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Harold Hartley Sees Real Self-Rule: A Maine Town Meeting

By **HAROLD HARTLEY**

Times Staff Writer

Islesford, Me. -- The purest form of self-rule still runs the show up here. It is the time-honored town meeting.

When the colonies parted ways with King George III with ball and musket, the town meeting already had its roots deep in the political soil of the new America.

It is direct government. You go, say your piece, pro or con, and vote. That is all there is to it. But it has taken on a few American refinements.

I WENT to a town meeting. It was the second held in the summer months in 20 years. I found the summer people who pay seven-eighths of the taxes cannot vote. They can root and cheer, and ring the rafters with glowing oratory, but when the scoring is done they cannot carry the ball, or vote.

Here in the Community Hall on this little neighboring island, they elected the chairman of the board of selectmen, like the City Council or School Board in Indianapolis.

The vote came out the way it always does. Nobody wants the job. It pays next to nothing, and is loaded with trouble.

Frank Bartlett, a carpenter, and a good one, got all 16 ballots. But there were more than 100 in the room, the rest being summer people who were "disqualified."

THIS GRATES a little but finally it makes sense. You cannot be a legal voter in two places. Your vote is where you live most of the year. You can get into the debate but the year-round residents decide what will be done.

The top issue was the mosquito which rolled through two meetings from Rachel Carson's "silent Spring," birds and fish poisoned by plane-sprayed insecticides, to the level of the water table on the island, with a throw-back to yellow fever and the Panama Canal.

The lady in the gray knit wool was on her feet. "Every mosquito carries about 2000 germs."

SHE WAS countered with a retort from a New York artist who said plane-spraying can be washed away by a sudden shower and lasts only 25 to 30 days at the most.

The plane spraying company was on deck. Its defense: sitting before it would become fatal and we use only one pound for 43,000 square feet. The blueberry growers spray four times a year and no one has been hurt yet. And the cranberry scare a few Thanksgivings ago was a farce."

Drainage ditches are already installed but the cost of keeping them clear so water will run

off the low places is costly. "Besides, draining the water from the surface lowers the water table and affects the wells. Fresh water is precious up here," said a summer resident.

BUT WHEN the voting was done it was the year-round residents who decided against spraying, 29 no, 11 yes.

Next came the town dumps. Residents have been throwing garbage to the sea gulls and rubbish into the sea long before the white man came, and no one is likely to change it now.

The tides at seven miles an hour, in and out twice a day, take care of the refuse. Although it is illegal to throw refuse in the sea, who is going to stop it?

The idea of digging holes in the ground to bury refuse had no appeal to natives who know they are actually living on mountain tops sticking out of the ocean to make these islands. And you do not dig far until you hit solid rock.

HERE ANOTHER touch of the American way came in. The moderator "referred it to committee" which will report back to the annual meeting next winter when the summer people have gone back to their homes to sleep snugly under electric blankets or to Florida, Arizona, California, but always far, far away.

Wilfred Bunker took us in his new 27-foot boat, the "Island Queen." I said as we docked, "How much do we owe you?"

"Nothing. We don't charge to go to town meetings."

Which to my way of thinking was a pretty nice gesture.