

# Dublin Historical Society

Dublin, New Hampshire 03444 • Founded 1920

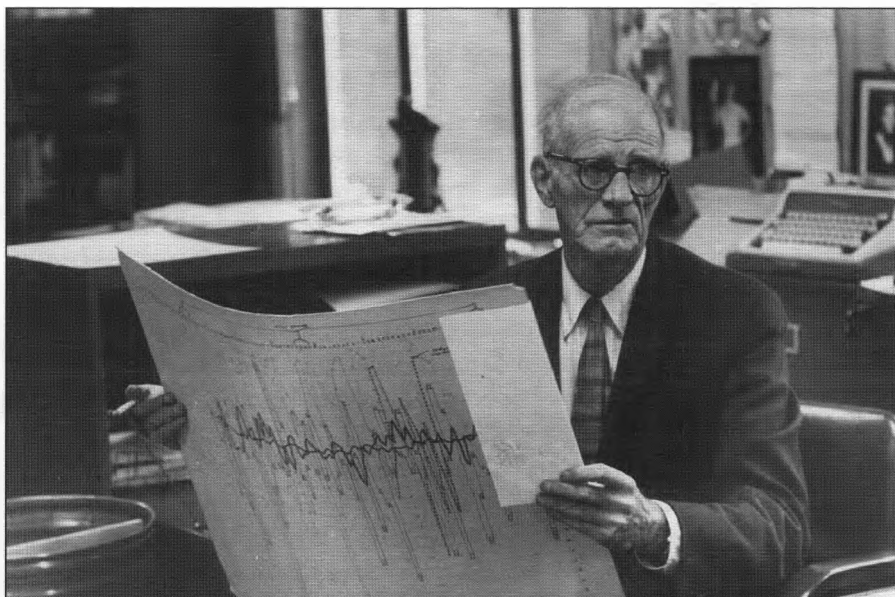
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## YANKEE AT SEVENTY-FIVE

**R**obb Sagendorph started *Yankee Magazine* in 1935, the sixth year of a far worse slump than the present one. Coincidentally, Paul Lehmann founded the Dublin School in the same year. Bad times don't seem to discourage people with ideas.

*Material for this article has been drawn from Yankee Magazine's 50th Anniversary issue, September 1985, and The Best of Yankee Magazine: 50 Years of New England (Yankee Books, 1985).*

– Ian Aldrich



*Robb Sagendorph as "Abe Weatherwise".* Courtesy of Yankee Publishing, Inc.

Town Meeting Day on March 12, 1935, was snowy and cold. Dublin residents gathered at the Town Hall to debate such typical questions as "To see if the Town will vote to sell the land formerly used as the Town Dump or take any other action related thereto." They also met to vote on a budget of \$58,266 and to choose a new selectman for a three-year term.

One candidate for the job was a relative newcomer, Robb Sagendorph, age 35, who had summered in Peterborough since 1914. When he had tired of selling steel in New York City for his father's firm, the Penn Metal Company, this graduate of both Harvard College

and Harvard Business School (1922 and 1924 respectively) looked around the Monadnock Region for a place to settle. He found a large, rambling, Italian-villa-style summer home, now owned by Rusty and Linda Bastedo, on a dirt road with a commanding view of Monadnock.

Since 1931, Sagendorph had actively pursued his chosen profession of writing; however, publishers had not matched his enthusiasm to the extent that Sagendorph could claim writing as his livelihood. Without a steady stream of dollars generated by the Northern Trust Company out of the estate of his wife Beatrix's father, the late George Arthur Thorne of Chicago, the Sagendorphs would have been living on meager fare. Having more spare

time than he liked, Sagendorph filed for the position of town selectman.

Dublin residents were not easily convinced that they needed the services of this tall (6'5") newcomer, and the selectman's job went to someone else. Still, the town fathers liked Robb Sagendorph and did not want to discourage him. "Just can't let him get a swelled head by winning the first time he runs for something," Henry Gowing was heard to say. Gowing, a local farmer who would become one of Robb's close friends, advised the selectmen that perhaps they should appoint Robb to a

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again, toppling through the overburdened floor of the print shop in nearby Marlborough into the Minnewawa River.

Yet slowly but surely subscriptions came in, 5,000 by November, and with them letters that told Robb that his "amateurish, uninteresting little magazine" had struck a nerve. *Yankee* did not thrive, but it did survive. During World War II publication was suspended for two years, while Robb did war work in New York for the Bureau of Censorship. To keep the copyright and trademark alive, he kept in touch with subscribers in various printed forms, mostly letters.

