

the Pedal Powered Poet

Walter J. Coates

From the *Christian Science Monitor*, Boston
Mass. August 2, 1941

"On our desk lies a little magazine called Driftwind and beside it a telegram. The magazine has a wallpaper cover with parrots on the front and, on the back of it, the printed words '18 cents a single roll' and 'use Pyramid Dry Paste.' It contains an essay on democracy and thirty-nine short poems. The telegram informs us that we can call on its editor no more."

The editor in question was Walter J. Coates, minister, storekeeper, postmaster, poet, and publisher of North Montpelier, Vermont. Born in 1880 in Montague, New York, he was educated at St. Lawrence University Divinity School at Canton, NY. He served as student pastor in Marshfield and East

Calais, Vt, and was ordained an Universalist minister in 1904.

After the death of his first wife Florence in 1906, he married Nettie Gove of Calais. Instead of pursuing the ministry, he purchased a small printing office in East Calais, partnered with his father-in-law Austin in the Coates and Gove store in East Calais, and served as postmaster there 1910-1920. In November 1922, he and Nettie purchased the George



Pray store in North Montpelier, and the Coateses and son John continued as the storekeepers.

Since 1917 Coates had been writing poetry, and he published his 1st slim volume *Mood Songs* *Voices Within Myself* in 1921. In the summer of 1925, editor and publisher W. Paul Cook, Coates, and Vrest Orton met in North Calais to discuss 'how to stimulate widespread and unified literary activity in Vermont—to encourage nascent writers and promote keener appreciation for their works.'

In April 1926, partly because of the North Calais conference and partly as a surcease from morbidity (son John was desperately ill with TB), Coates began publishing the magazine *Driftwind*, containing poetry



and essays by Vermont writers, as well as others. Coates explained "an antique Rotary Official Golding press, 8 X 12, foot power and of forgotten lineage stood unused, disreputable in the back room of the store." He set the type himself and used birch bark or wallpaper as the covers. He gave away copies for a year, as many as 60-80 each issue.

Son John died in November 1926 and Coates almost gave up *Driftwind* until his readers convinced him to continue. The magazine remained an amateur operation produced by Walter, Nettie and daughter Flora; by 1932, they were publishing 400 copies a month.

Coates published *Driftwind* for 15 years as well as operating Driftwind Press, which specialized in Vermont literature and small vanity poetry books. The Coateses operated the store until publishing became full time. A linotype press replaced the Golding press sometime in 1933, and the old press was sold to Weston Cate, Jr. in 1937 for \$13.

We also get a glimpse of Coates' public life and political thought. He served as East Montpelier's health officer, justice of the peace, town moderator, school director, and chairman of the Washington North-East School District. He was author of a request to allow a member of the Progressive Party on the Calais Board of Civil Authority in 1914. He supported Progressive Robert LaFollette in Vermont when it was unpopular to oppose a Republican candidate. He took up such causes as giving the Communist Party of Vermont the right to appear on the ballot, and he published authors who supported Socialist Eugene Debs.

Walter Coates' bookplate portrayed an anchor, with "Be Firm" above and "W.J. Coates below."

In 1929, Coates helped found the League of Vermont Writers, which offered encouragement and motivation to its writer-members. The University of Vermont conferred on Coates an honorary LLD in 1938. His "magnum opus" was the *Bibliography and Gazetteer of Vermont Poets through letter K* before his untimely death in 1941.

Nettie, Flora, and friend Paul Cook continued *Driftwind* until Cook died in 1948.



Compiled by Anne Ormsbee, from the Gove genealogy; *Across The Onion: A History of East Montpelier, Vermont, 1781-1981*; UVM Bailey-Howe Library; conversations with and materials from Weston Cate, Jr.; *Driftwind* publications in the East Montpelier Historical Society collection; and Carry Back Books of Franconia, NH, Fall 1975.

