

**Byron Hathorn**  
**Interview by Brian Knight**  
**May 31, 2017**

Byron Hathorn grew up on a farm in Hartford, Vermont. His father was not only a farmer but also a Vermont State Representative serving as a “Young Turk” in Montpelier during the governorship of Philip Hoff. At this time, Byron was a page in the statehouse. Following graduation from high school, Byron served in the United States Military, serving on submarine hunting airplanes based out of Maine. Following his stint in the military, Byron became a carpenter and a skier. In time, he became involved in many downtown White River projects including the renovation of Union Station and most recently the senior citizen assisted living facility,

Recording #1

0:00

Q: Can you tell me about your current project, The Village at White River Junction?

A: [Byron is discussing his ownership of the vacant lot prior to technical issues] So we basically became the landlords. Bill still owned it while we negotiated a sale of the property, which we did. And unfortunately, Bill passed away before we were able to close on the sale of it and his executors, his son and stepson, who we were very good friends with completed the transaction a few months after he passed away, I think in 2007. And we did a simultaneous transfer of the property to Northern Stage, same day, and we kept the remaining property which is this lot right here that we are building on now, which was a used car lot for Miller Auto. And Northern Stage did not need this property they only wanted the building footprint that was enough for them to build into a theater and all that. So, we kept the land knowing we were going to do something to develop it but we at the time had no idea what we would do and we went through over the years many iterations of apartment houses, condominiums, offices, Center for Cartoon Studies, State of Vermont Offices, all kinds of things. And Jay Barrett must have drawn 20 schematic schemes for me. And then 3 years ago I came up with the idea of the senior assisted living due to connections I had with other people in real estate industry that were doing it and encouraged me that it could work financially. And so, I embarked on building the development plan for this and eventually brought Dave Briggs and Shane Vahey who is the other partner with us in the land and the property was sold in January to the Village which is the new company that's building the Assisted living. So that's what I'm doing now.

Recording #2

0:00

Q: So, you said you bought the train station in 1995...

A: Yeah, it's an interesting story. At the time, in 1990, my brother, who was the photographer, he was a rail nut. And there are a lot of them in these here woods. You have probably run into them. And he had heard that the station was possibly for sale and at the time it was owned by the Central Vermont Railroad and the Boston and Maine Railroad. And they couldn't stand each other. And there was a big lawsuit that went all the way to the Supreme Court between Boston & Maine and CV regarding Amtrak. CV claimed that they had rights of track from here down to the Massachusetts border over the B&M line for Amtrak and B and M hated Amtrak and they wouldn't allow them on the line so they sued and the B & M lost. And that was right around the time we heard the property was for sale probably as a result of that action that they just didn't

want to be partners. Central Vermont owned two thirds of the property and B & M owned one third. And I had to negotiate with those two companies that couldn't stand each other. One of them was based in Burlington, well it was owned by Canadian National, but Central Vermont was based in St. Albans and offices in Burlington. B & M was in Billerica Mass. So, I started making some calls to see it was for sale. Yes, it's for sale and I made an offer, a dollar offer, just pulled a number out of the sky. And they said ok and that was fine. But then it took three years to negotiate the sale with them because they would lie about each other. We literally had to get them to come into the waiting room of the rail station, all of them together and stand in the middle of the waiting room to talk about the deal because my father-in-law said if you don't trust somebody you play poker with standing up. And unfortunately, my brother died tragically in a car wreck in 1991 and so wind out of my sails for a lot of reasons. But that process had started and I could care less if I owned that train station after October 5 of '91. I said let's just see where this goes and I had the attitude that I didn't care whether I got it or not and I think that probably why I was successful in getting it eventually because they would just throw something down and I would just say Ok let's just deal with that and go to the next one. And in February of '95 we got everything negotiate. I also had to negotiate a long-term lease with Amtrak before I owned the building, because Central Vermont would not sell it to me unless I had an agreement with Amtrak. I wasn't the landlord yet so that was tricky with a government agency, a quasi-government agency. So, I went to Burlington on Friday at eleven in the morning and close the deal with Central Vermont and bought the two thirds of it from them. At one on that Friday afternoon Central Vermont ceased to exist. They became New England Central. And I said to them I not going to deal with a new railroad if you want to sell this you need to sell before it closes. And this is Canadian National that was actually the owner that was selling. So, I got that done and then I closed on Monday with B & M so I was actually co-owner with B & M through that weekend. So, I got it in February of 95 and immediately started restoring it and spent close to a year. I did a complete historic restoration and I got tax credits went all through the Department of Interior process. And all the restoration processes of restoring windows and brick and all that stuff was done to the standards which was pretty deep.

