



THE BERRY CENTER



*Reuben Brown, Marvin Ford, Wendell Berry, Eddie Sharp and David Poe working the 1973 tobacco harvest at Owen and Loyce Flood's farm in Port Royal, Kentucky.
Photo: James Baker Hall*

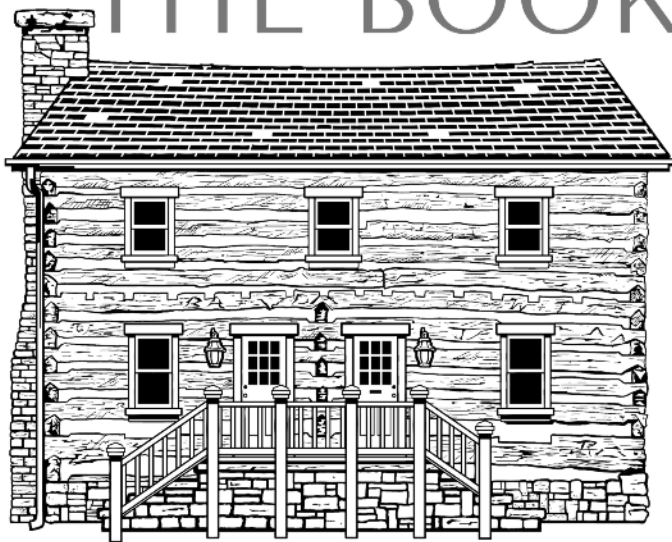
The Berry Center Journal

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The Pleasure of Work

AN EXCERPT FROM “*THE NEED TO BE WHOLE*”

by WENDELL BERRY



*When work is done for love—of the place where it is done, of the materials,
the artistry, and the product of the work, of the people it is done with and for—
then the sign or evidence of it will be beauty.*

THE FUNDAMENTALISTS OF religion and the fundamentalists of science make themselves equally ridiculous by reading the first chapters of Genesis as a kind of science and a kind of history. Those chapters, of course, give us one among many “creation myths.” The distinction, for us, of the myth in Genesis is that it is one of the sources of Western, our own, tradition. Our literary culture teems with remembrances of it, references to it and retellings of it. I have always liked it (in the King James Version) and have valued it highly ever since I got sense enough to do so. The only part of the Genesis creation myth that I would resist or revise is 3:17-19, which construes our need to live by work, by the sweat of our faces, as a curse. This suggests to me that our modern fear and disdain, now surely enlarged by ignorance, of physical work outdoors in the weather is an ancient thing under the sun, probably older than the Bible. Its origin, then, would be in the human trait (or deadly sin) known as sloth or laziness. If I were allowed to revise Genesis 3:17-19, I would like to describe the circumstances in which hard work in the hot sun might be considered a curse, as opposed to the circumstances in which it has been considered a privilege, even a blessing.

Work that is done on too large a scale and that goes on the same, day after day for too long a time, work in which the worker makes only a part and not the

whole of a made thing, work that is poorly compensated and unthanked, work for the benefit only of strangers, work that does harm to the world and other creatures, work that is done too fast and is poorly done, work that is ugly in the doing and in the result, work that one does only because one is obliged or compelled to do it, or that one must do because it is the only work available—such work may properly be thought a curse, and may receive curses in response. Such work may cause people to think slave thoughts and adopt slave ways. “Thank God it’s Friday” is a slave thought.

Good work, like the practice of neighborly love, depends upon a certain propriety or limitation of scale. For work to be pleasing and satisfying to do, good in performance and result, the scale must not be so large as continuously to enforce haste or overwork. Rightness of scale prevents enough work from becoming too much. The scale is right, particularly in farming, when work can be done at the right time. As the scale of grain farming has increased here in my country, the idea of “the right time” is ignored or forgotten, and the huge machines, also out of scale, wallow through the rain-softened fields, leaving gouges that would break a true farmer’s heart.

The issue of scale is fundamental and all-important. But good work is complex in its making. Once the scale is right, other indispensable qualities are combined with it to make the work right. When it



Wendell Berry at home in 2012.

Photo: Guy Mendes

is not solitary, work benefits in happiness and quality from good companionship among workers—from, obviously, the working-well-together of workers who know one another well. Good work employs the mind as well as the body of the worker. It embodies the difference between knowing how, using skill, improving with experience and working by rote as in effect a machine or a machine part.

It makes a great difference for the better if the work is the worker's vocation. People who are in no way "called" to the work they do, if it is only their "job," find little reason to work well, and they feel like slaves. The *Temenos Academy Review* recently published an address, "Education in Art," that Ananda Coomaraswamy presented at Harvard in 1947, and here is what he said about vocation:

In a truly civilized society men should be able to earn their living by doing such work as they would rather be doing than anything else in the world. It is only where, as Plato says, a man's vocation is also his means of livelihood, that

"more will be done, and better done, and more easily than in any other way." This I have seen with my own eyes in India where men are proud of their hereditary vocations, whatever these may be; under these conditions, hours of labor have no meaning, since one is naturally inclined to do as much as one can; the labourer is worthy of his hire, but he is not working *for* hire, and would often rather work than play or eat.

