

Saving and Celebrating the Socialist Labor Party Hall: An Interview with Karen Lane for the Barre Historical Society, May, 2019. Shannon Foley, Interviewer

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

Karen: Well, most people say and I... I think it really is true that I was kind of in at the beginning. I was working as the director of the public library, and I knew that this building was empty. And my friend Joelen Mulvaney and I - she had written about the building and had studied it, and we were both afraid it was about to be torn down, and sure enough a demolition permit had been requested. And one day I got to... Oh no, and then I had gone to the... I'm sorry, it had gone into bankruptcy. So the Granite Bank at the time — it's now TD Bank, but it was then the Granite Bank — they had possession of it because it was no longer in the hands of the people who had been running Tomato Pak, which was a kind of a re-packaging tomato operation. As director of the library I had a staff member, Marjorie Strong, who's now the assistant librarian at the Vermont Historical Society. And she was doing a lot of work at the library, and I had asked her about maybe coming over here, because Joelen knew that there were papers up in the attic. And we thought they might be related to the early history of the Socialist Labor Party and the people who built the building. So I went to the bank and talked to the branch manager, Mr. McMeekin, and I said, "I have an archivist at the library, she would be very happy to come and look at the papers in the attic to see if they are of historical value. And then we would try to help decide where they might go, to some historical repository." So he said, "Sure, sure, we'll let you know." One day I got to work on a Saturday morning, I think it was, and one of my friends who was a reporter for the newspaper — or maybe he was in advertising... Anyway, he came running up to me and he said, "They're emptying out the Labor Hall!" And I said, "What?!" Because I knew that Marjorie had never been given the chance to go and look at the papers! So I rushed over here. I called Joelen, she came. And by the time we got here, a few minutes later, the last of three big trucks was pulling away from the building. So we never got a chance to see the papers. We never got an opportunity to see what kind of history was stored in the attic. Because, it was all gone, it went to the landfill in Coventry. Everything went there and got smooshed, and packed, and whatnot. Terrible tragedy. There was a front-page story about it in the newspaper the next day. And, I think a group of us got together, some friends of ours, and the two of us, and several others... and we said, "You know, we really need to save the building, since we couldn't save the papers." So that's kind of how it all started. A friend of ours, sculptor John Hanna, said he'd be the president. Russell Belding, who transcribed the "Labor Hall Chronology, was the secretary... and we just kinda got started. The City Manager Mike Welch said to us, "Well, you know, the Barre Historical Society went out of business a few years ago. Why don't you revive the Barre Historical Society and that can be the group that

raises the money, cause we do need to be a non-profit." That seemed like a good idea, so I arranged with the IRS for us to become the Barre Historical Society again. And I've kind of been involved ever since, so that was I think 1994 or 1995, somewhere in there. So pretty soon this'll be 25 years we've been trying to save this building. And as to my job — and I have more to tell you but — as to my job right now, I'm on the program committee and I'm the vice president.

Shannon: What was the most challenging part about saving the Labor Hall, and setting up the Barre Historical Society?

Karen: Well, setting up the Barre Historical Society turned out to be very easy, because it hadn't been that long since they closed the books. So we still had their numbers and everything, and the IRS was very accommodating, which was really nice. So we just became the Barre Historical Society. The most challenging thing, apart from the story I just told you, was... We had learned that there was a... The National Park Service was doing what they called a theme study. And this one happened to be on labor history. I think a number of scholars had approached the Park Service, and they said, "You know, you have a lot of homes of famous people, and you have a lot of other historic properties on the National Register and the National Landmark list." Which is... you know, the National Register is a lot of like... I don't know... thousands of buildings. The National Landmark list is maybe a thousand, or two thousand, something like that, many fewer. It's a very special status. And so, this group of scholars had arranged for the Park Service to have the Newberry Library out of Chicago .. For one of their librarians, who was a historian... She started doing research on places around the country that could be nominated as National Historic Landmarks, with labor as their subject matter. And a friend of ours had heard about this study- This was Elsa Gilbertson. She worked for the Vermont Division for Historic Preservation... She said, "Why don't you guys nominate the Barre Opera House?" I think that's what she suggested. So we said, "Oh, that's a good idea!" And then we got to thinking about it, and we said, "The Barre Opera House, well you know, that represents a lot of things but... to us the really key LABOR building is this one. This was built by the Socialist Labor Party in the 1900s, so it makes it a really appropriate selection as a National Historic Landmark." We told that to Elsa, and she said, "Oh yeah, I think you're right, let's do that." And she kinda... set us off on our way to start doing research. So the folks from the Newberry Library — that was a woman named Robin Bachin, the historian — she came and visited and found out about the history of it, and she actually met with the folks on the Barre City Council. She went to a Council meeting, and it was broadcast on TV and she talked about what this would all mean. And then she went away and did a research project, and started writing up the history. So it was finally submitted to the Park Service and they said, "Well this is all very interesting, but how do you explain that it has any national significance at all?" Cause it seemed to them it was just local. Well, we had this wonderful, wonderful scholar friend in Minnesota named Rudolph Vecoli. And Vecoli had been