5:06

Q: What kind of condition was it in when you bought it?

A: Not quite abandoned but basically it was. Amtrak went in and out of there but the lobby was just open to get in and out of the weather and that was it. And I had to work around Amtrak because the station master when we were restoring the building would not let us into her space. So, we ended up destroying the entire building around the lobby and her space and never touched it and had this really nice beautifully restored upstairs all around it and she was in this hole. And then after she left Vermont Rail Systems took over the management of the Amtrak operations in Vermont then we were able to get in and do some remodeling of that.

6:14

Q: What do you remember of it as a youth, was it an active building?

A: Yeah it was, but declining. There was a lot of passenger trains when I was really young I remember taking train rides with my grandmother, day trips. I went to Boston one time, overnight, and a couple other day trips. My uncle worked on the railroad. A lot of my neighbors up near the farm worked on the railroad, so I knew a lot of them ... engineers ...brakeman. So, I knew about the whole history of railroading and a lot of the kids that I went to high school with - their dads worked on the railroad. So, it was ever present. We heard the whistle .... the train was right across the river from us in Hartford. It was always in the background. I live right near the railroad tracks up in Ely. I have been listening to that for sixty years.

7:24

Q: How many times did the railcar come through town?

A: All day long and all-night long.

7:32

Q: In the 1960s?

A: In the sixties, it was declining ... lot less so...but still.... [in] the early sixties it was still fairly active. I would say it weaned off pretty good by the time we graduated high school. My uncle and Cheech Magrone were still brakemen on the B&M into the seventies. The height of the passenger rail had really slowed after World War Two. I was never around for the real heyday of that, just the remnants of it.

8:09

Q: I read about a restaurant at the depot....

A: Not this iteration. There were actually two iterations. There have been four buildings on the property since 1846-7 whenever they first showed up. One was pretty much a temporary, non-descript building. The one that you are speaking of, that had the restaurant....it was a very elegant building that was built in 1870s... I can't remember the exact dates now. That burned down in 1920s..right around the same time the Hotel Coolidge did...in the 1920s. Then they put up two temporary buildings for 8 or 10 years. Then in 1936, they built the building that exists now. It opened in '37. All in the same location. When we were doing the work there, we found remnants of the foundations. This building is built partially on some of the existing foundation walls of that other significant building that burned. We were able to catalog that when we were doing the work for the restoration of it.

9:38

Q: There is a canopy to the south of the station....

A: Yup.

9:44

Q: That dates from which iteration?

A: I think that came up as one of the temporary buildings after the significant building burned. I am no expert as this...it is just hearing people talk and looking at all the photographs and stuff. There are a lot of other who would know the history much better than I. It is my thinking that there was a canopy where the 494 is...almost identical to the one that is still there. And there was a less significant closed building that was used for freight and mail came in. I think the tunnel under the tracks was built before this building was built.

10:39

Q: I that the Bridge Street tunnel?

