

Spring 2003

Volume 6, Issue 22



## GARDNER NEWSLETTER

### Island Pond, VT: The Same, But Different

For many years, Will and Olive Gardner's official address was Island Pond, Vermont. Even today the little town nestled in Vermont's Northeast Kingdom is much the same as it was when many from the Original Gang of Ten attended Brighton High School. Back in the early 1950s, I remember walking from the old homestead to Island Pond to get a haircut for 25¢. Then I would go to the Ben Franklin store and spend my allowance on some treats before walking back home.

Who would have thought that this northern Mayberry USA



World Locations of the Twelve Tribes, Commonwealth of Israel

would be catapulted into the national news under the glaring spotlight of the media, and that the consequences of those events would shake the foundations of our most cherished institutions – family, religion and the law. That's exactly

what happened on June 22, 1984! Members of the Gardner family who still live in the area (and other long-time residents) certainly remember this period and, I'm sure, have strong opinions about this story. Be sure to ask them when you visit.

On June 22, 1984, 90 Vermont state troopers and 50 social workers took 112 children into custody amid allegations of child abuse. The children were taken from the community known as the Northeast Kingdom Community Church. This organization took root in Island Pond in the summer of

1978. A resident, Andre Masse, had invited church leader Elbert Eugene Spriggs, Jr. to the village to help found a religious community. Spriggs came from Tennessee, where he had already founded a church group. Almost immediately, the Island Pond group tripled in size from its 20 original members to 60. From the beginning, the relationship between the church's bearded men and kerchieved women and the rest of the townspeople was uneasy.

After all the hoopla and uproar, Judge Frank Mahady

*(Continued on page 2)*

### Celebrate a Bicentennial and a Golden Wedding!

The month of July, 2003 has some great events for members of the Gardner Family.

On July 12, 2003, the Town of Charleston, Vermont celebrates its bicentennial. It will be held at the Charleston Elementary School. Some of the events include: a parade, antique car and tractor ex-

hibit, flea market/tag sale, craft table, face painting, petting zoo, plant sale, raffles and door prizes, speakers and dignitaries, entertainment, alumni chorus, old fashioned sing-along, lunch and refreshments, demonstration of "old skills," arm wrestling, tug-of-war, sack race/three-legged race, baby parade, and food judging.

Sounds like a full venue to me! If you are in the area, bring someone along. There's something for everyone. Plan to be there.

#### **Congratulations to Bunny and Tony Maria!**

They are celebrating 50 years of marriage this July! Bunny is a cousin of the Original Gang of Ten on Grandma Gardner's side.

Bunny and Tony have reached a great milestone and are planning to renew their vows! We applaud them as they go forward to their diamond anniversary. Maybe we'll have some pictures for our Summer issue.

*(Continued from page 1)*

dismissed the state's request to hold the children so they could be examined for evidence of abuse. The state dropped its case and the church proclaimed victory.

But who are these people? The Northeast Kingdom Community Church is now called the Twelve Tribes, The Commonwealth of Israel, and they are flourishing in Island Pond as well as in many other places in the nation and around the world (see the map on page 1). They actually share many of the same biblical beliefs as mainstream, conservative Protestant churches. What makes them different is their communal life style and their "spare the rod, spoil the child" belief regarding child rearing. (This latter belief caused the trouble in Island Pond, as well as in Chattanooga, Tennessee where the church's history began.)

The "tribal" concept of their organization is an interesting aspect of their belief system and each of the group's locations is named after one of the 12 sons of Jacob (the original 12-tribes of Israel). To digress a bit, the book of Genesis records Jacob's final blessing of his sons. Jacob not only established their characters and foretold the future fortunes of their twelve tribes, but he also handed on to them God's promise to give the land of Canaan to the descendants of Abraham.

The church addresses this on their web site where one of the FAQ questions is: "Why are you called Twelve Tribes?"

**Answer:** "The fact that we are called the Twelve Tribes has nothing to do with mystical tribalism, as in the beliefs of the Mormons, the Rastafarians, or British Israelism. Rather, we are speaking of people actually dwelling together in unity, living a tribal life in twelve different geographical areas on the earth,

so as to be a demonstration of how God has always wanted his people to live."

Mark Starr, a reporter for Newsweek, wrote this insightful article about the church on November 29, 1982 almost two years before the fateful raid. Here it is in its entirety.