Special to the Free Press - 1936

NORTH MONTPELIER, Feb. 20. They are changing signs over at the Coates place. "Coates Store" is coming down and in its place they are putting up a sign reading "Driftwind Press." The change is appropriate for it comes in time to mark 10 years of publishing activities of Walter John Coates and to record the progress he has made from keeper of a general store to well-known poet, editor and publisher.

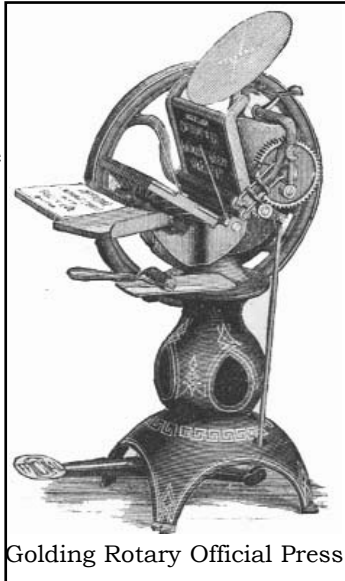
It was 10 years ago this coming April that the first issue of "Driftwind" appeared. Today this poetry monthly has a paid circulation of more than 400, is distributed in every State in the

United States and in Canada, Hawaii, Porto Rico, England, Italy, Germany. France and Transcaucasia. It has been quoted in Congress and in many newspapers and magazines of the country. That the magazine, as well as its editor and publisher, has been largely responsible for bringing about a literary renaissance in Vermont is denied by no one familiar with the facts.

Beginning with an antique foot-power Golding press, and a few cases of job type, located in a back corner of his general store, Mr. Coates' publishing activities have gradually pushed the store out of existence. The little old press has been replaced with a larger, electrically driven one, and instead of a few cases of type, there is now an up-to-date linotype machine. The publication of the magazine has gradually been extended until today, along with the magazine, the Driftwind Press issues numerous pamphlets, brochures and full-sized books.

Family His Inspiration

But back of the activities of the Driftwind Press is the man



Golding Rotary Official Press



Unknown woman holding Flora, John standing, Nettie in plaid dress.

and beside the man stands his family. Through all the years of struggle and achievement, Mrs. Coates has stood squarely beside her husband, furnishing him not only inspiration and encouragement but physical help as well. More than simply "best friend and severest critic," she has read thousands of pages of proofs, assembled and bound innumerable pages of copy. His daughter, Flora, acts as pressman and Mr. Coates, himself, besides editing, sets all copy on the linotype machine. Before her marriage his eldest daughter, Mrs. Guy Norton of Lyndonville, also aided him.

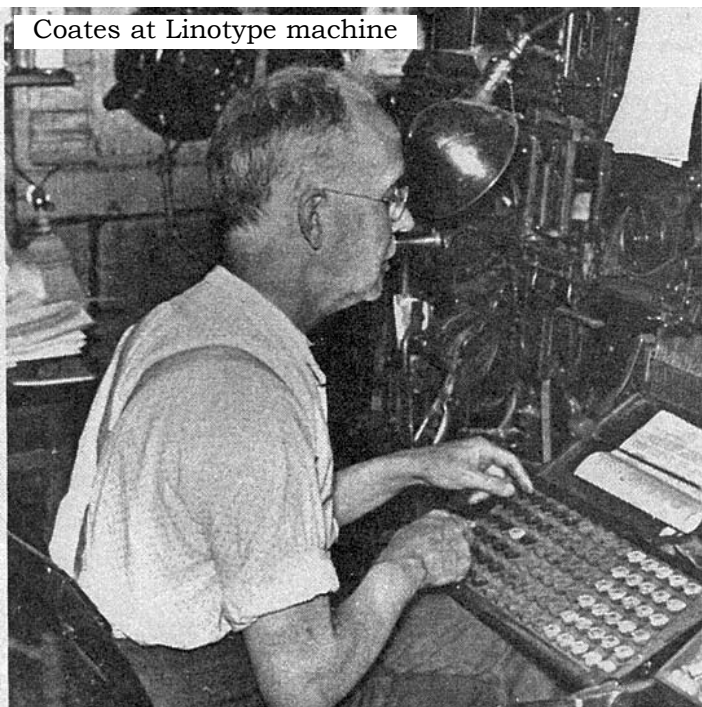
Born near Lowville, N. Y., on November 9, 1880. Mr. Coates' family soon moved to Dexter, N. Y., where the boy grew up, working on a farm, peddling papers and earning a few pennies in any way possible. At 17 while still a high school student he took a job teaching graded school. After his graduation from high school in 1900 he did carpentry work until he had saved up \$35, with which sum he matriculated at St. Lawrence University at Canton. He studied theology and during the summer vacations he came as a student preacher to the Marshfield and East Calais churches.

