



James Berry Vickery III with friend and colleague Ruth Shepherd Slater, Dexter High School, c. 1960. (Vickery Gift to Fogler Library, University of Maine.)

JIM AND RUTH'S GREAT ADVENTURE: SEEKING, PRESERVING, AND RECORDING MAINE'S HISTORY

BY CAROL FEURTADO

JAMES “Jim” Berry Vickery III and Ruth Shepherd Slater were traveling companions, both literally and intellectually for thirty years. Literally, because Jim never owned a car, nor learned to drive, and Ruth loved to travel and gladly chauffeured him, as well as other friends, family, and coworkers for pleasure and necessity. Jim has been described as a “teacher, historian, and antiquarian,” and Ruth gave him enthusiastic, appreciative, and working support in these three intellectual aspects of his life.¹ The results of their adventures together seeking, preserving, and recording much information about the history and culture of Maine will be used for generations to come.

This essay on Jim and Ruth’s intellectual friendship is based on the thirty-eight volumes of Ruth Shepherd Slater’s diaries that she kept from 1926 to 1983 that are now in the archives of the Dexter Historical Society, Dexter, Maine. The strength of Ruth’s diaries lies in their attention to who, what, where, and when—the facts. Unfortunately, she did not write in depth or voice her opinions or assessments about the work she and Jim did or the many meetings, lectures, and personal hours she spent with those in Maine’s historical community. The cumulative impression from reading her diaries is that Ruth was an intelligent woman with wide interests, had a wonderful sense of humor that was often self-deprecating, and a warm concern for her many friends. Her devotion to Jim Vickery and his work is a prevailing theme throughout her later diaries.

Ruth Shepherd was born on 4 April 1899. Her ancestors were early settlers of Dexter, Maine, like the Vickery family of Unity, Maine, and she was as proud of them and as attached to her town as Jim Vickery was to his. After graduating from the University of Maine in 1922 with a Bachelor of Arts, Ruth taught school in Livermore and Sanford, Maine. Ruth married her high school classmate Wilford Slater on 29 June 1926. She then began a “diary of our married life” and called it “Our Own Book” because her husband Wilford, she explained, “shared with me an

interest in it.”² Ruth began the first volume of her diaries with a scrap from her wedding dress and photos from their honeymoon in New Hampshire. In September 1926 she began to teach French at N.H. Fay High School in Dexter. Wilford worked as Dexter’s tax collector and later as the postmaster. The couple had an active social life with family, friends, and fellow Universalist Church members. Her diaries record all these activities and also include candid photographs and newspaper clippings.

In 1938 Wilford Slater was involved in a serious automobile accident. He spent over a year in several hospitals and was never able to pursue a career again. Ruth supported them with her teaching job as well as the work she did during the summer at a photography studio. When Wilford died in February 1951, Ruth was devastated and felt that she would never have reason to keep a diary again. “I am not starting a new record with any idea of interest in the present or future,” she wrote, “but without a written record of some kind I would forget some things I would want to remember.”³ Ruth did not realize, however, that this record would chronicle her growing friendship with Jim Vickery, which in many ways spanned the most vibrant, interesting, and fulfilling period of her life. Ruth’s first mention of Jim in her diaries presaged much of their later activities: “Wilford, James Vickery and I went to Ripley and did quite a lot of calling around as Jim was looking for information and pictures of his great-grandfather.”⁴

Jim Vickery first came to teach at Dexter’s high school in the fall of 1950. He boarded with Lois Blake, a widowed former English teacher and a good friend of Ruth Slater. In his photograph in the 1951 high school yearbook Jim has a somewhat tentative expression and posture, and he appears younger than his thirty-three years. He taught English rather than history because, according to him, the history teacher got saddled with coaching the basketball team.⁵ He also advised the yearbook staff and coached the Senior Play and Junior Prize Speaking Contest. Ruth was the French and Latin teacher and she was respected and feared. Former students all say that they would not have dared come to her classes unprepared. She was also the Dean of Girls, sponsor of the National Honor Society, taught public speaking, and coached the prize contests and one-act play competition.

In the 1950s Dexter was a small town and its high school had a small staff and student body. The entire faculty wore several hats in advising the many extracurricular activities and was closely connected at school and in their social lives outside of school. Jim and Ruth’s many school

responsibilities and activities often brought them together. They both had junior class homerooms that were across the hall from each other, and they alternately shared the role of class advisor. They participated in the local teachers club, Penobscot County and Maine State Teachers Conferences, and they attended plays, movies, and concerts together. Ruth loved to teach and she acted as a mentor to Jim as well, helping him to build his teaching career. She once mentioned that they “had fun discussing my course on child welfare. I tell him he’s getting the information for free and I had to pay forty-eight dollars for it.”⁶ With Ruth’s help Jim learned to be a teacher and he came to do it confidently and well, with obvious enjoyment.

