

Speak Loudly and Carry a Big Message

An interview with NYC historian Robert Snyder

BY LIZ THOMSON & CLIFF PEARSON

This year's Village Trip festival, September 25 – October 4, celebrates the Revolutionary Voices that have emerged from Greenwich Village and the East Village/Lower East Side, shaping arts, culture, and politics since the U.S. declared independence. Robert Snyder, professor emeritus of American Studies and Journalism at Rutgers University and former Manhattan borough historian, recently talked about some of these voices with Liz Thomson and Cliff Pearson, joint artistic directors of the festival. What follows is an edited version of their conversation.



ROBERT SNYDER, above. Photo courtesy of The Village Trip.

Thomson & Pearson: Why do you think so many pioneering artists and activists have lived or worked in the Village?

Snyder: Greenwich Village's reputation as a center for dissent is dated to the early years of the 20th century, when a whole generation of artists and activists was drawn there by cheap rents, easy transit connections, and proximity to the Lower East Side, Little Italy, New York University and settlement houses. There was a ferment in these years. It was powerfully present in movements against high levels of corporate power, movements for workers' rights, women's rights, freedom of expression and artistic creativity. All these coursed together and intersected in fascinating ways.

And one movement affected the others.

Yes, there was a multiplier effect. The same people might go to a Mabel Dodge salon, walk on a picket line, hang out in a cafe, create art. All these things came together, intersecting in ways that cross-fertilized lives and communities. I think the physical appearance of the Village has something to do with this. It's not on the grid. You feel that you are in a place that's somewhat outside the general logic of modern New York. That can be exciting.

In the early 19th century, the Village was a place of mansions and wealth.

The history of Manhattan Island in the 19th century is the history of affluent people moving ever further north to stay remote from poor people, immigrants and working people in lower Manhattan. So, the Village,

in some sense, by the early 20th century, is well behind the cutting edge of wealth. It's open for a new kind of settlement that's going to distinguish it in new ways.

What connects all the colorful characters and the movements?

For a long time, New York City has been a place where people go to reinvent themselves. And that means something different to everyone. If you're a landless day laborer in southern Italy, maybe you came in 1900 to work on a construction job, make some money, live in the South Village, and then go back to Italy and try to buy some land. If you're a small-town kid in the Midwest who is really bored with life on a main street that seems impossibly parochial, moving to New York City is a way to break free. By 1910, 1920, no neighborhood advertised that more conspicuously than Greenwich Village. It also attracted people who had political ambitions. Socialists, radicals, and anarchists of many stripes all found their way to the Village in the early 20th century. Latin American radicals had an enclave at the northern end of Thompson Street, just south of Washington Square. It's ironic that while the United States was descending into the worst of Jim Crow, Afro-Latino radicals in the Village were dreaming of a free Cuba that would be devoid of racism and slavery.

How can the Village maintain or reaffirm its role as a creative center?

If young artists can't afford to live in the Village, it's important to sustain institutions that provide incubators for them. My daughter acted in a center on the edge of Washington Square. I wrote a book at the Writers' Center on Broadway. We need places where people can work on creative projects and bring them to fruition. To incubate new creative talent, it's important to have venues for performance, like cafes and cabarets, small stages where productions can be put on without huge fixed costs. When you put on a festival in New York City, you have no trouble finding creative people. But finding spaces — that's the hard part.

What are some revolutionary Village voices that may deserve more attention?

I've always been drawn to the radicals and reformers of the early 20th century because they all confronted the challenges of economics, politics, and cultural life that still bedevil us today. But they confronted them with a tremendous sense of optimism. Some of their hopes were dashed in the Red Scare that followed World War I and then in the era of McCarthyism. But they didn't disappear. And the idea that there were sanctuaries in the city where you could go with a dissenting idea remained an important one. The Village was one of them. Harlem was another. It's important to remember the activism for LGBTQ rights dates to the Stone-



THE WEST STREET AND NORTH RIVER PIERS, New York City. Credit: New York Public Library.

wall era and AIDS activism dates to the '80s. These were strongly grounded in the Village.

In the aftermath of the George Floyd killing, many protests happened at Washington Square Park.

Washington Square Park remains a gathering place for protest that has few counterparts in New York City. People naturally gravitate there when something's happening. They know they'll be with like-minded individuals.

Your book *When the City Stopped*, tells the stories of the people who kept the city going during the pandemic. How did COVID impact the Village?

In a neighborhood that's famed for entertainment and nightlife, it drove people indoors. I think the crisis in commercial real estate and in-person businesses that hit New York City during and since COVID is also present in the Village. When I walk around there today, I see lots more empty storefronts than is healthy. And prior to COVID, places were closing because they were priced out. The Village specialized in quirky stores that sold clothing, musical instruments, records, books, and culinary items you couldn't easily find anywhere else. Once those stores close, it's hard to bring them back.

What were some of the other crises that affected the Village?

The Village has a reputation for being welcoming and tolerant. It's a place where anything goes, but there have always been exceptions to that rule. For example, interracial couples could be seen around the jazz scene, around the Beat scene. But in certain parts of the Village, they were not welcomed. My cousin grew up in the West Village in the '40s when it was a neighborhood of Irish and Italian longshoremen. Her neighbors were not thrilled when her first boyfriend was Puerto Rican.

It's amazing how the waterfront has changed over the last 20 years. Back then, the piers were pretty rough and known for its gay cruising scene.

No place in New York City has changed more

dramatically than the West Village waterfront. In the 1940s, it's still an active waterfront with working piers. It's a place where work and residence are integrated really closely. Patterns of shipping change, though. Container shipping rises. The port moves to the New Jersey side, where it can accommodate those big cranes. All of a sudden, the piers are underused. The nightlife scene has gone as well. There's recreational space there and new forms of housing. The old piers, that world is gone.

What can a festival like the Village Trip realistically do for Greenwich Village?

It can remind people of the best legacies of its history and launch them into the future in new ways. That happens when we give performance space and recognition to artists and thinkers who are coming up with new ideas or finding new ways to look at the past that enable us to envision a different future than the one that we have already. New York City, for much of the 20th century, was concentrated on the future. It was a monument to the idea that the future could be better than the past. That idea ran strongly through Greenwich Village. We don't want to lose that. We don't want to just be a museum of what was. We should embrace what is and think about nurturing it as we move forward.

There are different layers of history and some older neighborhoods, like the Village, have a lot of layers. You can go back to Lenape times. The ability to see all of those layers enriches your understanding of not only the past, but also the present.

I don't see a change in the housing prices. But I think if people play their cards right, the Village can remain a cultural center. A place that incubates new ideas, draws in new people, makes new visions of the future possible in both political and artistic terms. If that can happen, I think that'll be a good thing.

Join Rob Snyder for Reading the Declaration of Independence: A Conversation About Our Past and Present at 4 p.m. on September 26. More details: www.TheVillageTrip.com