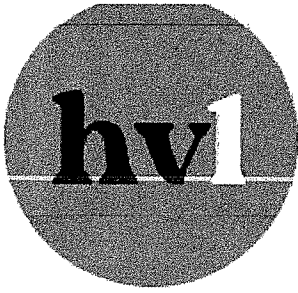


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Vern Benjamin's deep roots

by Irene Rivera Hurst — June 14, 2014 in Community

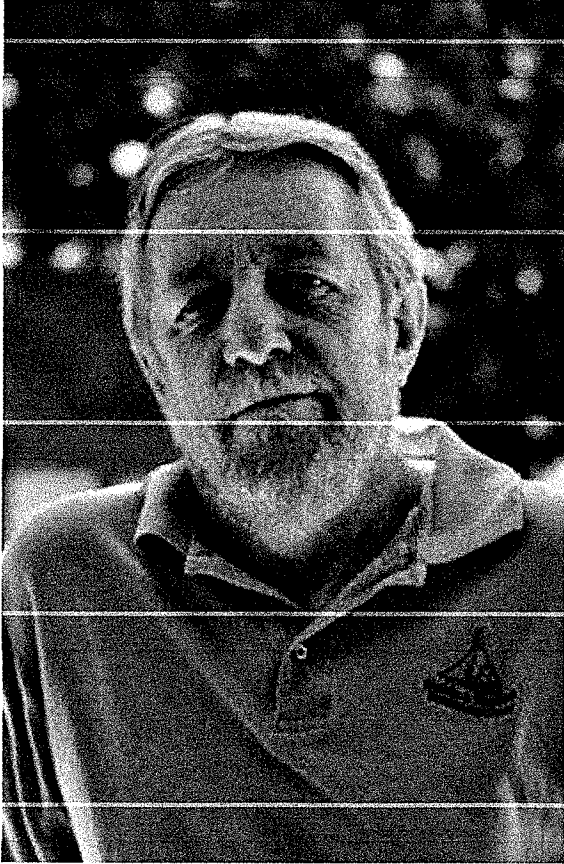


Early shafts of a red dawn rise on the eastern horizon, penetrating the sky as if wounding it, tomahawk-style...The great river's form appears as a slightly arching shaft indented by a few protruding landforms, freckled with marshes and a few scattered islands. Let us say that in the center of this lush landscape a human form appeared more than 10,500 years ago."

The passage is from page one of *The History of the Hudson River Valley: From Wilderness to the Civil War* by Saugerties writer Vernon Benjamin. Benjamin will read from and sign copies of the book at 5 p.m., Saturday, June 14 at the Golden Notebook, 29 Tinker Street, Woodstock.

More than 18 years in the making, this extensively researched book is a comprehensive history of the early Hudson Valley, part one in a planned two-part series. Benjamin guides us from the Paleolithic period through the incursions of Henry Hudson and the Dutch settlement of the New World, the Revolutionary and Indian Wars to the growth of commerce through the Civil War.

Within the pages of this history, Benjamin explores the geology of the river as well as its multiplicity of resources. He tells us why settlers of many nationalities and religions wanted land along the river



enough to endure hardships, disease and the natural desire of the Aboriginal peoples to fight for control of the valley.

Written in a conversational voice, the book invites us to look at our surroundings through historic events and the eyes of the people who lived them. It's packed with fascinating anecdotes about the familiar and unfamiliar denizens of the Hudson River highway.

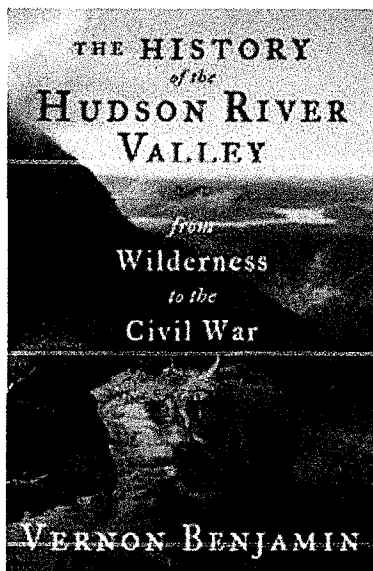
The writing is poetic: "The coldest part of the night arrives just before dawn at the Pine Orchard, the serene confluence of wilderness scenery on the northeast face of the Catskill Mountains...the Hudson River Valley spills forth, wrapped in a blanket of blue in the darkness before dawn. A firmament of stars covers the Valley, yet one can glimpse only its width, and part of its awe, from high on this aerie."