Wed While Sophomore

It was here that he met and married Florence Gray of East Calais in 1902 while a sophomore at college. In 1904 he graduated as a bachelor of sacred theology, receiving the highest honors in his class. Upon his graduation he turned down a position offered him as assistant pastor of one of the largest churches in New York City. Two years after his graduation, his wife died of tuberculosis and because he was in a poor physical and mental state, he went into the woods near East Calais and chopped lumber for a period.

In 1908 he married Nettie Alien Gove of East Calais and purchased a printing plant in that town which he conducted until 1910. He had decided to give up the ministry and so along with his printing work he became postmaster and ran a general store up to 1919. Three years later he moved to North Montpelier and with his son John, bought a general store which they operated jointly until John became ill and was sent to the Pittsford Sanatorium for treatment. The boy died in 1926 at the age of 22.

It had happened that in the late summer of 1925 Mr. Coates had held an informal conference with two of his friends, W. Paul



Coates at Linotype machine

Cook, editor and publisher of the magazine "Monadnock" and president of the National Amateur Press Association, and Vrest T. Orton, a young Vermonter interested in writing. These men had become acquainted with Coates through the earlier publication of his first book of poems. "Mood Songs" issued by J. Howard Flower from the Solitarian Press in Hartland.

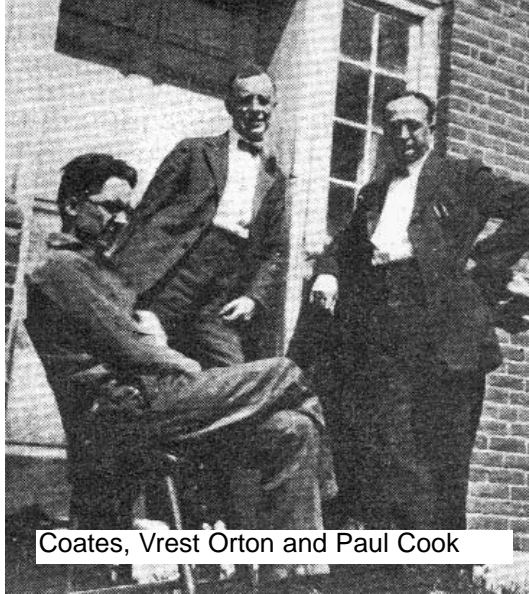
"Dreamy Laziness"

The three men met in an ancient, unused post-tavern in North Calais. Mr. Coates, himself described the occasion: "Dreamy laziness was the method; literature was the menu; Utopian visions were the dessert. We smoked, of course. We built castles. We talked. Individuality ran rampant-for each had literary loves, literary aversions. But on one subject all were agreed: Something must be done to stimulate more widespread and unified literary activity in Vermont-to encourage nascent writers and promote keener appreciation for their work. Both they and their local reading public were suffering from a self-imposed inferiority complex.

