Sometime last fall I received a letter from Virginia Downs, a writer and a former board member of the Vermont Folklife Center, suggesting that I interview Ned Handy from St. Johnsbury. I was intrigued by what she told me about his family’s emigration from Lebanon at the turn of the century and their subsequent business ventures. A few months later I set up an appointment with him.

Mr. Handy greeted me warmly at his house one cold morning. We sat down in his comfortable living room, and almost immediately, I was drawn into his family story, a tale of hard work, family obligation, and cooperation in the face of prejudice and suspicion. Ultimately, it became clear that Ned Handy’s notoriety as a caring citizen and the owner of one of St. Johnsbury’s best-known restaurants was the result of his own personal mix of hard work, charisma, an enterprising sense of business, and a remarkable generosity.

J.C.B.
Ned Handy: My two uncles were very courageous to immigrate to the United States. They were the first ones in our family to come to this country in 1908. When they got to Ellis Island, they didn't speak the English language. But there were interpreters, not only in Lebanese, but also in other languages. They carried little signs and immigrants would introduce themselves. The first question the interpreter would ask is, "Do you have a destination?" My two uncles said, "No, we have no destination. We don't know anyone." So then the interpreter tried to locate them geographically where they could acclimate and adjust themselves to the weather in this country compatibly to what they had been used to. To help immigrants get to their destinations, the officials would send some kid, elderly man, or elderly woman for a small fee to the railroad station to help with directions and buy tickets.

The Handys (Arabic name was Hend) came from the village of Wayda. Wayda was way up north in the mountains in Lebanon. They had snow and cold weather. So the customs man recommended a colder climate. He sent my uncles to Newport, Vermont, near the Canadian border. When they arrived in Newport, they lived together. They pooled resources. They worked together. They worked for a couple of months on the railroad. Then there were a couple months they worked in a sawmill.

Later they took the notion to be back peddlers. My aunts, my uncles would each have four suitcases. They packed two on their backs and one in each hand. They each had their own route. They would walk from one farm to the other selling for a profit naturally. It was very difficult, especially at the beginning. In time they acclimated themselves to being away from home and made acquaintance with the local farmers. When they needed a place to sleep, and if they were lucky, a lady would find them a place in her shed, attic, or basement and give them a blanket. For a bar of soap or package of razor blades they would get their supper, lodging, and breakfast the next morning. For three weeks they would be on the road. If there was a wagon or sled, they would get a ride. Back in those days every farm was occupied. So they had no problem finding customers. The rural area had a much greater population. The third week of the month, they would all congregate back at the apartment. They would restock, and then they would go back on their route. They did this from 1909 to 1913.

In 1913 they pooled their money and bought the Newport Ice Company. They had work for friends and relatives to come to this country. So they encouraged them to come. For two years before World War I, when transportation was available, they would bring their cousins, brothers, and sisters over. (My mother lost cousins on the Titanic). They all came to Newport first. They worked on the ice.

They discovered that there was money in the ice business, so they spread out. They bought the ice business in the towns next to them which had a creamery. The creamery was a very big market for the ice. It used to take from six to ten tons of ice to process the milk. And then that milk was put in forty-quart cans and put on railroad cars to be shipped to Boston. Back in those days, it used to take from eight to ten hours to get to Boston. So they had to have at least two to three tons of ice cut in small pieces to throw on top of the milk cans to keep the milk below forty-eight degrees and to keep the bacteria count down.

Whenever there was a large creamery, there were a lot of farmers. And the farmers had to have ice to cool the milk because the
rural area did not have electricity. Up to 1940 only 30 percent of the rural area had electricity. So the farmers had to have ice. It was their only way to cool their milk. There was much more profit with selling large blocks of ice to farmers rather than smaller pieces to houses.

