

Gene Logsdon

The Contrariest Farmer

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Introduction

As I keep on scribbling into so-called advanced age (there's nothing advanced about it) I am asked more and more if I have learned anything in life worth passing along. The question usually comes in a sarcastic tone of voice from someone who doesn't particularly agree with something I have written. But it is a question worthy of answering because if I try to be totally honest, I can think of hardly anything I've learned that is true enough to etch on a tombstone. Every time I think I have gained an indisputable fact, it turns out to be only half true. As of this moment, I can think of only two lessons in my life that I can pass on to you, dear reader, without a qualm.

1. Always make friends with the cook.
2. I know where I belong, and I am there.

The first lesson needs no comment. The second is my formula for true success in life. It took me until I was 40 years old to know where I belonged and then 40 more years of bullheadedness to go there and stay there. I wanted to live on and from my own little piece of earth on my own terms, not someone else's terms. I wanted to spend most of my time putting words in rows across pieces of paper or computer screens about what it takes to turn a piece of the earth into a biologically and spiritually sustainable paradise.

This is not at all what other people who ruled over me thought I should do. I was considered to be smart in school so my mentors believed that I should do smart things in life. I did not want to do what smart people did in life. I did not like to travel, to have to listen to loud noises, to be where masses of people gathered, to give speeches or listen to them, to sit in churches and classrooms where lies were being taught, or to work for other people in any capacity. I did not even care about becoming socially or economically successful in life. To go where I belonged meant becoming a sort of outcast, a ramparts person.

But a wonderful thing happened to me when I stopped trying to be smart. I found a whole world of unsmart people wanting to live the same way I wanted to live. Finding them, uniting with them, I have been able to achieve tranquility without apathy, riches without money, and solitude without seclusion. And so I continue to line up words in rows across paper and

computer screens and to luxuriate in a biological paradise while encouraging other ramparts people to follow their hearts and do the same. You have more company than you ever dreamed.

Gene Logsdon

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An Affinity For Tree Groves



I HAVE BEEN CUDDLING UP lately to the woodstove and giving thanks for my good fortune in being able to do so. When we could finally afford to buy our own land, my wife and I were determined to get a tract that had a woodlot on it and fortunately we were able to do that. My thinking, even in the early seventies was that I wanted my own source of fuel and in my mind, that meant some established woodland so I could commence staying warm immediately. But thinking about that while sitting by the fire, I was overcome by what I believe everyone refers to today as an epiphany. I realized that practical considerations about staying warm were probably not the real reason I wanted to live in the woods. It was suddenly apparent to me that I had spent almost all my life in or next to groves of trees. Even when I went to work in Philadelphia, we found, in the suburbs, a house that had a wild tree grove at the back end of it. And most mornings, by choice, I walked through woodland to get to the train that took me into the city. Even out my office window, there was Washington Square, a grove of trees for sure, smack dab in the middle of the city.

Before that we lived in an enchanting grove in a log cabin in the countryside near Indiana University. Before that, the seminary schools in Indiana, Michigan and Minnesota were all located in or next to woodland. And be-

fore that, I haunted the woodlots on and contiguous to our home farm. I wasn't intentionally picking out these places. I was not captain of my ship but just drifting along trying to stay sane in what was for me a rather insane world. Unwittingly, I think, I gravitated toward woodland because it was always my sanctuary, my retreat from human turmoil.

Then, as I sat by the woodstove, I realized something even more intriguing. Most of the people I know and admire, among them a few quite famous people, also have or had this seemingly seminal attraction to the forest. Mark Twain is my favorite writer, and all you have to do is read his essay about the tree groves on his boyhood farm to know how important woodland was to him. (It's in the new Autobiography of Mark Twain on pages 214- 220.) Here is part of a sentence from page 220: "I was ashamed and also lost; and it was while wandering in the woods hunting for myself that I found a deserted log cabin..." etc. This very same exact experience happened to me! Andrew Wyeth, my favorite painter, loved the forests of Maine. He told me that even blindfolded, he could tell what kind of evergreen he was standing under by the sound the wind made blowing through it. I did not know Alfred Kinsey, who had owned the log cabin and woodland we lived in when I was attending Indiana University, but I much admired his resolve in investigating sexual matters few others had the courage to consider at his time. Not many people know this but his hobby was filling his grove with wildflowers from all over Indiana. Wendell Berry, my friend, is a great lover of woodland. He does most of his writing in a cabin in the woods. My other hero, Harlin Hubbard, lived in the woods along the Ohio River in a house he built from the trees around him. Also I much admire Scott and Helen Nearing who not only lived in the woods but made a living from it. Current heroes and champion market gardeners, Andy Reinhart and Jan Dawson, live in the woods and make a living from a clearing on the edge of it.

So I venture to ask: how many of you reading this live in or next to woodland? Or would if you could? Can you articulate your affinity for trees? Is it something that is in all humans, but perhaps stronger in some than others? Is it practical security or philosophical sanctuary that draws us to the woods? If pioneer diaries can be believed, when Americans were clearing the forest primeval, lots of people, perhaps most, disliked the gloom of the deep forest and could not wait to clear it away. Then, at some point, something in us said we were going too far.

Give me something to think about. Make me come down with another confounded epiphany.

A Field Guide To Farmers

NOW THAT FARMER-WATCHING has become more popular than bird-watching, urban people need a way to help them distinguish between the various breeds in case they want to rent one, or buy one for a personal pet. Farmers actually resemble other members of the human race in most respects. They walk upright if there is no wheeled vehicle available to ride, have cell phones hanging on their ears most of the time, and feed at short order restaurants more than in their natural environment of open fields.

Like the ivory-billed woodpecker, farmer numbers are decreasing because of urban encroachment on their natural habitat. Little is known about their behavior because they shun the public eye whenever possible. No one has heard their mating call although it is presumed that they do mate because, although the ones most often seen are well above the average breeding age, an immature farmer is occasionally spotted, flitting and fluttering around the giant tractors in which farmers like to nest.

Zoologists distinguish several sub-types of the species, among them the Big Farmer, Hobby Farmer, Part-time Farmer, Dirt Farmer, Mockingfarmer, and the Debt-Ridden Ground Grabber.

The male Ground Grabber is best identified by his red plumage reminiscent of red-headed woodpeckers. But the real high flyers are so far in the red that they look more like cardinals. The Ground Grabber is very territorial, trying his best to stake out for himself enough land so he can plant it during the spring migration going north and then harvest it going south in the fall.

A Big Farmer is anyone who farms more land than the farmer you are talking to.

Hobby Farmers make their living doing something else and farm because they think of it as fun, if you can imagine that. As soon as they learn how to raise a bushel of zucchini successfully, they feel obliged to tell Ground Grabbers how to grow a hundred thousand bushels of soybeans.

Part-time Farmers differ from Hobby Farmers in that they no longer think farming is all that much fun. They need to make some money at it now. They work very hard at their other job to pay for their farming habit. It is hard to buy or rent a purebred Part-timer anymore because even most Big

Farmers have another source of income so they can buy gas for their motor homes and lake cruisers between planting and harvest when cash is in short supply.

The Dirt Farmer is embarrassed to learn that because of land inflation and subsidies, he is suddenly a millionaire several times over. He never planned for that and does not want a motor home or a lake cruiser. He goes around in bib overalls, making remarks like “ain’t them sixty row corn planters purty” to make salespeople think he is stupid, and proudly waves the flag of capitalism while accepting millions of dollars of welfare capital from the government. However, the Dirt Farmer contributes greatly to the well-being of the food supply by studiously ignoring well-meaning experts who criticize the way he farms.

Mockingfarmers grow bib overalls only as summer plumage but can be distinguished from Dirt Farmers because they like to feed on street corners and at university symposiums where Dirt Farmers rarely show up. (Dirt Farmers suspect that symposiums are places you go to watch dirty dancing.) Mockingfarmers are often the adult offspring of the urban rich, playing a game called Mockfarming. However they do a lot of public relations good for agriculture because they know how to talk to city dwellers. When the New York Times sends one of its crack reporters out to Windy Plains, Kansas, to get real grassroots reactions, the reporter invariably runs into a Mockingfarmer who takes him to the nearest bar and fills his recorder with grandly quotable remarks as long as the reporter will keep buying the beer.

