

The artful transformation of Brandon, Vt.
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BRANDON — “How do you stop people? Well, you stop them with pigs,” says Warren Kimble, leaning forward in his chair, a red, plaster-mache rooster, among his latest creations, perched on a table behind him.

Kimble, the contemporary folk artist, is in his gallery and studio on Park Street, talking cheerily about his adopted town, a place down on its luck a few years ago but now a lively arts community.

The people he had wished to stop? Travelers on Route 7, the two-lane federal highway that morphs into Park Street as it enters and meanders through the heart of this town of 4,000.

“We had always been a drive-through community,” says Kimble. The pigs, and later other critters and things artfully produced, made people take notice.

Brandon not so long ago had issues greater than anonymity. You wanted a good, old-fashioned bar fight? Brandon’s reputation once suggested such opportunity.

Brandon was home to the Brandon Training School, which for much of the 20th century housed hundreds of Vermont’s physically and mentally disabled. Named the State School for the Feebleminded when built in 1915, the facility attached a stigma to Brandon as, sadly, prisons or “insane asylums” could do to towns.

The state closed Brandon Training School 19 years ago after finding more enlightened ways of care, and when it closed, many locals lost their jobs.

Then along came Kimble and other artists, many of whom, like him, were drawn to the community by its 19th-century architecture, wide tree-lined streets, the Neshobe River that winds and tumbles through it, plus the nearby lakes and mountains.

Near Rutland, the state’s second-largest city, and Middlebury, the archetypal New England college town, Brandon had potential.

Thirteen years ago Kimble and others formed the Brandon Artists’ Guild, a cooperative gallery that opened in an empty Five and Dime. Four years later the Guild launched its first, artsy publicity stunt, “The Really Really Pig Show” (courtesy, Ed Sullivan). Members created colorful pigs of various materials, in all sizes and shapes, and held a parade, and then exhibited their artwork on lawns and display windows.

With the attention, came financial success: The artwork was sold at an auction fund-raiser to promote local arts programs.

Over the years, the Guild, now with 50 exhibiting members, continued the displays with new subjects, including sunflowers, birdhouses, cats and dogs, rocking chairs, even clocks (“Art Makes Brandon Tick”), all with playful titles.

Art in this town comes in all forms: ceramics, metal work, watercolors, oil paintings, jewelry, statuary, and woodcarvings. Robert Barral added culinary art to the mix eight years ago, when the chef, a native of southern France, opened Café Provence, an airy, open-kitchen restaurant with a patio and a French-inspired menu.

“French but not scary French,” emphasizes Barral. “People have to feel comfortable with the menu and not be intimidated.”

Barral, the former executive chef of the New England Culinary Institute in Montpelier and Four Seasons in Boston, has put Brandon on Vermont’s culinary map with Café Provence; and, more recently, Center Street Bar; a “culinary theater” for hands-on cooking classes presented by Barral and guest chefs; and, down the street, Gourmet Provence, a pastry, wine, sandwich, and gift shop. Barral rents space in his restaurant building to a culinary utensil shop, Vermont Kitchen Supply.

“The artists and Chef Robert have done a tremendous amount for Brandon, which has now become a destination for people from out of town,” says Kevin Thornton, a University of Vermont history professor, who moved here a few years back.

Thornton, who grew up in the Burlington area in the 1970s, remembers hearing about Brandon’s “rough reputation” and hearing “kids tease kids” about being sent to the Training School.

Café Provence’s reputation for distinction seems deserved. On a recent, cold spring night, in search of comfort food, I opted for a platter of baked half-chicken with garlic-mashed potatoes and a ratatouille of asparagus and yellow beets. The chicken, cooked with a rub of fennel, garlic, pepper, paprika, and cayenne, and flavored with a red wine sauce, was delicious.

Barral’s Gourmet Provence proved as good a spot for a breakfast treat as Café Provence was for dinner. (Recommendation to anyone on a non-non-fat diet: sticky bun and a croissant with chocolate, plus robust black coffee.)

Like virtually every Vermont town, Brandon offers options in outdoor adventure, which can be helpful considering the number of calories one can consume at Gourmet Provence.

Twenty minutes from the downtown is Lake Dunmore, site of Branbury State Park, presenting a long sandy beach, broad lawns with shade trees, and lean-tos and tent-camping sites. Visitors to the park can rent kayaks, canoes, rowboats, or paddleboats at the waterfront.

Nearby is a forest gem: the Moosalamoo National Recreation Area, a 15,800-acre tract of wildness with 70 miles of trails for hiking or mountain biking. It’s a popular spot for birders.

A visit to Brandon offers a glimpse into the 19th century. The downtown, with scores of 150-year-old houses, is on the National Register of Historic Places. Visitors can pick up a printed guide from the Chamber of Commerce that identifies town buildings of special historic and architectural interest.

The town likes to claim that Park Street, beyond the small commercial district, where the road is broad and tree-lined, and power lines are out of sight (behind homes), is among the most attractive

in the state. The homes, reflecting Greek Revival, Italianate, Second Empire, and other styles popular in the 1800s, were built in the town's manufacturing heyday, when Brandon was known for quarrying marble and producing scales, and wheels and chassis for railroads.

The street is home to the Lilac Inn, elegant with its gardens, and the Inn on Park Street, a six-room bed-and-breakfast built in 1865, the final year of the Civil War, which happens to figure quite prominently in Brandon's past.

The town is the birthplace of Stephen Douglas, who lived in the area until early adulthood, when he moved to Illinois, launched his political career, won a Senate seat, and then in 1858 faced off with Abraham Lincoln in the "Lincoln-Douglas Debates." The two sparred mightily over the issue of the expansion of slavery.

Douglas's birthplace, a small frame home, now a spare museum run by the Chamber of Commerce, recounts Douglas's life and the history of Brandon.

Visitors will want to check out the Brandon Baptist Church, built in 1832, on the lot next to Douglas's birthplace, its steeple casting a shadow over the old house. The church was a center of abolitionist ferment in a town and state where many opposed slavery.

Despite their abolitionist sentiments, townspeople were respectful when in 1860, Douglas, running for president, returned to his hometown for a visit.

"They had a reception and a band, and everyone was nice to him, and the town voted 4-1 for Lincoln," says Thornton.

Just up the street is a churchyard cemetery that holds the remains of Douglas's father and a set of grandparents, and just outside of town is another cemetery, with a memorial to the three members of Brandon's Ford Family who died fighting for the Union.

My brush with Brandon history included a comfortable night's stay at the Brandon Inn, a 39-room landmark located across from the town bandstand and a Civil War monument that honors the 53 men Brandon men who died in the Civil War.

The inn, rebuilt in the 1890s after a fire, suggests old, perhaps fading, New England elegance with its big lobby, dining rooms, pub, windowed porches, gardens, and spacious parlor with fireplaces, piano, comfortable chairs, leather couches, and coffee tables with Yankee and Vermont Life magazines. The inn and its grounds are quiet in early spring but are humming in summer with wedding and other types of receptions.

Like many Vermont towns, Brandon is still recovering from damage delivered last summer by Tropical Storm Irene. The normally polite Neshobe became a raging bully for a few hours, sloshing over Route 7 and severely damaging two downtown waterside parks and a popular pizza shop (now reopened at a new location).