### **The Kingdom at Island Pond**

**Newsweek/November 29, 1982**

**By Mark Starr**

Folks in the tiny village of Island Pond (population 1,542), nestled in rugged mountains near the Canadian border, like to say they live in "Gods country." But lately residents have begun to fear that some of their neighbors may be confusing God with Elbert Eugene Spriggs. A Chattanooga carnival barker turned self proclaimed Christian apostle, Spriggs has established a fundamentalist Christian community, the Northeast Kingdom Community Church [ known as the "Twelve Tribes"], in Island Pond and settled 300 devoted followers there. And although the town originally welcomed the kingdom, a bitter child custody dispute between an ex-Spriggs follower and his wife, still a group member, has unleashed charges of widespread child abuse among members of the kingdom and triggered a boycott of half a dozen church owned business by some locals.

Outwardly, subjects of the kingdom are a tranquil lot, quiet young men and modest women with kerchiefs on their heads. The charges against them became public at a hearing in which a former church member was excommunicated for questioning the gospel according to Spriggs. Witnesses testified that all the kingdom's children, from tots to teens, received frequent and lengthy bare bottom thrash-

ings with wooden rods, during which they were supposed to smile and thank their elders. The beatings so upset Charles and Tommye Brown, a couple recruited personally by Spriggs in Wyoming, that they quit the kingdom only a few months after hitchhiking for two weeks to reach it. "I couldn't stand what they were doing to their children," said Tommye. "or couldn't stand listening to them cry."

The kingdom defends its "spare the rod spoil the child" philosophy as Old Testament discipline that drives out the devil and renders the youngsters pure of heart. We're just trying to live a quiet, godly life, says Bill Hinchcliffe, a cheerful, young deacon. Local authorities have not been able to confirm child abuse charges because the kingdom is virtually a closed society that shuns contact with the outside world. Vermont state trooper Kathy Cunningham has followed the case closely, but says the police cannot do much. "They've taken away all our normal ways to detect child abuse," she says. "There are no teachers to report scars, no doctors to report anything funny."

There are also no doctors to save lives. Local officials say that the kingdoms reliance on paramedics and a makeshift health facility may have led to the deaths of three infants, including one whose spinal meningitis was misdiagnosed as an ear infection. Cunningham says one of the dead babies weighed only 13 pounds at eight months but had never been brought to a hospital. Elbert Spriggs could have hardly imagined such problems in 1972 when he founded a shelter for runaways, drug abusers and other alienated youths in Chattanooga. But when he discovered that his troubled flock was unwelcome in a local church, he simply began one of his own and it soon became a potent

*(Continued on page 3)*

**"They actually share many of the same biblical beliefs as mainstream, conservative Protestant churches."**

*(Continued from page 2)*

force. "Gene started feeling his oats, and we were working so hard toward the kingdom of God that we started to feel like a superior people," recalls Cliff Daniels, who joined the church at 17 after a long talking session with Spriggs and later became his right hand man. Daniels, who quit the church in 1976 before it left Tennessee, charges that Spriggs "is a father in the truest meaning of the word...he has manipulated people's emotions, lifestyle and thoughts, and used the Bible to do this."

If Spriggs is manipulating his flock in Island Pond, he is doing it mostly from afar these days. Seldom seen in Vermont, he is reportedly camping with his fourth wife and a former member's child in Portugal, where followers say he contemplates establishing another kingdom. Back in Vermont the kingdom appears to be thriving despite the boycott, thanks in part to two traditional New England virtues: a reluctance to interfere in the affairs of neighbors, and good, old fashioned Yankee thrift. "They do fine work," says one local, "and they charge a whole lot less than most folks around here." Others believe that in any case, the controversy is overblown. "I think the whole disadvantage for the group is that the Jonestown incident has sort of influenced townsmen," says Beverly Pepin, a local hairdresser. "The only comparison between Jim Jones and Gene Spriggs is that when Jones started, he felt he was the disciple of Christ too." Says one of the church's members: "we really trust in the Lord to vindicate us."

Moving towards present day, Boston Globe reporter, Brian McGrory, wrote this tongue-in-cheek article on November 20, 2001 about a restaurant run by the church right here in Dorchester, Massachusetts.

## One bite, I'm hooked

**Boston Globe/November 20, 2001**

**By Brian McGrory**

**T**he first thing I notice coming through the heavy wooden doors of the Common Ground Cafe is the smell - not of food, but of incense, or maybe it's scented candles.

Then there's the music, an eclectic collection of hypnotic instrumentals and chanting vocals drifting from the sound system and congregating at the base of my brain. Almost makes me want to don a flowing robe and slap a tambourine against my thigh.

Wait a minute - the waitresses already have. Well, not the tambourines, but there they are in sexless robes carrying chili and turkey burritos across the dimly lit room.

And they seem to fit right in. The atmosphere is embracing, soothing, even caressing. The walls are brick, the floors a dark knotty wood, the ceiling a rich painted tile. And above some of the dozen or so tables are tiki hut-style drop ceilings, giving the whole place an exotic, if not mysterious, feel.