A: No. There is one that is buried. It is actually still there but it is covered over. It comes out...you know where Vermont Salvage is? If you go behind the Cartoon Studies building and Vermont Salvage and you go to the fence line, you will see this twelve-inch black vent tube that is against the fence. That is the air vent for the tunnel. And over at the train station, right near the welcome center, there is a bump-up that has a concrete top to it. It has an aluminum trap door. That takes you down the steps.

11:18

Q: Was it a pedestrian tunnel?

A: It was originally built to haul mail back and forth to the post office. It was also a passenger tunnel. It was open when I was a kid. We went in high school. It got closed down after I graduated. It got to be pretty skanky in there and a lot of untowards hanging out there. So, they capped it off in the seventies sometime.

11:49

Q: Were there any other buildings in a state of dereliction? abandoned?

A: On Railroad Row...those buildings were still pretty active. It was the Interstate Tire Building which was right by the underpass. The next building was the Twin State Fruit which was the distribution of vegetables and fruit. That had been there for a long time. Those were all buildings that were distribution buildings for the railroad that had different lives. Twin State Fruit had that purpose for many, many years. The others evolved. Then there was a series of buildings where the courthouse is now, all along the river. All the way from the bridge all the way to the tracks. Maybe eight or ten different buildings. A lot of them were consolidated into Renehan Akers which was a building supply company, like Home Depot or something today. Then there were a couple of other buildings that were maintenance building near where the [Locomotive] 494 is, off the tracks. There were tracks that ran on both sides where the [Locomotive] 494 is. There are the tracks that exist now but there was another spur that went across .... split...so the railroad station lived in an island surrounded by railroad tracks. That spur spun off and went over to New Hampshire and down to Boston. You can still see remnants of that right behind the sign of the railroad station. You can still see a grass strip where that line was. There is still curbing there.

13:44

Q: Where did it cross the river?

A: Where it crosses now. Where the tracks are now over into the West Leb/West Borough yard. That line was given up in the early 1960s I think. Those buildings ... I bought materials from Renehan Akers when I was a carpenter going there. They went out of business and those buildings were bought and torn down for the courthouse. Bane Stevenson.... I don't know if you have heard this story...Bane Stevenson, who lives in Lyme, New Hampshire, who was a developer of sorts in the Upper Valley. He did a lot of stuff in Hanover. He owns a lot of properties in Hanover. He did the River Mill in West Lebanon. He did 13 Dartmouth College Highway in Lyme. A very, very wealthy family. He went to Yale with the son...well no... the guy who was the CEO of the Boston & Maine Railroad at the time - when I bought the train station. There was a push to build the courthouse up on Sykes Avenue and Dave Briggs went and got Paul Bruhn and Ann Cousins and everybody and all the Legislators. They fought it...it was where [Center for] Cartoon Studies is now. They wanted to move it out of the downtown. Everybody did not want that. They wanted to keep the use down here for all the obvious reasons. There was a big political push to keep it downtown. Jeffords and Leahy were involved in that...trying to remember who was governor then...Tom salmon maybe. They didn't have the land. They had to find a piece of land to put it. Somehow, somebody got connected with Bane Stevenson and he just wrote a check for all of that land to the Boston & Maine. He bought it from his classmate at Yale and turned it over to the State of Vermont to be able to get the courthouse built.

16:11

Q: It was good to keep it downtown....

A: It really was. One of the unintended consequences was that they put that crossing in. Nobody realized that a train whistle never blew in downtown White River until they put that crossing in for over a hundred years. Because you only blow the whistle when you are at a crossing. Now There was the one down at South Main...down there but nothing up here. To this day that is a

problem. At three in the morning, that whistle blows and those condos right there on the tracks...and if you're on the front side of the Hotel Coolidge or if you are in Northern Stage before they built the new theater.... halfway through the show, the whistle would blow.

17:01

Q: That seems to be a weird irony....