In the spring of 1962 both Jim and Ruth resigned from Dexter’s high school. For several years the teachers had tried to negotiate with the town and school board for salary and fee increases commensurate with their abilities and comparable to other school systems in the state. The results were not satisfactory and several of the best and most experienced teachers left Dexter. The previous year the principal Philip Mealey had taken a job at Brewer High School and Jim now followed him there. Ruth was soon able to join them after teaching a year at Bangor High School. She roomed in Bangor, while Jim shared living quarters with his nephew Erwin Vickery in Brewer. Ruth and Jim quickly made new friends among faculty and students at Brewer High and they both continued to coach the speaking and play competitions. Jim again advised the yearbook staff, and Ruth took on advising the Student Council. In June 1968 Ruth retired from teaching at the age of sixty-nine and went home to Dexter where she was still active in many organizations. She enjoyed swimming, playing bridge, and she took up square dancing. She continued to keep in touch with her Brewer friends whenever she picked Jim up to attend concerts, run errands or set off on one of their research and collecting adventures.

Jim and Ruth had early set a pattern of traveling together. They spent at least two weekends a month and many vacation days doing research in newspapers, courthouses, and cemeteries, or seeking items for Jim’s Maine collection in bookshops, antique stores, and at auctions. They often traveled to Portland together so that Jim could attend Maine Historical Society meetings and visit his friend, rare book dealer Francis O’Brien. Ruth would visit friends in nearby Yarmouth. Jim gave many talks, especially to the Belfast and Bangor Historical Societies, often illustrated with slides or excerpts from L.P. recordings, so he required Ruth’s help in transporting a projector and record player.

Research projects were always Jim's idea and were carried out under his direction. At first Ruth aided him as a friend, but she soon became interested and involved in doing the actual research. One of the first projects that they worked on together was expanding Jim's Master's thesis from the University of Maine into his book *A History of the Town of Unity, Maine* in time for Unity's one hundred and fiftieth celebration in 1954. Jim and Ruth made several trips connected with research for his book, such as the one Ruth noted in her diary entry for 13 October: "to Rockland to work all day in the office of the Republican journal getting material from old newspapers for Jim's history of Unity." On 8 November 1953 they went to Manchester, Maine, to an "interview with Mr. Tibbetts who is going to publish his book." Later they "spent the day with his publisher Had dinner with Mr. and Mrs. Tibbetts in their home."⁷ They made several trips to Unity for committee meetings in connection with the pageant that Jim wrote and narrated for the town's celebration, as well.⁸

Inspired by a meeting of the Maine Civil War Centennial Committee, Ruth and Jim spent 1959 to 1961 pursuing research on Colonel Walter G. Morrill who was in the Sixth Maine Regiment and later a hero of the Twentieth Maine Regiment at Gettysburg. They began by looking for Morrill's grave in Pittsfield on 27 September 1959. On 25 October of that year they visited the son of Otis O. Roberts of Dexter, who was also in the Sixth Maine Regiment, to borrow his diary, and on 7 November they went to Dover-Foxcroft, Maine, to study a pamphlet by Wainwright Cushing, another member of the Sixth Maine.

In 1960 they visited Colonel Morrill's great-niece Vivienne Page twice, found family gravesites in Sebec, Brownville, and Williamsburg, Maine, and in Milo they examined the diary of William Livermore and letters of William Owen, both of whom served in the Twentieth Maine. On 28 January 1961 they took photos of the Colt revolver presented to Morrill by his men at the end of the Civil War. Jim used all of their research in an article he wrote for the collection *A Handful of Spice*.⁹ Ruth helped to proof the manuscript in August 1967 and then helped with the print proofs in September 1968. She also attended a tea given to celebrate the publication of the collection at Dr. Edward and Mrs. Kellogg's "Cliff House" in Bangor, Maine, on 9 January 1969.

