watches, as a *farmer*, in general, to *legislate*.” [And then concluded:] “Ye farmers, merchants, laboring men! read and ponder. This is the language of the leading Whig paper in this city, or as it is often called, “Mr. Webster’s paper.” It is an index of the real sentiments and designs of the Whig party, or, at least, of the leaders—Let him who readeth understand.

In its next issue the *Democrat*, anticipating the usefulness of such a blunt and heavy cudgel as the September elections approached, reminded its yeoman readership that “the *Boston Courier* talks about the “HUGE PAWS” of the ‘FARMERS,’ and represents them as unfit to be members of the legislature.”¹¹ Two weeks later, the Oxford citizenry were warmed by the following toast from the recent Democratic convention in Bangor:

Resolved, That the principles and policy of THOMAS JEFFERSON and ANDREW JACKSON are, as our correspondents represent them, *identical*! That the Gag Law and the Sedition Act, which characterized the federal party in the days of the former, find their parallel in the Mobs, Riots and *Figure Head* Outrage, under the administration of the latter, and will be put down by the “HUGE PAWS” of laborers and “FURROW TURNERS!” whom Federalists affect to despise.¹²

Spurred by rallying cries such as these, the state's Democrats enjoyed a successful season at the polls. Between the 1833 and 1834 gubernatorial elections, vote totals increased from 25,731 to 38,133 (48.2 percent) and in Oxford County they rose from 2,656 to 3,646 (37.3 percent). In a word, Maine's Whigs were crushed that year.¹³ Perhaps the successful electoral outcome convinced the Democrats that phrases like these would remain useful. In any event, they wielded the rhetorical "huge paw" again and again in subsequent years.

Between 1835 and 1838, terms like huge paw, farmer, yeoman, and Maine became almost interchangeable as synonyms for Democrat, as two Fourth of July toasts from Oxford illustrate. From Bethel: "*Maine, with her huge paws.*—As true to republican principles as her guardian star is to the north"; and from Turner: "*The Yeomanry.*—If their huge paws disqualify them for seats in the halls of Legislation, their brawny arms will hurl from power those would infringe upon their privileges."¹⁴ During the 1838 election, another set of Whig anti-Democrat epithets complimented nicely the backwoods huge paw image that had proved irresistible to partisan sloganeers: "The State of Maine is a PALTRY WILDERNESS—the people a set of PAUPERS, SQUATTERS, and SWINDLERS, totally unworthy of credit;—her rivers, mere brooks—her ships, unseaworthy;—her mines and her timberlands, which some insane people have talked about as having a real value,—moonshine—existing only in the imaginations of visionaries,—her soil, too sterile to afford pasture for sheep . . . , [A] MISERABLE REGION . . . [of] mental obliquity."¹⁵

The *Kennebec Journal*, the Whig organ of Augusta, could certainly not have used such broadly anti-Maine language on its own pages, but it was apparently attracted enough by the "miserable region" image to adapt it to the most unremittingly Democratic of Maine's counties: "We have not so good an account to give our readers of the result of the election, as we had hoped to lay before them. The county of Kennebec has somewhat increased her Whig majority, but the Loco Focos have swelled their votes very much in the benighted regions of Oxford and Waldo, where it would seem as if scarcely a ray of light has been permitted to penetrate."¹⁶ Boston's insults against Maine's "paltry wilderness" could easily be ignored, coming as they did from a state whose own wilderness was so paltry as to be almost invisible. But the Augusta paper's "benighted regions" epithet apparently galled the *Oxford Democrat* leadership, since almost immediately this phrase joined "huge paws" in the Democrats' litany of proofs that all Whiggery despised the good people of rural Maine.

As the 1839 election season got underway, an unidentified Whig phrase-maker took the short but predictable step from the image of “huge pawed” ploughmen to that of “backwoods bears,” setting in place the last metaphorical piece of bear identity. The insult was vigorously parried by the opposition and loudly trumpeted as the *Oxford Democrat* seconded the *Eastern Argus* by reprinting the commentary: “FEDERAL INSULTS TO THE PEOPLE: Destitute of principle themselves, they [the Whigs] cannot conceive it possible for others to be actuated by honest motives.... Hence they sneeringly rail at the people as “*the blind bears of the back towns*.”¹⁷ By August 1839, “huge paws,” “the benighted regions of Oxford County,” and the “bears of the backwoods” commonly appeared in the same sentences in the *Oxford Democrat*. The metaphorical “huge paws” had been removed from the yeoman’s plow and had become firmly affixed to the front quarters of the bears of the benighted backwoods of Oxford County.¹⁸

As the image of the Oxford Bear was coalescing in the minds of the locals, it was also taking hold in the state’s farther corners. In the February 1840 session of the state House of Representatives, a debate over bounties on various predatory animals devolved into a heated argument, during which Washington County’s Benjamin D. Eastman leveled his finger at Oxford’s John J. Perry and declared, “If this Legislature doesn’t repeal this law someone will soon be bringing here the scalp of this old Oxford Bear himself for a bounty.”¹⁹ Since the exchange was reported in the papers of both parties in the state, the episode helped the Oxford Bear to slip the rhetorical harness of the Democrats and to take on just enough of a non-partisan air to give it currency as a county designation. While Democrats continued to refer to themselves proudly as Oxford Bears, the image of the Bear was soon adopted by the general citizenry of the county and came into common, non-partisan usage statewide. The Bear emerging as a symbol of Oxford Countydom may have also derived from the county’s steady outmigration, as the children and grandchildren of interior Maine’s first settlers left the subsistence farms and logged-out woodlands of the older rural communities for newer settlements in eastern Maine, the coast’s commercial centers, and the Great West. As the sons and daughters of Oxford County dispersed, so too did the image of the Oxford Bear.

