



COMMUNITY DESTINATION

The Little Festival That Could

Bluegrass fans flock to down-home delight in Alburgh

By STEPHEN RUSSELL PAYNE

Photographed by
JEB WALLACE-BRODEUR

ON A WOODEN STAGE AT THE EDGE of a freshly mowed field in Alburgh, Dave Carr steps to a microphone and cradles his well-worn fiddle between his white beard and blue suspenders. He looks out at the crowd, raises his bow, and reels off his entry in the Saturday morning fiddle contest. Next to him, his wife and musical partner of 46 years, Janice, plays an electronic keyboard. In front of the stage, two young girls with daisies braided into their hair jump up off a blanket, join hands with their parents, and start dancing in a circle.

Musicians and audience alike revel

in the atmosphere at the annual Lake Champlain Bluegrass Festival. Now in its seventh year, the event at Windmill Bay Farm in northwest Vermont has grown from a small one-day gathering to a major three-day wingding showcasing some of the most popular names in bluegrass, including Ricky Skaggs, The Gibson Brothers and, this year, Del McCoury. Beyond such stars, the festival offers an array of down-home touches ranging from the join-in "jam tent" to workshops, craft sales, cookouts, bonfires and hayrides.

This burgeoning festival began in a very unusual way with a retiree from

Alburgh named Tinker Palmer, who seems to be involved in everything that's going on in town and particularly likes to help people in need. One day in 2000, Tinker and some friends were having their usual morning coffee at Kay's Diner when they decided to raise money to buy a wheelchair-accessible van for one of their friends who had become disabled by multiple sclerosis.

Tinker came up with the idea of holding a fiddle contest on his farmland outside of town, with the proceeds to help buy their friend a specialized van. Tinker had no musical ability of his own, but with the help of his son, Steve, a civil engineer, the Palmers started researching the idea. Steve had no musical experience either, and he and his father certainly knew nothing about bluegrass. "Before my father got all of us into this, the only thing I could play well was a radio," Steve says. "We've sure come a long way since then."

The Palmers contacted Lee Dyette, an East Randolph resident who was president of the Northeast Fiddlers Association. Lee encouraged them to hold a small fiddle contest and concert, and

put them in touch with Willy Ryan, a farmer who had organized the legendary Craftsbury Common Vermont Fiddle Contest in the late '60s. With encouragement from Willy and Lee, the Palmers set off in search of bluegrass musicians who would play at their fledgling event. "We really didn't have a clue what we were doing," Steve says. "But when my father sets his mind and gets all wound up about something, he ends up figuring out how to do it, no matter what it takes."

The Palmers had heard about a great bluegrass group that lived in upstate New York, so Tinker set off for Ellenburg Depot and, after stops at several diners, was told to go to Dick's Country Store and they'd know who he was looking for. There he found Eric Gibson, a banjo player who, with his brother, Leigh, make up the core of the bluegrass band the Gibson Brothers. As Eric tells it: "Out of the blue, this Tinker fellow walks right up to me in the middle of the parking lot, said he needed us to play at a little festival he was putting on in three weeks across the lake in Vermont. He said he'd pay

me cash on the spot to do it and it didn't look like he was going to take no for an answer. I couldn't believe it, as we'd never been paid up front before, so, of course, I said yes." Eric and Leigh Gibson quickly became the musical backbone of the festival.

The first year about 150 people showed up to see a small fiddle contest and a couple of sets by the Gibsons. By the summer of 2007, the festival — which still raises money to help disabled people — had grown to attract a crowd of over 3,000, many of whom stayed all weekend in the 800 RVs and tents the Palmers allow on their land for free. The growth of this family-friendly festival has been staggering.

"We've played at the best festivals all over the East Coast and we've never seen anything grow like the Palmers'," says Eric Gibson. "Everything about it is great. You drive over that huge Lake Champlain bridge from New York and there's those beautiful green fields filling up with musicians, tents, campers and just a wonderful all 'round spirit. Bluegrass music brings a wonderful mix of people together." 🌿



HOW TO GO
What: Lake Champlain Bluegrass Festival
When: Aug. 8-10
Where: Windmill Bay Farm, on U.S. Route 2 in Alburgh
Phone: 482-8110
www.lakechamplainmusic.com
Community ties: Proceeds benefit transportation improvements for disabled people; event also helps fundraising for the Alburgh Fire Department