The relatives that came to this country went to Newport because my uncles were there. The men folks would work on the ice, and women folks would buy a house and turn the front room into a grocery store. They would earn their living this way. They saved their money, and they were very progressive. As demand grew, they would expand the businesses into the whole house. They would find a new place to live. In ample time the Handys (a first cousin, brother, or sister) were in Newport, Barton, Lyndonville, St. Johnsbury, Montpelier, Barre, Williamstown, Northfield, Winookski, Waterbury, Burlington. They all prospered, although the work was difficult. But work did not matter to them, hours did not matter to them, because they were accustomed to hard work. They could see that they were progressing. They did not mind the hard work that was involved as long as they were making good money.

It was difficult for the Handys in Lyndonville and St. Johnsbury and Barton. There were no other Arabs in the communities, and it took a while before the Handys were accepted. My family worked hard to promote goodwill and good relations with the local communities. In time we were accepted, but behind our backs we were still perceived as foreigners. Even up to today, there are a lot of hidden prejudices. More than you think.

I remember years and years ago back in the '20s there were probably twenty-five Lebanese families in Newport. They used to congregate at each other's house on Sunday night and talk about old times. The older generations spoke Arabic. But the younger generation, of course, went to school and learned English and American ways. The older generation knew how to manage finances very well, even with limited English. They could tell a dollar from a five-dollar bill, believe me! But when it came to reading and writing, it was very difficult for them. As their children grew up, they interpreted for them.

When my father came to this country, he had no home. So he lived with his cousin, Earl Handy and his wife. The family would share apartments. Two, three, or four families would live together with the oldest acting as the head of the household. They all listened to the oldest and obeyed his decisions. He was the law. At that time, it was customary to move in with relatives. It was not considered an imposition. This is how they survived: unity, harmony, and cooperation. My father put my brother, my sister, and myself in a convent for three years. I was three years old when we came over. When my uncle built a house in Newport that was adequate for his family, they left the apartment. My brother and sister and I still attended the convent school but lived at home with my parents in the apartment.

When my uncle had first come to this country, he left my cousin and his sister in my father's care in Lebanon. This way he would be more able to start a new life for his family in the United States. Once he established himself, my father joined him in this country. To compensate my father for his having taken care of Dick and Nellie, my uncle gave my father half his interest in the Newport Ice Company. My father and uncle owned half and my Uncle Pete owned the other half. My father worked in Newport for over ten years. He then sold out his interest to Uncle Pete and bought the Lyndonville Ice Company in the mid-30s. And of course moved his family to Lyndonville.

You have got to remember that, back in those days, life did not require college degrees and things like that. If you could read and write and count to one hundred and know your ABCs, that was good enough. When I started high school, Lyndon Institute, there were 117 freshmen. It was the largest freshman class back in those days. When we graduated, there were sixty-two. Most of the farmers could not come back and forth, so they quit and helped their fathers on the farm.

My brother Charlie is the one who pushed me. He went five years to school. My cousin Tom went five years to school. The older generation did not push education because they did not think it was necessary. All they knew was brute strength and hard work, hard work, hard work. It was no eight-hour day. It was from morning till night. It was customary for all to work that hard. We were devoted and obligated to our families. If your father put in those hours, he expected all of us to do it, too. And we did.

My father put a pair of ice tongs in my hands when I was fifteen. I was a freshman in

"There was much more profit with selling large blocks of ice to farmers rather than smaller pieces to houses."
Clearing the channel adjacent to the Handy's ice house in Lyndonville. Ned Handy is standing on the ice raft in the foreground.

high school. I delivered ten- and fifteen-cent pieces of ice up two and three flights of stairs every day. Sometimes a piece of ice weighed more than I did. One time my brother Charlie took a piece of ice to Mr. Eaton's house, and I took a small piece of ice to Mr. Croft's house across the street. Mr. Eaton was a fairly well-to-do man, and he walked up to my father and said, "If I catch that boy on that ice truck tomorrow, I am going to report you to the authorities."

Of course my father could not understand English. He said, "When Charlie comes home, you talk to Charlie." So Charlie went to Mr. Eaton's house.

He asked, "What's wrong, Mr. Eaton?"

Mr. Eaton said, "You tell your father that we have child labor laws in this country. And if your brother is on that ice truck tomorrow morning carrying that ice from one house to another, up and down the flights of stairs, I am going to report him to the authorities."