By mid-century the Bears were loose everywhere in Maine, but they seem to have been particularly successful in their move to Penobscot County. In fact, for one brief moment in the winter of 1851 they met in Bangor and made the “Queen City” their own. The event was announced in the *Portland News*: “The Sons of Oxford in the Penobscot re-



The Oxford Register.

SAMUEL R. CARTER, . . . Editor.

Paris Hill, Maine,

FRIDAY, JANUARY 8, 1875.

To those honest republicans who are too radical to believe anything emanating from democratic sources, we especially commend the leading article in the last issue of the *Oxford Democrat*, in which the republican party is arraigned for sufficient crimes to cause every one who desires to live under an honest government to refuse aiding such corruption to retain its power. The writer admits that all efforts within the party to correct these have been abortive, and as the only remedy he recommends a change of party leaders and says "that errors *cannot* or *will* not be corrected by those under whom they have arisen."—The italics are his own.—Is it possible that there is any one who has arrived at the years of discretion that can be made to believe that such a remedy can be applied; that those men who have for years been the leaders of a powerful party can be forced to yield their places to others, and still maintain the organization of that party? Such a thing might be effected in a single municipality and possibly in a small State; but in a great nation like the United States it would require years to accomplish it—if at all—and before that period arrived the ruin would be complete and there would be nothing left to save.

New Hampshire Democratic State Convention.

CONCORD, Jan. 5.

The Democratic State Convention was called to order in Phenix Hall, this morning, by Geo. F. Putnam, chairman of the state committee. The convention was one of the largest ever held here, the delegates crowding the hall to its fullest capacity, and the galleries being filled with spectators.

Hon. Albert R. Hatch of Portsmouth, was chosen president, and that gentleman made a brief speech on taking the chair.

The convention then proceeded to ballot for a candidate for Governor, with the following result: Whole number of votes 687; necessary for a choice 344; Harry Bingham, of Littleton, 1; John M. Hill of Concord, 1; Wm. Burns of Lancaster, 2; Geo. G. Jones of Warner, 3; Joseph Burrows of Plymouth, 13; Frank A. McKeon of Nashua, 79; Warren F. Daniel of Franklin, 249; Hiram R. Roberts of Rollinsford, 347;—and Hiram R. Roberts was declared nominee for Governor.

A. T. Pierce of Claremont, was nominated for railroad commissioner.

The committee on resolutions reported the following, which were accepted and adopted:

We the Democrats of New Hampshire, in convention assembled, send greeting to our brethren in other States, and rejoice with them in the glorious result of the recent elections, presaging the deliverance of the country from the dominion of radical tyranny and corruption, under which it has suffered for the last fourteen years; reaffirming our allegiance to the federal constitution as the supreme law of the land by which all powers not expressly delegated by the general government to the States themselves, and the people, we make the following declaration of principles as the basis of our political action.

1st—Public officials to be held strictly

During the campaigns of the 1830s, terms like huge paw, farmer, and yeoman became almost interchangeable with Democrat. These terms coalesced into the Oxford Bear. As late as 1875, the bear served as a symbol for Oxford County Democratic newspapers, but as these papers became less partisan the bear took on a more county-wide identification. *Illustration courtesy of the author.*

gion have held a meeting and voted to celebrate the 46th anniversary of the incorporation of Oxford County by a Grand Festival.”²⁰ No fewer than eighty Bears, including dignitaries and guests, assembled at the hotel to honor “Old Oxford.” The celebrants convened around numerous tables bedecked “with shaggy black bear skins, the regalia of the County of Oxford,” and from the center of each “spread the antlers of the stately moose, typifying the county of Penobscot.” The evening was filled with toasts, songs, panegyrics, and epic narrative, while letters were read from many absent bruins. Among these were several from Washington DC, including Congressmen Elbridge Gerry (of Waterford, not to be confused with his deceased and better known Massachusetts grandfather of the same name), Rufus K. Goodenow, Israel Washburn, Jr., Samuel R. Thurston, and Senator Hannibal Hamlin. There were also letters from Major Hastings Strickland, who had lost a recent congressional election to Washburn; from the immediate ex-Governor, John W. Dana of Fryeburg; and from perhaps the state’s most esteemed elder statesman, Albion K. Parris, born in Hebron but since retired to Portland.²¹ Among the attending sons of Oxford County were President Elijah L. Hamlin, formerly of Paris, Vice-Presidents Israel Washburn Sr., General Samuel P. Strickland, both of Livermore, Samuel H. Blake, ex-attorney general of Maine, originally of Hartford; Colonel Charles Andrews, congressman-elect from Paris; and Henry E. Prentiss, Esq.—West Point graduate, mathematics professor, lawyer, and timberland baron.