Their next project together involved tracking down information and portraits painted by Jeremiah Pearson Hardy (1800-1888), an early Bangor artist. They visited Hardy's granddaughter Charlotte Hardy in Brewer in 1962 and 1963, as well as a number of other individuals with

information about Hardy. They also traveled to the Farnsworth Museum in Rockland, Maine, to take photos of Hardy portraits. One of their most important contacts was William Mason, a former curator at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston, and owner of Hardy's portraits. They visited Mason several times in 1965, hoping to encourage him to donate his portraits to the Bangor Historical Society. When Mason died, the Society did end up with his Hardy portraits. In July 1970 Ruth recorded in her diary (surely with some satisfaction) that "Jim's hands [became] black from moving five Hardy paintings to the Bangor library" for storage.¹⁰

In 1966 Ruth and Jim traveled to Colby College in Waterville to meet with art professor James Carpenter and the director of the art museum Hugh Gourley to discuss a biographical essay of Hardy that Jim was to write for the catalogue of a forthcoming Hardy exhibit. "He took with him his folder of pictures that he has made of Hardy paintings in the area," wrote Ruth, and "surprised them with the extent of the information that is valuable to them."¹¹ On August of that year Ruth went to Unity and "sat on the lawn while Jim and I worked on the first draft of his Jeremiah Hardy biography I brought the first half home and worked on it in the evening."¹² At the opening reception for the Hardy exhibit at Colby College on 29 September 1966, Jim gave a lecture on Hardy and showed slides of his art. Ruth, of course, attended.

While Jim was doing research on Jeremiah Pearson Hardy he met Candace Loud Sawyer and Laura Loud Orcutt, the granddaughters of John E. Godfrey (1809-1884) who was a lawyer, judge, editor, and historian in Bangor. Godfrey kept journals from 1863 to 1869 that conscientiously chronicled his life and times and his granddaughters asked Jim if he would edit them for publication. He and Ruth made three trips in 1966 to borrow and return the Godfrey journals, two at a time. On 18 March and 6 May 1972 Ruth stated that they were at the Bangor Public Library to "copy Godfrey diaries that were written at Cliff House in 1864," and on 20 May she and Jim checked the pages that she had copied. On 4 August they had lunch with Mrs. Sawyer and Mrs. Orcutt and met "Marjorie Peters who is typing the Godfrey diaries ... that I am copying and Jim is editing." On 21 February and 23 March 1973 Ruth wrote that they checked over "fifty pages which I had copied." She was still working on them in February 1975 when they again checked the pages she had copied.

There were several interludes during their work together on the Godfrey journals. The first break was in 1973 and 1974 when Jim took time

to do research on Bangor architect Charles G. Bryant for the book his friends James G. Mundy and Earle G. Shettleworth Jr. were writing. In January 1973 Ruth “translated for Jim some French papers (1850) about Charles Bryant.” On 19 April 1974 she proofread the chapter Jim wrote for the Bryant book, and that August she wrote that she and Jim went to the Belfast library where “he was pleased to find quite a bit of information about Bryant.”

Their work on Godfrey was interrupted again in 1975 while Ruth took care of a terminally ill relative and Jim worked on projects for the upcoming national bicentennial celebration. During his tenure as the president of the Bangor Historical Society, Jim had taken on the project to create an illustrated history of Bangor as part of the city’s bicentennial in 1969. Ruth had helped with this project by driving Jim around Bangor to take photographs of historic houses and proofreading his text for the volume. They made three frantic trips to the printers on 3 October and were finally able to secure a stapled-together copy that Jim could use in a television interview that evening to launch the week-long festivities. Now in December 1975 they were together at “Furbush-Roberts Printers proofreading the addition he is getting out of the *Illustrated History of Bangor* in order to bring it up to date.” In April and May 1976 they were again at the printers “as Jim is now working on a pictorial history of Brewer. I proofread while Jim and Mr. R[oberts] were talking.” On 23 June they picked up 400 copies of the Brewer book and took them around to stores to sell.

Editing the Godfrey journals was a lengthy project because Jim needed to conduct hours of personal interviews and complete scrupulous research on nineteenth-century Bangor families. Ruth and Jim met to go over the Godfrey journals with Mrs. Sawyer and Mrs. Orcutt in 1978, and on 23 August 1978 they “had a long discussion of pictures to be in the published form of the Godfrey diaries.” In October 1978 Ruth and Jim worked on the introduction and Ruth took it home to find someone to type it for him. By June and August 1979 they had visited the printer in Rockland, Maine, so that Jim could check proofs. They picked up a carton of the first of the three volumes of the journals in November 1979 and took them to the University of Maine bookstore. The introduction to this volume contains Jim’s only published acknowledgement of Ruth’s invaluable support of his work: “To Mrs. Wilford Slater I am grateful for her assistance in copying sections of the diaries.”¹³

Ruth and Jim traveled a regular route in their pursuit of books and

cultural materials about Maine for his growing collection. Ruth called these adventures “browsing” and she described their times braving hot summer days and winter storms, as well as enjoying brilliant fall foliage and early spring green, coming home admiring sunsets, full moons, and “vivid red streaks in Northern lights.”¹⁴ Their route through Maine frequently took them to Augusta, Hallowell, then to Wiscasset, Damariscotta, Round Pond, and then stops up the coast to Belfast.