The Tax Farmer is a rich investor who thinks he can cheat Uncle out of paying his taxes by investing in farm land. The real payoff for a Tax Farmer is to be able to refer to his investment as “my farm” while talking to fellow surgeons or fellow NBA stars. The ultimate in worldly success is to be able to say, “my farms.” The Tax Farmer is the only kind who really benefits from subsidies but gravy money only means he will eventually have to pay more taxes. Uncle understands this very well.

(An earlier version of this piece appeared in The New Farm magazine in December, 1979 under a pen name, Chester White. The editor did not want me to use my real name because I was on the staff and he feared I would alienate the entire readership.)

Abandoned



THE ABANDONED FARMSTEADS SHOWN HERE are not far from where I live. Such sad scenes are easy enough to find. They have been a part of the landscape of my life, grave markers of the agrarian culture that I love. Each crumbling set of buildings has its own story to tell, but in general, they were built around 1900 or a little earlier, went through a generation or two of gradually diminishing prosperity, and then succumbed to the money-changers and the seeming necessity to expand farm size. These “losers” had no taste for competing with wealthier, sharper, or more aggressive farmers, and died without an heir interested in, or financially capable of, farming in the modern era. The sharper farmer who with his friendly banker bought the farm, chose not to fix the house up and rent it, but couldn’t bring himself to tear it down either. Or in other cases, the new owner did sell the house and barn buildings to someone who, remembering a happy childhood on a farm, wanted to live in the country. The house was saved, but inevitably the grand old barn blew down or was pulled down. Four of the barns that I played and worked in during my youth exist now only in memory.



I think abandonment is the greatest of our sorrows and fears. Death is the final abandonment. I like to linger at derelict farmsteads and imagine the happy family that once lived there, or at least the family that built the place in high hope of happiness. It is easy for me to imagine their lives because I can place my grandparents, parents, and siblings within the confines of such a farmstead and watch them, in my mind's eye, at work and play.

These homes were marvels of self-sufficiency. No one feared a power outage because the power, at least in the early days, was all homegrown. When “the electric” did come, I remember farmers who resisted it— sensed that it would be a sort of umbilical cord in reverse, drawing away their independent vitality. They grew hay to fuel the motive power of buggy horse and draft animal, cut wood to warm the house, erected a windmill to pump water into a insulated cypress water tank that stood partly above ground or on a high elevation so that water could flow by gravity to the barns and house. They built underground cisterns next to the house to fill with soft rainwater off the house roof for washing, and erected posts in the lawn for a clothesline to dry the laundry. My grandfather even kept a catalpa grove for fence posts. Catalpa endures. Some of his posts, which he used first, and my uncle used again, serve a third life in my fences.

The amazing diversity of the old farmstead was the key to its resilience. The summer kitchen for cooking during the hot months was built close by, but apart from, the house. (One of the photos shows a summer kitchen if

you look closely behind the trees. Note how the trees have grown up in what was once the lawn and barnyard. How quickly nature takes back the land when humans disappear.) There were separate buildings for the privy, the smokehouse— I remember one made from a huge, hollow tree trunk with a little peaked roof over the open top and a door cut in the side of it—, the woodshed, the granary, the corncrib, the chicken coop, the pigsty, the carriage house that became a garage. The big hay barn dominated all. Below its mows were the sheep shed, horse stalls and cow stable. If one source of food or income failed, there were others to fill the gap. The only way to starve out such a self-sufficient homestead was by way of paper money and usury which in one guise or another is often what happened.

Always there was a kitchen garden, a larger garden or truck patch farther away, and an orchard. Sometimes on abandoned farmsteads you can find tasty old apple varieties still growing. Frequently, you will still find rhubarb plants, lilac bushes, old fashioned roses, asparagus and lilies of the valley hugging the north wall of the house. All these plants tell in their quiet, enduring way, of farm families making a good life that could still be there if nature's ways had been followed.

In case I sound overly-romantic or sentimental, what I remember best about our farmstead was that even when my mother was heavy with child and carrying a heavy bucket of water from the windmill pump to the chicken coop, she was singing. I see Dad hurry to her and, scolding gently, take the bucket from her. She had a hard life in some ways, so, I ask, why was she always singing?

And if you think it is easy to sing and carry a bucket of water at the same time, try it.

Learning Reality The Ram Way

WE GENERALLY REFER TO male sheep as bucks in our neck of the woods, but ram is probably a better term since everyone here thinks bucks are football players at Ohio State. Turn your back on a ram and he will plant his head into the small of your back and send you to the nearest chiropractor for the rest of your life. And don't think you can teach him a lesson by returning the favor with anything short of lethal force. Rams love getting hit in the head. I think it gives them orgasms. The only way you can get any respect is to rap them sharply on the nose with a short, stout stick that you should carry in your pocket when you are in the barn.

When I hear an animal lover who has never had to take daily care of animals criticize the way we husbandmen treat our livestock, I wish that they had to learn reality the ram way. I look with considerable reservations at all those sweet biblical pictures of "good shepherds" who leave the ninety nine behind to go search for the one that is lost. Why are there no pictures of good shepherds getting nailed in the butt by a ram, a scene a whole lot more common? Sheep are never lost. Shepherds just don't always know where they are.

For some reason, in agrarian cultures, nothing is as funny as seeing a buck send a farm boy flying into a pile of manure. It has happened to all of us who raise sheep. I don't care how carefully you keep an eye out, the moment you forget and turn your back, BAM. Most of the time no harm is done which I suppose is why it seems so comical (especially if it happens to Dad after he has scolded you for something your sister did). But ram attacks are not funny. Rams can kill humans. So if you are a shepherd new to the business, I am, right now, going to save your life.

Do not try to run away from an attacking ram. He can outrun you. If you watch two bucks about to deliver orgasms to each other, they will face off and take a few steps backwards. Then they charge, colliding head on with enough collective force to make an anvil bleed. Then they quiver with pleasure and do it again.

So when you see your buck start to back away from you, walk towards him. I mean go right at him. Almost always this is confusing to a buck and he will keep backing away for awhile and might lose interest in killing you.

This can give you time to get closer to a fence or a tractor. If you can get to an immovable object like a tree, all you have to do is keep it between you and the ram. Then he can't do his classic charge and soon tires of the game.

Otherwise, like out in the middle of a field, he will eventually quit backing up at your advance and attack. Stand your ground. This takes a great deal of nerve the first time. But at the last second before he butts you, he will lift himself on his hind legs to give his forward motion extra pile-driver strength. Up on his hind legs, he can only lunge straight ahead. He can't turn. So when he lunges, all you have to do is step sideways, quickly of course, and his momentum carries him past you. This maneuver is quite effective and it is almost comical to see how puzzled the ram will be when all he collides with is thin air. If you are young and strong, this is the moment when you grab him, twist his head around backwards, set him on his ass like you were going to shear him, and pummel the living hell out of him. Some shepherds say this will only make him meaner but in my experience, he will act like a gentleman for about a month. Or will absorb enough fear of the Lord so that when you see him backing up the next time, a warning yell will make him stop short and decide it is more fun to go eat hay.

If you are not young and strong, you should only be out with the flock in the pasture if you are riding a tractor or other vehicle. I have often wondered what would happen if a ram decided to dispute his territory with a four wheeler. I'm afraid that the four-wheeler would come off second best.

My brother-in-law's ram, which was also my ram last year, absolutely loves to bash his head against anything that moves. When he no longer had a partner ram to amuse him, he challenged Brad's two steers. The otherwise placid bovines took turns bashing him until he finally realized that there was no future in ramming hard-headed animals three times his size.

So, and this is all the evidence you need to prove the insanity of the male hormonal system, he went after Brad's draft horse instead. You have to understand that the horse thinks he is master of the flock. He can round up Brad's sheep and bring them to the barn as skillfully as any border collie. So of course ram and horse are idiot male rivals. In the beginning, the ram got in maybe two or three good charges before the horse learned to wheel around and blast his attacker into cuckoo land with his hind hooves. I know you will not believe me, but the ram seems to love getting his head nearly

kicked off by flying hooves. He just keeps coming back for more. The horse has learned a new strategy. Wheeling all the way around to send the stupid ram head over heels got to be a lot more trouble than it was worth, so now when the ram charges, the horse elegantly extends one of his front legs and plants his hoof into the hapless ram's lowered head, like a football buck stiff-arming a tackler. That stops the ram dead in his tracks.

This suggests an interesting philosophical question. If I try to cave a ram's head in with a ball bat, the well-meaning, civilized observer will accuse me of cruelty to animals. What if a horse does it? And the ram comes back for more?