The event was a great success. Persis Sibley Andrews, wife of US Representative Charles Andrews, noted in her journal that her “Hus[band] went to Bangor last Monday morn’g to attend the ‘Festival of the Sons of Oxford’ on the 4th, being the anniversary of the Organization of the County. Returned last eve’g. He says it was rich in reminiscences—in letters & poems from her sons & daughters at home & abroad—in fun, pathos & love of home. No other Co[unty] in Maine has furnished near so many distinguished men as Oxford.”²² The tenor of the festival can be judged by a sample of the many toasts proffered, such as “*The Emigrant Bears*—Wherever they roam, they are true to their instincts of energy, patriotism and plunder”; or “The County of Oxford—Glorious in the magnificence of her scenery, rich in the productions of her enterprise and industry—richer and more glorious in her sons—at home and abroad.” And this ode to Oxford’s fair daughters who, although not allowed within the hall that evening, received equal praise: “*The Daughters of Oxford*, as pure and fair as zephyrs that kiss them in her own mountain air—From her hill-tops and streams, though far we may roam, the

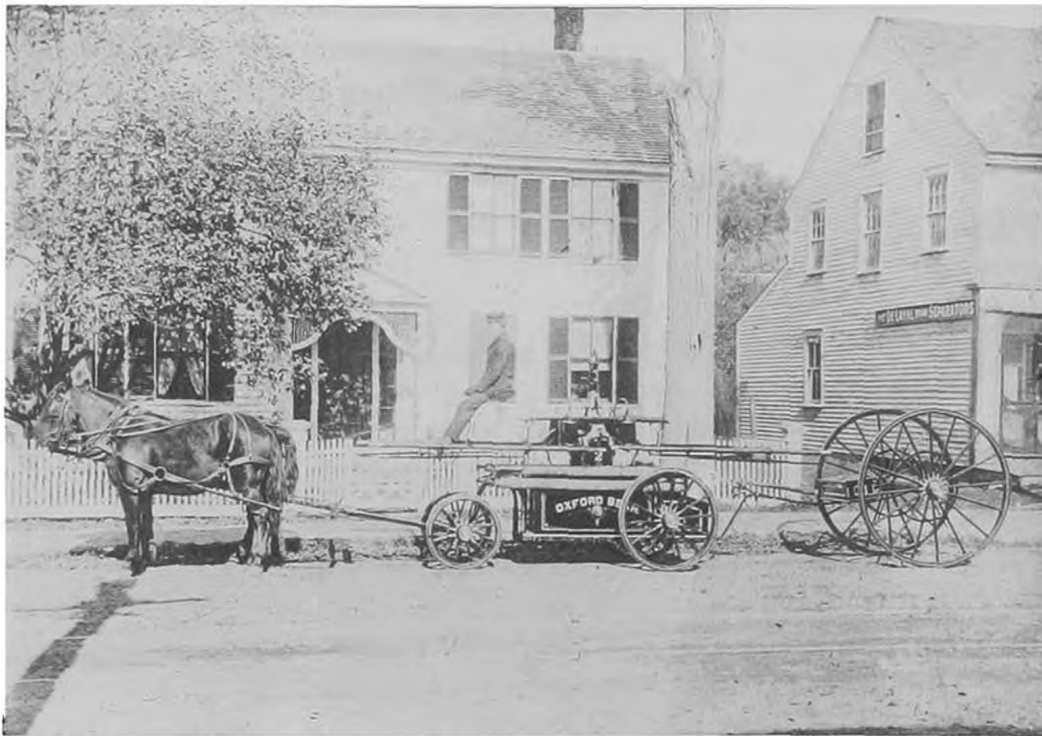
smiles of their beauty shall beckon us home.” Similar sentiments were echoed in the Bears’ rendition of *Auld Lang Syne*, a few exemplary verses of which were “can we forget the wild green-wood, unpierced by summer’s shine, where oft, we roved, in misty mood, in auld lang syne!” This was followed by “and sought the bear and flying deer, From morning sun till dine, Nor thought of danger or of fear, In auld lang syne?”

THE OXFORD BEAR then was born in, and to a great degree out of the extreme editorial partisanship of the 1830s and 1840s. But by the late 1870s and early 1880s the Bear had become a dominant symbol of cultural life in Oxford County. Often letters to the editors of the county papers were signed “A True Bear,” “With a Growl,” or simply “Bruin.” The new mechanical pumper for Norway’s fire brigade was christened the Oxford Bear. In 1860 a debating society by the name of the “Oxford Bear Club” was formed in Bethel. The winners of the Norway-Paris old-timers’ baseball game in 1867 adopted the name *Ursa Major*, and of course referred to the losers as *Ursa Minor*. Throughout the 1860s, the state’s most accomplished hunter, Joshua G. Rich, adopted the same Bear logo for ads for his sports camp on Richardson Lake. In fall 1867, when the Pennesseewassee Base Ball Club of Norway defeated the Bowdoin for the Maine state championship prize “Silver Ball,” the *Brunswick Telegraph* reported:

The story runs that during the “national” game in the “classic shades” Saturday, the Oxford Bears, with their eight pound bat, struck a ball so high in the air that, to the best of knowledge and belief of the college boys, it has not come down yet. . . . There is no well authenticated record that the Brunswick girls caught the sturdy Oxford bears in their arms after the victory of Saturday . . . but as the matter stands, the duty devolves upon the corn fed beauties of old Oxford.²³