Well, Charlie was a very quick thinker. He said, "Mr. Eaton, we do not want him to work, but he is a freshman. He is developing his muscles for football this fall."

"Oh, well, that's different!"

Little did he realize that I was forced. The only time I went to school was when my father did not need me at home.

In those days back roads were like cow paths. Many times I would eat breakfast at five o'clock in the morning, and I would not eat supper until eight o'clock at night because I was stuck in the snow or stuck in the mud. During the school term a typical working day was to get up at five o'clock, load the truck up with blocks of ice and then come home, eat breakfast, and walk a mile to school. After school my father and brother would pick me up to help them load two loads of ice for the creamery. And I thought nothing of it because it was my obligation. We all understood that we were building our future, and in those days families felt very dedicated and obliged to each other.

Harvesting ice was a physically rugged business. Once ice formed to a certain thickness on ponds, we had to get up in the early morning hours regardless of the cold and weather to cut the ice. It had to be cut and removed so new ice could form. We had to haul heavy blocks of ice across the ponds to trucks, stack it, and then transport it to the ice houses. Sometimes the ice houses were close to the ponds and so we had conveyor ramps from the edges of the ponds to the top floors. But in some cases we rented access to ponds from farmers and so the ice had to be hauled from the ponds, stacked on trucks, transported to the ice houses, and then stacked inside the storage houses. We had to fill the ice houses with enough ice to get us through the summer. Insulating the ice with hay was one way to keep it from melting. We did not have days off. The ice business was
constant. Our equipment consisted of all kinds of saws, ice tongs, and horse-drawn sleds. The ice business was a major industry nationwide in those days.

My older brother Charlie ("Chaiban" in Arabic) excelled in various sports: golf, bowling, tennis, baseball. He played baseball for the local teams and was spotted by professionals from Boston. When he was made an offer to go to Boston, my father refused to let him go. But with the influence of my uncles and their families, my father was persuaded to allow Charlie to play professional baseball. He was very good. However, as the ice business grew, my father needed Charlie back in Lyndonville, and so he called him back home.

In high school I was a pretty good athlete. The ice business certainly kept us all trim and in great condition. I played high school football and was pretty good, but the ice business came first before football practice. Every time it snowed, I had to quit school to scrape the ice pond. And every time we cut ice, I had to quit school to drive the truck. I wasn’t the most studious, but back in those days teachers were very dedicated. I used to get to school a half-hour in advance in the morning and Miss Matheson used to help me with my English. I used to stay an hour after school and Miss Miles used to help me with my bookkeeping. From eleven o’clock to quarter to twelve we had study hall, and Charlie Wright used to help me with my algebra.

The ice business was a very profitable business. As soon as I graduated from high school, I joined my father and brother in the business, and we bought two milk routes from Lyndonville Creamery. We’d go to the farm, pick up milk in the morning, and I’d deliver ice to the farmers in the afternoon. Days were long, but the jobs had to be done.

World War II was being fought and the milk and ice deliveries were important services that had to be maintained at home. I had enlisted in the air force and served for two years. However, because the American government considered the ice and milk industries critical to the war effort, they had priority and I was eventually ordered back to northern Vermont. The government even allowed my father to buy trucks in spite of the stiff ration laws. They allowed us to buy gasoline and whatever else was necessary to service the farmers. Most young, able-bodied men were in the military, and others had left the country to work in the city. It was difficult to find help. So the farmers, with assistance from county farm agents and the Red Cross, petitioned the government. The air force reclassified me as “inactive” and ordered me home for what they called “an emergency leave of absence,” subject to be called for active duty at any given date. But the air force never called me back to join my squadron, the 182nd Service Group, and I had to remain hauling milk and delivering ice to the farmers.

