

## **Rural Character of Shirley**

*By Jackie Eselionis*

I've heard a lot of talk around town and in board and committee meetings about preserving the rural character of Shirley. Everywhere I go it seems that everyone is in agreement that this is essential we must preserve our rural character. But it has occurred to me that I have heard this phrase from all factions, from strict preservationists to developers the whole spectrum. Some of us want to preserve land just as it is - don't walk on it, don't use it, just look at it. Some want to remove trees and soil, and place homes or businesses close together. Most of these people come to the table with the thought that their ideas are good for the town. It is such a phenomenon to me that some time ago I began asking people what "rural character" meant to them. Some people really didn't have a good answer. Their answer was, "You know." Well, I do know - at least I know what it means to me. But I was curious what it meant to others. It seemed to me that if we could actually define "rural character" it might help us to work together toward the common goal of maintaining it. If we can all agree on what it is, we will have a better chance of maintaining it. Some people I talked to felt that maintaining Shirley in its current state was the ideal but it seems the current state depends on when you moved here. In this version, nothing changes except for the minor things like painting a building, tending to a fallen tree, or maintenance of roadways, etc. There would be no new businesses added, no new homes, no clearing of land for development purposes or even for recreational purposes. In this realm, many active uses of the land shouldn't be encouraged - just passive uses. Others I talked to felt that if a town doesn't have growth, it would die - that it is impossible to maintain the status quo. It's either forward or backward for some. Rural character to them was focused more around the people in the town. They felt that the definition of rural character was the fact that you can go into the local hardware store or your church, or the post office and run into people that you know and can talk with - as around the wood stove. They like the fact that you can "go to the top" in Town Hall and other places and be heard and be helped. Then there are those who would make changes to the town in order to make, in their opinion, a better town. Some feel that the look of some parts of the town could be much improved and they are committed to making that so: to develop a theme for the Village area, for example, and ensure that any changes would encompass that theme rather than the mixed way the Village has developed. This group seemed to feel that we needed to create a look because the mixture of varieties of looks was not attractive. Then there are those who feel the rural character of the town is that you can be so separated from one another with large house lots and lots of buffer that you never have to interact with neighbors at all unless you choose to. They come home from work and sort of hibernate until they are ready to emerge - their home is their castle and their retreat and no one comes in unless they let down the bridge over the moat. They are happy with their privacy and relish it. They can become lost in the rural character and, for them, it is a good way to live. The point is that most of us agree that we want to maintain the rural character of Shirley in whatever way we perceive it but there is no definition of "rural character" and we all have different views in this regard. In our Master Plan, preserving the rural character of Shirley is one of the goals. The discussion comes up in board meetings on a regular basis whenever something new is proposed. But the real question is: What is rural character?

Is there a way we can meet the ideals of all of the various factions and their idea of what this is? We might be able to save a lot of discussion and time at board meetings if we actually knew how we define rural character. We might all be able to get on the same page if we knew how to define rural character and were able to come to consensus on just what this is. It would send a clear message to all those who might offer changes to our town if there was some clear direction of the Town's plan to "maintain the rural character." It is such a mainstay of what we say we are and want to be in the future. We have all kinds of groups promoting this or that or looking into this or that. It's important that someone take charge of identifying just what rural character is to most people who live in the town. It's important that all factions have areas of their concern addressed somewhere in the town. It's important that someone take charge and make sure that all of the viewpoints are validated and that all points of view are considered and have a place in our town. Many people I have talked with or listened to say they "love this town." Why? What do you love about it? I challenge those who have a viewpoint to make it known and to understand others may have a different viewpoint. It's important that we respect and find room for all points of view. What does your perfect Shirley look like? How do you want to see the town go forward into the future? What is important to you about our town? At a minimum, take the time to write a letter to the editor, to the Selectmen, to the Planning Board or any other board or committee that can take some action on your behalf. Make your wishes known in a very explicit way to give the "powers that be" guidance. Without your input, no one has any way of knowing. Without your viewpoint, we may continue in this quagmire of what is our rural character. At best, volunteer to serve with a group that might better serve your vision. And make it happen.