In July 1945 he published a slim, 10-page issue of *Yankee* announcing the magazine's full return. At around the same time he moved the magazine's offices to a house next to Gleason's store on the south side of Main Street. The local telephone operator, Mrs. Bell, was housed on the second floor, where she could see everything in town. If Robb did not answer the office phone, she would tell the caller that he had "just left and should be home in 10 minutes."

#### THE ALMANAC IS ADDED

Part of the reason *Yankee* survived those early lean years had to do with the success of another publication: *The Old Farmer's Almanac*. The oldest continuously published periodical in the country, the *Almanac* had been founded back in 1792. But by 1939, the year Robb purchased it, circulation had dropped and the once popular publication faced uncertain times.

Robb, however, was bullish on the *Almanac's* future. While preserving its original format and style (you could hardly tell the difference between issues 100 years apart), Robb was able to surprise the reader with a mixture of fact, fantasy, and pure down-home humor. This made the *Almanac* a real favorite, especially with the press.

The first issue Robb edited was the 1941 edition, and

some old friends helped him out. Robert Frost wrote original poetry; Ben Rice wrote the Farmer's Calendar. Robb either wrote the rest himself or reprinted sage advice from the past, and he did the weather forecasts as well, using an old formula that had been devised by the *Almanac's* founder, Robert B. Thomas. With a lot of work and promotion, the *Almanac* thrived.

#### YANKEE'S SUCCESS

Soon *Yankee* Magazine did, too. By the 1960s, *Yankee* had ingrained itself in New England culture. Circulation took off—the magazine's readers went from 200,000 in



The Yankee trio: Robb Sagendorph, Rob Trowbridge and Jud Hale, 1960s.  
Courtesy of Yankee, Inc.

1966, to 325,000 in less than two years. By the 1980s, *Yankee* boasted a circulation of over a million.

Two hires in particular greatly contributed to the success: Robb Sagendorph's nephew, Judson Drake Hale, who arrived at *Yankee* in 1958 and eventually succeeded his uncle as editor; and Robb's son-in-law, C. Robertson Trowbridge, who joined the company in 1965 and soon took the reins of the company's business side.

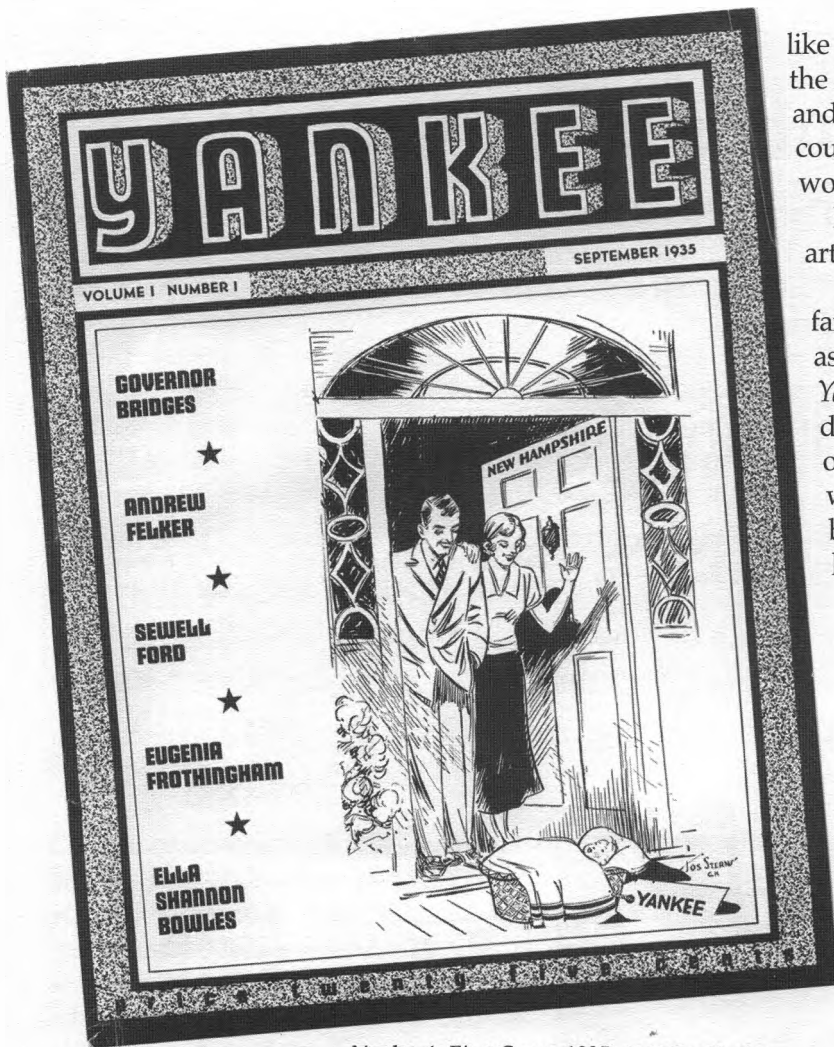
For Jud Hale, the plan as he remembers it was to