A: It is. There is a solution that I have been working on with the people in the Department of Transportation. A quiet crossing that they did up in the Burlington area for the short-lived commuter train which I was involved in. So, I understand what a quiet crossing does. It is just a matter of getting the money to pay for it and maintain it. The State of Vermont owns the line on the other side of the train station but they don't own that line. That is the New England Central which is now the Tennessee and Wyoming. I have started talking to the Secretary of Transportation who is a friend of mine ...just got appointed...trying to get that conversation going again because that would be really good to get that whistle out of downtown.

17:56

Q: In my brief time here, it seems there is a lot of activity with changing cars and tracks....

A: Yup. And Amtrak comes by at 11:00 AM and comes back through around 6:00 PM. They build one fairly large freight during the day - mid to late morning. So, they block the crossing there which, since now the underpass has been updated, it is not a problem because you have a nice sidewalk there. Before it was a little creepy. Then there is one on two or three nights a week - that is built in the middle of the night. Just pulling cars from the yard out here on the White River and down on the south end by the Connecticut [River].

18:49

Q: Can that tie up that crossing for hours?

A: No. They are not supposed to tie it up for more than fifteen minutes. They typically don't. It is usually only five-ten minutes. If you know, you just don't sit there and wait. You go to the underpass. It is the noise and the banging when the cars come together and stuff.

19:13

Q: The underpass has been there as long as you know?

A: Yup. Hundred or more years.

19:19

Q: Changing gears a little here. In my research, I have come across photographs a lot of diners and restaurants in downtown White River.

A: Yeah. You had a lot of railroad workers. You had fifty passenger trains a day coming through...changing trains to go up the Connecticut, up the White, down to Boston, down the Connecticut to Massachusetts...to Woodstock...there was the Woodstock Railroad. It was a happening place...before my time. Even when I grew up there was the .... the Polka Dot was always very popular. There was Teddy's Bar and Grill which is where....it is the empty lot near the underpass which is now going to be built as a new building. That was right on the corner. That was a very popular nightclub when I was growing up. My parents went there a lot. When I got of age, it wasn't Teddy's anymore, it was called something else. It was still there all through the seventies and eighties. The Hotel Coolidge always had an active dining room. That was kind of the elegant dining room for dining downtown. There were several different places down on South Main Street that are no longer there. Those were mainly gone when I grew up. There was a lot going on.

20:48

Q: Research has shown a large Italian population on the southern end of town...

A: The Schetinos...the Sczelzas...the Romanos.... they were all classmates of mine. Big time Italians on South Main and some up on the hill. If they did well, they moved up onto the Terraces.

22:22

Q: Did they celebrate their culture? Parades?

A: yup. Not necessarily a separate parade for them but always had a component of whatever parade there. Whether it was a Memorial Day parade or Flag Day. I don't specifically remember a 4th of July parade but there probably was. French Canadians....to a certain extent...not as concentrated as the Italians.

21:56

Q: Speaking of parades, were there any big events downtown?

A: Every Friday night was a big event for us because it was the only time we came off the farm. We would come down and do our shopping and we would go to the Lyric Theater. The kids...we would get money to go to the movies and my mom and dad would shop right in here in White River. Then we would get out of the movie and walk over and we would meet them at the Hotel Coolidge. They would be sitting there in the lounge with their friends...having drinks. Then we would go back home. Until I was in junior high school, rarely did I ever come down to do anything in White River. Our church was in Hartford Village and my family was a member of that and I did youth fellowship and all of that stuff. So, our social life outside the farm was with the church. Many of my classmates of mine, one of which is a trustee of this church to this day [Methodist Church on Gates Street]. I worked with her on this project [assisted living development]. I had a cousin who lived in Wilder whose dad worked on the railroad .... right up by the Wilder dam. Really, the only place I ever went for an overnight was his house. That was like going into the city because we could walk to the little store, Allen's Market in Wilder, and buy a soda out of the soda can. We never had sodas...we had Kool-Aid. I got to meet my future classmates of high school who were growing up on Passumpsic Avenue and all those streets in Wilder. There were a lot of them. I kind of knew a lot of kids I ended up meeting up with in ninth grade. Because I met them younger through Tom. I had another cousin who lived up the hill behind where the police station is now. So, we would have family events up there...reunions. My dad's siblings lived all over Vermont. A Lot of them farmers...some up in Burlington ...some up in Washington County. My Uncle Rip lived here. My Aunt Thelma lived here. My aunt Moanie lived here... There were seven of them. There was one in East Calais, one in Morrisville and one in Burlington... When we would get together, we would get together on our farm or get together at my Uncle Rip's place. He owned a trucking company in town, so he was a pretty big deal in White River. Also, a [state] representative after my dad.