Ruth recorded the names of the many stores and dealers at which they stopped along the way, but only rarely mentioned the treasures Jim found. In August 1959, they found “128 volumes of records of the Rebellion” at the Monmouth Library and they took them to Unity “and left [them] in Margaret Vickery’s attic.” Writing in her diary on 25 October 1961 Ruth stated: “Jim and I went to Charleston for him to get a book by Whipple—the first book ever printed in Bangor” by printer Peter Edes. In August 1964 Jim found at “Betty’s Trading Post in Lincolnville Beach an item he was delighted to get ‘History of Skillins River.’” While Jim searched for treasures, Ruth often visited friends and relatives or read in the car, which she “welcomed the opportunity to do,” or she took walks, especially at Spruce Head, which she particularly enjoyed.

Ruth helped move Jim’s collection to his home in Unity every school vacation and at the end of the school year, loading her car for two or even three trips each move. When his collection became unmanageable, Jim began to consider what to do with it. In her diaries Ruth mentioned many trips that they made to the University of Maine to discuss donating it to Special Collections at the Fogler Library. Part of the negotiations that were reached allowed Jim to assist with cataloging his collection, and on 24 March 1978 Ruth and Jim looked for a place for him to live on campus. An article appearing in the *Bangor Daily News* described the 3,000 books, pamphlets, and prints that he donated to the university included an interesting statement: “Vickery has supported his collection by never owning a car.”¹⁵

In the fall of 1979 Ruth and Jim made their final trips to Unity together to move most of Jim’s remaining books to his apartment in Bangor. Ruth wrote that Jim’s brother “Eric is going to shut up the [family] house and take a small house downtown [Unity] and Jim is nervous about leaving his books in Unity on account of fire or theft.”¹⁶ By this time Jim had begun to travel more with younger historian friends James H. Mundy and Earle G. Shettleworth Jr. In the early 1980s Ruth, who was eighty years old and almost twenty years older than Jim, was slowing down and she began to suffer health problems. Even so, Ruth and Jim

continued their travels on occasion until her long descent into Alzheimer's disease forced her to enter a nursing home in Dexter where she died in 1989.

The details and dates gleaned from Ruth Slater's diaries, while seemingly mundane, make clear her dedication to Jim's work—work that was relentless and tedious as well as exciting and rewarding. Although Ruth received public appreciation as a teacher and a member of several organizations, her contributions to Jim's work have never been fully recognized. But this was never a consideration for Ruth or Jim. It was his work, and she was just helping him because she cared about him. The public appreciation of Jim's life work began after Ruth was no longer a part of it, and no one seemed to wonder how Jim had been able to achieve so much on his own without a car or a license. From Ruth Slater's diaries we gain a deeper appreciation and understanding of the collaborative nature of Jim Vickery's scholarship and passion for collecting Maine's cultural heritage, and the important role that Ruth's intellectual friendship played in his life and work.

NOTES

1. Dedication in W. H. Bunting, *A Day's Work* (Gardiner, ME: Tilbury House, Publishers, 1997).

2. Ruth Shepherd Slater Diary, 9 March 1951, Dexter Historical Society, Dexter, ME (hereafter RSS Diary).

3. Ibid.

4. RSS Diary, 11 November 1950.

5. *Bangor Daily News*, 21 May 1981.

6. RSS Diary, 12 November 1960.

7. RSS Diary, 19 April 1954.

8. During Jim Vickery's first year at Dexter High School he also wrote a pageant about the incorporation of Dexter in honor of the town's sesquicentennial as part of the graduation program.

9. James B. Vickery, "Walter G. Morrill: The Fighting Colonel of the Twentieth Maine," in *A Handful of Spice: A Miscellany of Maine Literature and History*, ed. Richard S. Sprague, University of Maine Studies, 2nd series, no. 88 (Orono: University of Maine Press, 1968), 127-51.

10. RSS Diary, 29 July 1970.

11. RSS Diary, 25 May 1966.

12. RSS Diary, 2 August 1966.

13. James B. Vickery, ed., *The Journals of John Edwards Godfrey*, vol. 1 (Rockland, ME: Courier-Gazette, 1979).

14. RSS Diary, 5 September 1959.

15. *Bangor Daily News*, 8 August 1978.

16. RSS Diary, 17 November 1978.