Throughout the 1880s and 1890s, news items from the various hamlets and crossroads of the county appeared in the *Oxford Democrat* under a column entitled “Bear Brigade.” When the 17th Maine Regiment was formed on August 7, 1862, one of its Biddeford volunteers wrote in his diary that the unit was composed “almost entirely of men from York and Cumberland counties, with a few ‘Oxford Bears’ sandwiched in.”²⁴

In summer 1873, the *Bridgton News* described a meeting of the joint

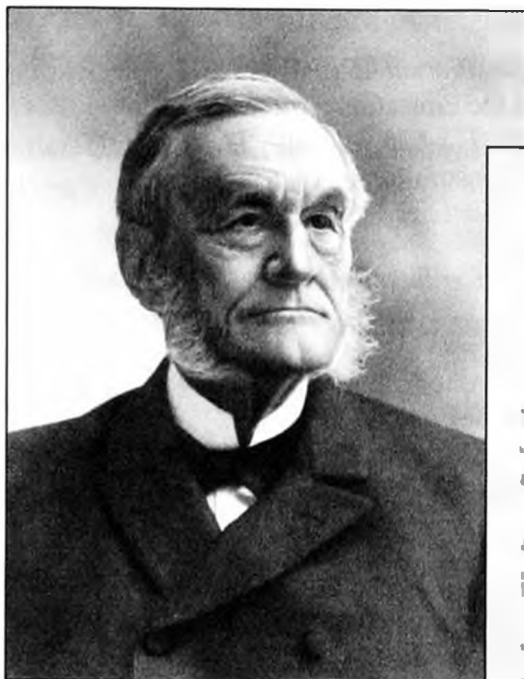


Oxford County identity could be seen in examples like the Norway Light Infantry and the Norway Sax Horn Band, all standing with their stately bearskin hats before the Elm House Hotel in Norway in 1855, and in the Norway mechanical fire-pumper, christened the Oxford Bear. *Norway Historical Society photos courtesy of the author.*

Oxford and Cumberland County commission on the maintenance of certain shared roads, noting that “the Oxford Bears were out in force, and showed a bold front”; and in 1879, when the *Lewiston Evening Journal* reported on the centennial celebration of the town of Paris, its headline read “the Paris Centennial and the Famous Oxford Bears.” When President Grant came to Maine for the opening of the European and North American Railroad, “an Oxford County company of a hundred men, handsomely uniformed and wearing tall bearskin hats” entertained.²⁵ It is clear that by the end of the nineteenth century the Oxford Bear image had emerged as something much more than a political character sketch. Most early nineteenth-century papers were rabidly partisan, crammed with political diatribe and carrying hardly any material that we would now describe as “local news.” However, this situation changed markedly after the Civil War, when even the most factional papers gave over relatively large percentages of their non-advertising print space to recording the minutiae of social and family life in the surrounding neighborhoods and towns. During this period the interests and energies of large segments of the American population became engrossed in the doings of “society,” no matter how provincial or parochial.

This development can be seen in the proliferation of news items relating to vacationing, tourism, picnics, weddings, sports, public lectures, and clubs of every sort: men’s, women’s, outdoor, sewing, literary, cycling, baseball, whist, and countless others. In this context it is easy to imagine the result of a lengthy notice in the *Eastern Argus* announcing a reunion of “the Sons and Daughters of Oxford County,” to be held on March 4, 1882.²⁶ No fewer than ninety-eight sons and daughters assembled at the Falmouth Hotel in Portland. The event had been instigated by George F. Emery, who had been involved in the Bangor meeting thirty years earlier. The organizing committee comprised about two dozen of the city’s best-known citizens, including Sullivan C. Andrews, Albert L. Burbank, Alvin Deering, and ex-Governor Sidney Perham.²⁷

The keynote speakers for the evening were Emery and Gen. John J. Perry. Both had enjoyed distinguished careers as lawyers and newspapermen, and both had been associated with the early rumblings of the Oxford Bear. Both, too, had played important roles in the formation of the Republican party, but they had emerged from that tumultuous process on opposite edges of the political thicket. Emery was Hamlin’s brother-in-law, and was allegedly instrumental in holding Oxford’s Democrats in line when many of them wanted little if anything to do with Hamlin’s undisguisedly abolitionist agenda. Perry was one of the key figures in



"Oxford Bear" Reunion.



The Second Annual Reunion and Dinner of "The Society of the Sons and Daughters of Oxford County" will take place at the Falmouth Hotel, Wednesday evening, March 7th, at 6 o'clock.

Arrangements are now being perfected by the Executive Committee to make this reunion fully as pleasant and successful as was the first.

The Literary Exercises will be briefer than they were last year, and more general in their scope. Vocal and instrumental music will form an attractive feature of the entertainment.

The price of the dinner tickets is placed at \$1.50 each.

Please notify Chairman of Dinner Committee on or before Monday, March 5th, as to number of tickets you will be responsible for.

No Tickets can be obtained later than Tuesday, March 6th.

Dinner will be served promptly at 7:30 o'clock.

Tickets may be had of any one of the Executive Committee.

PERCIVAL BONNEY,
E. S. OSGOOD,
J. A. KING,
MERRILL

— Oxford — — Reunion. —

— Falmouth Hotel, March 7th, 1883, —

AT 6 O'CLOCK. P. M.

