

THE GREAT MEETING HOUSE LEVITATION

by Bill Rodeschin as told to Deborah Stone

Photo Essay by David Diehl and Laura Pinkney

If you've been anywhere near Lempster Street this summer, you've seen the Meeting House rise up off the ground, hover there awhile on orange I-beams, and then inch-by-imperceptible inch, come to rest on its new sills and cement foundation.

This extraordinary magic show is the fruit of hours and hours of labor by the Friends of the Lempster Meeting House and the strong support of Lempster townspeople. It is also Phase I of a four-phase project, to be completed in 2011 if all goes according to plan.

According to Bill Rodeschin, the Friends' mission is to "conserve and renovate the building and get it back into community hands." It's a mission endorsed by the townspeople at many town meetings, and the Friends have dedicated themselves to making it happen. Not only have they done the leg work to develop the design, use and renovation plans, but they are doing major fund-raising to gather financial resources other than town taxes as much as possible.

In June, the selectmen signed an agreement with Englewood Construction (a Manchester firm) and Ch. Williams Architects. Under guidance of the project architect, Norm Larson, the Friends and selectmen have developed a four-part restoration plan that will take place over four years, as money is raised for the project.

In Phase I, taking place this summer and fall, the building was raised, a foundation poured, and the floor joists are being replaced or strengthened as needed. This was the most crucial phase, because in 1997, the inspection showed that the floor was too weak to support large gatherings, so the Meeting House was limited to infrequent small events. When this phase is completed (we're hoping for end of October), we will have our Meeting House available for full use, including Town Meetings if the selectmen choose.

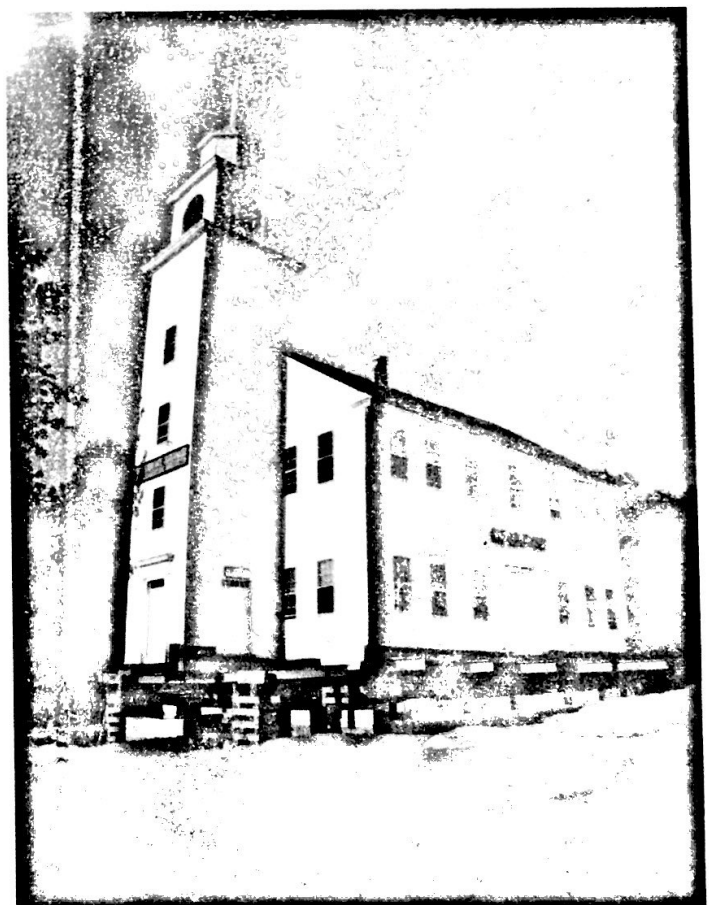
Phase II, to be done in summer 2009, includes fire protection (a fire alarm and smoke detectors, hopefully linked to a remote-site alarm company); a well and septic system; a wheelchair ramp by the double-doors; a unisex restroom; and a well-planned parking area. This phase is estimated to cost between \$70-\$75,000. Goodbye to Portapotties!