24:51

Q: What were some of the distinctive businesses downtown?

A" Briggs and Phillips which began Briggs Limited which is now Revolution. That was owned by Dave Briggs' family. It was a men's clothing store and sporting goods. There was Orvis in the fifties and sixties.

25:12

Q: Fly-fishing?

A" Yeah and they sold ammunition and guns.

25:16

Q: Where was that?

A: Where Revolution is now. Same shop. One of the first jobs that I had off the farm was that I would go down there the night before hunting season started on Friday night and I would write up deer licenses for hunters coming in. There would be a line out the door From Massachusetts and Connecticut...hunters coming up to go hunting. It was a huge deal. We would sell licenses until one or two in the morning. Fred and Bonnie would hire me.... I can't remember how much I got paid...maybe I got a sport coat out of it...I don't know. The Briggs and the Hathorns were friends when I was in grade school. Dave is three years older than I. His sister, Diane, was on year older than I. He had siblings a little bit younger. They were good family friends. But that was Briggs and Phillips...before it was just Fred and Bonnie. Phillips was Elwyn Phillips. They started off...they operated a gas station where the park is now... across from Piecemeal Pies. There was a gas station there. Elwyn and Fred ran that gas station. And then they...together...went from gas station to opening a men's clothing store.

26:58

Q: logical....

A: Totally logical...follow suit. So, it was Briggs and Phillips until I was twelve or thirteen years old and Fred bought out Elwyn and Elwyn sold real estate after that. Scott Phillips was a classmate of mine and a very good friend of mine so I knew both the Phillips' and the Briggs'. And Bonnie and Dave were just the rocks of downtown White River. Bonnie is still here. Fred passed away some time ago. He was a significant World War Two vet...really, really nice guy. And there was White River Paper Company. It was prominent...where Vermont Salvage is now. The banks. First National Bank. First Interstate Bank. Same building. Right next to each other. There was the post office when I was first growing up and then the post office moved up to Sykes Avenue in the late sixties/early seventies and became the courthouse. And then the courthouse was built and it was empty for quite a while. A couple of people leased it. A woman came in ...Marjorie Debell...fifteen or twenty years ago and started buying a bunch of real estate. Thought she kind of wanted to get into the real estate development business until she found it was hard work. So, she got sick of spending money. So, the Center for Cartoon Studies was able to purchase that building from her six/seven years ago which is great that they are there. It is really substantial

28:44

Q: I noticed that your wife's name is Gates...any relation to Gates Street?

A: My mother...no relation. But, when I was setting up the limited Liability for this with my partner, we started a company that will do more than one of these. So, this is called The Village at White River Junction. The Umbrella Company is called Gates and Dixon. I was trying to come up with a name for the LLC.... Gates an Currier Street...and I said 'wait a minute' so I texted 'what is your mother's maiden name?'. And it is Dixon. My mother grew up in Barnard. There is no connection that I know of between my grandfather and the Gates here. The Gates here we're here for a long, long time. Jim Gates came down from Barnard. Before that he was northern Vermont. I do not know nearly as much about the Gates side of the family as I do ... a lot of people have done a lot research on the Hathorn side.

30:13

Q: Earlier in this interview, you were talking about how White River started to percolate again. Was there a low point in White River Junction's history?

