

Yee-ellow! I'm Leon Thompson

Frankly? I am not the most qualified Vermonter to write a guidebook about Vermont. That would have been the late Slim Bovat.

Slim's native Vermont life would fill a trilogy of books and likely begin with his legendary claim that he started "chewin' tabacka" when he was six years old. Hard to believe, considering that, back in his day, Vermont students couldn't even bring their cigarettes to school until they were at least seven. (Eight, in more progressive counties.)

Slim was one of those Green Mountain octogenarians who resisted such useless, nonsensical trends as "computers," or "iPods," or "running water," yet he wasn't too proud to break down and sign a cell phone contract. It was a Vermonty way of saying, "I know more than ya think."

Slim swore by his cell phone, but, initially, he had a problem with it: his hands. Decades of dairy farming had turned Slim's hands into baseball gloves with four hot dogs and a Twinkie attached to each. Hands like that make it hard for a man to store a credit-card-sized cell phone in his Dickies shirt pocket and answer calls quickly—before they go to voice mail.

Slim was missing calls. Slim hated missing calls. So Slim fixed it.

Not Too Awful Bad

He found a piece of sturdy string and duct tape. (Almost a fact: Vermont law requires duct tape in every household.) With the tape, Slim attached one end of the string to his cell phone and fastened the other end to a pen. A good, thick pen. Not one of those thin, blue, plastic pens where the ink freezes while you're milking in January.

From then on, when Slim's cell phone rang, he yanked the pen from his Dickies shirt pocket, fished out his cell phone, and answered.

"Yee-ellow!" (That's how Vermonters answer cell phones. "Yee-ellow!" It's a bona fide Vermont greeting. More on that later...)

Just when Slim thought he had his cell phone all figured out, another obstacle arose. His oversized fingers kept interfering with those tiny volume control buttons, so the person on the other end either got **TOO DAMN LOUD**, or Slim couldn't make out a word they were saying.

So Slim fixed it.

He got his duct tape. (He didn't have to look far.) Then he found a matchstick. He yanked his pen from his Dickies pocket, fished out his cell phone, and stuck the matchstick to the tiny volume control buttons. From then on, when Slim had to adjust his cell phone volume, he simply pressed either end of the matchstick. He never started a fire. Far as I know.

"It's quite a get-up," said his granddaughter, Lisa.

Slim's cell phone was very Vermont. Slim was very Vermont. That's because, as I said, Slim was a native Vermonter.

I'm not Slim, but I, too, am a native Vermonter.

I was born in St. Albans (pronounced "Snobbins," if you're native) and raised eight miles north, in a small riverside town

called “Swah’in” (pronounced “Swanton,” if you’re non-native). Swanton is home, no matter where home is.

Mom was one of ten children; Dad was one of eight. My maternal grandparents’ ancestors crossed into Vermont from Canada, which explains the strange pronunciation of my first name—“Le-IN,” not “Le-ON.” Actually, another Le-IN grew up in Swanton, and another in Fairfield, a nearby farming town. Le-IN: It’s a French-Canadian thing.

My grandmothers were strong, smart homemakers. While PePe Laroche—Mom’s father—worked on his 500-acre dairy farm, Grandpa Thompson served the railroad. His long hours of exposure to loud train engines sparked hearing loss and yet another mispronunciation of my name: “Le-urn.” (He can’t hear how he says it. Poor guy.)

Lots of my relatives hunt, fish, and cruise through mud bogs atop four-wheelers (ATVs, or all-terrain vehicles, for you city folks). I don’t, although I enjoyed fishing as a child, especially during those rare moments I didn’t catch weeds or—this really happened—tree limbs.

Usually, they were behind me.

I couldn’t cast well.

I was what you’d call an “inside kid.” I started reading *Mad* magazine when I was in fourth grade. While the other kids were in their backyards, I was in our living room, playing along to ABBA eight-tracks on the piano we didn’t have—namely, our couch—or developing my uncanny impersonations of The Fonz (“Ayyy!”), W. C. Fields, and Pee-Wee Herman.

“You weren’t wrapped too tight,” says Uncle Turk, Dad’s youngest brother. “You still aren’t.”

True.

Not Too Awful Bad

If I can be nakedly and brutally honest here—and I'm a Vermonter, so I'm allowed—I never believed Vermont fit me, and vice versa. I felt like a tea bag in a fishbowl. I always sought an escape, right from childhood. Vermont is a small state, and I thought I was bigger. At age eight, I walked into our kitchen and told Mom my dream of being a famous comedian. She laughed. To me, that was a start.

