

**Barre Historical Society Oral History Project:  
Carolyn Shapiro & Marjorie Power**

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**What is your role at the Barre Historical Society? What projects have you been involved with? What are you currently working on?**

**Carolyn:** I'm Carolyn Shapiro and I'm on the board, and I have been the one who's been spearheading the bakery, and the restoration of the bakery. So that's primarily what I've been doing, but I help on other things like exhibits, with Marj. We've done some on the history of the bakery and some other things. So just as a board member, I help out.

**How did the idea of reviving the bakery first come about?**

**Carolyn:** Well, it came about because Chet Briggs and Karen and I were on the porch, and Chet was saying, "Oh, I can smell the bread. Wouldn't it be wonderful to have this come back alive?" And Karen said yes, and I was at a point where I didn't have something that was really compelling. And I was an exchange student **at** Leigh in 11<sup>th</sup> grade (in Lakewood, California), and I taught U.S. history at the high school level, and I love community work, and it all seemed to pull together. The Italians built the Labor Hall and the bakery, and the bakery could be rebuilt with the use of teens. They could be looking at the labor history and the history of the bakery. And so I said, "Well, let's give it a try, and let's start out with something like a kick-starter, and see if there's some interest." And, there was!

**Marjorie:** And we should go back before that, because Carolyn's talking from the point at which we actually owned the bakery building. But back in the day, the title to the bakery and the Labor Hall had been separated. They had been created into two different parcels. And the bakery belonged to the property behind the bakery, and the granite business that owned that property went belly up, and the property was going to be put up for auction. But even before that, the neighboring granite shed, Pepin's, had got, in conjunction with the previous owner that later went belly up, a demolition permit for that building. They were going to extend that granite shed not only onto the bakery

property, but also onto our property, because – why not! The fact that they didn't own our property didn't affect their application to the zoning board of adjustment. And the zoning board of adjustment didn't read the ordinances, and they said "Why, sure! Demolish it." And so we had to take them to court to prevent the demolition of the historic building and the historic district. So when the auction came – because we had prevented the demolition, but the owner had gone belly up – we went to the auction and we had got a donation for the down payment on the building, if we were able to get it. And Karen Lane and I ponied up the rest, and took a mortgage on the building, and we bid on it. And I think we were quite innocent. Because the actual owners of the building, at that point, were the bond holders or the debt holders on the belly up. And I think if we had waited, they would not have got enough bids on it, and we would have been able to buy it cheaper. But what did we know? Not very much. So we bid on it, and we got it. And, then it sat there. And it sat there, and trees grew up around it. And, there was always some question because the old coal gas plant in Barre had leaked, and there was a pollution plume that was slowly coming out from where the plant had been, and going on the ground under properties. And that was just spreading and spreading. And we knew that part of it was under the bakery. So there were pollution issues from this old plant. And, so it just sat there. And we bought it in 2004, and it wasn't 'til Carolyn got the bit between her teeth, as she has described, that anything happened, aside from picking a few weeds. And it was being used for snowmobile storage and other stuff, not ours. The granite shed next door, who had wanted to demolish it, used it as storage, and we were okay with that cause we weren't using it. It did get a few inches of water in it at the time of the 2011 flood. We had three floods at the Hall here after we opened it, re-opened it. One flood was just three months after we re-opened it, and that was very, very discouraging. And that was 2000. Then we had another flood in 2007. Neither of those floods reached the bakery. But the basement of the Hall was quite full of water. And then the 2011 flood was even higher than the previous two, and that one actually got, just right up at the floor level in the bakery.

**Carolyn:** The bakery is now a foot higher in its floor, because it's been insulated and more cement put on it, so we should be okay now.

**Marjorie:** And the insulation also keeps the plume, any fumes or contamination from the plume, from the old coal gas plant, from getting into the bakery itself.

**Carolyn:** And we actually had that tested by a company that came and drilled, and tested, and drilled, and tested, and came back several times, and there was nothing. And we had been told if we didn't disturb this huge eastern cottonwood that was in the back, that was lifting the building up, that had to be taken down. If we didn't disturb the root system on that, which would be pretty extensive, we would not get down to where it was maybe six or seven feet deep, where there was some evidence of plume.

**So it sounds like... Was there a lot of construction that had to be done to restore the structure of the bakery?**

**Carolyn:** A lot.

**Marjorie:** A lot.

**Carolyn:** There was a crack in the back wall from the tree lifting up, there was a hole in the roof that cats and things were coming... squirrels were coming down into, and rain as well. Yeah, it basically... all the surfaces got touched in one way or another.

**Marjorie:** It was a fragile shell of its former self. And, it's amazing that we even were able to do it. The whole back wall basically got patched with historic brick. We learned more about brick than we ever wanted to know. Who knew that you had to match the mortar? And you had to match the bricks? And you had to match... and of course all the brick works are out of business now. The local brick works that made the bricks that were used in these two buildings. So, who knew?! It's what happens when you get involved with old, historic buildings. The more you do, the more you find out that you need to do.