Corn Is For Eating... Or Drinking

A HOT TOPIC OF CONVERSATION in our neighborhood is how to teach “them Ayrabs” a lesson by burning corn to heat our homes and fuel our cars. That idea sounds patriotic, but as Samuel Johnson said over two centuries ago, patriotism can be “the last refuge of a scoundrel.” Using corn as a way to heat a home might be economical for a farmer who grows his own corn but even that is debatable and in any event it isn’t going to solve our problems with “them Ayrabs,” any more than that other way to waste corn, making ethanol out of it for car fuel.

The reason that the corn stove business sort of tanked last winter proves the point for both cases. With the government pouring billions of dollars into subsidies for the budding ethanol industry, the price of corn shot up to four dollars a bushel. People who were toying with the idea of burning the stuff to heat their homes did a little arithmetic and not many of them followed through. An average-sized house needs at least two bushels of super-clean corn a day (no cob chaff to float around the house) to keep it comfortably warm for five months a year (estimates vary higher or lower depending on whether the estimator is trying to sell you a stove). If you buy that corn at a grain elevator you will find that it can cost a couple of dollars above market price — for handling, cleaning, and drying. Moreover the new, efficient corn blowers that break up the clinkers formed by burnt corn can cost \$5,000 to \$8,000. And of course, every time a homeowner opts for corn, he increases demand and the possibility that the price will go up further. It just might be, most people decided, that burning gas was a lot handier and not be that much more expensive. Or they opted for cleaned, pelleted anthracite coal which is what my veteran expert on home heating recommends.

The situation with ethanol is similar. Every new plant that goes on line increases demand for corn. Even when corn prices were \$2.00 a bushel, the government was subsidizing the ethanol industry 45 times more than it does the oil industry, says David Pimental, a scientist at Cornell who has studied ethanol for years. At four dollars a bushel, even the government might start having second thoughts, especially when one contemplates the fact that if we put all our annual corn crop into ethanol, it would supply only about 7% of current fuel usage. If we put every arable acre in America to corn,

it would make only about 17% of the automotive fuel we consume every year. And what the ethanol proponents don't like to admit, their plants are being run on coal, gas, and electricity, not ethanol. If that were not true, says Marty Bender (now deceased) at the Land Institute near Salina, Kansas, the lack of profitability in ethanol would be even worse.

Corn is, in case anyone has forgotten, our main livestock feed and is used in other industrial products. Unlike subsidies to farmers for growing corn, which tends to bring the price of corn down, the more corn that subsidized ethanol plants use, the higher the price rises, and so inevitably, the price of meat, milk and eggs too. Somewhere along the way, the consumer may face a momentous decision: shall I eat or shall I drive?

The best use of corn in my opinion is to make good bourbon. At least we might die happy if our civilization crashes like the corn-dependent Mayan culture did. It is a crying shame, but the best Kentucky bourbons are rarely available in my corn belt county and I bet not in yours either. Since ethanol is nothing more than corn whiskey, why not convert all those ethanol plants to distilleries, hire experienced Kentucky distillers to run them, and sell the product at \$125 a gallon rather than the measly \$3.50 a gallon that subsidized ethanol costs? Farming might actually become profitable.

Hitching Farm Implements To An Older Tractor

I KNOW IT'S DIFFERENT in advanced agriculture today where tractors and the implements they pull are the size of aircraft carriers. But on farms like mine, which make only limited use of three-point hitch systems, attaching a tractor to a plow, disk, rake, baler, wagon or star has not changed much since the “old fashioned” days. (I heard e-mail referred to recently as “old fashioned.”) You back the tractor up to the implement’s tongue, get off the tractor while it idles, lift the tongue up to the drawbar and drop the pin through the holes in the tongue and the one in the drawbar. Sounds easy, doesn’t it. It was fairly easy back when family farms really were family farms. Dad, on the tractor, could always bellow, and some poor child (me) would come running to do the actual hitching. As Dad, always in a hurry, roared in reverse back in the general direction of the wagon to be hitched up, poor child held the tongue up with one hand, prepared to move it to one side or the other to keep it lined up with the oncoming tractor draw bar. At the proper moment poor child dropped the hitch pin in place with the hand not holding up the wagon tongue, praying to God that Dad would stop the tractor at more or less the right time and that his foot would not slip off the clutch. The process often involved more shouts of “whoa!”, “back!” “up!” than it took to hitch horses to an implement.

When agriculture entered its FFA phase—Fathers Farming Alone—a whole new art had to arise to take the place of poor child. As all of you know who have spent the better part of your working life hitching and unhitching stuff, when you are alone you must bring the tractor to a dead stop at the exact right place, get off, and because you never are in the exact right place, pull the implement forward or the tractor backward the inch or so necessary with brute, hernia-causing strength. No tractor yet made, even on perfectly level ground, will stay put exactly where you stop it for hitching. When you push in on the clutch and put the gear shift in neutral, the tractor will ease an inch forward or an inch backward by the time you climb off and attempt to attach the tongue to the drawbar. So you outfox the bitch by stopping just a bit beyond the drawbar hole or not quite to it, depending upon whether your tractor likes to ease forward or backward. But that rarely works because the bitch senses that you are trying to outwit her and chooses to sit exactly

where you stop her for the first time in 20 years.

So to hitch up, you stop the tractor in what you figure is the exact right place, keep the tractor in gear, and turn off the motor. Be sure to let the motor come to a complete dead, silent stop because if there is just one more turn of the crankshaft when you let out on the clutch, the cursed tractor will lurch one inch away from match up with the implement tongue before it totally dies. Then you have to start the motor and do it all again.

My cousin who had no poor child to help him hitch up and who farmed alone most of his life, attached a four foot length of baling wire to the heads of his hitch pins. The wires allowed him from the tractor seat to dangle the pins gingerly down through the drawbar and tongue holes when they were lined up correctly. Of course he also had to have the implement tongue raised up off the ground on a bucket or block or jack at just the right height. He solved that problem by using a steel rod bent into a hook on one end to reach down from the tractor seat and lift the tongue up so he could back the drawbar into it. This whole hitching up maneuver required the same kind of finesse you need to play The Warsaw Concerto on a violin while eating a bowl of soup. He would clamp his knees against either side of the steering wheel to guide the tractor, keep one foot on the clutch and the other on the brake, use one hand to lower the hitch pin on the wire, the other to lift the implement tongue with his steel rod. If you don't think farming is an art, try this.

I have another ploy that usually works. I leave the implement sit on a gentle slope when I unhitch. When I hitch up again, I back the tractor a few inches too far past the tongue holes and turn off the motor with the tractor in gear. On the ground, I raise up the implement tongue with one hand, lean forward and press in on the clutch with my other hand. The tractor coasts forward (sometimes) and I can let out on the clutch to stop it at just the right place. As the old saying goes: "if you don't use your head you have to use your hands and feet." When hitching up alone, you have to use everything you've got. Once I placed a pin in the drawbar with my teeth, the only part of me not already involved in the effort.

Real Farmers Have To Be Real Smart



EVEN THOUGH I SPEND a lot of time growing stuff and raising animals, I am an unreal farmer. A real farmer spends about half the year farming and the other half up at the FSA office trying to figure out how to cultivate the government. Cultivating the government takes real brains. I did not realize that until I received a yellow card in the mail last week. It was from the FSA. Even unreal farmers get notices from the FSA. Here is a list of things on it that I could not comprehend:

Direct and counter cyclical payments (DCP)

Acreage Crop Revenue Election (ACRE)

Reconstitutions.

Supplemental Revenue Assistance (SURE)

The De Mimmis waiver

Risk Management Purchase (RMPR)

Acreage Reporting deadlines

Conservation Reserve Program (CRP)

State Acres For Wildlife Enhancement (SAFE)

Unmarked Map Layouts

All that on a three inch by five inch card. Little explanation was included because real farmers know what these mysteries are all about. Or at least they better, because behind DCP and ACRE and SURE and RMPR and CRP and SAFE lurks plenty of taxpayer money for the farmer who knows how to cultivate these acronyms without telling any lies, or at least not any big ones. The Washington Post calls it harvesting cash instead of crops.