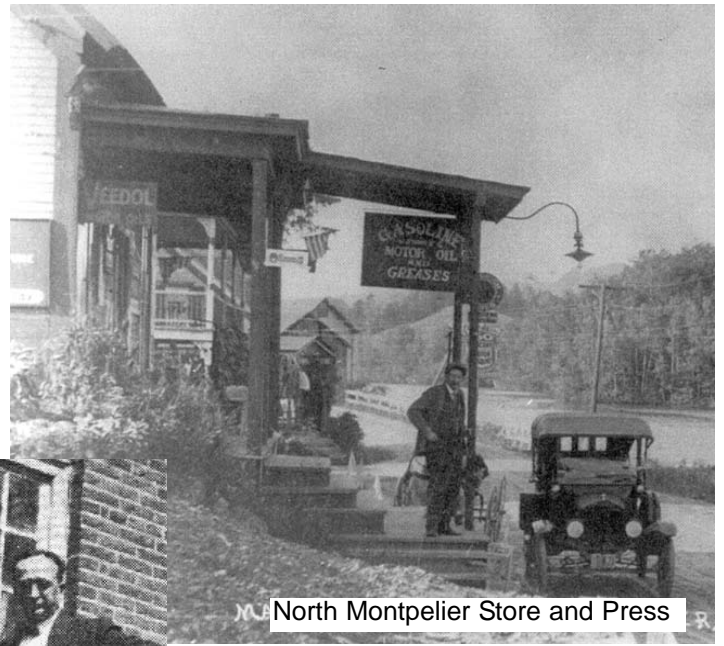
"There had once been an epoch, we recalled, when the State could boast a distinct literary atmosphere, with a nationally recognized group of artists and writers. Once. In Royall Tyler's time a North Hills weekly, published in Walpole but largely inspired from Vermont, had been foremost among journals devoted to belles lettres west of England. At that period of early American letters, the so-called Guilford School of poets, essayists, dramatists, in Vermont, Tyler, Fessenden, Dennie, Denon, Chamberlain-were a power to be reckoned with. Why not again-or at least partially again? A distinct spirit, it was conceded, haunts this Green Mountain region-a distinct egoism is peculiar to this terrain."

Driftwind Born

And so in April, 1926, partly as an outgrowth of this meeting and partly as a surcease from morbidity resulting from the illness of his son, "Driftwind-A Tramp Magazine Issued for the Love of Literature" was born. Dragging out the old Golding press, a relic of his print shop days, Mr. Coates went to work and set up and



Coates, Vrest Orton and Paul Cook



North Montpelier Store and Press

printed 50 copies of the first number. Practically all of these were given away, without charge, to friends. A few copies were bound in birch bark, taken from the wood-pile in the woodshed, and this practice continued throughout the year. So rare, in after years, became complete files of this first year's harvest, that the birch-bark files, brought as high as \$25 per volume from the Harvard University library.



Netty with Frances and Flora

Hard Years

Thus began a literary venture which in 10 years has become an institution. There were hard years, times of discouragement and doubt when it seemed hopeless to try to go on. But go on, it did. In one corner of a country store, in a crossroads village, alone save for the encouragement of a few local friends, this magazine struggled for existence. Hand-set, assembled and sewed by hand; edited, published and mailed by one man, his wife and daughter, it is a work of individuality from beginning to end.

In recognition of the influence of Driftwind and its publisher in awakening the literary consciousness of the State, the League of Vermont Writers, organized in 1929, has repeatedly elected Mr. Coates its president every year since its second.



Coates and Gove Store in East Calais

His Published Verse

Mr. Coates' published volumes of verse includes: "Mood Songs," -1921; "Land of Alien," 1928; "A Bible Handbook for Young Babbitts," 1932 and "Sonnets of an Editor," 1934.

Besides writing his own poetry he has found time to edit five volumes of "Favorite Vermont Poems," published by his own press, to collaborate with Prof. Frederick Tupper in editing "Vermont Verse-An Anthology" and with J. Howard Flower in the editing and publishing of "The Yankee Bard," an anthology of Vermont Ballads.