**Carolyn:** But it's been wonderful because different companies have really come forth to do the work, for not as much as they would charge otherwise -- because they know it's a non-profit, and they liked the project. And so, the person who did the back wall had to take out a third of that wall and replace it. And he was willing to have some teens from YouthBuild come and help as a way to introduce them to brick work, and to do it for not as much as it would normally have cost.

**Marjorie:** Yes, we've been very fortunate. The people... the tradespeople who have worked on the fabric of this building have often got into it, and have given us bargain rates. And that goes for all sorts. I was just paying a bill from the sprinkler system guy, who lives in Milton and came out in the middle of the night, having previously -- because an alarm went off -- having previously repaired the system, and given us a break on his labor. So, they know we're on the edge, we're always on the edge. When we were putting in the flood mitigation system at the Hall, for which we had a grant from FEMA, after our three floods they thought, "Maybe we should do something, we keep paying out on this building!" And so, we got a grant, which consisted of putting in a gigundous sump pump in the basement and various other things, and cementing the half of the basement that had not yet been finished, the floor. And the grant, you had to pay first, and then they would reimburse you. Well, when all the bank accounts got down to zero, the people who were digging out the basement preparatory to laying the cement, took their shovels and went home because we couldn't pay them. And then we discovered there was a special exception where, if you had incurred the bills, they would pay it before you did. So they would pay it to us, if we showed them that we were actually liable for it, and then they would give us the money, and then we could give it to the craftspeople and then the diggers came back. But, that's the sort of edge we were always on. I was treasurer at that time, and I did not dare set up any of the automatic payments for monthly bills that you set up for yourself when you've got a mortgage or something that has to be paid, same every month, you set it up so it automatically goes out of the bank account. I didn't dare do that, because I never knew if the money would be in the bank account to cover it. So, because we had multiple debts that we had to pay for flood

borrowings, that we had to borrow money to repair after each flood, and so we had loans and... ugh. Someday we'll be debt free!

**Where is the bakery at right now? Is it finished?**

**Carolyn:** The construction is finished, and we're now just looking to find a baker that can come and do the start-up bakery, and the workshops, and all that we had said in all our grants that we are going to be doing.

**What was the most challenging part restoring the bakery?**

**Carolyn:** Well, it's interesting. It had a snowball effect, because after we got the kickstarter, that served as money that we could go ahead and match for grants. As Marj was saying, a lot of times you had to show that you had the money in the bank to match a grant. So that got us started. And I think there's been just tremendous enthusiasm by the community and grant sources for having us come back. So that's not been so much the challenge, and as we've said the people we were working with have also been just amazing. Just amazing, I mean... I can tell you stories that are pretty incredible, because the sewer line instead of going through the parking lot goes through the bottom of the bakery- or, the Labor Hall, in the basement. And the granite stone had to be drilled out at the back and the front, and that was just this major challenge because it had to be a six-inch hole through granite block that was like 26 inches.

**Marjorie:** That's our foundation... It's made of old waste. Giant waste granite blocks! Cause they were in the business!

**Carolyn:** That was huge, that was huge.

**Marjorie:** And it was way thicker, it turned out, than anybody expected.

**Carolyn:** Right.

**Marjorie:** At the front of the Hall it was particularly thick.

**Carolyn:** At the front.

**Marjorie:** And I have pictures of the guy down there drilling, and drilling, and drilling, and pulling out his drill, and looking for dirt. And there was no dirt, it was just more granite dust! And putting it in and drilling, and drilling, and drilling, and pulling out his drill and looking for soil on his drill bit, you know, giant drill bit! And..

**Carolyn:** That was definitely challenging because we knew – I mean in terms of the septic we had to do that, we had to connect – but again it was one of the fortuitous things because the town, the city, was repairing the road here, and they were down to where the septic was going to be so, it was possible to form a special-

**Marjorie:** Well they weren't repairing the road, they were putting in a new sewer, because-

**Carolyn:** Yeah, exactly.

**Marjorie:** Part of the flooding was caused by the river backing up through the sewer and coming out through the drains.

**Carolyn:** Right. So...

**Marjorie:** It wasn't coming over the bank, it was coming up.

**Carolyn:** Yeah.

**Marjorie:** So they were trying to fix the sewer system so that it was not going to back up.

**Carolyn:** Right, but then they had dug up-

**Marjorie:** But they had the road up.

**Carolyn:** And so they were, with a separate contract, going to go ahead and connect up our sewer to that sewer – to the city sewer. So that was just like this timing, and circumstance, and the person who was doing the road being very willing, said "Sure, I'll make a contract for you, I'll come do it." And so I

think the thing that's been the hardest, is I have a couple of sources of materials that have not been in Vermont, that don't have that same kind of dedication to the project, that have been a little difficult to work with. And I'm still working with one of them to try to get a refund for something that was not good material. But other than that, it's been a very, very positive experience.

**Marjorie:** But it required organizational chops, because there are multiple licenses needed. You know, to be a bakery you have to have health, you have to have fire. You have to meet the fire code, the health code, the building codes.