These are not by far the only programs that farmers can wring money out of if they are smart. The most mysterious one for me is the loan deficiency payment program (LDP). Real farmers have patiently explained LDPs to me any number of times. While they are explaining, I think I understand and nod, but two days later when I try to explain it all to someone even less a real farmer than I am, my mind goes blank. LDPs seem to happen when someone in the government, perhaps in consultation with God or his designated archangel in charge of agriculture, sets a pretend price for corn. Then when the real price falls below or above that, there are formulas the smart farmer can use to borrow against it until he goes broke. But don't take my word for that. To me, LDP might just as well stand for "lingering dark puzzle."

There is also something called EQIP. I don't know what that stands for, but among other things, it pays out money to animal factories to keep them from flushing manure into waterways. Another subsidy pays dairymen to slaughter their cows. I don't know if it has an acronym. KILL might work. The idea here is that if enough cows are slaughtered for meat, the price of milk will go up. Instead, the price of meat goes down. Dairymen slaughter their least productive cows, of course, and as soon as they can, replace them with ones that produce more milk.

The most confusing subsidy to me involves federal crop insurance. I have tried to find out how the coverage works but can't. Some private insurance companies are making a fortune on it according to various critics. Henry Waxman, the congressman who is looking into the matter, says, and I quote, "federal crop insurance is a textbook example of waste, fraud and abuse in federal spending."

There is also a payment to farmers that I refer to by the acronym W-E-L-F-A-R-E. It is not much bandied about, but the reason farming has so far escaped the economic crunch of recession is that the government just gives landowners or renters of farm land so much money per acre with absolutely no strings attached. All the recipients have to do is keep on breathing. Trying to find out how much an individual farmer gets is difficult. The government does not have to obey the Freedom of Information Act on this one, which shows even FIA is a farce.

Taxpayers aren't paying enough attention to the March of the Agricultural Acronyms. I'd love to do a survey. I'll bet even money that most of us don't know what FSA stands for. I thought I did, but I was wrong. That just shows how dumb an unreal farmer can be. Do you know what FSA stands for?

PS: I ran one version of this essay in my weekly newspaper column last week. So far the people who have commented all say they don't know what FSA stands for. I'll give you a hint. It used to be called ASCS, but I never knew for sure what those letters stood for either.

Tired Of Tires

DO YOU KNOW HOW MANY pneumatic rubber tires you own? I bet when you count them up, you'll be surprised. Even on my little one horse farm, there are 40 tires in use, not counting the ones on the car. And ten percent of them are flat at any given time. This is partly because most of my tires were vulcanized in the late Middle Ages or thereabouts. But it is also because there is something unsustainable and unnatural about riding around on air wrapped in a substance that comes from trees that grow half a million miles away.

This is the time of year when I fare forth to another season of mowing and planting. I know without looking, that my first chore, after getting all the motors (6) running, will be fixing flats. I thought maybe this year would be an exception. The green tractor started right up and the hydraulic system on it worked fine. I backed up to the disk to hitch up and the hole on the disk tongue lined up with the drawbar hole perfectly on the first try. Oh perfect joy.

One pass across the field and behold, the left tire on the disk was as flat as a pancake. I pumped it up (by hand) and proceeded on to the gardens which were actually dry enough to disk (the corn ground wasn't) and worked up two of the plots before the tire went flat again. Pumped it up again and it lasted until I had finished the other two plots. I would not have been so stubborn about it except rain was threatening and it might be another two weeks before the soil was dry enough to work again.

Have you ever stopped to think just how dumb it is to have pneumatic tires on a disk? They are only in use when the disk is not disking and that would mean, in my "operation", about three hundred feet a year at a speed of not more than two miles per hour. Those tires could easily be made out of metal or even some high grade plastic. I should never have gotten rid of my really ancient disk which had no tires at all, but an adjustment to swivel the disk blades straight enough so they wouldn't cut into the dirt as they rolled along.

Yes, I know, I know. Modern farming requires many acres scattered over ten townships or so, with more time spent moving on the road than actually working in the field. But how about us small timers and slow timers, or

how about garden tillers and lawn mowers that will never move off the homestead and rarely move faster than 3 mph? How about my two-bottom plow once owned by Daniel Boone's grandfather, or my manure spreader, wheelbarrows, and pull-type sickle bar and rotary mowers? The only piece of farm implement I own that exhibits intelligent design is a side delivery rake. It mercifully has steel wheels.

None of my garden and farm implements need tires made of rubber with air inside them. Nor my tractors. Sometimes I even wonder why science has not found better things for cars and trucks to ride on than air. We had to replace all four tires on our 2005 car because of faulty valve stems. I hear other people complaining about car tires too— they refer to “bad batches” of tires where the outer tread slips loose from the inner tread.

The most ludicrous of all are pneumatic wheelbarrow tires. They are, in my experience, very cheap and go flat almost before you get them home from the hardware store. I have seriously thought of sawing off nice round discs from a red elm log of the right size to make wheelbarrow wheels. Or why does a rear end garden tiller need pneumatic tires? My tiller's tires like to annoy me by taking turns going soft. They could be made out of metal easily enough.

I am very much in accord with those Amish sects which allow their members to use tractors so long as they aren't equipped with rubber tires. One Amish community I know decided it was okay to cover their steel wheels with rubber mat treading so they wouldn't tear the road up too much. When the bishop was teased about this minor transgression of the rule (I tell this story in one of my books), he replied: “We prayed over the matter and finally decided it was not the rubber itself God was against, but riding on air. Only angels should ride on air.”

During spring flat tire fixing time, I heartily agree. And the next time someone tries to get me on an airplane, that's going to be my answer.

Calling Home The Sheep

CALLING LIVESTOCK IS HARDLY POPULAR music these days but it nevertheless remains alive and well on many garden farms, and is, I would argue, as pleasant to the ear as any rap song I've heard lately. Humans have been making conference calls to their animals for a long time. Yodeling began as a way to call in the flocks on the vast mountainsides of the Alps but is actually much older than that, a form of it having been practiced by pigmy societies in Africa in the 1600s. Humans have probably been whispering to, calling to, even singing to their animals forever. Think of the singing cowboys which became an icon (I am starting to hate the overuse of that word) of American so-called civilization.

I grew up— woke up many mornings— to the wail of my cousin, Ade, calling his sheep. His farm was next to ours and he took to practicing this primitive ritual at about four o'clock in the morning. Mom said he wanted us to know he was already up and about and anyone still in bed was a sinner. But his sheep call was music to my ears. Up the little creek valley that connected our farms would roll this long drawn-out wail of “shooooooooooooooooopeeeeeee” that began on about high A over C on the musical scale and fell, quaveringly, a couple of notes on the second syllable. The call lasted as long as he could keep expelling air with enough force for the sound to carry a mile or two.

I practiced that call till I got it down fairly well. In seminary high school, it became the battle cry of our wayward class as we frolicked through the 400 acres of woodland that we had access to. I have a notion most of southern Indiana within several miles of our forest fastness knew that sound and believe to this day that banshees live in those knobby hills.

When I came back home for good, Ade was still calling his sheep, and I made up my mind that, as long as I lived, that song would endure in that little valley of Warpole Creek where my family has kept sheep for well over a century. Only now, as I grow older and slighter of breath, the sound is more like “shooopeee.”

The way farmers get the attention of livestock varies from farm to farm. We call hogs with a shrill whoooo weeee, whooo weeee, accent on the second syllable, but other farmers resort to a much softer soooooey, soooley. When

we milked cows, they responded to sook-boss, sook-boss. My chickens perk up their heads at my cherk-cherk-cherk call, but unless I am carrying the garbage bucket or an ear of corn they go back to chasing bugs. Our horses in the sweet long ago responded to any human noise by high-tailing it to the farthest reaches of the farm. They knew that coming to the barn meant harness and sweat.

I'm sure all of you have your own sounds for getting animals to the barn. The practice can come in very handy if you practice rotational grazing. When I want to move my sheep to the next paddock, all I have to do is open the right gate and holler shooopeee, and they come running. They have gotten so smart about it that usually all I get out is shoo— and they practically run over me.

Throwing Away Billions of Dollars In Pet Manure



NOT UNTIL I WAS WELL INTO writing my new book, *Holy Shit: Managing Manure To Save Mankind*, which is about how to manage manure for soil enrichment, did I realize that cats, dogs and horses are a very significant source of valuable fertilizer that we are mostly throwing away. Or, as our friends' cat, Django, indicates in the photo, flushing it down the toilet. Until I got to know Django, my attention was focused on farm animal manure and human manure. I was really surprised to find out how much feces, urine, and litter that pets were adding to our overflowing waste stream, let alone realize that cats were learning how to use the flush toilet.