When I read to the end of that last sentence, I laughed because it reminded me of a story.

A good many years ago, to write an article for my friend Maury Telleen, editor of *The Draft Horse Journal*, I went with my son to visit a good Amish community in Indiana. Will Schmucker and his nephew, Martin Schmucker, whose small farms adjoined, were among the finest breeders of Belgian horses. Toward evening on the day of our visit, our hosts began to show us their horses. At Martin's direction, his children, some of them very young, began leading horses from the barns and, one after

another, trotting them up and down the lane in front of the farms. The horses were of all ages, and in conformation, motion, and style they met, with remarkable consistency, a high standard of excellence. We were watching what amounted to a horse show of rare quality, put on with considerable painstaking and effort, for an audience of two.

The two barns held a lot of horses, and the show went on at such length that I began to feel uneasy. My son and I had not come as buyers. Even considering the exhibitors' obvious pride and delight in them, the horses were being shown as a kindness that we had no way of repaying.

"Martin," I said. "It's late. You all need to be eating your supper."

It had not occurred to me that Martin was the third member of the audience. He said, "Around here, we eat when there's nothing better to do."

* * *

When the scale is right, and the work answers the calling of the workers, "such work as they would rather be doing than anything else in the world," then the work comes to be motivated by love, and that changes everything. When work is done for love—of the place where it is done, of the materials, the artistry, and the product of the work, of the people it is done with and for—then the sign or evidence of it will be beauty. Both the work and its result will be beautiful. Ugliness in work, or in its results, is a sign of something badly gone wrong. In my early years, when farming here was smaller in scale and far more a discipline of the eyes and hands than now, an adjective often applied to work was "pretty." Of mowing a field or cultivating a row crop with a walking or a riding plow, you would hear, "Oh, that's pretty work." That work can give pleasure is one of the happiest things we can know of our life in this world.

If, under the right conditions, work can be rewarding, something people can be glad to do, even reluctant to stop doing, then we were wrong to have decided, as we seem generally to have done, that sedentary work or light work or easy work or brief work or no

work is better than good work. The idea that human workers can and should be replaced by machines, which has been the ruling dogma of the industrial revolution until now, is radically reductive and deterministic—I would say nihilistic. It reduces us and our work by subtracting artistry, love, beauty, workmanly pride, pleasure—all the qualities and powers that enable us effectively to love one another and our home places in this world. The idea that work is bad, long an axiom of so-called industrial civilization, forestalls as a matter of course any effective opposition to the replacement of human workers by industrial devices. Such replacement obviously is promoted also by the vast increase of degrading industrial jobs.

The reigning experts, politicians, columnists, and other announcers of public truths customarily do not ask why the "advance" of drastically reductive technology is called "progress." They do not propose that any mere person might or should have a choice for or against the adoption of such technology. They do not suggest that freedom may require, or depend upon, the willingness to deliberate upon and exercise such a choice, against as readily as for. They appear instead to believe that the choice has been made for us by some superhuman power or fate, and that the future of technology is as fixed and unchangeable as its past. Thus, so far as the public powers are concerned, human beings are now as reduced, as deprived of their traditional qualities, standards, and aspirations, as so many specimens, skinned and stuffed. But technological determinism is really no more than a fashion or a fad, and it can be chosen against, as the Amish have done. The rest of us can choose against it by refusing to buy anything we don't need. Speaking of course just for myself, I have gained far more happiness from my refusal to buy a television set and a computer than from anything I have ever bought. And I have experienced intense happiness from work done with old (cheap) technologies—a pocketknife, a hoe, a pencil—and my bare hands. ■

The Need to Be Whole: Patriotism and the History of Prejudice will be published this summer by Shoemaker + Company.

Working Landscapes, Working People

An interview with MARY BERRY



Mary Berry sat down with board member Kate Dalton Boyer to talk about the coming year at The Berry Center.

Kate. Tell us what's on your mind at the moment.

Mary. I am thinking about the failure of imagination to do anything about the state we are in. Since the goal is to quickly and easily move raw materials from rural places into urban places at the lowest possible price, nobody seems to be willing to think outside of our current system. I wonder what it's going to take for people to think in the way that my grandfather did. He would talk about what government was for, about "these little people"—and he certainly didn't mean "little people" in any derogatory fashion. He was talking about his own people, his own family, people that were little in power but it turns out very long on culture—long on the knowledge you need to survive; the kind of people the climate change movement needs to be working for.

I also continue to think about what's been left out of the conversation, particularly among the people who should be our natural constituents, people who care about the environment or who want to talk about conservation. Agrarians remain so marginal. Many people don't see the plight of the small farmer as the place to start. But there will be no social justice in this country as long as the land that we depend upon for everything we need is abused, and the people who actually know how to use that land, to supply us with what we need to live, can't survive economically themselves.