**Carolyn:** Yeah, yeah.

**Marjorie:** You know, and there are all these other codes that you need to meet, for good reason. They don't always fit together comfortably.

**Carolyn:** Right. And my husband has been very helpful, along with other professionals. Like we got donated the architectural drawings, and donated the mechanical drawings. And then my husband's an engineer, so he's been helping with all the insulation and the mechanical parts. And he knows people from his work that he can call on who come and... will... do that.

**Marjorie:** Advise, or help or...

**Carolyn:** The boiler, or the hot water, or whatever. So, that's been really good too. And he gets a lot of credit for-

**Marjorie:** Oh yeah!

**Carolyn:** Having the building up.

**Marjorie:** He's a patient man.

**Carolyn:** Yeah, he is. So, it's been good.

**What are your hopes for the future of the bakery? Can you talk about some of the program ideas you have that you mentioned earlier?**

**Carolyn:** Yes. It's a bit going to be up to who we find as a baker, and what they come up with... A plan for it. But what we have been saying in our grants that we want to see happen, is to have a baker that will do a start-up bakery and work with a couple of teen apprentices, so that we're creating jobs for teens, by having them have those skills. And that there can be workshops for the community to come in and learn something about the baking. And even if you don't have a wood fired oven, you can still do these breads in a conventional oven with tiles and whatever to kind of mimic a wood oven. So, community ones. And then the other would be, there are two culinary programs that are walking distance. One is Capstone's Culinary, that works with people who-

**Marjorie:** That's the local community action agency.

**Carolyn:** Right. And you know, with groups of people who are really looking to have some kind of... forms of employment. And they've been very successful after the culinary project in placing people. And one of the things they'd like is to have them have the experience with a wood oven. And the other is the Vermont Career Center that works with the high school students, and they're just in walking distance, they would come over too and do a workshop. So, between those culinary programs, and the community, and maybe some pop-up events, and baking for the Labor Hall when Primo Maggio or some event happens, and a start-up bakery... That's what we're hoping can happen.

**Marjorie:** It will require a very unique and dedicated baker. You can't... They won't just be able to come in and think, "I'm a baker, and I'm just gonna bake." They have to be an educator as well as a baker. And basically, be into it, otherwise it's just not gonna work, because I think it will be quite hard to make a living out of it. So they're gonna have to have quite a bit, I think, of dedication to the concept.

**Carolyn:** Well, and the other thing that's really rather remarkable is we have a grant from Canaday Family Charitable Trust – that's located in New York – that helped us to finish the construction but also then said "You need some money for transition." And so, we have a sum of money that can help somebody who is a baker come in, where we can offer to support the rent or some expense that would be happening for that first year, to have them really get started -- which will be really helpful. Besides being a non-profit, so that we don't have to make a bunch of money off of the rent.

**Marjorie:** Yeah, to be... the first year of a business... What did they say? It takes three to four years before you actually start making money? And I'm not sure that this business will ever make anybody rich. In fact, I'm sure it won't! So it will require someone who's kinda devoted to the concept, to do that. I hope those people are not too rare.

**Is there anything else you wanted to touch on that we haven't already?**

**Carolyn:** I think... the only other thing that I can imagine is... The Labor Hall has so much history, and the bakery has so much history. And it has to do with labor history, and the people's history. And that's not something that gets taught in high schools, or community colleges, or universities even. So to have – like what Karen says, a resource of, kind of a library – but also to have, as one aspect of the re-programming, some information about the importance of this history. And that we all are walking in the footsteps of people who have done a lot of struggle to bring us where we are.

**Marjorie:** Yes, it's... When people come here, they get the spirit. Back in, at our grand re-opening of the Labor Hall, which was in 2000 – September 2nd, 2000 – I remember it well. And, it was back before you young people got into politics at all, and I remember Bernie came. Yeah, we had all the politicians in the universe here. Everybody came for the grand re-opening. The governor was here, it was Howard Dean at the time, and everybody who was anybody wanted to be here, it was a big photo-op. And there was all sorts of speechifying in the afternoon. And

Bernie, who was then a congressman, came. And, he got the spirit! And he got totally carried away, because for the first time I had ever heard him - in a public speech, use the s-word. He actually used the word "socialist." He had totally got carried away with the idea that he was speaking in the same place as Mother Jones and Eugene Debs and others of - his own heroes! And I thought, "Wow!" And, so, there's a spirit in the Hall. Many people have spoken about their feeling, about the Hall, sort of... conveying the spirit of new immigrants to the United States, who founded the Hall -- people who took their political participation very seriously -- and all those civic virtues that sometimes, nowadays, we don't appreciate. Education, political participation... thinking about how politics, and government, and society should be ordered. You know, these were ordinary people, who were thinking about that - not, sort of, academics in ivory towers. This was the nitty gritty, there was a grocery store in the basement, and civic virtue upstairs. It was... it was amazing, and it's something... And it was all self-generated. And I think it's something that we've kind of lost. Or at least, in the degree that this Hall represents, and hopefully, this Hall will be used as a model to bring that back.

**Carolyn:** That's a good thing to end on.