Instead of wringing hands over the problems of livestock manure, the non-farm sector of society might first want to take a closer look at its own problem: manure from pet cats, dogs, and recreational horses— animals that have little or nothing to do with putting food on anyone's table. According to recent statistics, there are 73 million pet cats in the United States

in addition to an equal number of feral cats roaming the alleys and fields (and killing millions of songbirds). There are some 68 million pet dogs and of course millions of strays out there doing beneficial work like killing my sheep. In addition there are some 9.5 million horses and the number is rising.

The numbers I use in *Holy Shit* to calculate the amount of manure flowing from these pets can only be approximations but they are based on the best statistics I could find. A horse weighing a thousand pounds produces about 20 tons of manure a year including bedding. So unless I can't multiply any more, 20×9.5 million equals 190,000,000 tons of road apples. Pet dogs and cats together produce per year another five million tons of manure. All this waste is good, holy fertilizer. Dog and cat waste is particularly valuable because, compared to most manures, it is higher in phosphorus, the plant nutrient most difficult for organic farmers and gardeners to come by naturally.

Only a small fraction of this manure is being used for fertilizer however. Most of it is going to landfills or to sewage disposal plants as pet owners get rid of the manure by way of dumpster or toilet. Pet owners are supposed to pick up manure when they walk their dogs (which they then flush down the toilet or put in the garbage) but when I walk public park areas, I see droppings all over the place. And of course the urine, which is richer in nitrogen, phosphorus and potash than feces, just disappears into the public grass or the neighbor's lawn.

This waste is particularly worrisome now because the cheaper sources of commercial fertilizer for farming are declining. Competing uses for natural gas, our biggest source of nitrogen fertilizer, is driving up prices. Potash deposits in Canada, our handiest source, are declining, and talk of opening up new mines in the rainforest does not sit well with the environmental community. Some specialized phosphorus fertilizers are very expensive. The day is coming when we must start thinking about scrupulously saving our wastes for fertilizer as humans have done, especially in Asia, for centuries.

Django is not going to appreciate this but, as I write in the book, the possible specter of 73 million cats perched on toilet bowls across the nation causes me to shudder. Doubtlessly training cats to go on the pot is rather clever and saves messing with litter boxes. But with the tiniest bit of effort, litter

boxes can be dumped into compost piles instead of flushing them down the toilet. I wonder if cats will learn how to flush the pot too. Will they do like children do sometimes, and flush the toilet just out of boredom when master is not around? Or maybe flush master's slippers down the pot? But whoever does the flushing, let us contemplate seventy three million toilets flushing ten times per day just from cat use. That would take something like 36.5 billion gallons of water. Every day! Now add on the incalculable number of flushes from human use and you have a demand that the experts say would be impossible to meet if the whole world lived like Americans.

What are we throwing away in money? In *Holy Shit* I use my own way to come up with a figure. Experts say that ten tons of animal manure and bedding per year can adequately fertilize an acre of farmland. Therefore we have enough pet manure in this country to fertilize something like 20 million acres every year. If a farmer is paying out \$100 an acre for commercial fertilizer (right now it's lower than that, last year higher) we're talking about a value for pet manure of something like two billion bucks. And the cost of throwing it away in the landfill or sewage treatment system is a whole lot more.

Acquiring Knowledge By Accident



WE LEARN OUR LESSONS more by chance than by deliberation. Or maybe it is more to the point to say that we learn by living. For sure, what we learn from experience sticks with us longer than what we think we learn in classrooms. I can't remember how to do algebra problems involving two unknowns but I will never forget what happened when I was dumb enough to touch a frosty piece of iron with my tongue.

I learned by chance that a good way to start tree seedlings is not to clean out the roof gutters. Another accidental discovery: you can make a deer proof fence by planting a row of red cedar trees about ten feet apart and after they get 15 feet tall or so, tie a wire panel fence to the trunks. The trees will continue to grow, closing the space between them with dense branches that extend above the fence high enough to stop the deer from jumping over. The only problem is that you have to accidentally learn this lesson many years before it takes effect.

Here's another one. Last summer, making hay with rain threatening (rain is always threatening when you are making hay), I decided to dump a couple of pickup truck loads of loose hay in the machine shed instead of forking the hay into the barn loft, to save time. The little stack would still be handy

enough to the barn to carry forkfuls over to the hay ricks for winter feeding.

So now it is winter and the sheep are still out eating on the haystack in the field. The stack in the shed keeps settling down and spreading out more than it should be doing naturally. What gives?

First I blamed it on the cats romping over the top of the stack. Then it became apparent that the chickens loved to scratch merrily away in the hay, eating green bits of clover leaves and grass seeds out of it. With the ground frozen and covered with snow, they can't forage in the woods, so they are supplementing the whole wheat and corn I feed them by eating the haystack.

Not in all the annals of agriculture can I find any treatise on feeding haystacks to chickens. A fellow in England got into the books a few years ago by making silage out of grass clippings which he fed to chickens. That's as close as I can come to finding a self-feeding haystack for hens in the literature. I had to learn it by accident. That little stack is suddenly worth some real money because now I don't have to worry about buying the hens expensive feed supplement over winter in this crazy year of corn at six dollars a bushel. The egg yolks stay marvelously bright yellow-orange from that high quality hay and taste just as wonderful as they do in summer. Rest assured that from now on, there will be a little haystack in that shed every winter.

The beauty of it is that the hens eat only a fraction of the hay pile while pecking away at it. They don't seem to deposit manure on the stack either, although they have made a couple of nests for egg laying. Most of the hay I can still fork over into the hay ricks for the sheep as the hens scratch it off the top of the stack.

If only I could live another century, I'd be a genius.

Hauling Farm Animals

LOADING FARM ANIMALS ON TRUCKS is something that requires the patience of Job and often ends up with a person sitting on a heap of dung too. This experience seems to be both the destiny and the downfall of every beginner in farming and quite a few oldtimers too. I had thought by now everyone knew this but only yesterday, I received an amusing letter from a friend detailing the agony her family had gone through trying to move a couple of hogs by truck to their new farm. At least they did use a truck. Some brave souls have used cars.

I guess that until you have, in utter frustration, tried to carry a 100 pound pig onto a truck because there was no other way the stubborn glob of wriggling pork was going to get there, you are not a true homesteader. If you have, in anger or desperation, tried to use brute force to load any animal bigger than that onto a truck, I doubt that you are still among us or if so, you have at least one hernia. (I have two.)

The only reason many of us are still among the living is because of the livestock trailer, one of the few technological advances that really does benefit mankind— and animalkind too. The bed of a livestock trailer can be lowered almost to ground level so that the hog or cow or sheep can walk into it with only the slightest step upward. Makes all the difference in the world. Truck beds are several feet above ground level which looks like half a mile to a cow going up a ramp. I bet that cattle ramps have killed or injured more cows and humans than all the foot and mouth disease outbreaks in history. Animals will not walk up a steep ramp unless forced to and forcing them often involves the kind of actions that gives the farmer involved, not to mention the Humane Society, heart failure.

But just because you have the benefit of a livestock trailer, you are not home free. How often I have seen a new farmer back his trusty trailer up to the door of the barn so tightly that anything going out of the door must go into the trailer. The beginner thinks that all he has to do next is “urge” the cattle or sheep or whatever up to the door and the animals will walk right on board.

Would you place a bathtub full of water right next to your farm pond and expect the fish to jump into it just because you urged them to do so?

You must make use of some kind of chute leading to the trailer door if you want to persuade the animals to walk on. Funnelled into a gradually narrowing chute, the animals soon realize that there is no where else to go but straight ahead into the trailer. Once one of them gets the idea, the others will generally follow. Without the chute, they just scatter in all directions when you try to drive them on the trailer.

You can buy very nice chutes which also come in very handy for worming and other handling chores. I never thought I could afford one so I've just used board gates or wire panels to form a chute, wider at the end away from the door, narrowing gradually to the width of the door. Often you still must prod the animals along when they are jammed into the chute. Many a wise husbandman will park the trailer at the barn or pen door the night before and put some choice hay in it. The animals get used to the trailer, may even walk on of their own accord. We once parked a trailer out in the pasture and put some yummy grain and molasses in it. It took a few days but finally our steer walked right on.