→>*TICKET TO THE BANQUET.*←

On March 4, 1882, the Society of the Sons and Daughters of Oxford County assembled at the Falmouth Hotel in Portland. George F. Emery, who had been involved in a similar meeting some thirty years earlier, convened the meeting. The following March the Oxford Bears met again for their second annual reunion and dinner. *Illustrations courtesy of the author.*

bringing about the Portland bolt from the Democratic Party in 1853, which effected the nomination of Anson P. Morrill as a so-called “fusion” candidate, most of whose supporters would soon become known as Republicans. Emery, however, proved unwilling to abandon his ancestral party and remained “a life-long Democrat of the old school,” while Perry became the first in a long line of Republican editors for the anachronistically titled *Oxford Democrat*.

Like the meeting three decades earlier in Bangor, the Portland convention was filled with toasts, songs, and praise for “Old Oxford.” But when these Bears and Bearesses vowed to continue the happy tradition in future years, they were not simply growling into the wind. Over the next seven years, the “Sons and Daughters of Oxford” congregated in various dens and dales. Their next three meetings were held at Gilbert’s Hall in Portland. On March 7, 1883, the featured speaker was Portland’s ex-mayor George Walker, who confessed that though he had not actually been born in Oxford County, he had spent his formative years in the sylvan setting of Lovell. The following April, the assemblage was treated to a speech by the most hallowed Bear of them all, Hannibal Hamlin. And a year later, on May 27, 1885, it was John D. Long of Buckfield who sung the county’s praises.

Long was then in the midst of a seven-year term in the Massachusetts House of Representatives. He had served an earlier term of four years, had been speaker of the House, lieutenant governor, and then governor from 1880 to 1882; but as he spoke to the Bears in 1885, equally noteworthy years lay ahead of him. In 1897, President McKinley would name him secretary of the Navy, and a year later he was at the helm of that department when the battleship USS *Maine* went down. In his career, he would preside over Harvard University’s Board of Overseers, translate the *Aeneid*, write histories of the Republican party and of his adopted town of Hingham, Massachusetts, and donate a beautiful little shingle-style library designed by John Calvin Stevens in his father’s name to his home town of Buckfield.²⁸ In another notable event of the 1885 meeting, Prof. Frank L. Bartlett presented a mounted bear to the group. The bear was henceforth given a place of honor at each meeting of the association.

After four years of meeting in Portland, the Oxford Bears finally burst their urban constraints and on July 1, 1886, set out for the lovely intervale of Fryeburg, their county’s earliest incorporated town. The event was detailed in the following day’s edition of the *Eastern Argus* in a lengthy article written undoubtedly by its editor, Col. John M. Adams,

the esteemed vice-president of the Bears. Over a hundred members left Portland by train, he remarked, and upon arriving at the platform in Fryeburg, they were saluted by the Mt. Pleasant Band of East Fryeburg, formally welcomed by several of Fryeburg's leading citizens, and led down the main street by the band and a carriage in which was placed the Oxford Bear brought from Portland. Arriving at the Oxford House, the group entered the dining hall under a large banner declaring "Oxford Bears Welcome." The keynote address by Major David R. Hastings was followed by numerous other contributions from the group, and the session concluded with a large group photograph taken on the steps of the inn. After strolling the town and enjoying the fabled mountain views, the Bears reassembled at the railway station. Just under three hours later, the train, "filled with happy, though somewhat tired Bears," arrived in Portland.²⁹

The Fryeburg outing was such a pleasant success that the group yielded to their wanderlust again the following year. On June 29, 1887, they embarked in even larger numbers for Norway. The special train rolled into South Paris station to the strains of Chandler's Band, which accompanied the excursion. The Bears turned out in "full force": between two and five hundred Oxford residents living in Portland made the trip to Norway, filling four cars.³⁰ After being shuttled from South Paris via the Norway branch railroad, the visitors toured the town and convened for a banquet at General Beal's hotel. The usual songs, poems, and speeches followed. According to the *Democrat*, "the assemblage was enlivened by the presence of Chandler's Band, and also by the Association's bear, which occupied a place of honor on the stage." Although not the final speech of the afternoon, the pithiest summary of the spirit of the day was uttered by Dr. Seth C. Gordon of Fryeburg who, in the words of the *Democrat*, "demonstrated that the Oxford Bears must be far ahead of all other animals, because 'we say so ourselves.'"

THE ENERGETIC forays into the hinterlands during the summers of 1886 and 1887 must have exhausted the Bear brigade's enthusiasm, since the convocation for 1888, initially planned for the Ottawa House on Cushing's Island, never occurred. However, the year of rest apparently rejuvenated their energies, as the following spring found them on the move once again toward the beckoning Oxford Hills. Their destination in 1889 was the picnic grove at Lake Anasagunticook and the little village of Canton just beyond. On June 18, over a hundred Oxford expa-

triatres boarded the Grand Trunk in Portland, and after taking on additional passengers at Mechanic Falls, arrived at the lakeside grove just before noon. After a picnic dinner, they assembled in the pavilion and listened to an address by their president, Byron D. Verrill. Afterwards, some remained at the lake while others took the train one stop further into Canton village, where waiting teams took them on tours of the town and onward to the Androscoggin and into Gilbertville to view the pulp mills.

An event of particular note in the Anasagunticook grove was a “side-show” performed in a booth near the lake. There the Hon. George F. Emery, through an unusual union of spiritualism and literary history, experienced a visitation from the ghost of Artemas Ward, the creation of Waterford-born humorous Charles Farrar Browne, who at age twenty-four created the nationally famous bumpkin character while working for the *Cleveland Plain-Dealer*. Ward’s burlesque descriptions of politics and other national events were hosted in papers and journals throughout the nation.