to Barre to speak at the Barre Opera House, before it even re-opened, many years ago. And we had kept in touch with him, and he was helping us, and so we wrote to him and we said, "They don't think it's nationally significant." And he said, "Not to worry!" And so he sent out messages to at least a dozen historians and scholars, including a folklorist, who all wrote letters to the National Park Service. And they said, "This is why this building is very, very important." And I think that began to persuade the people at the Park Service, that yes, this was appropriate. And then it was the final letter that came in... it was the one that really clinched it. And that was from Eric Foner, a professor at Columbia University who, at the time, was the President of the American Historical Association. So he was like, very, very important in the field of American history. When we got the news, the people from the Park Service called and they said, "We just got the letter from God." Which to them meant, well, you know, the final persuasion that we needed was the letter from him. So that's kind of what did it, and it meant that we were able to recognize this building. It was recognized in May 2000, and we had our grand re-opening.

Senator Leahy had gotten a big grant, which enabled us to re-open this space, the kitchen, and the bathrooms downstairs. So we had a big party that September, on Labor Day. And there's a poster of it, over there. It was a great event. We had speeches, and we had a concert in the evening, and some of the best singers you've ever heard singing labor songs. And there is a brass plaque on the outside of the building that they sent us. And the funny story about that, is that they sent a copy to us, and it had a spelling error on it. They had spelled "anarchists" as though it would read "anarachists." Had an extra "a" in it. And we said, "um." So they had to make us a new one. So we have the old one upstairs, but the new one's on the building.

Shannon: The story of Primo Maggio...

Karen: We re-opened the building in 2000, and then in 2004, one of our board members — Giuliano Cecchinelli, a native of Carrara, Italy, who's been here since he was a teenager, carving marble and granite. He's an amazing artist. And he was looking at some of the old photos, and there's a picture of a bunch of people inside the building, or somewhere, we don't really know what the setting was... But they're all people with newspapers saying "Primo Maggio," on May 1st. And we got to know some of the families, so we knew that the people in the photo were people who were adherents of this building, and people who had probably helped to build it back in 1900. And he said, "Why don't we have a dinner, and we'll recreate that picture? We'll get all the people who come to go stand out in front of the building, just like they did in - actually, in 1904. But I'm getting mixed up. I'm sorry! The photograph we were going to copy was from 1904, and it was one that had belonged to our dear friend Mario Barberi, whose grandparents had helped to build this building. Sorry I mixed the photographs up. So anyway this one was also a Primo Maggio picture, but from 1904. And it was taken in front of the building, so there are kids and men and women, and people looking out the windows and.. It's

just a great picture, there must be 75 or 80 people in the picture. So that's what we did. So we had another dinner, a hundred years later, on May 1st, 2004. And we recreated the photograph from 1904. And we have both of those pictures, one's in color. So it was very... a really nice way to commemorate the history.

Carolyn (Shapiro): We do have those pictures? Cause that would be great to have up for a Primo Maggio.

Karen: It really would. You know, and, maybe somewhere in the hallway, it could just be permanent.

Carolyn: It should just be.

Karen: It should just be side by side. Yup, the original, and... Yeah, we need to do more of that.

Carolyn: Cause there's the Primo Maggio posters.

Karen: Yeah, we used some of the photos in the posters.

Karen: Anyway, that was the story I wanted to tell. So now we do Primo Maggio every year, like we just did this past week. We try to celebrate the way they used to. They would have lectures, and dances, and dinners and, you know, they'd have guest speakers come, or stuff like that. So it was a big holiday.

Shannon: What are your personal hopes/plans for the Barre Historical Society in the near future?

Karen: Well the new space*, I think, is going to be multipurpose. To me, it's a place where we can have exhibits on the walls, but we can also have people use it as a meeting space. You know, if you're having a big meeting and want to have a breakout room, I think it's great for that. And if you want to have just a little meeting and not use the main hall, you can do that. So there's a lot of uses, and I think it's pretty special to have had a University of Vermont student named Pam Daley do the paint studies back in 1998, it was... When she figured out what the colors had been originally, and now they're back. I love that! As for upstairs, I had a lot of help from Christian Golden, another UVM student. He may come back and do some more work this summer if he can, but what he and I were trying to do was organize the papers that we have upstairs... Which are... the history that we're talking about right now, going back to 1994 or '95, somewhere in there. And also, a collection that we've been making of books and papers. I just

had a fellow at the dinner saying, "My grandfather gave me some labor broadsides from the 1930's and 40's that I want to give you."

Carolyn: Whoa!

Karen: And I said, "That sounds wonderful." Cause we'd like it to be kind of a study center. And I think that's what my husband Chet Briggs and his friend John Bloch dreamed about. And then I think also the generation before, Bill Kemsley, Ben Collins, some of the other people... who really wanted to save this building, but they weren't able to back in the 70's, so... We have a lot of people to kind of honor in the work we're doing. But I think it would be nice to have a small meeting space like that*.

* The small room by the front door now known as the "Ambrosini Room."