For garden farmers who raise just a few animals for meat, there is an alternative to hauling them to the slaughterhouse. In most rural areas, there are country butcher shops that for a nominal price (even if it is not nominal, it is well worth it) will come to your farm, slaughter, skin and gut your animal(s), and haul them to their butcher shop for further processing. In the case of a 1500 pound steer, it is at least 1500 times easier to load a dead carcass than a live animal.

A Wallet Full Of Scrambled Eggs

SOMETHING HAPPENED TO ME recently that I'm willing to bet is new to the annals of farming. All of us "country folk" know that carrying eggs in your pockets, especially in tight jeans, is not a good idea. Should you bend over, the eggs are very likely to break. But I was not thinking. We had just come home in early evening from two strenuous days on the road and I just wanted to go to bed for about two years. But being a country folk, I had farm animals to look after first. I had left enough feed and water in the coop so I could leave the hens penned up while we were gone to keep them safe from raccoons, mink, foxes, and various other dragons of the woods. Now, running on empty, I staggered zombie-like to the barn to let the hens out to roam a little before dark after two days of imprisonment.

I decided to gather the eggs too. Having been penned away from their favorite nesting sites in the barn, the hens had laid 14 eggs, 8 in the nest boxes and 6 in a corner on the floor. I did not spy the 6 on the floor until I was about to leave the coop, with four eggs in each hand. Usually I am wearing a jacket with ample pocket space for that many eggs but not now. Instead of being smart and leaving the 6 on the floor until I came back up later to close the hens in for the night, I decided to stick 6 of the 8 eggs in my hands in my jean pockets and pick up the other 6 on the floor. When I bent over, the eggs in the right pocket popped because, with my wallet also in residence, it was a tight fit all around.

My only thought was to try to get the cracked eggs out of the pocket before slimy yokes seeped down through the pocket lining, through pants leg, through underwear, rolling like a minor tsunami toward my ankles. In panic, I first emptied the eggs out of the left pocket to prevent further breakage and dropped them on the floor. Two of them broke in the process. Then, as I tried to fish the cracked ones out of the right pocket, they caved in completely and the yolks and whites soaked through my clothes.

For some reason, no doubt because I am a child of the money economy, my biggest distress was over my billfold. It was covered in yellow slime. I hurried over to the machine shed where I knew some rags were hanging, and commenced to clean up my proud symbol of capitalism. Then I tried to wipe the yokes and white stuff out of the pocket although by now much of it was all sliding lasciviously down my leg. The odd part of the whole

affair was that I did not boil over with cursing and swearing. I was too tired even for that.

The penetrating power of egg goo is something to behold. Back at the house, I spent a half hour cleaning egg yolk out of the billfold and off of eight dollar bills and two twenties. Had I not done that, the paper money would have been stuck together forever. So I ask you: has anyone else ever had to clean egg yolk off his or her hard earned cash? I also had to painstakingly wipe off my driver's license, Medicare card, a credit card and several photos of very cute grandkids.

The good news is that egg yolk or white or a combination thereof seems to have a beneficial effect on leather. The outside of the billfold now shines like a new one. Maybe the next time I am stupid enough to put eggs in jeans pockets, I'll just let the goo slide on down my leg to give my shoes a good shine.

When The Gumboots Come Marching In

THE MOST ESSENTIAL ACCESSORY in the garden farmer's wardrobe is a pair of gumboots. This is the most practical piece of footwear ever invented. You can slip gumboots on your feet easily without having to bend over or without straining your guts while pulling them on. They are made entirely of seamless rubber and reach up to just below the knee. No strings to tie, no zippers to zip, no buckles to buckle. They fit loosely, so you can also slip out of them without slipping a disc in your back. Their loose fit means that walking in them produces a clomping sound not unlike what a Belgian draft horse would make coming in last at the Kentucky Derby.

More civilized people refer to these boots as Wellingtons after the first Duke of Wellington who popularized them a century or so ago. When the British were going through their turn at trying to run the world, soldiers and officials going to Africa to save all those people from sin and ignorance often wore Wellingtons, which the natives called gumboots since they were made out of gum rubber. Why we farm kids of the middle 20th century in Ohio also called them gumboots I do not know. We wore them regularly and so, human beings being what they are, gumboots became a symbol of our country culture and we were ridiculed for wearing them by town brats. Even as a young man who often went to town wearing gumboots, I was teased, usually in good humor, but the barb was always there. The city slickers didn't realize that gumboots were very fashionable with the British aristocracy in the early nineteenth hundreds.

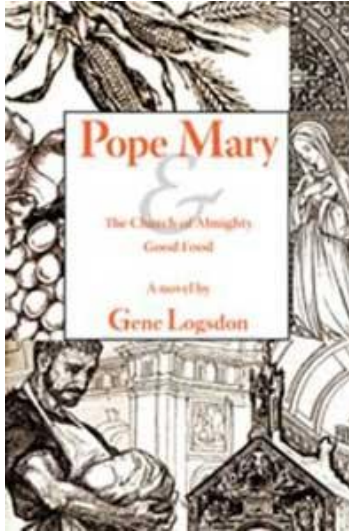
I chanced upon a tennis court once (in Iowa, honest) where there was a rule that only tennis shoes could be worn. But an exception was made for gumboots. The sight and sound of a bib-overalled farmer clomping around the court in gumboots while brandishing a tennis racket made for a better clown act than I have ever seen.

Gumboots are perfect apparel for garden and farm work, especially this year when the rains won't stop. They won't keep your feet warm in winter, but I still wear them through the snow to the barn when I know I will be back in the house in a half hour or less. They are so much easier to slip off than insulated boots without coming into contact with the manure on them. Even on summer days, the pasture grass often remains dewy until nearly noon, so it's on with the gumboots even in fair weather.

The only problem is that the gumboots coming out now are so cheap they can develop leaks almost before you reach the barn the first time. The answer of course is to buy more expensive models. But I have discovered a way to beat this system. My dirt cheap gumboots are roomy enough that I can wear the right one on the left foot and vice versa. For some reason, my left boot will invariably sport a hole in about three months but the right one will go on for two years if I'm lucky. I must list slightly to the left when I walk. Can't figure it out, but I get my money's worth out of the deal because most of the time I'm wearing two right-footed boots.

Gumboots are right for garden farmers for another reason. The Africans developed what became known as gumboot dancing after the British tried to stop them from dancing to the beat of drums. African dancers found that they could stomp and stamp around in gumboots and produce a sound not unlike drumbeats— as any of us who wear them easily understand. Some of the gumboot dances actually made fun of the way British officials would pompously stomp around in their Wellingtons. It became a not-so-silent way to ridicule, protest and undermine officious bureaucracy. I think of those old gumboot dances (Paul Simon has even recorded some African gumboot music) whenever I read the latest absurdity from our Department of Agriculture about subsidized farming. I stomp and stamp to the barn with more noise and spirit that is actually necessary. Maybe I stomp harder on the left boot and that's why it wears out quicker.

Trying To Make Sense Out Of The Last Supper



MY NEW NOVEL, *Pope Mary and The Church of Almighty Good Food*, is raising lots of eyebrows so maybe I should write something about it. The story takes place in the rural countryside which should be no surprise to readers familiar with my books. But this time the subject is very controversial for a lot of people: the closing of so many local churches. The inspiration for the book came from the closing of a little rural Catholic church that I can almost see across the fields from my place. Perhaps some churches do need to be closed because of dwindling congregations, but this one had the money and parishioners to keep on going just fine. Friends asked me why I cared, since I'm not a church goer anymore. First of all, I care because I think many small churches are closing for the same reason small farms are closing, that is, false notions about economics. The general thinking is that it is more profitable to cram more people into fewer, bigger churches just like it is more profitable to cram more hogs into fewer, bigger barns. I

don't buy that kind of banker talk anymore. Secondly, to me it is a matter of justice, not religion. That church was built and paid for (some of them were my ancestors) before there was a bishopric or diocese in this area. I don't see how church authorities can close it against the will of the people who worship there.

Anyway, this dispute went to court, and unlike any other case I know about, the judge ruled against the church authorities. He ruled that this was a matter for civil law not church canon law and that the protestors could indeed hold legal title to the property. The upshot was that the protesting parishioners got their property back, not as a bonafide Catholic church anymore, but as a place they could meet for various community exercises like marriages and funerals. This was really an extraordinary court victory but it happened too far out in the countryside to attract public attention. So I decided to write a novel inspired by it.