“Is the spirit of Artemas Ward present?” asked Emery.

“That depens,” replied an ethereal voice.

“On what?”

“On who calls. Who ar yer, any wa?”

I am one of the Oxford Bears,” declared Emery.

“At hom, then, every time,” the spirit replied.

At length the phantom presence dictated an address to the assembled mortals, proclaiming,

Respectid bretherin, and you, beloved sisterin, speshually of the shemale sect: Welcum agin to yure nativ hith. Yu cum not as pursenal indevidooals, but in an assoshiatin kapassety, a mootual admirashun sositaty, as it war, the beat of which can’t be found — outside of Boston. Yu do wel to cum hom agin. Yure nater demans it. Fer grace has had a hard tussle with yu sence yu left yure native hith to jine the Filistins.

After a few more spirited declarations on “the gloriz of Old Oxford,” the shade released his hold on Esquire Emery and faded back into the netherworld.

In an irony probably more appreciated by the fading ghost of Ward

than by his earthly audience, something of the spirit of the Bears also faded that day with the setting sun on Lake Anasagunticook. Not only would the Bears never again return *en masse* to the rivers and hills of Old Oxford, but the winter of 1889 would enfold the association in an hibernation from which it would not awake. There was no organizational meeting in the spring of 1890, and the article from the *Argus* about the events in Canton, written by Col. John Milton Adams of Andover, the man who had been elected president of the group that day, were the last report pasted into the association's official scrapbook.³¹

Although the Oxford Bear was occasionally sighted over the next several decades, its days of profusion and exuberance passed away with this generation—a generation that left huge prints on the political landscape of Maine and the nation. Oxford's original Bears included people such as Hannibal Hamlin, who passed away in 1891; John J. Perry and John M. Adams, both of whom died in 1897; Byron Decency Verrill, who passed the following year; George F. Emery, who died in 1904; and the association's scribe, Albert L. Burbank, who died in 1920.

Even before these passings, at the height of the Bear's activities, one death deserves special mention: Joseph Howard exemplified the essential spirit that was the Oxford Bear. Born in Brownfield in 1800, he had been both a general in the militia and a justice of the state's Supreme Court. He graduated from Bowdoin in 1821 and studied law with Daniel Goodenow (three-time gubernatorial candidate and fellow Bear). He married the sister of John W. Dana, who was three-time governor of the state and yet another Bear, served as United States Attorney for Maine, as mayor of Portland, and as the Democratic candidate for governor in 1864 and 1865. In December 1877, on his way from Portland to a court session in Fryeburg, Judge Howard stopped in Brownfield for a visit with his brother in their boyhood home. After dinner, Howard went outside for a walk but failed to return. An anxious search ensued, and the judge's body was soon found in the nearby wood. Clutched in his hand was a bunch of evergreen he had evidently gathered along his final path.³² Throughout his life he had been a devoted amateur naturalist: as one obituary said of him, "the study of flowers was a favorite occupation with him and he knew all the secrets of nature in her floral developments." The obituary writer also noted that he was "benevolent without ostentation. He loved to hunt out the deserving poor and secretly relieve their necessities." Howard made his name and fortune in the state's larger cities, but he passed away in the county among the hills of his youth. This, then, was the model Oxford Bear: of humble origin, intelli-



OXFORD
BEARS



FRUIT
GROWERS
ASSOCIATION

To Rumford Falls Trust Co.,



gent, industrious, amiable, a lover of his native home and the people and wildlife around it. Remarkably successful in his own time, he was mourned by those who knew him but is almost completely forgotten today.

WITH THE passing of this generation, the Oxford Bear went into hibernation. On March 4, 1926, the *Oxford County Democrat* displayed the caption, "Oxford Bears," for the last time. Surely the publisher did not recognize the significance of this date, but in fact this was the seventy-fifth anniversary of the meeting of the "Sons" in Bangor. "Bear Brigade" had been attached to the *Democrat's* masthead in 1888, the year following the Bears' grand railroad excursion to Norway, and the display had run for a year and a half before the editor changed it to "The Oxford Bears," a title it then retained for over thirty-five years. But in 1926, when the paper's format was redesigned and its size increased from four to eight pages, the Bears disappeared from weekly public view. The change was an unmistakable sign that local memories of Oxford's bruin heritage were nearing their end.

In one of the final appearances of a living, breathing Oxford Bear, Donald B. Partridge of Norway ran a successful congressional campaign in 1930 aided by the friendly bruin. His billboards appeared in the shape of a silhouette bear, upon whose back was the message, "Partridge for Congress." At rallies, Partridge stood on the platform flanked by masquerade bears, a feature that reminded his audience of the notable legislative Bears of the past. Yet even though the Bear helped him into congress in 1930, it could not keep him there beyond a single term. The census of 1930 resulted in Maine's losing one seat in the House, and Oxford's political authority had waned to the extent that the seat was Partridge's own. Subsequently, neither he nor the Bear appeared again on the county or state political scene.