It is evocative. "[During the Revolutionary War] the Americans faced marauding parties along the Hudson Valley's Western Frontier, which was protected with an advance post in Little Shandaken and forts established in Boiceville, the upper Rondout, and Wawarsing."

And, it is amusing. Benjamin's description of James Fenimore Cooper and Washington Irving brings those literary icons down to earth: "Cooper and Irving produced works that were respectable reading for men in middle class households, but neither author was a great favorite among women." One critic noted the "puny vitality" of Irving's stories and considered Cooper's rough wilderness tales "soon to be forgotten." Benjamin agrees, since "Cooper was not averse to making disparaging remarks about women, and Irving's humor was ill-fitted for lady readers at the time."

Vernon himself is a part of Saugerties history. He was born in Dale's Sanitarium, a respite care home located at the foot of Barclay St. from the 1930s until the 1960s. A few beds were set aside to accommodate expectant mothers who couldn't make it to Kingston on time to deliver their babies. Mrs. Alice Benjamin was one of them.

Vernon lived in town with his parents and two older brothers. He attended Siena College, where he studied sociology, then sought a master's in English literature from Long Island University. Benjamin was a good, but not devoted student until an auto accident made him "a changed person." Laid up for three months, he rethought his life goals and philosophy.



Upon graduation, he gravitated to New York and found employment in the financial district. It was Benjamin's job to investigate potential Wall Street employees and then write a detailed report on each. Typing two or three reports a day helped him hone his writing skills.

A few years in Manhattan prompted the author to relocate back to his old stomping grounds in the Hudson Valley, where he took a job with the Hudson-Register Star. After five years, Saugerties called via a job with the *Post-Star*. An article he wrote about the town's assessment practices and their effect on the senior housing complex on Main St. awakened an interest in politics. His resulting 1981 run for town supervisor was not successful. It did, however, bring Benjamin to the attention of then-Assemblyman Maurice Hinchey, with whom he worked closely for much of

the next decade. Vernon wrote bills, speeches and environmental proposals to benefit Saugerties and Ulster County.

Benjamin ran for county legislator in 1983, won a seat, and served for three terms, earning the term "gadfly" for his challenges to the establishment on issues affecting his constituency.

In 1989, the town of Saugerties was struggling to keep Winston Farm from becoming a county dump. Benjamin left the legislature to run successfully for town supervisor. He worked with many others in town to forestall the placement of a dump on this pristine piece of land, later the site of Woodstock '94. Benjamin lost his first reelection bid and went back to work with Hinchey, helping him stage his successful run for Congress.

It was around this time he began work on the book following an offer by Overlook Press.

He subsequently edited *Saugerties Times* for four years.

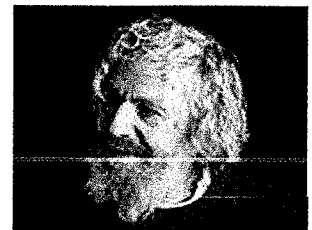
In 2002, he was invited by Marist College to teach, first local history and then art history with an emphasis on the Hudson River School.

According to Benjamin, the combination of reading primary source documents while in Albany, a personal connection to the author Alf Evers and his book, *The Catskills: From Wilderness to Woodstock* and the encouragement of friends and family both inspired and supported his decision to write his own local history.

In *The History of the Hudson River Valley: from Wilderness to the Civil War*, Benjamin has given us a scrupulously researched and intuitive volume which lends itself to reading for research or enjoyment.

Readers can sample the text and meet the author in Woodstock Saturday, June 14 at 5 p.m. at the Golden Notebook, 29 Tinker St.

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- Goddy Sveitkauskas, Publisher



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