That's how it started out anyway, but when I get involved in writing novels, or anything else, the words end up going in directions I never envisaged, in this case rather far from the real event that inspired it. The fictional characters finally told me to go sit in the corner and let them handle the affair, which I was only too glad to do. Eventually, they figure out what they are going to do with the church that they have won title to, but can no longer use for regular church services. They turn their place of worship into a glorified restaurant and farm market of local food with nearby farmers kicking in land around the church for community gardens. So successful were their efforts that the pro-bishop forces and the anti-bishop forces decide to sit down together and eat in peace.

The heroine of the story is Pope Mary, so-called derisively by her critics, the pro-bishop supporters, and in good humor by her anti-bishop supporters, because she is forever brazenly pontificating on all subjects religious or agricultural and invariably turns out to be right. She has returned home from working at the Chicago Board of Trade, is farming with her father and gets drawn into the conflict mostly against her will. She is much more interested in another young farmer who just happens to be the grandson of the hero of my novel *The Last of the Husbandmen*.

The other main character is a seemingly mild-mannered priest who is having grave doubts about the theology he is supposed to uphold. He likes raising horses and sheep more than he likes quoting the bible and ends up being

called the Lone Ranger because of his habit of riding his horse to the rural churches he is in charge of, to save on gas, he says as an excuse. The Lone Ranger and Pope Mary get involved in all sorts of adventures, from trying to figure out who broke down the locked church door to who scammed the diocese out of the closed church's money, to how the bishop and the local government agricultural officials got outwitted, to who is in love with whom. Things turn out well for almost everyone and if you can get through the book without laughing at least once (even if you are a bishop) I'll give you your money back.

Anyway, I was half way through the writing before I realized what my characters were telling me. In all religions (well, all Christian and Muslim sects anyway) the consumption of food is at the center of the worship ceremonies. The Eucharist or Communion service in Christian sects and Ramadan in Islam are really centered on spiritual and physical celebrations of eating communal meals, the Last Supper over and over again. Food really does, in an ecological sense anyway, transubstantiate or consubstantiate into body and blood, no big mystery about it. Food is supposed to be sacred, not fast. Maybe I should have titled the novel "Holy Food," to go with my other book, "Holy Shit."

Buried Treasure



SEPTEMBER IS THE TIME we dig for buried treasure, that is, potatoes. I try to wait for a day at the end of a dry spell. The spuds come out of the ground without much muddy clay clinging to them. When I had to contend with muddy potatoes, I would spray them with water to get them clean, but I read somewhere that washing is not a good idea if the potatoes were going into storage. Better just leave the dirt on until it comes time to eat them. Don't know how true that is, but I will use any excuse available for not doing work that I don't have to do. For what its worth, dirt clings to red potatoes more than white or yellow ones, but I think that is because our red ones, Red Norland, are a bit rough-skinned while the white ones, Kennebec, are as smooth as a baby's cheek. All red potatoes seem to develop slightly rough skins in our ground, but Red Norland is the best tasting potato of all to my taste buds.

Anyway, I like to dig potatoes. Maybe the next hill will have the biggest potato ever, or the most spuds in a hill ever. I leave the treasures lay on top of the ground for an hour or so to dry out in the open air and sunlight, then load them in a wheelbarrow and let them sit over night in a dark, dry place. If you let potatoes sit out in the sun too long, as you all know, they will start turning green and that green is somewhat toxic.

Next day or two days later, I re-bury the potatoes. For years I had two steel barrels (30 gallon size) that I dug into the ground to hold them. Digging holes for the barrels was not easy but I was younger then. The barrels rusted out and I had to replace them this year. Being older and smarter (debatable), I used plastic bins and dug them into a handy slope at the edge of the woods. The bins are less than two feet tall, easier to reach in to the bottom in the ground. They are two to three feet in length and so hold about as much as the barrels did. As you can see in the photo, taking advantage of the sloping hill, I only had to move about half the dirt I would have if on the level, and put the excavated dirt on the downside of the hill to bury the bins up to their lids. The slope also means that water will drain away from the site better. These bins have a curled lip around the edge, allowing me to drill little holes all around for a bit of air circulation without letting any water or mice in.

First a layer of straw goes in, then a layer of potatoes, then more straw and another layer of potatoes, and so on until the bin is full. Later in the fall, I will pile autumn leaves over the bins about a foot or so deep. The potatoes never freeze even in sub-zero weather. Then through the winter I just have to push aside snow and leaves and lift the lid to get another basket of spuds. The two bins will last until new potatoes are ready next year. In fact, we've also saved our own Kennebec seed potatoes nearly forever and got the Red Norland start a few years ago from organic growers Andy Rinehart and Jan Dawson (Jandy's Farm Market). That's the only way I can be sure that our potatoes continue to be truly organic, that is without the BT gene that has been put into commercial potatoes to combat potato bugs. The experts say it is safe to eat a potato that will kill bugs, but not me.

That's all the know-how necessary. What could be a simpler, more secure food supply? Even if the electricity goes off, even if the house blows away, even if we are visited with "the rocket's red glare and bombs bursting in air," our buried treasure will be safe. Along with carrots which I leave in the ground in the garden covered with more leaves, and cabbages that should last where they grow until January if given a little protection, there's about ten million scabby apples on the trees this year, too many for even the deer to eat. Apples can be stored for winter much like potatoes but we just keep some in the cellar. Plus, there's all the stuff that Carol has canned. I think we could survive a couple of months anyway. Can't say that about gold.

Down With Raised Beds



THE ONLY RAISED BED I've ever found useful in sixty years of gardening is the one in my bedroom. And after I quit double-digging, I didn't have to spend as much time there either. Or if I did, it was for reasons other than resting.

I must be wrong, but I don't understand the modern enchantment with raised beds. Yes, if you are a market gardener, you will no doubt feel obliged to plant on raised beds to get the earliest possible crops but you can get early vegetables in unraised beds too. I have a very disgusting sister who plants peas in March here in northern Ohio, and often gets away with it, without raised beds.

If you want to plant a garden on an old parking lot (I have a hunch there will be many abandoned ones in the future) then by all means you will need a raised bed. (It should give us all pause, however, to realize that plants can come right up through cracks in pavement and grow vigorously— so what's that say about all our dearly held beliefs about gardening?) And definitely, if you want to plant a garden on something akin to swampland, you will surely want a raised bed. But the poorly-drained soil under it will still "lay wet" and give you problems when your plants put down deep roots.

Other than those situations, raised beds guarantee only one result as far as I can see. You will have to irrigate more when dry weather comes and it comes quicker on raised beds. All of us gardeners pride ourselves in being eco-friendly. What is so ecological about using water (and the power to pump it) when you can avoid doing so? Also, if you are bound and determined to make raised beds, a veteran market gardener just told me that you should be sure to mulch the paths heavily around the raised beds. Otherwise moisture will be drawn out of the bed even faster. So why not just go with unraised beds and mulch them?

My disgusting sister who gloats about having peas two weeks before I do without raised beds has been fertilizing her garden heavily with composted manure every year for at least half a century. Her soil is so rich you could stick a broom handle in it and it would grow. When you make soil like that, who needs raised beds? Even she still has to replant some years because peas have a tendency to rot rather than sprout if it snows too hard after planting. Needless to say, that would also be true on raised beds.

I have almost the same kind of bias about double-digging. To turn compacted soils into a productive garden, double-digging makes sense the first year or two, I suppose. But I will bet a bushel of surplus tomatoes (from soil never double-dug), that if you have that kind of compaction problem, it will take quite a few years of mulch, compost and avoidance of unnecessary tillage to change it, and double-digging won't speed up the time.

Please tell me how you increase the fertility of your soil, if you bury unfertile soil on top with the unfertile soil underneath it. Or if the soil on top is fertile, why bury it under the less fertile soil underneath. If both the topsoil and the soil under it are fertile, is it not just loony to risk throwing your back out of whack by double-digging? If compaction is the problem, shouldn't you be attacking the cause? Usually compaction comes when a clay soil needs underlying tile drainage. The impatient gardener roto-tills too deeply before the soil is sufficiently dried out and that happens on raised beds too.