I've given up on political solutions almost entirely, although I'm not going to give up on the chance that there are solutions. But I certainly would like to feel that our constituency is growing in knowledge and interest. Steve, my husband, says that what the local food movement has not done is grown that constituency. Both he and I started as first adopters in entrepreneurial agriculture around 1990, and we had a wonderful constituency of people who would make the trip to pick up our chickens or our vegetables an important part of their week, and who came to know us. But since then we haven't grown the pool of people who see the difference between that and buying organic food from large grocery stores. And I am asking myself why this is so.

Kate. Part of your work here is to remember and revive some good ideas that have been shunted aside or forgotten. And one of them is the idea of a parity price, setting a price that allows farmers to make back their costs plus a living wage for their work. How are Our Home Place Meat's Rose Veal and Berry Beef doing in getting that parity price?

Mary. A couple of years before The Berry Center started it became clear to me that the burley tobacco program and its principles had been forgotten. Those principles are: parity pricing for farmers,



Road to Steve Smith and Mary Berry's barn, Trimble County.

Photo: Ben Aguilar

and managing supply so as to maintain a parity price. When I took my father's advice, that you have to start any good work with an inventory, I knew that what we had to work with here was pretty good livestock farming. So we started with that, and at those first meetings the farmers who came were very silent—just listening, not talking. It was completely unnerving. But we made clear that our intention was to ensure our farmers made back the cost of production plus enough profit to make at least part of their annual income so they could plan an economic year. We said we're going to make a contract with you at the first of every year, and we're going to live up to that contract. And we've done it. And we will continue doing it, even though the inflation our farmers are dealing with has made it necessary to revisit our pricing.

We've heard from some of our farmers that Our Home Place Meat is the reason they're keeping on. We've heard that they can imagine someday they might not have to work a full-time job off the farm. This is still in the future. But the numbers are all going the right way. We're growing intelligently, in order to protect that parity price, so we don't have too much product on hand that we have to move quickly.

Kate. Didn't we just see at lunch an Our Home Place Meat farmer who has persuaded friends to move down from Indiana to work here together with him and his wife?

Mary. Yes, and it sounds like they are sharing some of the responsibilities for caring for the beef cattle in our program. That this farmer has encouraged another young couple to move to Henry County and farm—what could I hope for that’s better than that?

The farmers in Our Home Place Meat understand they need each other. They understand we’re trying to scale out the prosperity, so more farmers can benefit, and not scale up for just a few. And in fact we are adding farmers, slowly, and we can do that because one of our key customers, What Chefs Want, came to us and said they wanted to plan for growth 15 years out. In all the years I’ve worked on a local food system, this kind of planning has been unheard of. But the people at What Chefs Want seem to understand that a ready supply of good meat is something they need and would like to ensure. And that’s good for us all.

Kate. Another phrase you’ve been using a lot lately is that old promise of “forty acres and a mule,” an idea that runs counter to the current trend of larger farms and fewer farmers. While people in cities may be generally aware of this consolidation, they aren’t thinking much about rural places in economic decline or hollowed out of their people, and what it means to us as a state or a region or a country when you lose the countryside. What would you say in response to that lack of understanding?

Mary. The hope that the freed slaves had for forty acres and a mule is so meaningful. It’s the most American of dreams, and it speaks to so much that we need to think about. I think it was William Faulkner who said that the sweat of a man’s work ought to fall on his own ground. The freed slaves understood that deeply; they understood what it meant to be able to take care of yourself. That’s about as free as we’re going to get.

But this idea also speaks to limits: how much do you need? The problem of our culture—the problem of agriculture, the problem of industrialism—is there are simply no limits. Instead, we are encouraged to think of limitlessness: that we are not a land-based economy, which of course we are; that we are not bound by the laws of nature, which we are. Educators have been telling young people for a few generations now that you can be anything you want to be. That’s never been true, and it’s not true now. To think of a culture and a people able to imagine in their hopes and their dreams that they will be content with forty acres and a mule—well, we all need to be thinking within those kinds of limits.

Kate. I want to go back again to this idea of price. Americans will pay up for so many things, and that’s true of Americans at all income levels. People eating out will pay an amount that could feed them at home for several days, and they are completely willing to pay that extra for the experience or just for the convenience. But when it comes to buying food at a grocery store, the pressure on price is severe. A grocery or a farmers’ market is not an easy place to make money. And the biggest price pressure is always going to be on the person raising the food. That indicates to me that we need a change of mindset. What would a cultural change require?

Mary. It will require a lot of work. Something like Our Home Place Meat could apply to everything that farmers produce, and that’s work. Once you acknowledge a problem and get to work on it, you can solve that problem, and the problem itself is no longer abstract. I think that’s the way work has to go—you can talk for a while, but then you’ve got to start doing something.

A program like Our Home Place Meat is not going to work on a large scale; it’s got to start in a particular place with particular people working hard every day to make it fly. We are doing that and we are compiling information other people can use in other places to do something like this. That’s

I believe the cultural change we need now is to become a people who are willing to get to the truth of the way we live. I also believe that once you start working toward the truth about something, you can begin to be more hopeful.



the “easy” answer. The cultural change needed seems to me to get back to “working landscapes, working people.” We’ve got to understand—and unfortunately it’s necessary to say again and again—that we’ve got an economy that’s destroying the land and the people of this country, and it’s going on all over this world. Our national culture is somehow protected from this knowledge. I’ve lived in a rural place all my life, and lived with the decline all my life, so the fact that people don’t know it’s happening is amazing to me. When I started The Berry Center I traveled around speaking to groups, and I kept having to point out that just because people talk about a local food system all the time doesn’t mean things are better in rural America. In fact, things are getting worse.

