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Shamy: The sun never sets on the Winooski legacy

In China, Onion City is the Land of the Giant Umbrella

BY ED SHAMY, FREE PRESS COLUMNIST • JULY 27, 2008

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Chen Bai lives in Shanghai, China. That's a port city of nearly 20 million people, vast beyond comprehension.

It is also very far from Winooski — pretty much on the direct opposite side of the planet.

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This makes things difficult for Chen Bai, mythbuster.

Bai was reading in a sixth-grade school textbook all about Winooski, the remarkable Vermont city with a canopy covering the entire community. Included with the text is even an illustration, the billowing canopy anchored to an 11-story building that towers over the Onion City.

Reaching Chen Bai via e-mail proved futile, so we don't know — among other things — whether Chen Bai is the father or mother of the sixth-grader and in which class (geography? fantasy?) the Winooski item was included.

Bai was kind enough to translate the textbook entry into English. Here is an excerpt: "Wi'nooski City is a small town in the state of Vermont, U.S. It is located at the junction of the Northeast U.S. and Canada. The local population is less than 20,000. It is harsh climate with biting wind and heavy snow every winter there. But in 1980, a giant umbrella was launched in the sky of Winooski, all the urban constructions, such as housing, roads, bridges, squares, green spaces, etc., with the area about 36 million square meters of, were under the giant umbrella. With this canopy, residents are no longer afraid of the harsh winter....The city under the giant umbrella is so famous in the United States and around world. Winooski becomes a new hot spot for tourist. Every winter visitors from everywhere come and meet together under the canopy of the Giant Umbrella."

Chen Bai, eager to learn if this Giant Umbrella over Winooski was legit, on Wednesday fired an e-mail query around the globe to www.virtualvermont.com, a Web site hosted out of Richford by Matt Wills. Wills describes the site as an Internet magazine, and it contains information about every single Vermont municipality including the City of the Giant Umbrella.

Wills explained to Chen Bai that the story is rooted in a tiny grain of truth.

In 1979, three or four energy crises ago, Winooski applied to the U.S. Department of Energy for a grant to study the construction of a huge clear

Ed Shamy

Ed Shamy joined the staff of the Burlington Free Press as metro editor in 1999. He'd previously worked as a reporter, columnist and editor at newspapers in New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Virginia, Maryland, and Washington, D.C. Shamy graduated from Columbia University and served in the Peace Corps in Paraguay. The father of four children, he lives in Franklin County.



Special to the Free Press

Pages of a Chinese text book that describes how the city of Winooski reportedly is covered by a giant canopy to help reduce the effects of harsh winters and has therefore become a major tourist attraction.

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plastic dome over 850 city acres. The dome would save 90 percent of winter heating costs, the reasoning went. Four hundred homes would be fitted with solar panels or weatherized. The Winooski Golden Onion Dome Club was formed. Inquiries poured in from around the globe, and R. Buckminster Fuller, the visionary engineer and father of the geodesic dome, visited St. Michael's College to talk about the plan.

By May 1980, the feds had told Winooski to take a hike — there would be no grant money forthcoming. After Ronald Reagan took office in January 1981, a flurry of activity aimed at resurrecting the dome application was greeted from D.C. with an even more stern don't-even-think-about-it.

The dome died prematurely, but its legacy had grown legs in China and stubbornly lingers to this day.

"You may not know that the story is very popular around mainland China," Chen Bai wrote to Wills in Richford.

It fell to Wills to burst Bai's bubble — everything you read in a textbook isn't necessarily true. Nothing against Chinese textbooks. Same surely goes here stateside.

"There is no giant umbrella, never has been," Wills wrote back.

"No tourists come to see anything (Winooski has been undergoing changes in its downtown area; it's a decent place, but there's no tourist attraction of that sort)," he wrote. "Residents deal with winter the same as everyone else ..."

And their electronic exchange ended with Bai's vow: "Now I will try to clean the fake story."

Yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus. But no, Chen Bai, there's no Giant Umbrella over Winooski.

Ed Shamy's column appears Sundays, Tuesdays and Thursdays. Contact him at 660-1862 or eshamy@bfp.burlingtonfreepress.com

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