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Gilmanton portrait: New book explores rich history of 'Peyton Place' inspiration

By [MELANIE PLENDA](#)

For the Monitor

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Gilmanton is a town in Belknap County, New Hampshire, United States. The population was 3,777 at the 2010 census. The town includes the villages of Gilmanton Corner and Gilmanton Ironworks.

That's the Wiki version. Jessica Lander's version of Gilmanton however, tells a much richer tale of this small town not too far from Concord. Hers is the story of artisans and farmers, thinkers and writers, scandals, heartache and even a serial killer.

In Lander's debut book, *Driving Backwards*, she explores the deep history and vivid patchwork of characters that has populated this place since the 1600s. The Gilmanton Winery and Vineyard will host a book signing event Sunday from 8:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m., during the winery's regular brunch hours.

"It's really looking at Gilmanton as every town," Lander said. "It's really about any and every town in America. And it's a portrait of what that town is today. There are profiles of wild blueberry farmers and artisanal goat cheese makers and a 99-year-old man who's served in every town office and has a remarkable memory.

"It's really about the extraordinary, ordinary people that are in our everyday lives that we might take for granted and not listen to the stories that they have or pay attention to the lives that they lead because they are not ending up on the front page of a newspaper."

One such character is 99-year-old David Bickford, who was born, grew up, got married and had kids all on the same street in Gilmanton. Bickford was also someone who not only had the distinction of serving in every office in town, but also was the town's memory keeper.

"He could call up dances from a half a century ago," Lander said. "He would tell you who was sick, and what dances were held and whose living rooms they were in; he had a stunning memory."

Though Bickford passed away in spring 2013, Lander hopes by capturing his story and stories, his legacy will live on.

Other characters include profiles of a woman who tends 65 goats, home-schools 10 children and crafts artisanal goat cheese; a couple who raise miniature horses, flocks of chickens and long-eared rabbits, all on two tiny acres; another man who is a third-generation farmer, who harvests thousands of pounds of wild blueberries every summer; and another man who runs a six-generation dairy farm, among others.

"These . . . are very creative people and hardworking people, who we often take for granted because they are in our every day," Lander said.

That said, the book also touches on the time when the town was the most famous small town in America when it was thought to be the real life inspiration for *Peyton Place*, a tawdry novel about the secrets and scandals taking place just under the surface of a seemingly idyllic New England town. *Peyton Place*'s author, Grace Metalious, lived in the house that's now the winery.

"So I didn't actually know about *Peyton Place* when I started writing the book," said Lander. "And the town does not advertise *Peyton Place*. (Metalious) is a complicated character and had a complicated relationship with the town."

Published in 1956, the book was extremely controversial for its time, tackling topics like incest, abortion and sexuality.

"She took a lot from fiction, but also from real life," Lander said. "A lot of it was fiction, but America looked at Gilmanton as the epitome of small town American and took everything in the book as true, which it wasn't."

Another surprise Lander found in her research was that before Metalious owned the house, so did another of Gilmanton's notorious: Herman Mudgett, better known as H.H. Holmes, America's first serial killer.

"So his great-great grandmother owned it and of course H.H. Holmes's ancestors were the first people to settle in Gilmanton back in the 16 and 1700s," Lander said. "I was surprised by the connections between people and surprised by the stories I discovered."

"There was such richness and wonderful connections between people through history and the present day that I couldn't have imagined when I started out writing the book."

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By STEFANIE DAZIO and DAISY NGUYEN - Today

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