

History of the Vernon Grange

By Geraldine Strong

The Patrons of Husbandry is a fraternal organization. It is commonly called “The Grange”. The Grange is actually the home or the center of the organization. Thus the hall where the members met is called the Grange Hall and the members are often called Grangers. The organization came into being shortly after the Civil War and was started to give farmers and their families a chance to get together socially and promote their common interests.



Vernon Grange, N. 52, Patrons of Husbandry, was organized on November 29, 1886 in the house across the street from the present Grange Hall. For a while, they met in members’ homes. As the group soon became too large, they rented the former “Town Hall Room” in the basement of the First Congregational Church in Vernon Center. Membership continued to increase and many young adults and families welcomed a place to socialize.

The church fathers put restrictions on the activities held in the church building, and in particular, did not allow dancing. This prompted the Grangers to decide to build their own Grange Hall. Land was acquired in the Ogden’s Corner section of Vernon and members were asked to make monetary pledges toward a building fund.

In December of 1926, a “Board of Directors” was formed to be in charge of building a Grange Hall. A large agricultural fair was held the next year to raise money for the hall. The basic plans for Grange Hall were acquired from the National Grange. The committee visited Echo Grange Hall in Mansfield, Connecticut which had recently been constructed. This proved most helpful and the committee members were able to get costs and more detailed plans from them.

In November of 1927, the members voted to build a hall, but specified that it be built in Vernon Center. A lot was purchased from Edwin Baker for \$600. Mr. E. T. Hallcher was contracted to build the hall for \$6,036.00. This did not include digging the cellar, backfilling, or painting which would be done by the members or contracted separately. A mortgage was obtained from Frederick W. Bradley for \$4000 at 6% interest, payable semiannually.

On June 6, 1928, the Grange members assembled at the church and marched in a body to the site of the hall where a service was held and the cornerstone was laid by the charter members of the Grange.



The cornerstone is on the right side of the building near the parking lot

The Vernon Grange Glee Club, a group of younger Grange members, had been busy earning money for the Grange Hall furnishings by staging minstrel shows and musical performances. Chairs and kitchen equipment were purchased by them for the new Hall.

The dedication of the Hall was held in September of 1928 with a banquet and about 200 members and guests attending, including the State Master Minor Ives and the National Grange's High Priest of Demeter, Charles Gardner.



The sign over the front door on the Grange building

Although there was no running water in the Grange Hall, and it was heated by a hot air wood burning furnace, the Hall became a busy place. Square dances were held every Saturday night. Often there were more than 200 in attendance. The orchestra and prompter would occupy the stage. There would be a single row of chairs against the wall around the room and as many as 24 sets of eight dancers each would occupy the center of the hall. One set of eight would dance in the hallway. People came from all of the surrounding towns. Although people of all ages attended, many a young person of that era met their future mate at the Vernon Grange dances. The dances continued until the young men went into service in the 1940s during World War II.

Another fund raiser for which the Vernon Grange became famous was its Chicken Pie Suppers. Most of the farmers belonging to the Grange raised a few chickens and would donate an old hen to the Grange. The men would dress the chickens. The women would cook the chickens, take the meat off the bones and make gravy from the broth. On day of the supper, the pies would be assembled at the Grange Hall in 15 inch tins. Each pie had plenty of chicken and gravy with a rich biscuit crust. The pies were then taken to Krause's Bakery in Rockville where they were baked and brought back hot in time to serve them. Mashed potatoes, vegetables, and desserts were cooked at the Grange and mostly donated by the members. Around 120 people could be fed in one serving and often there were two servings. People came from surrounding towns to partake of these delicious meals and the money earned was used to pay off the mortgage. In December of 1936, the final payment was made.



Grange members and guests relax after a delicious meal.

In 1931, city gas was installed in the Grange Hall and a second hand commercial size gas stove was purchased for the kitchen. That same year an artesian well was dug, 155 feet deep. The cost of drilling was \$441.75 and the pump and plumbing was \$268.00.

Vernon Grange was incorporated on May 23, 1932 and all property of the organization was turned over to the corporation.

In 1936, a 50 year birthday party was held. About 150 members and guests attended the banquet and program.

