

A TIME TO BE HEARD

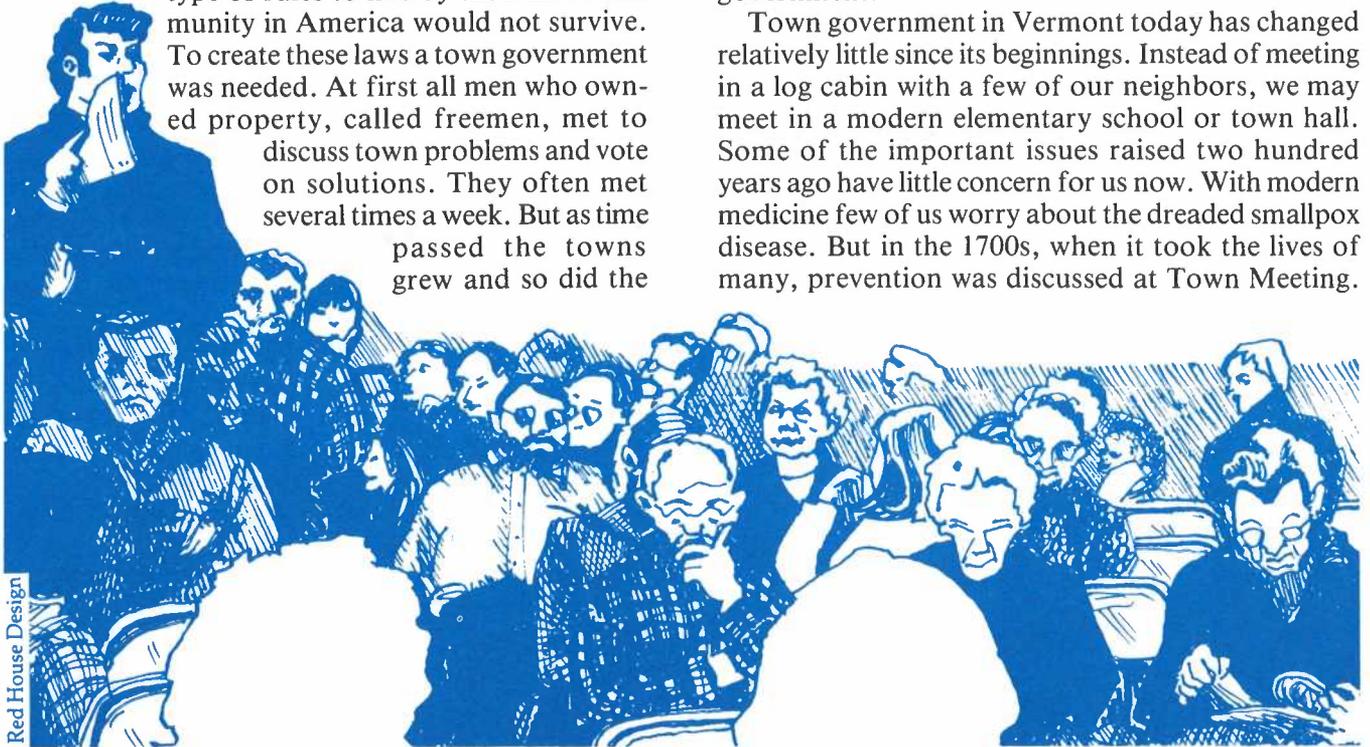
Visions of mud, heavy, wet snows, sugaring season, the first signs of spring, and one of Vermont's state holidays - Town Meeting Day - come to mind when one thinks of March in the Green Mountain state. But there is more to Town Meeting than just getting the day off from school, although that is a nice spring bonus. It is a day for community residents to get together at the town hall, school, or church. It is a chance to socialize with neighbors and discuss issues that will affect residents.

Vermonters have gathered to discuss and solve their community problems for well over 200 years, longer than Vermont has been a state. Town government was not **unique** to Vermont. In the 1600s Massachusetts Bay colonists found that without some type of rules to live by their new community in America would not survive. To create these laws a town government was needed. At first all men who owned property, called freemen, met to discuss town problems and vote on solutions. They often met several times a week. But as time passed the towns grew and so did the

amount of work needed to run them. The freemen, tired of their frequent meetings, selected a small group of men to conduct the work that the large group had been doing. These men, like our selectmen today, took care of the town business between meetings. More and more time passed between these meetings until eventually Town Meeting came only once a year.

This form of government spread throughout New England. As persons moved to new lands they brought this tradition with them. And so it came to the Green Mountain state. Between 1749 and 1764, New Hampshire Governor Benning Wentworth granted well over one hundred charters in the area that would later become Vermont. In these charters, Town Meetings were **designated** as the form of government.

Town government in Vermont today has changed relatively little since its beginnings. Instead of meeting in a log cabin with a few of our neighbors, we may meet in a modern elementary school or town hall. Some of the important issues raised two hundred years ago have little concern for us now. With modern medicine few of us worry about the dreaded smallpox disease. But in the 1700s, when it took the lives of many, prevention was discussed at Town Meeting.



Towns voted to build trails through the woods, a horse stable near the town common, or another sawmill on a nearby brook. But whatever the issue, now as then, many people feel that Town Meeting is still the big event of the year.



Huntington Town Meeting 1972

Now Town Meeting in Vermont always falls on the first Tuesday in March. It is described as pure **democracy** in action because everyone has the opportunity to speak and be heard. In this way Town Meeting differs from our state and federal democracy where we vote for other people to represent us at the assemblies and law-making meetings. At Town Meeting we do it ourselves. Neighbors discuss problems and listen to others express their opinions. Then we vote and by doing such make those opinions law.

About two to four weeks before Town Meeting, a Warning must be posted for town residents. The Warning is a public notice that states the time of the meeting and lists all the items to be voted on. A Checklist is also posted which lists the names of all the registered voters in town. It is the residents' responsibility to make sure their names are on the list before town meeting. To vote in Vermont, one has to be a state resident, at least 18 years old, and have taken the Freeman's Oath.

At 10:00 a.m., or thereabouts, March Meeting, as Town Meeting sometimes is called, gets underway. For some towns the first order of business is the election of officers, beginning with the moderator whose job it is to **preside** over the meeting.

Then the town clerk is elected. It is his or her duty to take the **minutes** for the meeting as well as to record all births, deaths, marriages, real estate sales, and legal licences for the town during the **ensuing** year. The election of other officers follow. In towns where the secret or Australian ballot is used, the officers elected during the previous year's Town Meeting run the meeting. Those elected during the current meeting's secret voting will do so next year.

After the officers are elected, the meeting follows the schedule laid out in the Warning. Most decisions concern **finances**. Questions are raised, articles are argued, discussed, and argued over gain. Young and old take part, voicing their opinions on town taxes, roads, schools, and **zoning** regulations. The more money a project may cost, the longer and more heated may be the debate.

By noontime everyone is ready for a break. Perhaps a lunch of beans, brown bread, hash, salad, pie, and coffee, prepared by women in the town awaits the crowd who continue their discussions over the meal. The meeting then resumes, finishing up in time for the farmers present to get home to milk their cows.

Now only in the New England states is this old and democratic form of government still commonly practiced. It remains the one area in this country where the average citizen can contribute directly to the making of policy in his or her town. It is the duty of every Vermonter to take advantage of that privilege.

VOCABULARY

unique - original

designate - specify or select

democracy - government by the people

preside - to act as chairman

minutes - official record of proceedings at a meeting

ensuing - following immediately afterward

finances - money

zoning - town or city rules regulating what people can do with their land