I start humming "Kumbaya." I quell the temptation to announce that I've changed my name from Brian to Meadow.

Mysterious it is, this little outpost on Dorchester Avenue, situated next to the Four Provinces Market and across the street from Daisy's Nails - mysterious enough, that is, to be careful, which I'm trying to be.

The Common Ground Cafe and the neighboring Common Sense Wholesome Food Market are anything but common. In fact, they are owned and operated by what they call a "spiritual brotherhood," what you and I might

label a religious sect, and what the less charitable refer to as a cult.

The reviews aren't all good - on the sect, not the food. The Twelve Tribes brotherhood that owns the restaurant has been fined in the past by authorities in New York for violating child labor laws. The Boston Herald reported earlier this year that group members admitted disciplining children by whipping them with resin-dipped rods.

Indeed, Robert Redford pulled furniture made by the group from his Sundance mail order catalog. The sect leader, Elbert Eugene Spriggs, a former guidance counselor and carnival barker, is known to shuttle between homes on Cape Cod, the south of France, and Sao Paulo, Brazil. Religion pays.

But they make a fine turkey and cheddar sandwich, served warm on a homemade roll with plump slices of fresh tomato and a small mountain of gourmet potato chips.

Two bites and I'm ready to shed any and all worldly possessions and sign my condominium over to the talented Mr. Spriggs. My dining companion wisely advises caution.

Still, I could if I would. Twelve Tribes has group houses in Dorchester, Plymouth, and Hyannis, as well as in New York and Vermont - more than 30 compounds worldwide, places where inhabitants "voluntarily share all they possess," according to the Web site.

And the restaurant, if not the religion, seemingly has its devoted followers. A pair of women at a corner table gab on cell phones. A young woman fires up her laptop computer as she awaits her meal.

The food goes heavy on the butter, but the staff is light on the

*(Continued on page 4)*

**"Robert Redford pulled furniture made by the group from his Sundance mail order catalog."**

# Cars I Have Owned, A Gardner Newsletter Serial

By: Clayton Gardner



Top Left: 1946 Mercury Coupe  
Bottom Left: 1955 Ford  
Bottom Right: 1953 Mercury

**See you this Summer!**

## 1946 Mercury Coupe

I had a Mercury, like the one pictured, for a little over a year. I purchased it just before Willy, Arza, and I bought the Burlington Auto School. I installed dual controls and used this car to give driving lessons. During the time that I had it, nothing went wrong with it. I traded it in for a new 1953 Mercury.

## 1953 Mercury Two-Door

Our 1953 Mercury was light green and very pretty. I installed dual controls and used this car to give driving lessons. Once, on our way from Burlington to Charleston, I scared Gerry half to death. As I started to pass a slow car, he speeded up and tried to keep me from passing. I floored it and easily out ran the fool, but Gerry was screaming and carrying on. It was foolish for me to race like that, especially with children in the car. I traded this car for a 1955 Ford.

## 1955 Ford Two-Door

After installing dual controls on this car, I also used it to give driving lessons. My students wore out a couple of clutches, but otherwise no problems.

*(Continued from page 3)*

proselytizing. The menu makes mention that “Common Ground represents our desire to stand together with you in that place where men’s hearts can finally have peace.”

What I want is to stand in a place that makes a blueberry muffin this good. I nibble a corner and want to shout my lifelong devotion to their cause.

That’s when Yaqarah, the waitress, stops by the table with that faraway look in her deep-set eyes. Her lips move, and I think she’s saying, “Follow me to a place where the turkey is always sliced thin and the muffins are always warm.” Alas, I’m hearing things. She says, “Our vanilla ice cream is even better than homemade.”

I don’t wait around to find out, not here, not now. The dessert course in this joint could spell the end of me.

### Final Thoughts

We have to stop and think. Is this a cautionary

tale? Should we get involved? Why don’t we just exercise the great American principle of “live and let live?”

Well, we do. This group has 25 communities around the world: 15 in the United States; six in Europe; two in South America; and one each in Canada and Australia. They are, by all accounts, doing quite well. But society must protect the children. Usually, if child abuse is even suspected in a single family, great pressure is brought to bear on that family by society and its institutions. When abuse occurs in these types of groups, apathy is their greatest ally. We must be ever vigilant to protect the rights of those who cannot defend themselves. That is what those hearty New Englanders in Island Pond were trying to do back in 1984. Whether the legal system succeeded or failed is moot. They did something. And at least now, people know and are watching.

Island Pond today is just as picturesque and beautiful as it was when Grandpa Gardner took his car in for servicing at the Texaco station, did his banking, or grocery shopped at the IGA. But the town is not the same.



**Bunny Maria (right) and her daughter Charlene**  
(See Page 1)



**Tony Maria, celebrating 50 years of Marriage**