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#### One Washed Out Promotion

Most of *Yankee's* early promotion was limited to New Hampshire, but by 1938, when *Yankee* was three years old, Robb Sagendorph envisioned a future for the magazine throughout New England. On a September morning in 1938, he sent out a mailing of more than 300,000 pieces. Postage had been paid at the Dublin post office and the mail truck was on its way to Keene by way of a bridge spanning the Minnewawa River. But this was no ordinary day. The rising wind suddenly strengthened and blew the mail truck right off the bridge and into the river. Robb's big promotion became one of the many victims of the 1938 Hurricane! His total return, Robb liked to say, "was one water-soaked piece which came back from a Connecticut postmaster marked, 'Returned for better address, 3¢ postage due.'"





Yankee's First Cover, 1935. D.H.S. collection.

vacancy on the Library Committee. As usual, the selectmen took Henry Gowing's advice.

By coincidence—or was it fate?—the Library Committee decided to contract for the reprinting of an article from a 1901 issue of *New England Magazine* called "Historic Dublin, New Hampshire." Word spread quickly about the printing job, and Arthur "Abe" Bennett, an itinerant printer, appeared at Robb's house that same week to ask if he could do the job. He had debts to pay, he said, and he needed the work "bad."

Sagendorph asked Bennett if he could print a magazine on his equipment. "Sure could." What would you call it?" asked Bennett. "We'll call it 'The Yankee,'" Robb replied. And on that March day an enterprise was begun that would take up the rest of Sagendorph's life, a good deal of his wife's money, and much of the time and talent of his close friend and editorial colleague, Benjamin Rice of Peterborough.

### YANKEE'S BIRTH

Between March and September 1935 *Yankee* was conceived and born. Articles would be written by professional but country-oriented authors. Traditions

like square dancing that had begun to disappear from the scene would be rediscovered through its pages, and even older customs, such as bundling (in which a courting couple shared a bed—without undressing), would be fondly remembered.

For many years Beatrix Sagendorph, a talented artist, produced most of the magazine's covers.

Beth Tolman, first wife of Newt Tolman whose family dominated the nearby town of Nelson as well as local square dancing, became Associate Editor of *Yankee*, traveling each day by car, horse, or bicycle, depending on the weather. Phyllis Worcester signed on as treasurer and office manager. All three worked in a little six-sided shack that Robb had build behind his garden, just out of sight of his house.

Robb would later say, "The publisher still doesn't know of any particular reason why *Yankee* was begun or is still around. To get any editorial policy out of him would be as difficult as it would have been to persuade Calvin Coolidge to sing tenor to 'Drink to Me Only with Thine Eyes.'"

But inside the cover of the first *Yankee* Magazine, September 1935, Robb wrote of his magazine as if it were flesh and blood. "*Yankee* is born today. His destiny is the expression and perhaps indirectly the preservation of that great culture in which every Yankee is born and by which every Yank must live. Give him your care, your interest, your heart..."

And they did. Circulation eventually boomed, while from its humble offices in Dublin, *Yankee* made its mark as one of the most successful regional magazines in the country. Over the years, writers as diverse as Robert Frost, Donald Hall, Ernest Hebert, John Updike, Pearl Buck and Stephen King contributed poems, stories and nonfiction.

Equally important was the fact that *Yankee* stayed close to its Dublin origins. The company became not only a magnet for drawing talented editors and art directors to the Monadnock Region, but also an outlet for writers with local roots, such as Richard Meryman, Tom Hyman, Tony Anable, Clarissa Silitch, Dick Heckman, and others.