It was very difficult during the war because there were two able-bodied men at home while others were serving as soldiers. Colonel Butterfield’s father lived across the street from us and he hadn’t heard from his son for one year. Last he knew, he was at Iwo Jima. And yet Charlie and I were at home. Two able young men of foreign extraction. It felt terrible. Mrs. Miller had three children in the service. “Why isn’t one of the Handys in the service?” Mrs. Richard had two. “Why wasn’t one of the Handys in the service? Why are they both at home?” Even from my own relatives. The first casualty in World War II in Montpelier was my cousin. It got so that I hated to face my uncle. And my Uncle Gabriel in St. Johnsbury had three in the service. And yet Charlie and I were at home. My cousins Anthony and Johnny in Barton faced the same dilemma. Anthony had been in the service and they sent him home to help out because of the shortage of local workers for the ice businesses. It was very difficult.

“We were devoted and obligated to our families.”

In 1953 the back roads were electrified. At the time we had five ice houses, three in St. Johnsbury and two in Lyndonville, but there was now no market. The farmers, what few there were left because their children were going to the cities for easier and better work, started to sell their land and just keep their houses and maybe a couple or three acres for themselves. Many farms disappeared. Some remained and they installed mechanical refrigeration. The creameries installed mechanical refrigeration. New thermos tankers started to transport milk to Boston, which for better roads, now took six to seven hours instead of the earlier ten hours. And so the ice businesses went out of sight. The last ice we cut was in 1953. And as the milk business dropped, we all had to look
for other things. For example, my cousin Tom from Newport went into real estate. My cousins Anthony and Johnny went into farm implements. Charlie, my brother, went into the drive-in business. I went into the restaurant as did my cousin Sam. We all found something to do.

I bought the restaurant in 1952. I was about thirty-five, and I operated that restaurant for twenty-five years. When I bought the place, everybody thought I was crazy. I knew nothing about the restaurant business, and the restaurant that I had bought already had a bad reputation. But I knew that I could learn fast. I expected to work hard, and I wanted to try. In a very short time, believe it or not, I promoted that restaurant into one of the most popular restaurants in northern New England.

The restaurant was in the Citizens’ Bank building, next to the railroad station in St. Johnsbury. It was on a side street, and a lot of people thought I was foolish because no one had ever been able to make anything out of that restaurant. It was too “out of the way.” To make matters worse, the previous owners created a dubious reputation for the restaurant. I had lots to change and lots of hard work ahead, but I believed it was worth the try.

God was good to me. I understood how important it is to accept constructive criticism. If somebody walked up to me and said, “Ned, you should do this way,” I'd evaluate what they said. I never once said, “It’s none of your business.” Also, I considered the earning power for the area. I decided to work for volume and offer people lots of food at a very reasonable price. That brought people back. Also I knew how to buy. I had five freezers. I kept them full because lots of times Swifts would give me a good buy on meats. Also, I was willing and able to put in fifteen, sixteen, seventeen hours a day for work. And the better business got, the harder I would work. I never came to work with a suit and a necktie and delegated my work and then go play golf. I was on the floor with my help working alongside them.

The restaurant prospered, but lots of people thought I was foolish the way I ran it. They thought I was giving away too much food on the plate. My servings were large. Homemade french fries were piled high. Steaks and hamburgers were generous. Portions were always large. Every time there was a family with kids, as the father would pay his tab, I'd give his children a handful of pennies. In those days a penny could buy you something! People thought I was crazy to give away money. But I've had a hundred fathers and mothers say that even if they had wanted to go somewhere else, their children would not let them.

I specialized in steaks and southern fried chicken. Not only that, I used Swift shortening when others used liquid shortening because it was cheaper. I never used frozen french fries like some restaurants. I contracted with local farmers for shipments of fresh potatoes. I was famous for my french fries. I would go through seven hundred pounds of potatoes a day, seven hundred! That's the gospel truth. Also, to have a good donut, a good chicken, french fries, you have to have the proper shortening. I would change my grease often even though it is more expensive to keep changing. I kept everything clean, fresh, and cheap.

