

**V***anish: Disappearing Icons of a Rural America* begins in a snowstorm. The sky and earth are sheet-white; visibility is low. A lone figure with a tripod in tow marches toward something in the distance — the faint outline of a cow barn. It's 7:30 a.m. on a Saturday in Charlotte, and though the snowy conditions don't make for a pleasant walk, they provide a fleeting opportunity to photograph the barn in its battle with the elements.

The intrepid man behind the lens is Jim Westphalen, a Shelburne-based photographer who has been chasing and shooting classic rural structures for more than a decade. His new film, *Vanish*, swivels the camera around to explore his subjects and process. The film had a sneak preview in April and will have an encore screening this Saturday, June 17, at Middlebury's Town Hall Theater before officially premiering at the Middlebury New Filmmakers Festival in August.

Originally conceived as a 20-minute short, *Vanish* is now an 80-minute feature. It follows Westphalen across Vermont, and cross-country to Montana, as he photographs old barns, schoolhouses and churches — and speaks with the families and communities to whom they belong. Westphalen considers the structures in his photographs to be important artifacts of the American frontier; for the people who live around them, they are sites of cherished family memories.

*Vanish* is an art film, but it's also a film about "history, anthropology and storm chasing," Westphalen said.

The film appeals not only to "art buyers or photography appreciators, but [to all] Vermonters," said Theresa Harris, director of Middlebury's Edgewater Gallery, which represents Westphalen's work.

This is Westphalen's first foray into cinema. He directed the film and leaned on his longtime studio manager, Bill Killon, for help with editing.

In *Vanish*, audiences see the unglamorous work that goes into Westphalen's creative practice — canned-tuna meals eaten roadside, 4:30 a.m. alarms in Montana motel rooms — and learn about his childhood visits to his grandparents' lodge in the Poconos, where his love of the American countryside began.

"I've always been on the other side of the camera," Westphalen told *Seven Days*, reflecting that "it was tricky" to take center stage.

Westphalen shares the limelight with Mother Nature. He is repeatedly blown back by wind, swallowed by storms. Capturing the fight between the elements and the human landscape is core to

FILM



A barn in Orwell



I WANT PEOPLE TO REALIZE THAT THAT'S NOT JUST SOME CRAPPY OLD BUILDING; **THAT WAS SOMEBODY'S LIFE.**  
JIM WESTPHALEN

PHOTOS COURTESY OF JIM WESTPHALEN

## Now You See It

In a new film, *Vanish*, local photographer Jim Westphalen traces a fading American countryside

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Elling-Morris gold mill in Montana

Westphalen's art. "You won't see me out on too many sunny days," he said, naming "vulnerability" as something he looks for in his subjects.

Westphalen's chief aim is to "create the awareness and the appreciation of what we have here," he said, referring to our once-iconic rural structures. He leaves it to

audience members and other stakeholders to respond as they see fit — be it through memorializing the bygone buildings or fighting to restore them.

*Vanish* has already struck a chord with viewers. The film's April screening at Town Hall Theater filled up quickly. "We were sold out and sadly turned people

away at the door — folks who traveled from Burlington and beyond," theater executive director Lisa Mitchell said.

She added that Westphalen's presentation of the effort to save the memory of an eroding landscape "is something that really resonates with Vermonters."

Jay Craven, artistic director of the Middlebury New Filmmakers Festival, selected *Vanish* for the festival program for similar reasons. Westphalen's work goes "beyond the pictorial into something cultural," he said, citing the artist's "unusual" facility "in evoking time and place."

Craven added: "Its connection to Vermont is certainly one of its strengths."

Despite the film's local roots, Westphalen hopes to share it with a broader audience and has submitted it to film festivals across the country. To him, *Vanish* isn't a vanity project but a call to attention.

"I want people to realize that that's not just some crappy old building; that was somebody's life," Westphalen said. "If I can make people sit up and notice what we have for this very brief moment in time, then I've done my job." ⑦

### INFO

*Vanish: Disappearing Icons of a Rural America*, Saturday, June 17, 7 p.m., at Town Hall Theater in Middlebury. \$16-18. [townhalltheater.org](http://townhalltheater.org)

The film will also appear at the Middlebury New Filmmakers Festival, which runs from August 23 to 27. [middfilmfest.org](http://middfilmfest.org)