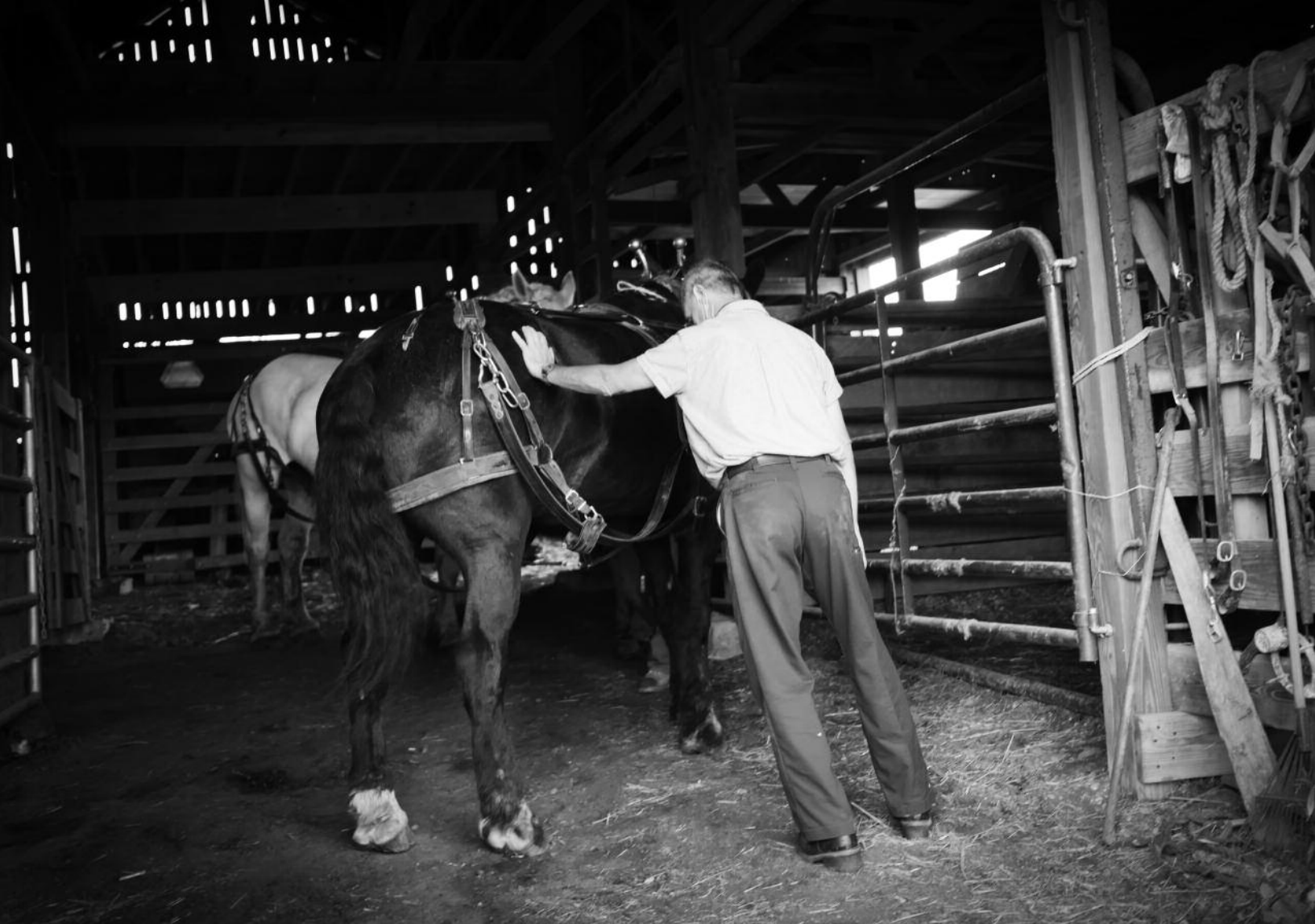
Somebody asked me the other day if farmers weren’t happier now than they were a couple of decades ago, because when she goes to a farmers’ market, the farmers there seem happy. I told her I sold at farmers’ markets for years and I often seemed a lot happier than I was. Any farmers’ market requires some performance art.

One of the cultural changes people need to make is to learn something about what they’ve got to have to survive. What’s keeping them going? Where’s it coming from? We are all complicit in this destructive economy, and we all must think about what we can do to live less destructively. But industrialism has taken over people’s minds. It’s certainly done so to farmers: it takes over their minds first, and then it takes their farms. And if we can’t see outside of it, around it, we come up with movements which are often bandaids. A garden on a White House lawn does not mean the culture of agriculture has changed, and it behooves people to notice that fact. We can start just by noticing.