Okay, so I'm being a little facetious here. Correct double-digging is not exactly the way I describe. It is even loonier. You dig up a spade's worth of soil across the garden plot that you are about to desecrate. You put it in a wheelbarrow. Then you loosen up a spade's depth below that. Then you dig up the next trench's worth and put it where the dirt in the wheelbarrow had

been, being careful to keep the topmost soil on top even though, and I just watched a gardener doing this, there is absolutely no difference between the soil on top and the soil four inches below it. And so you proceed until you have moved the top layer of soil over about six inches. Then, if you have not yet slipped a disc or two, you put the wheelbarrow load in the last trench. Never in the entire process is the cause of the compaction, real or imagined, addressed and so the suffering double-diggers figure they must move the top layer of their garden over another six inches next year, until knee surgery do us part.

Maybe you have arguments in favor of raised beds and/or double-digging that I don't appreciate. I'll bow to your expertise if that is so. But since I get gobs more food from my garden than I can ever eat without these tortures, why would I want to torment myself and end my gardening life too early? I would rather spend that time in another kind of raised bed I highly recommend. A hammock.

Why Do People Congregate In Big Cities?

ONE OF LIFE'S MYSTERIES for me is why country people have inevitably migrated to the cities in every civilization that I have studied. In the United States, where there has been little of the kind of violent upheavals that send third world countries into instability, the reasons for migration to cities seem especially specious to me. Some say we move because rural life is boring or stifling with puritanical overly-conservative life styles. Actually agrarian society has often been shockingly wide open as I tried to point out in *Mother of All Arts*. What happened to me just yesterday seems appropriate. I was parked along the edge of a country road jawing with a couple who were harvesting wheat. A very long-haired individual, naked to the waist, came flying by on a motorcycle, tresses trailing in the wind. Trying to be funny, I opined: "Well it must have been a man because it wasn't wearing a bra." One of the farmers replied, rolling her eyes: "That's a dangerous conclusion to reach around here."

Others move to town because they want to escape what they consider the hard work of farming. That is no longer all that true either and I wonder if it ever was. Millions of factory and construction workers perform harder physical work than most farmers do today or ever did. A friend likes to tell how thrilled he was to get off the farm 70 years ago because he had to work there every day milking cows, no weekends off. When he finally got a decent job in town, he found that, to get ahead, he still had to work on weekends.

Sometimes I think the ideal life occurred in Europe (probably other places too) before the two world wars wrecked the old agrarian life there. Unlike in America, where farmers established themselves on homesteads dotted out all over the countryside some distance from each other, European farmers preferred to live in villages, and to go out daily to their farms around the village. There was little chance to feel isolated or bored and lonely because in the evenings they all gathered on doorsteps or street corners or more likely in the taverns, and enjoyed the camaraderie, true social security, pastimes and amusements of communal life. I'd vote for that any day and now of course we have that, in a way, on the Internet. My village community now extends to New Zealand and Australia which is just awesome.

The main reason country people move to town is because that's where the money is, or so they have always been taught. At some point in every civilization's history, money becomes the standard by which all things are reckoned, and after that the seemingly simple, laid-back pastoral life is no longer deemed possible. I have watched this happen first hand in our own Appalachia. In some parts of the world migration is physically forced on people by various forms of military or political or economic power. But the mountain people of Appalachia were not exactly forced to leave in most cases. I know personally quite a few of them. Some of them once worked for me when I was running a ditching machine. They claimed to love their mountains and would go back home into the hills every weekend, often hocking their spare tire for gas to make the trip. So why did they go north to the factories?

I think that in some cases, people leave rural homes for quite specific material reasons that are overlooked by economists. I have a theory about Appalachia which I have seen hinted at by only one other author, Richard C. Davids, in his excellent non-fiction book, *The Man Who Moved A Mountain*. The destruction of the vast forests of chestnut trees by blight in the Appalachians coincided roughly with the Great Depression when the great migration from the mountains to the cities got into full swing. The hill people depended on chestnuts as much as we depend today on corn and wheat. The end of the chestnut meant the end of the hill economy. Could that have been the real reason they left their independent life for the auto factories of Detroit?

I have heard scores of reasons for migration to cities, all creditable, most of them based on reactions to population pressure. But I am still left with an anomaly. If there are too many people living in the country, how do they improve their lot by moving where populations are even denser and competition for jobs even greater? If people are short on food, why would they move to a place where they can't grow any of their own? Detroit, by the way, is making news today because of a large garden farm being established right in the center of what was once factory fantasyland.

All this migration to the cities seems especially crazy now that we live so much in an electronic world. People still flock to the city for jobs, but the jobs aren't there anymore. I will probably be ridiculed up one side of Manhattan and down the other for writing this, but I say that the modern

large city is a dinosaur, economically and environmentally, and people are slowly beginning to realize it. The extended village is the wave of the future. I look at those energy-sucking skyscrapers and I see very tall tombstones.

Stay Home And Make Some Real Money

FAR BE IT FROM ME to criticize the American way and it wouldn't change if I did. But it seems to me that another way of looking at life needs to be presented occasionally. Those of us who choose to live the home-centered garden and farming way have some built in advantages when it comes to profits and losses.

If time is money, I've lost thousands of dollars waiting for traffic lights to change or traffic jams to clear up or planes to get back on schedule. The fuel and blood pressure burned up in the process could cost me a whole lot more than four dollar gas. On trips, if you don't pack some food, a meal on the road is going to average out at about eight dollars a head. If you stay at a motel, deduct another bunch of bucks. But the bedbugs are free. All this is what you get for the thrill of staring at the scenic sides of huge semi-trucks as you roar down the highway always three feet and three seconds away from death.

I manage to shed twenty bucks minimum just going to town no matter how hard I try not to. If I drive around long enough looking for bargains, I spend the money I might save in the store on gas.

We hear a lot about local food these days, but the bankers sure don't want anyone to take that too literally. If everyone ate at home out of their gardens most of the time, the so-called economy would collapse because it is based on the assumption that the vast majority of people will continue to eat at restaurants, out of necessity or simply because that is the established way of American life.

If you want to make some real money, start eating breakfast at home, pack a lunch, stop snacking at your favorite local sugar shop and eat dinner at home. One of these days a parent might take a good look at the daily budget and decide that it might be more profitable to stay home and cook than to hold down an outside job.

It is not just the cooking. There is also housework which more and more is done by hired help. Having that evening cocktail at home costs half of what you'll pay at a bar. Then there is the second or third car that becomes necessary, not just for going to work but for carting children around from one event to another because no longer are there activities for children at

home. I like to brag about a family in southern Ohio I know well, where all the children were homeschooled. The one I have been corresponding with for about 10 years scored in the highest percentile when she took those ACT tests to go to college without ever having graced a regular school. I call her Super Gal. She taught herself to play the organ and plays professionally now, is a fairly good artist and illustrates her sister's regular family newsletter detailing the sometimes highly adventurous life on their farm, is an expert on raising chickens, helps with the family garden and the neighboring farmers in haymaking, works in a local greenhouse when she has time, taught herself how to wire a house, repair a pickup, tan animal skins, build sheds, and is one of the most well-read young people I have ever encountered. (At the moment she is reading Thomas Aquinas and I am not making that up.) All through her and her siblings' childhoods, her parents paid particular attention to providing home activities, both of work and play. She likes her courses in college now but is not sure it is worth the money. Getting a degree for a high-paying job is not a big deal with her. She is in school to pursue wisdom and knowledge; she already knows seven ways from Sunday how to make money. I know one thing for sure. Super Gal's mother has made a lot more real profit raising her family than she would have at a salaried job.

Let us say that a person like Super Gal decided not to go to college, which is what her sister decided. You can pursue a higher education on your own at home, as many people are doing. That would save you at least \$12,000 a year and probably a lot more.

Dining out as much as people do now is costing a family of four well over a hundred dollars a week so there's at least another \$5000 a year that you could save cooking at home, especially eating your own backyard and barnyard food.

A second or third car cost about \$7000 a year to own.

Vacationing and recreating at home would save another \$5000 minimum. You can travel all over the world on the Internet.

Savings on not having to buy so many new clothes or extra gas or hiring babysitters so you can work an outside job could amount to at least another \$5000 to \$10,000 a year.

My numbers may not be accurate enough, but they prove the point, I think. The farming and gardening way of life offers the opportunity to save a lot of money just by staying home. And you won't have to pay a cent of income taxes on it either.

Author Gene Logsdon



Gene and Carol Logsdon have a small-scale experimental farm in Wyandot County, Ohio. Gene is the author of numerous books and magazine articles on farm-related issues, and believes sustainable pastoral farming is the solution for our stressed agricultural system.