A: I don't think you can pick an exact date. I think there was a low era. Historically, there is this ebb and flow since the railroads showed up which is when White River became. This wasn't

even a village before the railroads came. This was built because of the railroads. Dave Briggs does a really good lecture for his people who come for the Road Scholar program. He talks about this whole ebb and flow. Generations of investment and absentee ownership and then a reinvesting into it. It is like a thirty-forty-year predictable sine wave. It actually a very interesting lecture.

31:20

Q: This is occurring right now...

A: Yeah. Now we are on the up flow. So, it was on its downhill slide when I was in school. I did not know that. We just called it "The Junk" or "Rio Blanco" which was the name of my corporation for forty years. Just jokingly. The railroads were going away, but it wasn't part of my life. I do remember when my uncle retired and when Cheech Magrone, who lived next door to us, retired. Because they were really getting rid of all the freight builds here... There was a period when there was rarely any railroad activity here for many, many years. For maybe many as twenty or more. So, when I bought the train station in 1995, I would say that it was probably at its lowest, or damn close to it. Dave bought the hotel in 1985. There were still things going on but it was a struggle. Newberry's was still there...the five and dime. Briggs Opera House had not operated for many years. It was Dave and his Dad who got that kind of ... new seats there and paint and stuff...and got it opened up and started getting performances in there which eventually became Northern Stage. Several iterations before that. That is an interesting history right in itself. So, it kind of plugged along. The bakery was operating when I was a kid and then that went out of business. And that was occupied by an electric repair business that used just a very small portion of the building all through the seventies and eighties. Matt Bucy bought that in the early nineties, I think. Even 1995, when I did the train station, that is when I got involved with Preservation Trust of Vermont because we have reached out to them ...Paul ... just for support of what we were doing and Paul was involved with the courthouse...which was there. I can't remember what year that was built ....1992...1993. I became active in a lot of the downtown conferences...I have been to many of those around the state for the last fifteen twenty years. We often talked about how typical White River was with Brattleboro or Bellows Falls and Bennington...Rutland...all of them. It was not unique to White River Junction by any stretch. But I think what happened to help White River in the end was rising property values. The Upper Valley was always relatively prosperous and stable. It kind of created a stable economy here that Rutland could not enjoy or Brattleboro or Bellows Falls. After a period of time, the deals for real estate were in White River. That is when Mike Davidson came. Mike Davidson started over in Lebanon. He showed up here and started picking up a building here and there. Really, really rough shape buildings. He does not build anything new. He redoes everything. Matt Bucy showed up with total imagination. Came out of Denver. His family was a real estate development family. He has an architecture degree. He is just an artist by nature. Him coming in with imagination into the Tip-Top building, which everyone is going 'what is going to do with that?'. That kind of put a little wind in Dave's and mine sails and others who said 'hmmm. Let's keep plugging away here.' I often tell people that it is thirty-year overnight success. Dave has been 1985 until now. I bought the train station in 1995. It's true. It is now...it is on the cusp...if it is not already there with a high point...that it could be compared with any of the high points in its history. When the main block...hotel...get redeveloped, that will be the capstone of the whole thing. That will absolutely happen because of all the things that have happened around it. It now makes it a viable investment. Whereas as before, we used to stand up on the rickety roof and point to people - architects and Paul Bruhn - and say 'someday there is going to be a theater there.' well now we can point to the theater. Someday there will be buildings on railroad row...now they are there. Now this piece is being developed. It hasn't had a building on it since the seventies and most of them since the fifties. You can see that all of the retail is lifting up in quality and activity. You don't see anyone hanging around on the street corners anymore. Some



were problems and some were...that was the way they lived. It was a cheap place to live here. They have gone .... Disappeared.... Because they were basically anti-socials. They owned the corner because nobody else was on the corner. Those guys are gone. Some of them are still here...they have kind of integrated.