I believe the cultural change we need now is to become a people who are willing to get to the truth of the way we live. I also believe that once you start working toward the truth about something, you can begin to be more hopeful. You can have joyful days. But if you’re lying to yourself, or indulging yourself all the time—and self-righteousness can be a terrible indulgence, and so can fear—then, in my experience, you stay muddled, and worried, and you need a vacation to get away from the stress. Being angry with the present, if you stop there, and dreading the future, are not going to get us anywhere.

But I think the truth *does* set us free. I say that even though we’ve got to acknowledge that doing anything about the situation we’re in now is going to take a long, long time. Wes Jackson says if you think your work is going to be finished in your own lifetime, you’re not thinking big enough. I know that to be true. Should we be so fortunate as to be able to keep on with the work at The Berry Center, I will not be around to see what I hope someday other people see—myriads of small farmers making money from their cattle and their forests and their small dairies. That’s not going to happen in my lifetime, but the changes I do get to see are enough to keep me going. We can’t get lost in the big answer, which is never really an answer for a rural community. We need thousands of small answers, and we need to keep at work on all the many little steps forward those answers require, that make real change possible for working people. ■

Mary Berry is executive director of The Berry Center.



Professor Rick Thomas with the horse team Jed and Felix at The Berry Center farm.

Photo: Ben Aguilar

The Vulnerability of ‘Efficient Markets’

by ALAN GUEBERT



ONE OF THE most beautiful—and inexplicable—aspects of economics is how its practitioners never seem to be wrong. Indeed, almost every school of economic thought, from John Maynard Keynes’ demand-driven economics on the left to Arthur Laffer’s supply-side economics on the right, is crowded with disciples defending their leader’s theories and just as often, if subtly, attacking their theological foes.

One such fistfight broke out in, of all places, the Feb. 28 editorial pages of *The New York Times*. In it, writer and editor David Dayen undressed one of

the most famous economists of the last forty years, Lawrence Summers, for his role in building one of the most efficiency-centered, imbalanced, and fragile economies in history. “For decades, economists like Mr. Summers advanced policies like globalization, deregulation, and markets that valued efficiency over competition,” says Dayen. “They promised that these trends would deliver lower prices. And they did, for a time. But they also left the system vulnerable.”

Vulnerable to what we see today—broken global supply chains impossibly slow to repair; a domestic

‘The trade-off was clear: sacrifice resiliency, wage security, and community for the promise of a five-dollar pack of tube socks.’



economy that, somehow, is both quickly growing and mired in inflation; and a consumer culture so treasured that we gladly trade regulation and competition for lower prices and higher economic growth. It's the manifestation of Nobel Prize-winning economist Milton Friedman's "marketized economy," explains Dayen. "[T]he sole social responsibility of business is to increase profits. Cut regulations, cut taxes and allow companies to structure markets, people like Friedman maintained, and watch the economy take off."

In short, markets are most important and government—regulation, taxes, antitrust—are far less important.

That's been a solidly bipartisan tenet for fifty years. While Republican administrations—Reagan, Bush II, and Trump—cut taxes and nearly eliminated antitrust, Democratic administrations, especially Carter and Clinton, deregulated trucking, airlines, railroads, banking, and agriculture. And most of this was accomplished by the early 2000s to lay the foundation for globalization—ever bigger free trade deals; the rapid rise of unregulated financial derivative markets; easy access to cheap, plentiful labor; and sophisticated, just-in-time supply chain management.

A Summers' acolyte, Dayen reports, once likened it to how Walmart initially impacted the U.S. economy: the giant retailer might not have been good for local communities or local job markets, but there "is little dispute" Walmart's cutthroat business model helped the other 120 million Americans not employed in local retail. As such, "The trade-off was clear: sacrifice resiliency, wage security, and community for the promise of a five-dollar pack of tube socks." We may not like the comparison but

we know it's spot-on because, by golly, a pack of tube socks for \$5—even if the socks were made by children working 70 hours a week in a pollution-riddled sweatshop—is still an easy, smart buy, right?

Until this year, when those socks—like our long-ordered television, new dishwasher, or car—were trapped somewhere in a global supply chain with too few manufacturers, too few shipping companies, too few ports, too few railroads, too few truck drivers, too few retailers, and too few solutions on how to fix the whole bloody mess.

American farmers and ranchers know the feeling. Two years ago a global pandemic, predicted though it was, fouled the food system because no one thought it could happen so no one had any plans for when it did happen. And when it did happen, what was our first instinctive reaction? Give market giants like exporters and meatpackers even more market power; power it will take decades, if ever, to get back.

Today, war is ripping through integrated markets from Odessa to Omaha. No tax cuts, fewer environmental rules, more deregulation or less antitrust enforcement will lower crude oil prices or cut U.S. potash costs. But none of this should be news because, as Dayen reminds us, "Broken systems raise costs far faster than resilient ones."

America's too few farmers and ranchers, too many broken rural communities, and too much cheap food are testament to that inarguable economic fact. ■

This article was originally published as a syndicated column the week of March 13, 2022. Past columns, supporting documents, and contact information are posted at farmand-foodfile.com. © 2022 ag comm; all rights reserved by Alan Guebert.