### LEAN BEGINNINGS

In the fall of 1935, however, it was hard to forecast all that success. By actual hand count there were 613 subscribers—of which 600 turned out to be bogus names provided by a slippery subscription service. The only press had been salvaged from the bed of the Connecticut River near Brattleboro, Vermont. At each revolution the whole press could be seen to sway some  $\frac{3}{4}$ ". Shortly the press was river-bound

## SOCIETY NEWS

The **Schoolhouse Museum** will be open on Saturdays and Sundays from 12-2 from the July 4 weekend through Labor Day weekend.

There are new exhibits on Dublin's most prominent citizen, the late Doris "Granny D" Haddock, and our most prominent corporate citizen, Yankee Publishing, which this year celebrates its 75th anniversary.

Our main current project at the **Archives** is the sorting and processing of several thousand photocopies of documents collected by the National Gallery of Art as part of the research for the catalog, *George deForest Brush - The Indian Paintings*, for an exhibition mounted at the Gallery in the fall of 2008.

Although this collection contains not a single original document, its significance comes from the

painstaking gathering and collating of copies from an extraordinary range of sources. As would be expected, a good portion came from the Archives of American Art and the Library of Congress, but also from university libraries (Berkeley, Cornell), private libraries (the Huntington), newspaper files (the N.Y. Times, the Boston Transcript), and in a few instances, to our particular pleasure, the Dublin Historical Society.

The copies include letters to and from Brush and members of his family, articles on Brush and his contemporaries, newspaper and magazine reports on art exhibits and sales, passports, shipping reports – in short, just about everything a biographer could wish for in reconstructing the sequence of Brush's life. Only a great national institution could have assembled such a collection, and we are pleased to be able to preserve at least some of it for future generations.

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work for his uncle for a year, pick up some magazine experience, then head to Boston or New York for a "real job." He was immediately assigned to edit, write copy, sell ads, take photos, and when he was finished, to unload the trucks of paper and haul trash to the dump. For this he received \$50 a week.

Wanting to improve *Yankee's* design—but not knowing how—he contacted art students to give him mock layouts, and secretly, at night, he incorporated them into the magazine. He'd lay the issue out, go home around midnight, then arrive the next morning to find that Robb Sagendorph had come in at 6 A.M. and "everything was in a shambles. Robb would have put everything the way he liked. So I began arriving at 5:30 to protect my layouts until we realized we either had to reach a truce or both die from a lack of sleep."

In the early 1960s, *Yankee* was entering the modern magazine age with hopelessly outmoded methods. There were still no ad salesmen. Printing was done in a little print shop in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, hopelessly overburdened by the task of printing *Yankee*. What the magazine needed, Robb would say, was someone to "straighten things out." He looked no further than his son-in-law, Rob Trowbridge, a lawyer who knew little about publishing, but with a knack for business and order. Robb Sagendorph would complain that a weekend's "relaxation" with his son-in-law left him too fatigued to face the week: tennis, golf, sailing, more tennis, more golf, all punctuated with fevered plans to improve *Yankee*.

In 1970 shortly before his death, Robb Sagendorph

called Jud Hale and Rob Trowbridge into his hospital room. He knew *Yankee* was now in their hands. Always a man of practical sensibilities he gave them the best advice he had. "Don't grow anymore, boys," he cautioned. "The plumbing won't take it."

### YANKEE TODAY

Neither paid much attention to his advice. While Hale revamped *Yankee's* editorial brand, Trowbridge drove the magazine's wildly successful circulation increase.

Today, despite recent pressures on the publishing industry—first from widescale media consolidation in the 1990s, and later the Internet—*Yankee* is still very much a family-owned, family-run business. Rob Trowbridge died in 2003, but Jud Hale now serves as Editor-in-Chief and as Chairman of the Board; his son, Judson D. Hale, Jr., is publisher; and Jamie Trowbridge, Rob's son, is President of Yankee Publishing, Inc. Other family members serve on the Board of Directors.

Seventy-five years after Robb Sagendorph first started *Yankee*, his magazine originates just a mile or so down the hill from the hexagon shack where it began so many issues ago. The Franklin stove is gone. As are the typewriters. There are computers and Web sites. There are a lot more people. Same dream, though. Same vision.

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## C R E D I T S

This issue of the Dublin Historical Society  
Newsletter was edited by John Harris.

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