

BEACHCOMBING: Bethany Bookstore a 'Place of Magic'

By Randall Beach



New Haven attorney Norm Pattis, owner of Whitlock's Book Barn bookstore in Bethany and its manager Meg Turner Wednesday, November 23, 2016 in the book barn.

“A community without a bookstore is like a body without a heart.”

—Norm Pattis
Criminal
Defense Lawyer,
Bookstore Owner

Nestled between a pasture of grazing horses and a stretch of woods in the town of Bethany sit two barns, each with a sign posted above the front door: “Set yourself free.”

Norm Pattis, a New Haven-based defense attorney, put those signs up in 2005 when he bought — and thus saved — Whitlock's Book Barn.

“A book, for me, has always been the key to salvation,” Pattis says as he stands beneath that sign in the main barn. “A bookstore is a place of magic, where you can set yourself free from whatever troubles you.”

But this “magic” was in danger of disappearing after the store's founder, Gilbert Whitlock, died in March 2004. Ever since the

late 1940s, Gilbert, assisted by his brother, Clifford Everett Hale Whitlock Jr., had spent long hours acquiring books all over the world or at auctions in Connecticut and nearby states, then offering them for sale. First they sold them out of the family house; in 1962 they moved the books across the street to the barns, evicting the turkeys and sheep.

Clifford, the store's manager, died in September 2003.

At about the same time, Pattis and his wife bought a house a mile or so from those barns.

"My wife and I are compulsive readers," Pattis notes. "One day I said to her: 'The bookstore around the corner is for sale. What do you think?'"

His wife replied, "Sure!"

"Frankly, it was a reckless decision on my part," Pattis now says. "I was thinking I'd be able to serve two masters, my law practice and this store. It was a serious miscalculation."

But you can tell he doesn't regret it. He says he's "proud" to have saved what he calls "a valuable community resource" and "a place for independent and quirky souls, off the beaten path."

Pattis adds, "A community without a bookstore is like a body without a heart."

After these passionate declarations, Pattis admits, "I remain an amateur at this. For me to replicate what the Whitlock brothers did is impossible."

He says he relies on the store's dedicated staff, led by its lone full-timer, store manager Meg Turner, to keep the enterprise afloat.

Turner says the work keeps

her "constantly interested" because "you never know from day to day what's going to come in. Last week I bought an old Beatles poster." She held it up: a photo of John, Paul, George and Ringo promoting their 1963 show at the London Palladium.

"What I love about this job," she tells me, "is that anybody can come in to buy a Mad magazine (circa 1970) for \$3 or a biography of Abraham Lincoln for \$30."

Pattis picks up a book (he has 50,000 on hand) and exclaims, "Where else can you buy *Memoirs of a Fox-hunting Man*?" That gem, written by Siegfried Sassoon, was published in 1977 for the members of the Limited Editions Club.

When you explore the main barn, walking carefully on the uneven wood floor, you will come across vintage postcards from all over the world (priced from 10 cents to \$30); Yale vs. Harvard football game programs (\$4) which sit atop a Playboy magazine from September 1976 (\$5); the Little Golden Book series, including *Dumbo* and *Peter Pan and Wendy* (\$1); and *Beatrix Potter's The Tale of Peter Rabbit* (\$2.35). Nearby are political buttons: "Goldwater-Miller, the best for the job" (\$5) and "I'm a Weicker Liker" (\$2). Don't miss the vinyl records, including the soundtrack to *Good Morning, Vietnam* (\$1).

The inventory is eclectic, yes, but Turner notes the specialty is "history of any kind — American, foreign, national, naval, Connecticut." On a recent weekend she visited a man in Hamden who sold her some rare historical tomes; his grandfather was a founder of the New Haven Civil War Roundtable.

Pattis emphasizes they will buy memorabilia as well as books. "We'll take a magazine or newspaper from a historic event, if its condition is good." Indeed, near the front counter I spot an issue of *Time* from July 7, 1967, with the cover story "The Hippies: Philosophy of a Subculture" (\$4).

But Pattis notes, "We're turning away more than we're taking in. People should call first and describe what they have."

The store has cut back its hours to five days a week: it's closed Mondays and Tuesdays. But Turner maintains the online sales when the store isn't open. She estimates one-third of the total sales are online and the other two-thirds come from foot traffic. (See whitlocksbookbarn.com.)

Dominick Natalie, who had driven down from Windsor with some friends, notes: "There aren't many bookstores of this kind anymore. It's nice to look at books without having to use the internet. It's nice to browse."

When I venture over to the

upper barn, I behold another vast collection of books, ranging from interior decorating to genealogy; in the floor above them reside up to 20,000 historical maps.

When I ask Pattis about the future of Whitlock's, he grows thoughtful and subdued. "It's a unique financial challenge. We operate at a modest loss every year. And in the not-too-distant future we'll have to address a critical infrastructure issue: The upper barn needs a new roof. We'll probably request crowdsourcing to help replace it."

And yet it seems he will find a way to keep these old barns going. "When you say 'no' to me, that's just an invitation." ■