An Update on Our Home Place Meat

by BETH AND KYLEN DOUGLAS



*“I dislike the thought that some animal has been made miserable to feed me.
If I am going to eat meat, I want it to be from an animal that has lived a pleasant,
uncrowded life outdoors, on bountiful pasture, with good water nearby and trees for shade.”*

—WENDELL BERRY, *WHAT ARE PEOPLE FOR?*

HENRY COUNTY, KENTUCKY was once a thriving working landscape where farmers could afford to farm and not need to supplement their income with an off-the-farm job. With the number of family farms decreasing, and the number of acres per farm along with the price per acre drastically increasing, farmers have been forced to be price takers at the industrial market instead of price makers.

The Berry Center recognizes the best farming we have left in Kentucky is livestock farming, and started Our Home Place Meat in 2017 to encourage the kind of farming that works with nature instead of against it. Regenerative farming maximizes crop yields while improving soil health, water resilience, and nutrient density. The idea is to meet farmers where they are, using Our Home Place Meat’s flagship brand, Rose Veal, as a perfect product for Kentucky’s cow-calf producers. Unlike conventional veal, Rose Veal animals are not byproducts of the dairy industry, but are bred for their meat and spend their lives in perennial pastures with their mothers. The descriptor “rose” comes from the color of the meat developed while roaming the pastures.

We introduced a second product line in the fall of 2021, Berry Beef, which is sold exclusively to restaurants through the distributor What Chefs Want. This meat comes from cattle that are pasture-

raised but finished with some grain, and gives us another way to market sustainably farmed Henry County beef.

To build a livestock cooperative in Henry County, The Berry Center hired staff to run the program and gathered good farmers to work with and help guide the staff. Over the years, this once-quiet and reserved group of farmers are now not afraid to speak up, because they know their voices are being heard and respected. Two of the most important aspects of this program are the parity prices and production controls. Farmers are paid for their expenses and time, while still making a profit. They sign contracts at the beginning of the year, allowing them to know how much money they will make off contracted cattle, and limiting the supply to what the staff at Our Home Place Meat knows they can sell.

Because the nonprofit Berry Center is running this program, Our Home Place Meat is not pressured by an immediate need to be profitable in order to survive. The Berry Center is funding the program so there is time to “work out the kinks” and make mistakes without the whole organization falling apart. The program began with nine farms, has added two so far in 2022, and we hope to add a few more before the end of the year. This year we expect sales to increase by 215% over 2021, and to increase again in 2023. With these anticipated



Dinner break for the Fiechter and Monroe families of Valley Spirit Farm, who raise cattle for Our Home Place Meat.

Photo: The Berry Center

sales and volume, we will be able to bring in still more farmers—and we believe the day is coming when the program becomes profitable enough to be self-sustaining.

One of the more difficult aspects of the Our Home Place Meat program has been finding the market for Rose Veal. Americans are so far removed from the farm that we have forgotten what our families used to eat: a weaned bull calf that we could put in the freezer and feed the family for the winter. Today, there is a considerable amount of education for consumers. “Is it beef or is it veal?” It’s young beef, but an animal still raised for its meat. “Are these animals put in a cage with movement restricted?” No, these animals thrive on perennial pastures with their mothers. “Were they fed formula?” No, they were raised with their mothers and naturally weaned.

For farmers, Our Home Place Meat strengthens the farming culture in Henry County and gives us something to be proud of. The end of the tobacco base on our farms took away a financial guarantee, and The Berry Center recognizes the need to replace the burley program with another that can give farmers stability. Neighbors who are not in the program want to be, and neighbors in other counties want what we have. Our hope is that this program will be replicated elsewhere, both for meat for other farm products. The truth is, there should be a Berry Center in every region advocating for our farmers. ■

Beth Douglas is director of Our Home Place Meat, and Kylan Douglas is an agricultural education teacher at Franklin County High School. Together they raise beef cattle for Our Home Place Meat. They live with their children in Henry County.

The Old Farmers

by JUSTIN MULLIKIN

As a child in Kentucky,
I sat on the side of a tobacco field
with my dad, in the shade.
Hot from the work, and a little old
he tried to doze
Still enchanted with the world, and young
I asked questions.

* * *

“Dad, what’s this plant called?”
I asked.
That’s ragweed; what makes you sneeze.
So, I don’t like it much,
but something’s got to.
The Good Lord wouldn’t put it here
for no reason.

“Why don’t you cut all the weeds down?”
I asked.
Son, a weed’s just a plant
people think is useless or ugly.
But if we cut all this down,
what would the deer eat?
Where would the rabbits hide?

“What was here before the weeds and tobacco?”
I asked.
It was all forest,
as far as you could see.
Used to be, a squirrel could travel
from the ocean to the Mississippi
and never once touch the ground.

“Is it fun, being a farmer?”
I asked.
You do what you like, but truth is
it’s getting hard.
I’m the only full-time farmer out here now.
Too much work for too little money.
But I like it; that’s all I know.