Mr. Coates' private collection of Vermontiana is one of the most extensive in the State. He has spent a number of years compiling a bibliography of Vermont writings and hopes, eventually, to see it through the press.

Besides all this work, Mr. Coates has found time to devote to civic and fraternal affairs. He has been secretary of the Wyoming Lodge of Masons for 11 years. He is school director, moderator of town meeting, justice of the peace and president of the school directors of Orange and Washington counties. He was a member of the Vermont Commission on Country Life. He is a speaker and trustee of the Unitarian and Universalist State conference and is one of a committee of 18 in the United States which selects the mottoes for the Wayside Pulpits.

THE IDEAL STATE

'He governs best who governs least,' 'twas said,
And truer words no prophet ever cried:
The sage had learned what lesser tongues denied.
Autocracies have flourished, kings long dead
Repressed our human hopes, and cliques have bled
Man to the bone, while heroes vainly died
For lost Equality: vital life can bide
At trunk, when only root and limb be fed.

My chosen government is one in which
Freedom begets more freedom, under wise
And equitable pronouncements. Neither rich
Nor poor shall lack in honor or emprise,
But mutual aims and interests understood
Shall make for peace and universal good.

Walter J. Coates March 3, 1929

THE BARRE DAILY TIMES, BARRE, VT., WEDNESDAY, JULY 30, 1941.

Dr. W. J. Coates Fatally Stricken While Driving

Dr. Walter J. Coates, 60, of North Montpelier, writer, editor and publisher, died suddenly at the wheel of his automobile on Barre street in Montpelier shortly after 3 o'clock yesterday afternoon.

Dr. Coates was driving along Barre Street in the direction of the Pioneer section from Main Street when he was stricken with a fatal heart attack. He slumped over the driving wheel and his automobile swerved to the left hand side of the road and collided with an automobile owned and operated by Kenneth Hill of Barre street, Montpelier, which was being driven toward Main Street.

Both cars had been proceeding slowly and the impact of the collision as the front ends of the two automobiles came into contact was not severe. Mrs. Coates, who was riding in the front seat of her husband's car, was thrown into the windshield and sustained a cut on her forehead. Neither Hill nor his wife, who was accompanying him, was injured.

Dr. R. H. Bisson was summoned and he pronounced Dr. Coates' death due to heart failure. Mrs. Coates stated that her husband had been troubled with an angina condition for three years and had had attacks in the past. Her injured forehead was bandaged by the doctor.

Acting Chief of Police George Connor and Officer E. D. Sloan of the Montpelier police conducted an investigation of the accident. Damage to the Coates car was estimated at \$25 and to the Hill car at \$20. The accident occurred in front of the Lemay boarding and lodging house at 169 Barre street. The body of Dr. Coates was taken to the Guare and David-son funeral home at 57 Barre Street.

Dr. and Mrs. Coates were on their way to their home in North Montpelier, where he was proprietor of the Driftwind Press, when he succumbed. They had been visiting Mrs. Lillian Ainsworth, secretary to Commissioner Timothy C. Dale of the state public welfare department, and had received from her some souvenirs she brought back to them from a recent trip to the west.

... (Expurgated to remove information about his life)

He was married to Nettie Alien Gove of Calais 32 years. She survives him as do two daughters, Miss Flora Coates, who lives at home, and Mrs. Guy Norton of Lyndonville.

Dr. Coates is also survived by three sisters Mrs. Lois Morgan, Mrs. Olive Hartman, Mrs. Winnie Blanchard and one brother, George Cortes, all of Watertown, N. Y., or vicinity.

Funeral services, for Dr. Coates will be held on Friday afternoon, with a prayer service from his late home at 1:30. Services will be held in the East Calais church at 2:30 p. m. and burial will be in the East Calais cemetery.

2007 History Expo Exhibit

Walter Coates was the feature of the Society's exhibit at the Vermont History Expo at the Tunbridge Fair Grounds in 2007.

Nancy Bisson created the background showing the old store and the Golding Press.