When planning the menu, the first thing I did was ask myself, “What does this meal cost me?” I was buying potatoes at five dollars a hundred pounds. There were so many buckets to one hundred pounds. Slices didn't cost me more than three cents. Vegetables didn't cost me more than a nickel. So I figured that the whole thing was about seventy-five cents. Then I would serve a thirteen-ounce sirloin steak for $1.25. But I used to sell 100, 150 a day. Other places, for example on Sunday used to serve turkey dinner for $2.75. I charged $1.50 and served the plate high. I would sell three turkeys to their one. I believed in big portions of good food for a low price. As long as I was realizing some profit, that made it fair for the consumer and me.

Probably for lunch we used to feed 150 people and for dinner, from 80 to 100. And for breakfast, oh my God, we served a huge breakfast—ham, eggs, bacon, oatmeal, whatever you wanted. I was there for breakfast, lunch, and dinner, and I cashed out. That is why I did so well. I was always there doing my own work. I did not expect others to do it for me.

I had such a reputation that all the national celebrities passing through the area would stop off at Ned's Steak Grill for a meal. I was well noted for my steaks, southern fried chicken and big servings of golden-brown french fries. You couldn't begin to finish eating the portions that I served.
Cutting Ice

[Images of ice cutting process]
the Beatles. I fed Frank Sinatra, Jr., Helen O'Connell, the Tommy Dorsey Band, Paul Newman, Alfred Hitchcock, Walter Cronkite's daughter, Katy, I knew well. Walter Matthau, too. The Beatles heard about me when they spent the night in Stowe, Vermont. On their way to Boston, they stopped to have lunch at Ned's.

The restaurant was right next to the railroad station. So I had sixty-seven railroad men right there. They were a business all by themselves. And I took good care of them. I used to stay up at nights trying to think of ways to outwit my competitors. For example, back in those days, the banks weren't open on Fridays. People with checks came to me to cash them. I was always thinking of ways to better serve the public and build my business.

In addition to the restaurant, I started buying real estate. I bought my first apartment building in 1958. I did well as a landlord because I knew who to rent to. A man who cashed his Friday paycheck and then sat down and spent half of it before he went home was no one I wanted for a renter. But the guy that came to get his check cashed and said, "Thank you, Ned. I'll see you later," now he was the guy I would rent to. I had eighty-nine apartments for over thirty years, and in those thirty years, I lost only four months' rent. People still can't believe it. But that's the gospel truth, four months' rent.

The restaurant did well because I had good help. If you have good help, you take care of them. It was good for the restaurant and its patrons to have dependable help. Their familiar faces made the customers feel at home. Also, with minimum turnover, we could provide consistent service to the customers. So it's good business to hang on to your help as much as you can.

The biggest tip I ever saw was for a ten-cent cup of coffee. It was about this time of year. It was awfully cold. This handsome young man of about thirty came in, sat at the bar, ordered a coffee. But he said, "I want that pretty girl to wait on me." So I called Eleanor over and asked her if she wanted to serve the gentleman.

She said, "Sure, I'd be glad to." So she dropped what she was doing. She asked him what he wanted.

"I'd like coffee," he said.

So she served him a coffee. I don't think he took two sips when a Massachusetts car drove in front of the restaurant. Two rugged men, well dressed, walked in. One stood behind the gentleman and the other sat next to him.

The guy sitting next to the three of them at the bar overheard one of the three men say, "Are you coming with us peacefully, or are you going to give us problems?"

The guy said, "No, I'll walk out with you peacefully, but let me finish my coffee." So he lit a cigarette, took probably five sips of coffee. Finally, he called the waitress over and asked, "How much is the coffee?"

"Ten cents," she said.

He pulled out a one-hundred-dollar bill. He handed it to her and said, "You pay for my coffee and keep the change. Where I am going, I won't need money."

I never knew whether they were gangsters taking him for a ride or FBI agents taking him to jail. I never heard any more, never saw him again. $99.90 for serving a cup of coffee!

One Saturday this guy came in. He said, "I haven't had anything to eat in three days. Can you help out?"

"Sure," I said. It was beans and franks for special on Saturdays, so I got him a big plate of beans and three hotdogs and two glasses of milk. Filled him right up. Tears came down his eyes.