* * *

As an adult, living in Rwanda,
I sat on the side of a maize field
talking with elderly farmers.
Curious about this outsider, or out of politeness,
they talked.
Curious about their work, and how things had changed,
I asked questions.

* * *

“I heard there are different names for the soil.
What’s this one called?”
I asked.
Gitwa is like this place where we are sitting.
It is the soil that produces more
than all other types of soil.
Gitwa has a beautiful black color, and it is soft too.

There is *rwona*, the soil that doesn’t yield.
and *amayaga*, which doesn’t produce much.
And another one is called *indeka*,
which is the one that yields more.
Munyere is that soil which is red.
If you plant there without any fertilizer,
the maize will sprout with red leaves.

Ikidudu is soil where cows used to be around;
where the log fire would be lit,
and where they would rest.
Ikidudu doesn’t need fertilizers.
Because it contains very old manure.
That soil in which you plant maize and it sprouts
in the blink of an eye, looking nice.

“What used to be here before the farms?”
I asked.
There were trees.
There were those called
ndakatsi, *intusi*, *sipure*, and so on.
And nowadays, coffee.
You just see coffee trees.

“Do your children know all of this?”

I asked.

How can they know?

They only know what they study at school,
modern music, politics, and nothing else.

There were many traditions related to agriculture
which are dying off nowadays.

They live in different worlds;

as we can't know the modern ones,
so they can't know the past ones.

We don't have any scholar knowledge;
we only know the hoe.

So for us, even as we work,
we work for our children.

“Do you want your children to be farmers?”

I asked.

I hope they can be something else.

Farming is getting too hard, now.

Rains never come on time and there is too much sun.

No, only if there is nothing else
can I want them to be a farmer.

What I can add is that in the past
crops would grow, no problem.

But nowadays . . .

I don't know what happened to the soil.

It got depleted.

The earth is old.

Nowadays, you have to force the soil.

People also loved each other back then,

they knew the value of a person, more than today.

You used to prepare sorghum beer,

and invite people to come and help you farm.

After the work was done you would go drink,

eat, sing, and dance until it's finished,

and go back to your homes happy.

They are just working to get money now.

They don't have that time to dance,
they are only focused on cultivating.

There are even those who are more advanced
who are using machines to farm!

And can the machines dance?!

No... Our culture is dying.

* * *

I told them about our farm and my dad,
the last real farmer he knew.

And together we sat in nostalgia
and grief

over all the things lost

and the lost names of things we still see
but no longer *know*.



Farmer Steve Smith, Trimble County.

Photo: Ben Aguilar

Justin Mullikin is a doctoral candidate in geography at Rutgers University. He lives in Philadelphia, and grew up in Madison County, Kentucky. His dissertation is on agrarian change in Rwanda, where he lived and worked for almost a decade.

Mallika
A Life in West Bengal
by APARAJITA SENGUPTA



A lot of the hardships that Mallika faces derive from the fact that someone decided to be concerned about her, therefore causing more damage to her life and livelihood than before.

THE VILLAGE OF RUPPUR in rural West Bengal, although only a three-hour train ride away from my home city, Kolkata, is still primarily agrarian. Mallika is our closest neighbor in the village, and while we were building the shack that was our first shelter on the land, she let us use her house, a beautiful but simple two-story mud-walled and straw-thatched structure, to store our stuff. We would arrive daily on the land from a house we had rented close by, work all day building and planting, and then leave at sundown. Our daughter was then five years old. One day, after a visit with Mallika and when I had just begun to know her story, I went back to our rental house and quickly wrote down these lines. I know now that what I had observed about her spirit could not be truer. As I am currently writing a book about the challenges that women farmers face, Mallika, more than anyone, deserves to be my first sketch.

* * *

Mallika—her name means a small, white, fragrant flower in Bangla—does not fit the stylized poverty of Satyajit Ray’s 1955 film, *Pather Panchali*. She is rather the woman described by Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyay in the novel on which that movie was based, the mesmerizing Sarbajaya who runs a kitchen without sugar, but weaves magic out of molasses and mustard oil for Apu and Durga, her two children. Today, in the quick-falling dusk of the approaching winter, the fire flamed as usual in

Mallika’s tiny, thatched kitchen shed. Today was a special day, because she had bought some *shemai* (a thin rice noodle) to cook a milkless *payesh* for her children. The household owns two spoons, one of which my daughter received with the *payesh* of love on what was possibly the only porcelain saucer in the house. Brother and sister would have to share the other spoon—more a tablespoon than a spoon—and the sister, the elder, ran back into the house to get it.

On the clean, mud-daubed yard, the tops of our heads started feeling the dew. The straw mat torn in places, the soft warmth of the mud *unun* (a hand-dug stove), the single bulb burning dimly, the newborn kids pressing up against the broken tin door of the cowshed—everything reminded me that we had stuffed their rooms with our urban trash: books, pictures, music systems, lamps. Maybe even before we can take our things away in the next few days, they would muddle up the distinction between things needed and things wanted in the heads of these children. Their household (all they owned would fit into a single tin box), the warmth of the evening, and most of all my plate of *payesh*, put my pictures and books and music to shame. I tucked my legs under my body and pulled my daughter close to me. She pushed a spoonful of *payesh* into my mouth and said excitedly, “This is delicious!”