In the Hurricane of 1938, the chimney was blown off. The roof was damaged and had to be replaced. The driveway was also oiled this year. In 1940, the Board of Directors discussed enlarging the Hall because of the large membership and the crowds at the dances and suppers. No action was taken at this time, but they did vote to put an oil burner into the hot air furnace.



The Grange continued to meet during World War II, although their activities were very much restricted. With the young men in service and those at home working long hours in the defense industry and on the farm, and with gas and food being rationed, the Grange supported the war effort by encouraging "Victory Gardens", purchasing war bonds and remembering their service men. A plaque hanging in the Grange Hall lists 33 young men from the Vernon Grange who answered their country's call. One was killed in action.

The boys returned after the war and the Grange resumed many of its former activities. The dances were once again held. The Grange had a baseball team and played Grange teams in surrounding towns. The young people presented plays and musicals. There were about 250 Grange members at this time.

The Grange plaque honoring members who served in World War II

Talk again resumed about adding on to the Hall, increasing the size of the parking lot and having their own baseball field. On July 15, 1948, they purchased the adjoining property to the south from Norman Bell.

While the Grange continued to thrive for the next two decades, its youth population began to mature. The baseball field never materialized. In 1959, the Grange voted to sell the additional lot to the Vernon Fire District for a new firehouse.



The Fire House for Company #1 was built on Route 30 next to the Grange property.

With the completion of the interstate highway through town, Vernon experienced a building boom. The former farm land became house lots with single family homes. Soon there was a baby boom and Vernon could not build schools fast enough. During the 1965-1966 school year, the Grange rented the hall to the Town for a classroom while one of the new schools was being completed. For several years, they allowed the First Congregational Church at Vernon Center to use the Hall for overflow church school classes.

With the advent of television, the dances became less popular and in 1962, they were discontinued. The Grange continued to hold public suppers and provide meals, as well as offer a meeting place for agricultural, social organizations and private parties. They also held auctions and food sales.

The expenses of maintaining the Grange Hall rose with each year. The town taxes on the Hall were increasing as were the costs of heating and insurance. It became harder for the older and declining number of members to continue with fund raising activities to maintain the Hall. In 1980, it was voted to rent the Hall to the YMCA for \$300 a month. (This amount was later increased to \$325.) The Grange was to continue to hold meetings there also. This agreement continued through June of 1983. This was not a very satisfactory arrangement as the old hall could not stand the hard usage which the "Y" required.

In the winters of 1985 and 1986, the Grange closed the Hall, drawing off the water and turning off the heat. The members continued their meetings at the home of Brother Ernie Graham. Closing the Hall created problems with the plumbing, and the varnish on the furniture was affected by the dampness. The town taxes on the property were now nearly \$2000 a year. The Grange's surplus funds were disappearing and the members were becoming concerned about how much longer they could continue to keep their Hall.

The Vernon Historical Society was looking for a permanent home and felt that the Grange Hall would meet their needs with space for a museum, workroom and storage on the lower floor, and with a meeting rooms and space for special exhibits on the upper floor. The Society would maintain the upper hall as a Grange Hall, because they considered it a part of the history of the Town of Vernon. The Grange would dispense with its kitchen and dining room equipment. It was decided that the Historical Society would rent for a year or two to make sure that the two organizations were compatible. In the fall of 1986, the Historical Society moved in. Before the year was over, it was clear that the two societies could become permanent housemates.

With the help of a Grange member, Attorney Robert F. Kahan, and with the blessing of the Connecticut State Grange, Vernon Grange voted to sell the Grange Hall to the Vernon Historical Society for the sum of \$1, retaining the privilege of using the hall for their meetings as long as the Vernon Grange was in existence. The papers were signed on August 18, 1989.

The Historical Society has made many much needed repairs and improvements to the Grange Hall and grounds. The Grange has disposed of its surplus equipment and is able to contribute annually to the maintenance of the Hall. Because the Historical Society is not liable for town taxes, that sizable sum may now be used annually for building maintenance and improvements.



The Grange Building: Home to the Vernon History Society and the Vernon Grange

The members of the Vernon Grange continue to meet at the Grange Hall monthly. They are proud to see that the building for which they worked so hard is so well maintained and is assuming a different important role in the history of Vernon Center as the home of the Vernon Historical Society.

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