My high school guidance counselors asked me: “What do you want to be after high school?”

“Gone,” I'd say.

I was George Bailey with braces.

Unfortunately, colleges and universities do not offer “comedian” as a major. Also, schools cost money. Lots. So I spent four years at Lyndon State College, a small liberal arts school in Vermont's gorgeous Northeast Kingdom.

At Lyndon, I majored in radio and then English, and started writing a humor column for the college newspaper, *The Critic*. My column was called “Pronounced Le-in.” (I made that up all by myself. Clever, eh? Just wait until I get going here.)

My first two books, *Good Junk* and *dork: another look at my junk* are collections of (mostly) humor columns I've written in thirteen years of journalism. I enjoy telling stories. Other people's. And mine—as long as other people relate to my stories. Otherwise, it's all just blah, blah, blah.

The book you are holding contains stories and jokes from all sides of Vermont, from all kinds of people connected to it. Some of these jokes and stories are mine. Some aren't. You'll know the difference. If not, just ask. I'm here to help.

You're probably wondering if I ever grew an affinity for Vermont. Sure did. I lived and wrote in South Carolina for two-plus years. As you might discern, South Carolina is not Vermont. I enjoyed South Carolina and learned a lot there, especially on that day the state literally shut down after a two-inch snowfall, which, to me, was like taking a shower—normal. But frightening. I have never been so scared to drive in the snow. Not because of the snow, but because of the inexperienced southerners that drove in it with me. (In South Carolina, highway workers cover roads with beach sand during snowfalls. No. Joke.)

When I returned to Vermont in 2000, I realized it is not merely New Hampshire turned upside down. (Find a map. It's freaky.) My advice to Vermont's inside kids is to leave. "Go," I say. "And come back. Rediscover the unique, magnificent, bucolic state that you so foolishly resented for so long. Trust me, you'll be a better Vermonter for it."

I hope I am.

The famous promotional slogan says, "I (heart) VT."

Me? I dig Vermont.

I dig that when I wake on a midsummer morning, and it looks like a John Denver song outside my open windows, I have several options: run by the lake, bike on the recreation trail converted from a dormant railroad bed, or spend the day at a local nudists' campground. (True story. You'll see.)

I dig that I come from the first state to abolish slavery and the first state to tell people, "We recognize the love you have for someone else, no matter who that someone else is." I dig wondering what will happen next in this tiny state that regularly shifts the world's large eyes on it.

Not Too Awful Bad

I dig Vermont Teddy Bears and Ben & Jerry's and the fact that all my out-of-state friends ask to see Church Street in Burlington just minutes after they get off the plane.

I dig living in a town so small that people often say, "Hey, there's the guy from the newspaper," but large enough where others could give a damn who I am. Pockets of anonymity do exist here, no matter what you hear.

I dig that so many of my music-loving friends will ask, "Have you ever met any of the guys from Phish?"

Yup. Mike Gordon. The bassist. I dig his hair.

I dig that I've also honed a pretty dead-on impersonation of Vermont's independent U.S. senator, Bernie Sanders. I'll do it for you, if you ask. Nicely.

You don't want to hear my Howard Dean. It's loud.

When she was six, my daughter, affectionately known to me as "Bebo," invented her first recipe: Smash Mash. It's one part tilapia, one part brown rice, one part corn, and one part cottage cheese, all mixed together in a bowl.

I dig that Vermont is a big bowl of Smash Mash.

So, I suppose I'm qualified to write this book because I am a native Vermonter who digs Vermont. Plain. And. Simple. We all know there are tons of books about Vermont on shelves and in libraries—from historic texts and outdoor guides to photo collections and novels that make Oprah cry—but not many native Vermonters wrote those books.

But, again, I'm probably not the most qualified native Vermonter who could pen a book about Vermont. That would be Slim Bovat, and other Vermonters like him.

Keep in mind: This book is a guide aimed at helping you comprehend the thicker and finer points of this state. Also keep in mind: I'm only one Vermonter. Go easy on me. I haven't

seen or done everything, so, inevitably, I'll miss something—maybe a few somethings. I don't ski. (Many natives don't.) I don't own a single piece of camouflage clothing. And I've never tipped a cow, only because any cow that's waited on me hasn't deserved a tip.

Cows stink at keeping your coffee hot.

Slim Bovat

March 22, 1923–May 19, 2009

May Heaven have plenty of duct tape.