

Modest Proposal: A Vermont Town Bucks Nakedness

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Skinny-Dipping Spurs
An Outbreak of Nudity;
The Fanny-Pack Man

By **SHEFALI ANAND** | *The Wall Street Journal*
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BRATTLEBORO, Vt.—Policeman Robert Perkins received a complaint the other day. A man was standing near the tourist information kiosk in this quaint New England village, in the nude.

Officer Perkins spotted the perp and issued a warning: Keep your clothes on, or risk a \$25 ticket. The man “was unaware” that being naked in town was illegal, Officer Perkins says.

In fact, until just a few months ago, public nudity was perfectly legal here—as it still is in many Vermont towns. However, over the past two years, Brattleboro, pop. 12,000, has experienced sporadic outbreaks of naked bicycling, naked hula-hooping, and nakedness in general. That, in turn, triggered a period of civic navel-gazing, both literally and figuratively.

Last month’s incident by the tourist kiosk was the first report of public nudity after months of wintry weather. But now that spring is in the air, Officer Perkins says, people are starting to wear less clothing. “We’ll see if they take it all off,” he says.

Brattleboro’s troubles started in August 2006, when three young men went skinny-dipping in a swimming hole outside of town, then decided to see what would happen if they went into town and got naked there.

So the three headed to Harmony Parking Lot—a

popular hangout for kids just off Main Street—and took off their clothes. “It was kind of a spur-of-the-moment thing,” said Chris Corry, 20 years old and a member of the group.

For about a half-hour, they sat on the sidewalk in front of Everyone’s Books. They waved at passersby, and persuaded a friend to stop and disrobe with them.

While nobody kept an official tally that first summer, there were at least a half-dozen other instances. On one occasion, a woman walked around topless. Another evening, several kids went to Harmony Parking Lot and engaged in naked hula-hooping and skateboarding.

Ian Bigelow, who witnessed the hula-hooping (but says he kept his clothes on), compares events in Brattleboro to what happened during the Renaissance, when artists were criticized for painting nudes. “People should be comfortable with their bodies,” he said.

Vermont has laws against “lewd and lascivious conduct,” but doesn’t prohibit public nudity. Many states have indecent-exposure laws that consider nudity a misdemeanor, though some go further. Louisiana, for instance, considers public nudity an obscenity that can lead to jail time.

Not everyone in Brattleboro approved of what they were seeing. “It’s not appropriate behavior to run around nude in the business district,” said Theresa Toney, a local resident who complained to the town about the hula-hooping.

Michael Gauthier, 43, recalls heading home from work one day that summer when he saw a man on a bicycle wearing what he presumed was a “neutral colored body suit.” In fact, it was his birthday suit.

“We don’t want to have to deal with [nudity] in our face,” said Mr. Gauthier.

Once winter arrived, nakedness went out of fashion. But last summer it became more popular

than ever, particularly as word spread of Brattleboro's liberal attitude toward nudity.

One Friday last July, an elderly man participated in Brattleboro's monthly downtown Gallery Walk tour wearing nothing but a fanny pack and a head band. That weekend the same man, who told people he was visiting from Arizona, showed up at Sam's Outdoor Outfitters on Main Street. The staff asked him to put on some clothes, which he did, before helping himself to some popcorn from the store's free-popcorn machine.

The store's owner, Stan "Pal" Borofsky, complained in writing to the town's Selectboard. "We have just had the infamous nude senior male in our store," Mr. Borofsky wrote. "We are not happy at all."

Some letters to the town voiced support. John Gusch of Kassel, Germany, wrote that he was "utterly exhilarated" after reading in his local newspaper that Brattleboro permitted nudity. Still, Mr. Gusch said, there should be limits. "I would like to join you in NATURE nude stark naked; yet NOT in the supermarket," he wrote.

On the five-member Selectboard, the debate last August was stymied by lack of consensus on one specific point: whether or not it should be illegal to expose breasts and buttocks. So a first attempt at a permanent ban failed.

Last fall, two women showed up nude on Main Street, this time as part of a marketing ploy. The women represented People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, an organization that occasionally uses nudity as part of its campaign against animal abuse and the wearing of fur.

But the final straw came in December, when a rumor swept town that someone wanted to start a juice bar with topless wait staff. So on Dec. 4, at a heavily attended Selectboard meeting, the issue of a permanent ban was again aired.

Some attendees worried that outlawing nudity would restrict their right to skinny-dip. Others supported a ban. According to the minutes of the meeting, one woman in attendance described encountering a man with no clothes in Dunkin' Donuts. "She didn't know what to do," the minutes note.

Dunkin' Donuts didn't comment.

In the end, Brattleboro's board voted 4-to-1 to ban public nudity. First offenders get a warning. After that, fines start at \$25 and can climb to \$100.

Following last month's incident near the tourist kiosk, Dick DeGray, who is chairman of the Selectboard, said if there are any signs that people take the rule lightly, he would propose making it a criminal offense. "People in Brattleboro don't want to hear about nudity anymore," he said.

The boys who staged the parking-lot sit-down two summers ago say things have been blown way out of proportion. "It's kind of bizarre" that it became such a big deal, said Mr. Corry, who studies psychology at Greenfield Community College in Greenfield, Mass.

"They talk about it like it's naked city, while it's not that at all," said his friend Aleck McPherson, 20, and another of the original three. "I don't really care anymore," adds Mr. McPherson, who studies sociology, art and music theory at Greenfield Community College.

His father, John McPherson, 60, feels everyone should keep perspective. The boys had their fun and got some attention, he said, then went on their way. "The adults are still arguing about it."