But even after the Bear had disappeared entirely from politics, it continued on as a commercial symbol. The Oxford Bears Fruit Growers Association, formed in 1911 by the seven Conant brothers of Buckfield and Hebron, sought to establish a recognized brand with a guaranteed level of quality that would stand out in a market awash with otherwise indistinguishable fruit. The formula was an admirable success: "Oxford Bear" apples sold well locally but achieved even greater success in Europe. Britain especially was hungry for high quality fruit, and wholesalers soon found that apples from the Oxford Bears were dependably excel-



The Oxford Bear stands against the skyline as a conspicuous landmark during the 1930 state campaign that elected Donald B. Partridge of Norway Republican congressman from the Second District. This novel reproduction was conceived by leaders in the local Partridge-for-Congress Club. *Courtesy of the author.*

lent. The marketing plan succeeded for at least fifteen years, but the Oxford Bear apples could not escape the relentless forces of nature; in this case, business nature, human nature, and mother nature all conspired to bring the creature down. The native Maine fruit business, regardless of catchy brands and determined marketing, could not long compete on a national and international scale with western agribusiness. Ironically, the organization was financially and emotionally wounded when one of the brothers fell prey to a moral frailty: he absconded with the company's cash box *and* the inspirational singing instructor from the local Universalist church. The pair was last heard from in a distant western state. Finally, a disastrous winter in 1933 destroyed immense numbers of trees and rootstock, and by fall 1936 the town of Hebron was preparing a property tax lien upon the Bears' only remaining asset, a large storage building.³³

The demise of the Oxford Bears Fruit Growers' Association left only one group holding up the standard of the once-proud bruin. This was the "Oxford Bears Lodge #54" of the Hanover Knights of Pythias. But like the fate of so many of the social clubs that once prospered in cities and towns throughout the state, the aging Knights failed to draw younger recruits into their hall. In 1988, the last of a long procession of Oxford Bears took down their banners, closed their doors, and for just



The Bear last appeared as a symbol for Oxford County in a logo for the Oxford Bears' Fruit Growers Association. This business marketed Oxford apples successfully as far afield as England. *Norway Historical Society photo courtesy of the author.*

one dollar sold their once boisterous hall to a group that has since turned it into an antique mall. Today, few have any recollection of the Oxford Bear. In fact, when the Oxford County commissioners adopted an official seal in 1982, no bear ranged among its fields, trees, and ponds. Today the county retains but a shadow of its former political and economic authority, and its signature Bear remains not at all.

Since this bicentennial reminiscence may be the final view of this Oxford creature, it is important at least to acknowledge briefly the several interrelated forces that gave the Oxford Bear its remarkable, although short-lived vitality. Five elements shaped the image of the Oxford Bear and perpetuated its existence to the end of the century. First, the image was politically useful. The original "backwoods bear" was simple, appropriate, and versatile; it was large, lumbering, and dangerous enough to serve as an effective bogey-man for the Whigs, yet noble and powerful enough to work equally well as a totem for the Democrats. It was physi-



By the late nineteenth century, the Oxford Bear was in decline, and today few have any recollection of this proud symbol of Oxford County. When the County Commissioners adopted an official seal in 1982, it contained no hint of the animal that had once represented the rough-hewn yeoman of the central Maine frontier. *Illustration courtesy of the author.*

cally, politically, and geographically grounded. In modern marketing parlance, the concept “had legs.”

Second, the powerful personalities involved in promoting the image did more than anything else to assure the Bear’s prosperity. The names of Parris, Hamlin, Washburn, Fessenden, and Dana were impressive in their day and remain so even now. In addition, a considerable number of the Bears who were faintly known, or even entirely unknown today, were significant figures in their time. They included some of the most successful lawyers, judges, military figures, editors, businessmen, and entrepreneurs of the day.

Third, as the image crystalized, it became a powerful rallying point for all Oxford residents. As the political maelstrom which swept Maine in the decade of the 1850s decimated parties and allegiances, the Bear remained a unifying image for county residents and expatriates. Ironically, a creature born of political controversy proved more enduring than any of its parent issues.

Fourth, even though Oxford County is remote from metropolitan New England, it was, for more than a century, one of the most accessible “wild” regions in the nation. Campers, hunters, and fishermen came in droves each summer, and left with at least an inkling of the Oxford Bear. At the same time, steady commerce along the Androscoggin, Presumpscot, and Saco river corridors resulted in a steady movement of people and products in and out of the region. Such communication allowed the Oxford Bear to publicize itself.

Fifth, the Oxford Bear “club” was ushered in during a period of rising popularity for outdoor excursions, camping, and group picnicking, and it thrived on the social possibilities engendered by annual meetings of former Oxford residents. In post-bellum America there was a particular enthusiasm for associations that were social, rather than political, religious, or reformist in purpose. In this milieu, the Bear was a natural.

Sixth, from its beginning the Bear absorbed powerful nostalgic associations. It became an easily accepted emblem of how things “used to be” in the real or imagined wilderness that surrounded the region’s earliest settlements. As the boisterous politicians of the 1840s and 1850s became the esteemed elder citizens of the 1880s and 1890s, they composed, both literally and figuratively, the histories of the towns from which they had sprung. Without doubt, the Bear provided both historical depth and social breadth for this pleasant industry of memory making.

In its glory years, the Oxford Bear represented a distinctly local example of the meanest political warfare of a very political time and place in New England’s history. The image prospered, though, as a convenient object of social fashion and frivolity. In this respect, the Bear provides an interesting study of the interaction between politics and place in the New England experience. And for readers from the northwest corner of Maine, this review may encourage current Bears, Bearesses, and Cubs to reexamine a few of those “gloriz of Old Oxford.”

