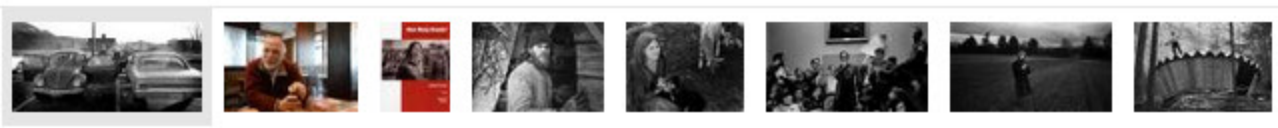
Days of Change and Growth

Photographs of the 1960s and '70s Capture an Era of Transformation

"New franchise parking lot, West Lebanon, New Hampshire, 1971" from Jonathan Sa'adah's book "How Many Roads?: Photographs of the Sixties and Early Seventies." (Jonathan Sa'adah photograph)



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Saturday, January 31, 2015
(Published in print: Saturday, January 31, 2015)

Of all the odd places to sit down for an interview, the McDonald's on Route 12A might be the oddest.

But in the case of Jonathan Sa'adah, the location made sense. Sa'adah, a Woodstock native who now lives in Montreal, photographed the McDonald's when it first opened, and those images figure prominently in his recent book, *How Many Roads? Photographs of the Sixties and Early Seventies*.

In one of those frames, Connecticut tourists lean on their cars in the McDonald's parking lot, litter from their meal strewn on the pavement between the vehicles. In the background is a farmhouse and barn, long since replaced by commercial sprawl.

The picture typifies a central aspect of the book: The young people Sa'adah photographed in the Upper Valley and in New York City were searching for a more open, freer way of life, unfettered by consumerism and in protest of the politics of the day. But the consumerism followed them up the highway. Even then, McDonald's was in the foreground and the farm in the background might as well already be gone.

"I guess what I think is we were participating in a period of time when there was real change in the Upper Valley," said Sa'adah, who photographed the arrival of the interstates, and the gritty, messy lives of his friends living in the Upper Valley. There's little sense of "flower power" in the black-and-white images.

How Many Roads? marks the first time these pictures have been seen. Sa'adah developed his film with water taken from a spring and heated on a wood stove, so the images can be grainy, a little rough. He was able to print them after making digital scans. The book was published by Phoenicia Publishing, an imprint started by his wife and business partner, Elizabeth Adams.

Born in the Upper Valley in 1950, and raised in Woodstock, where his father, Mounir Sa'adah, was for two decades the Unitarian minister, Jonathan Sa'adah started taking photographs early on. It was a hobby his parents weren't interested in, and he was happy to have something to keep to himself in a competitive, intellectual family.

He found his subject in the opposition to the Vietnam War and the counter-culture that built up around that opposition.

"I think our generation felt we could really have an impact and that we would be different as a generation as we grew," Sa'adah said.

While a student at Dartmouth College and afterward, he and his camera bore witness to the spirit of the times, but also to the vast changes just reaching the Upper Valley.

"The coming of the roads brought traffic, speculative land development, agri-business, franchises and sprawl; and it fractured the rugged, self-sufficient, individualistic, rural way of life that had persisted in New England for centuries," Sa'adah wrote in a preface to the photographs. "To me, and to my friends in the back-to-the-land movement, the destructive impact of these changes went hand-in-hand with the raw political and economic power behind the war."

Sitting in McDonald's over paper cups of coffee, it seems

easy to declare victory for the economic power Sa'adah describes. On 12A, at least, the pavement overran the garden. Playing over the McDonald's sound system was Carole King's *It's Too Late*, with its indelible chorus. "We really did try to make it."

"In doing the book, I really had to try to go back," Sa'adah said. "It seems so far away in so many senses."

A common view of the 1960s and '70s holds that the idealism of those decades are behind us, but Sa'adah sees more links than ruptures between then and now.

"I think the hippie movement is largely discredited," Sa'adah said. "I see it as more of a continuity." People who are politically active now have a connection to the period, he added.

The similarities between those days and these are hard to overlook: The war in Vietnam and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, for example, or the sense that social justice and equality haven't been attained.

But there's no movement now, or if there is, it's smaller. Marches for action on climate change or for racial equality seem more sporadic.

"I don't know if this is totally fair to say ... I think there was a lot of hope in our generation." The country was prosperous, with what seemed like unlimited growth in the 1950s and '60s, Sa'adah said. Now, "there's a lot of economic uncertainty that I think wasn't a part of our generation."

Also, "it felt more visceral, I think, because you were threatened by the draft," he said.

As much as the interstates and the nation's economic power transformed the country, so, too, did the generation that dropped out as it came of age, then found ways to drop back in once the war ended.

"We really believed we were going to have a huge effect on things," he said. But after the Vietnam War ended (the Paris Peace Accords were signed in 1973), the counterculture broke apart. Opposition to the war held the fragile coalition together, and without it, members drifted off to other causes or careers.

Still, there were a lot of people who persisted, who stayed in Vermont and New Hampshire, raised families, took jobs and left a mark.

"The whole area was affected by people who came out of that generation," Sa'adah said.

He's an example of that phenomenon. After living in the wilds of Strafford, Norwich and Thetford, Sa'adah settled in Hartford Village in 1974, where he and Adams started work in communications, including for New England Digital and the Dartmouth Atlas of Health Care.

He was at the center of the Hartford Community Association, which brought people together to advocate for Hartford Village in town government and to get to know their neighbors. He and Adams moved to Montreal in 2009.

The influence of his fellow back-to-the-landers was felt farther afield.

He cited the example of Steven Tozer, who is pictured in the book looking fiercely at the camera over a thick beard while gathering wood in Norwich. He attended Dartmouth and lived in a cabin on a point of land on the Connecticut River, near where the Montshire Museum is now. He worked in the Chicago public schools and is now head of the graduate education program at the University of Illinois-Chicago.

"He teaches principals to improve dysfunctional schools," Sa'adah said.

Another photograph, of three young girls sitting on a hay bale in Lyme, includes a very young Nenah Cherry, a future pop star whose father, jazz musician Don Cherry, is pictured several times.

Other people in the book have stayed in the area. Sa'adah pointed out Fred Haas, a fellow Dartmouth graduate, in a picture from a protest at the college. And Strafford native Pace Kendall, cradling a puppy. Hoyt Alverson, then a young Dartmouth professor, addressing a protest in the administration building. Other names were lost. Is that a future Woodstock architect standing on the roof of a yurt in Pomfret?

As much as the photographs in *How Many Roads?* look back at a time and place, they are also of the moment, Teju Cole writes in an introduction that contrasts the eras of the Vietnam and Iraq wars.

"In the faces of these young people, I see something permanently contemporary," Cole writes. The book "obliterates the distance between the present and the charged past."

Sa'adah said he's been pleased to see the book strike a chord with younger generations.

"I think within families, it's surprising how many children have bought it to give to their parents as a way to say 'I get it about you now,'" he said.

How Many Roads? *is available at the Norwich Bookstore or through Phoenicia Publishing at phoeniciapublishing.com. AVA Gallery and Art Center in Lebanon plans to exhibit photographs from the book from April 17 through May 20.*

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