Phase III includes work to what Rodeschin calls "the envelope": the chimney, the tower, the roof, the windows, and repainting the building. Also, the furnace will be moved from its current location next to the stage down

to the cellar (where it belongs). This phase will be done during 2010.

The final phase is designed to make the building usable for the 21st century, and will be done in 2011. It includes upgrading the electrical and plumbing systems, possibly adding a phone system, and many interior repairs to the ceilings, molding and plaster.

The work we have seen this summer, certainly the most dramatic of the four phases, cost about \$200,000, a large part of which was paid for with grants (\$75,000 from LCHIP) and donations and other smaller grants (\$50,000). All told, the Friends are looking to raise \$900,000, including support from the town, and have already raised about \$115,000 in donations. The community yard sale on September 27 brought in over \$2,500. Despite the rain, the crowd turned out, bought and donated. Check the sign in front of the Meeting House for progress reports, and please give what you can to raise the red bar.



The Meeting House reaches to its highest level in 200 years

mind the goofy wires, you could often see the pistol bulge under a jacket), their laser-like gaze, and their avoidance of fraternizing with the jubilant crowd. Yet beyond fascination, over and over I heard people express empathy and gratitude. "I feel so sorry for them." "What a hard job." "What an awesome responsibility. Imagine if something went wrong." "I'm glad they're here."

Zana Kehm, a Unity resident, told me she'd been to an Obama rally during the New Hampshire primary. Overcome with a sense of protectiveness toward this man she hoped would win, she implored a Secret Service agent standing next to her: "Please keep him safe." She never expected the agent to say anything. "These guys don't talk, you know. But he actually answered me. You know what he said? He said, 'I'll try.'"

For all the theater and all the controlled logistics, rallies bring out our most human qualities, too. I felt myself swept up in the magic of politics, even as the political scientist in me was busy studying how a rally works. You can see the candidates on TV a hundred times, but being in their presence is absolutely transporting. They become real people, confident yet vulnerable, savvy yet fallible. They're real but they can make you dream.

When Obama and Clinton began their long walk to the podium, the crowd pressed to the fences, arms strain-

expression "pressing the flesh." When I watch such scenes on TV, I can't fathom what makes people so frenzied. In Unity, I understood the yearning to touch someone who is part human, part hero, and part hope. And yes, I got to shake hands with both of them.

Being in a crowd of folks who care enough about



Obama cheering for Unity

photo by Claire Thurber



Hillary greeting fans, closely eyed by Secret Service
(Challenge: Can you find Barack, too?)

photo by Everett Thurber

ing for a handshake or a touch. At the end of the rally, people compared notes on who got a handshake (was it full or half?), a brush, a pat on the shoulder, or a hug. Our own Debbie Wirkkala scored a bear hug with Clinton. "I'm a health care worker," she told me, "and I wanted to thank her."

Journalists disdain this part of campaigning with their

America's future to wait four or five hours to meet politicians and listen to what they have to say—well, it restores your faith in democracy. I met a woman who had taken the day off and driven up from Boston "because I want my nine-year-old daughter to know what politics is all about." A woman right behind me had three little kids in tow. At first I thought it was asking too much of them to endure this thing they couldn't possibly understand. I changed my mind when first Clinton, then Obama, talked about wanting to teach our children that they, too, can make a difference.

Early in the day, a German reporter asked me if I thought all the symbolism—a town named Unity, 107 votes for him and 107 for her—wasn't "just a little over the top." I told her, "No—politics is all about symbolism." Later I turned the tables and asked her if she could tell me why Germans are so interested in this election.

"Because of Obama," Anna Engelke of ARD German Radio and TV Network answered without hesitation. "Germans are sick and tired of Bush. Since the Iraq war, not liking Bush led to not liking America, unfortunately. Now we have rediscovered America. It's a kind of falling in love. To have a woman and a black running—we didn't think Americans would go for it. This is giving us hope again."

After the Unity rally, I know that Ms. Engelke could be speaking for many Americans, too.