NOTES

1. Regarding movement of the county buildings, see *Oxford County Advertiser*, January-March 1893; *Oxford Democrat*, January-March 1893. Regarding unsuccessful movements for separation, see Oxford County Commissioners’ Meeting Minutes, October 8, 1805, Maine State Archives, “Graveyard” File, Box 247, folder 2.

2. *Maine Register*, 1834, 1852.

3. *Maine Register, State Yearbook and Legislative Manual* (Portland, Maine: Tower Publishing Co., 1834).

4. Regarding the role of the partisan press during the period, see Jeffery L. Pasley, “The Tyranny of Printers,” *Newspaper Politics in the Early American Republic* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2001); Frederick G. Fassett, *A History of Newspapers in the District of Maine, 1785-1820* (University of Maine Studies, 2nd Series, No. 25, 1932). Regarding early Maine newspapers in general and the Oxford County press in particular, see Joseph Griffin, *History of the Press of Maine* (Brunswick, Maine: Press of J. Griffin, 1872).

5. *Oxford Democrat*, September 14, 1841; *Portland Advertiser*, August 16, 1832;

Belfast *Republican Journal*, October 7, 1829.

6. Ronald F. Banks, *Maine Becomes a State: The Movement to Separate Maine from Massachusetts, 1785-1820* (Somersworth, N.H.: Somersworth Publishing Co., 1973); Edmund Quincy, *Life of Josiah Quincy of Massachusetts by His Son Edmund Quincy* (Boston: Ticknor & Fields, 1868), p. 374.

7. *Oxford County Democrat*, July 15, 1834.

8. *Boston Courier*, July 21, 1834.

9. *Boston Courier*, July 28, 1834.

10. Concord (N.H.) *Patriot*, August 4, 1834; Newport *Rhode Island Republican*, September 3, 1834; *Pittsfield (Mass.) Sun*, September 18, 1834; Montpelier *Vermont Patriot*, September 29, 1834.

11. *Courier*, August 19, 1834.

12. *Courier*, September 2, 1834.

13. Election returns are from *Maine Register*, 1841. Conclusory statement is from Michael F. Holt, *The Rise and Fall of the American Whig Party* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 36.

14. *Oxford Democrat*, July 21, 1835.

15. *Oxford Democrat* of September 4, 1835.

16. *Kennebec Weekly Journal*, September 12, 1838.

17. *Oxford Democrat*, July 16, 1839, excerpting from a much longer item appearing in the *Portland Eastern Argus*, July 8, 1838. The original language most likely appeared in *Voice of the People*, Luther Severance's short-lived Augusta campaign paper.

18. *Oxford Democrat*, August 6, 1839.

19. As retold many years later by Charles F. Whitman in his "Oxford County Tales," *Lewiston Journal*, August 18, 1917. For contemporaneous coverage of the incident, see *Eastern Argus* (Democrat), February 10, 1840; *Portland Advertiser* (Whig), February 10, 1840.

20. *Oxford Democrat*, February 21, 1851.

21. Direct quotations are from the extensive coverage given to the meeting in the *Oxford Democrat*, March 14, 1851. Reports also appeared in the *Bangor Daily Whig and Courier*, March 6-7, 1851; *Kennebec Weekly Journal*, March 13, 1851; *Eastern Argus*, March 8, 1851. The *Oxford Democrat*, March 21 carried a number of lengthy letters from Bears who had not been able to attend the meeting.

22. Persis Sibley, manuscript diaries, undated entry immediately preceding that of March 16, 1851, Maine Historical Society, Collection 206.

23. The Brunswick paper attributed the facetious coverage of the championship game to the *Eastern Argus* and *Daily Evening Press* of Portland. The "eight pound bat" image is from the *Argus* of October 21, 1867; but the original "corn fed beauties" has not been found.

24. John West Haley, *The Rebel Yell & The Yankee Hurrah: The Civil War Journal of a Maine Volunteer* (Camden, Maine: Down East Books, 1985), p. 23.

25. *Norway Advertiser*, June 13, 1930; *Bridgton News*, June 27, 1873; *Lewiston*

Evening Journal, September 11, 1879.

26. *Eastern Argus*, February 2, 1882.

27. Much of the following information is taken from Albert L. Burbank, comp., *Sons and Daughters of Oxford County*, record book and scrapbook, Maine Historical Society, Collections 3008, 3009.

28. Randall H. Bennett, *Oxford County, Maine, A Guide to Its Historic Architecture* (Bethel, Maine: Oxford County Historic Research Survey, 1984), p. 78.

29. *Eastern Argus*, July 2, 1886.

30. *Oxford Democrat* of July 5, 1887.

31. The scrapbook now reposes in the archives of the Maine Historical Society.

32. *Oxford Democrat*, December 18, 1877. See also Supreme Judicial Court of Maine, *Maine Reports* (Portland: Dresser, McMillan & Co., Vol. 67, 1878), pp. 600-605; and Gideon Tibbetts Ridlon, *Saco Valley Settlements and Families* (Portland, Maine: the author, 1895), p. 739.

33. Scrapbook and memorabilia from the company's history are at the Paris Cape Historical Society, South Paris, Maine. The incident of the cash box and the music teacher was described privately to the author by one of the proprietor's relatives.