

How I Uncovered Pine Plains By Living Local

By Stan Hirson

Stan Hirson and Sarah Jones have been full-time residents of Pine Plains since moving from New York City in 2000. Hirson publishes documentaries about Pine Plains and videos of the town's board meetings at www.PinePlainsViews.com.

Pine Plains is a beautiful place. Since it is only 100 miles from New York City, we — like many others — weekend here to chill out from stressful urban careers. We visited to enjoy the quiet and fresh air of the country.

As weekenders, we had moved to a community, but when we became full-timers we moved *into* it.

The Tree Couple

Finding people who had the skills needed to repair and mend a house that is more than 100 years old was a challenge. Word of mouth was our Google.

A huge old tree was leaning precariously over our house, defying my Eagle Scout skills and confidence. There was no way I could cut it down myself without destroying whatever it would land on. Around the Stewart's Shops in Pine Plains, where they were known as the Tree Couple, Todd and Kim Richards regularly dealt with such issues.

Todd would first climb and limb the tree while his wife, Kim, a nursing student, handled the ropes from the ground. Dangling 80 feet in the air with a chainsaw in one hand, Todd would cut the trunk into fireplace lengths from the top down. Yes, from the top down. When I heard that was the plan, I ran inside and grabbed my video camera.

Chatting with them over lunch, I met fascinating people who had skills I never knew existed. And because I am a documentary filmmaker, it became an edited

video vignette: "The Tree Couple."

Farming, music and the Dutchess County Fair

When we needed to dig a hole for a swimming pool, we turned to a local excavator, Pete Howe, who turned out to be an accomplished bluegrass guitar player. His father was a dairy farmer in nearby Falls Village, Conn. After his folks got married in 1939, his mother started taking shots of life on the dairy farm in the 1940s with the 16mm movie camera she was given as a wedding present. Work horses and then early tractors were her subjects.

Pete and his brother, Jim, found a shoebox of her films and projected them against a wall so they could videotape them with a home camcorder. I edited the videos and set them to music in "Howe They Farmed."

Pete invited me over to his kitchen in Pine Plains one Wednesday night to hear a

bluegrass group — which had been going on for 40 years with people moving in and out it — and that became "Wednesday Night Jam."

That's how I met Patty Hall, on the guitar, and filmed her later when she supervised the 4-H Club at the Dutchess County Fair in "Farming the Future."

Pete and his wife, Cindy, have since moved from Pine Plains to be closer to their beloved bluegrass in Virginia, but his partner, Matt Blackburn, became a dear friend and remains our digger of choice.

Cars and a connected small town

Pretty soon, exploring nature took second place to exploring Pine Plains and making friends.

A rollover required major repairs to our car, which brought us through the doors and into the universe of Wheels of Time. There is no way the written word can convey the antics of restoring old cars in that shop. That is why I had to film it as a series of videos that became "Wheels of Time: Where Every Car Has a Story."

And of course making friends

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Stan Hirson's Preface to Pine Plains Views

I came to Pine Plains by choice, not by chance of birth.

But the small-town rural community I chose is changing. The farmers have, for the most part, sold to people from the city and fields are becoming lawns.

And, like the land, people, too, are becoming subdivided as difference breeds distance rather than discourse.

I have been making these videos to preserve and reconstitute what I can of a changing way of life and to share it with the community.

On a more personal level, I am making this website as a way of holding on to the reasons why I came here.

Living Local ...

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with Wheels of Time's Bill Bartolomeo led to another car expert, John Corson, one of the town's hidden talents. I filmed the Hudson Valley Region of the Porsche Club of America's pilgrimage to Corson's shop on a back road in Pine Plains for "The Porsches Have Landed!"

In a small town, you see how people are interconnected. The person who waits on you at the hardware store turns out to be married to the bass player in "Wednesday Night Jam." And several times a week I eat at the Pine Plains Platter, where Amy Benack-Baden is the chef and manager. Her husband, Carl, mows our lawn, and I filmed their children in the school play in "It Takes A Play to Make A Community." It



PHOTOS BY STAN HIRSON

Stan Hirson moved to Pine Plains for the quiet and fresh country air.

goes on. And on.

Some serendipity fed my curiosity. One day as I was driving a familiar road I noticed some guys fussing around the foundations of

the crumbling old water-powered grist mill on the edge of town. What were they doing? Only one way to find out: hop out of the car and ask! Well, one thing led to another and



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I came up with “That Old Mill” and I satisfied my own curiosity — as well as that of many others — about what was actually inside.

I could go on and on about these stories and videos. In fact, I did: Pine Plains Views now has an archive of more than 50 video stories, and more are in the pipeline.

But what to do with all those videos?

Launching Pine Plains Views

I started this in 2000 as the internet was just coming alive. It was before YouTube. Google had just been launched. Posting video was very difficult and awkward, lying right along the bleeding edge of technology through really slow dial-up connections. I cobbled my stories, photographs and videos into a “vlog,” a video blog using the primitive software of that time to show the world what I had uncovered about my small town. Bit by byte, the world came to see Pine Plains Views, and it now has had over 100,000 visits.

One blaring gap remained: political life. Could I portray it without fragmenting the community more than it already was? With the New York state open meetings law at my back, I found my courage and started showing up at public meetings of town government with my video camera. The archive of meetings now covers over five years, accessible anywhere, anytime, on Pine Plains Views for free.

I added a section of links, free to any local business or organization



Hirson filmed a Porsche Club’s trip to Pine Plains for his video, “The Porsches Have Landed!”



Patty Hall was featured in Hirson’s video, “Farming the Future,” while she worked with the 4-H Club at the Dutchess County Fair.



Hirson’s visit with a bluegrass group in Pine Plains led to many new friends.

with a website, and a popular collection of more than 80 still photographs of Pine Plains and its surroundings.

Drop by www.PinePlainsViews.com and you’ll find the Pine Plains

that I uncovered. But even better, go out and uncover your own community! All it takes is curiosity and a dash of serendipity. Camera optional.

Live where you are living.