Mallika gets up every morning, cooks a meal, sends her children off to school and her cattle and goats

to graze, and goes to work for a family in the village. She cleans their house and washes their dishes for them. She is usually still smiling when she comes back in the afternoon to cut grass for the cows. She married the man of her choice, an alcoholic now, who works silently when he is able, but talks incessantly when he is drunk. He sometimes beats her. Mallika, who stands about four inches taller than her husband, is physically quite able to return his blows, but winning a physical fight does not earn her a chance to stop working hard. She can fight him back, but she must keep fighting her other battles. They do not own any land, working mostly as hired labor planting and cutting rice, or sometimes leasing a piece of land to work as sharecroppers. When the hiring begins every season, landowners come looking for her, because she is one of the most efficient rice-planters in the neighborhood. Bent like a penknife over the flooded paddy, she sticks the rice saplings into the sticky mud with the precision of an electric stapler.

Maybe I will find out more about her dreams on another winter evening like this, sitting together by the glowing *unun*. She was asking us about Kolkata today. My precocious 5-year-old informed her that Kolkata is extremely polluted, and that one cannot even breathe there.

We headed home as the evening progressed. Someone from the village dropped in for a chat the next morning and remarked that Mallika's husband had not cared for the *payesh* last night. Drunk as usual, he had taken her by the throat and pushed her up against a wall. But her smile, when I met her next, carried no signs of that moment. That is how I know she had kept breathing, and that she will breathe again in her mud yard and in the rice fields, our Mallika flower. If she sheds a petal every day, she grows it back the very next day.

* * *

When I look at Mallika now, I realize how difficult it is to express the dualities of her life. I do not intend to romanticize her poverty, but at the same time, it becomes impossible to see that as her only reality. She is kept poor by her caste, her lack of



Mallika

Photo: Aparajita Sengupta

education, government apathy and chemical farming, and I do feel the need to point out those injustices. However, she is also healthier than most of my friends from the city, is not bound to go to a nine-to-five job, lives in harmony with nature, and is not in debt. I am reminded of Cassie Chambers' *Hill Women*, where she comments on the poverty of rural Appalachia: "Some people look at this image of poverty with a sense of disgust: they see unkempt humans living in unkempt homes. Others view it with a sense of pity: those poor people, trapped in such awful circumstances. I try to look at it with a sense of respect: to remember how hard

Her ancestors have lived in this region for centuries; they have survived droughts and storms with the help of their skills and their knowledge about nature. They hunted, foraged and cultivated the land, and although they never came to own land, they belong here.



they are working to survive in the overlooked corner of the world they call home.” For my part, I am not sure that being overlooked is such a bad thing after all. A lot of the hardships that Mallika faces derive from the fact that someone decided to be concerned about her, therefore causing more damage to her life and livelihood than before. The Green Revolution wanted to end her hunger, thereby depriving her of her free and natural sources of food; the government and corporations decided that she needed more rice, therefore taking land used for growing lentils; the poisons of the Green Revolution killed the free fish and shellfish in the rice fields and she was left with a carbohydrate-only diet. Even charitable organizations that saw her as needing more clothes dumped mostly used synthetics on her, so that her usual cleaning cloths and sanitary pads could no longer come from used cotton sarees, but had to be bought. The government pitied her mud home, and will give her a grant only to build a brick box. To finish building that house, she is finally having to go into debt.

The idea that her children need to be removed from the land, be educated and given jobs in the city is a violent, colonial idea that I cannot support. Her ancestors have lived in this region for centuries; they have survived droughts and storms with the help of their skills and their knowledge about nature. They hunted, foraged and cultivated the land, and although they never came to own land, they belong

here. In this moment in time, it would be enough if her son and daughter could become literate, if her daughter could know how to make a decent living from a homestead and not be married off at 18 (or younger), if her son would invest his money in land or farm equipment rather than in expensive cellphones or motorcycles. Living and working in this landscape has assured me that it is possible to lead a satisfying, nurturing life in this ecosystem—it offers fertility, three growing seasons, plenty of rain, and robust native perennials that can feed entire families. I find myself in a conundrum as I try to decide if Mallika needs any kind of intervention at all, and I believe the answer is to celebrate the inherent beauty and rootedness of her life: the model of sustainability that she is in her personal life, without wanting to be a model of any sort; her resilience in the face of her problems; her mental strength and her capacity to be happy; her deep relationship with nature reflected in her ability to find and cook foraged meals; and above all, her beautiful, strong human spirit. ■

Aparajita Sengupta lives and works on a two-acre natural farm near Santiniketan, West Bengal, India. She and her husband grow almost all of the food that her family eats. She used to teach college before becoming a full-time farmer, and is currently on a Fulbright Academic and Professional Excellence Fellowship at the University of Kentucky, working on a book about small farm-based businesses run by women.

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