"I want to thank you so much. Some day I may have the money to pay you," he says.

"Look," I said, "Just forget it. I'm glad to do it. You're not the first one I've fed and you're not going to be the last one. I never refuse anybody."

Two weeks later, I had the slowest Saturday morning I ever had in my life.
I don't think I took thirty dollars. I used to take that in twenty minutes. Open up at six a.m. and by twelve, nothing! There was just nobody around. The same guy came in.

"Do you remember me?" he asked.

"Yes," I said.

He said, "I want a meal, and I'll pay you for this one, and the one two weeks ago."

"No," I said, "if you have money, you pay me for this one, but just forget the other two weeks ago."

He said, "I want to pay you."

"You really want to pay me?" I asked.

"Yes."

By that time, I had served him his food. I told him, "If you really want to pay me, say a prayer for me."

Honest to God, he dropped his knife and fork, he made the sign of the cross. He meditated, I dare say, for a good five minutes. It wasn't two minutes later, as God is my judge, that the place filled right up. And I had the damnedest Saturday you could ask for!

I did so well in the restaurant. It enabled me to help others. I used to buy food and clothing for the poor and deliver it to their homes. If I knew of a family in need, I was there for them. I knew the back roads from the icy days, so I could get to abandoned farms. I used to feed the needy in the restaurant. There wasn't a week that went by that I didn't get notes from local ministers saying, "Please give the bearer of this note a two-dollar meal and send the bill to the parsonage." I never sent any bills. All the state social service people knew that if there were people in need, send them to Ned Handy. For Thanksgiving, I used to give twenty turkeys to the fire department to distribute to needy families with children. Children get the best of me! I used to feed approximately 150 children for Christmas. I arranged with a local church to provide Christmas dinner for the children. My only condition was that my name remain anonymous.

The last month I was in the restaurant, who walked in but Governor Salmon. He came in and sat at the bar. I offered him a drink. He declined. He then said, "I have driven all the way from Montpelier to interview you." I asked why. He said that the social welfare office had told him how much I had done for the poor. He wanted to hear it from me. I told him that what I had done was between me and God, so there was nothing to say. He then said that he had a reason for asking and asked me please to respond. He would not tell me what was on his mind. So I simply told him, "I feed anybody who is hungry, and if I know of anybody who needs shoes or clothing, I take care of them." There were several occasions when the Catholic Church contacted me. They helped resettle families from Vietnam. The Catholic Church would find apartments for them. I furnished the stoves and refrigerators, so I always had two, three, four stoves and refrigerators on hand. The Vietnamese had to live together in apartments like we Lebanese did at the turn of the century. It was no imposition to help needy people. It is an obligation to help one another.

The governor asked me questions and I answered him reluctantly. What I had done I had done privately. Between me and God. Well, I'll be damned! Four days later, I received an official Vermont State Proclamation from the governor. Here it is hanging on the wall. Governor Salmon proclaimed October 30th officially "Ned Handy Day" in the state of Vermont, with the governor's signature and state seal. It makes me feel good.

The restaurant was doing well, and I could have stayed with it longer. But for all my life I had been putting in fifteen to sixteen hours a day, seven days a week working. My children were growing. I had missed their childhood. I didn't want to be the richest man in the cemetery. So I decided to retire. When I retired, I gave the restaurant fully stocked to my help. I had four people that had been with me a total of eighty-nine years. I appreciated how much their dedication helped make my restaurant such a success. I wanted to recognize them for that, and I gave them the restaurant in gratitude. They ran it for a short time and then sold it.

I tell you, when I was in the restaurant business, there were so many who knew me. Everybody called me "Ned" from a six-year-old kid to a ninety-year-old woman. I knew everybody and everything that was going on. Even politicians on the state level, county level, local level came to me. "What do you think?" "Can I get your support?" "What do you hear?" And honest to God, I could go within 150 miles and somebody would say, "Aren't you from St. Johnsbury where you put out those big steaks and heaping plates of french fries?"

“I did so well in the restaurant. It enabled me to help others.”