



THE ALLEGED FARM NEWS

6 September 2007

When we bought the farm in 1994 Bill Connor, Ad Pearson and Smitty Lundberg were still orbiting the neighborhood—very slowly.

It was never entirely clear what gentle cosmic force had set these three men in motion. They were all in their seventies and without many pressing errands. Bill, at least, had occasional reasons to go out in his truck. He continued to sell a little seed corn so he would have to drop in on folks to get orders and make deliveries. Not that that required him to pass by our house the ten or twelve times a day he did. Ad had sold his dairy farm up at the end of the road in the late 1960's and retired to a little house down the hill. When we first arrived he would come by with his bird dog on the seat next to him, so perhaps he was looking for grouse. But then again maybe not. His dog was about as old as he was. As for Smitty, once he had sold his shop (though shop is perhaps too kind a word for The Easton Trading Post) down on Route 40, I have no idea where he could have been going. I doubt he did either. He stopped by the edge of the field one day to chat and mentioned that with the vision in his good eye seriously deteriorating he was getting uniformly blind, which was a positive change because he felt a lot less dizzy and got fewer headaches. He might just have been trying to find his driveway.

Or maybe he and Ad and Bill simply felt the need to keep an eye on the land they had worked their whole lives. With no fields to drive back and forth across any longer, they had taken to the roads. That might help explain why they all drove at fifteen miles an hour. That would have been about the top road speed of their tractors in high gear. It must have felt like the proper pace.

It also happens to be a fine observational speed. If you drive down Cooke Hollow Road from Vly Summit at the rate most people do—somewhere between 30 and 50 miles an hour—you will have plenty of time to note that we have put up another greenhouse and painted our house dark blue. You will see by the new name on the mailbox just before the old school house that Smitty's son John finally made good on his plan to get away from Easton—and you will see too that the guys who meant to fix up that schoolhouse (which Ad and Bill attended) have made no progress. If you know where to look you will get a quick glimpse of Mary Jane's garden and you will note that DJ still has not put the siding on the east end of his barn. You will certainly remark on the terrible state of the lawn at Dick Cary's farm (which he bought from Ad) and know, if you have not already heard, that Dick died this past spring. You will see rabbits in the short grass by the road and a cat or two leaping into the hedgerows and maybe a flock of turkeys and you will know you have seeded down a field and who has chopped their corn. And you will think you have had a good view of everything along our road—that driving around at a reasonable speed is a great way to see the country.

You will, it is true, see far more of this country while traveling at modern speeds. When Bill and Ad were boys taking lessons in that one room school house and helping out on their family farms—harnessing the horses, splitting wood, planting fields of corn by hand—a trip to Greenwich was a major endeavor. Nobody would have thought of going to Saratoga for lunch or popping down to Schaghticoke for a few pieces of lumber.

This week's share: Beans, Carrots, Eggplant, Endive, Husk cherries, Lettuce, Melon, Peppers, Hot peppers, Tomatoes, Cherry tomatoes, Basil

Seeing more of the country, however, is not the same as having a good view of it. We hardly ever travel through the world at a leisurely pace any more. We walk short distances, mostly inside, often without even a window to look out, and then we get in cars to rush from place to place. When we get stuck behind some old coot going half the speed limit we curse the delay, tailgate impatiently, and zoom past at the first chance.

But maybe we should try going at the coot's speed some time, not because we cannot find a good passing spot but just to see how the world looks going by at half its normal rate. Sometimes as I come past the Connors' house I think about Bill and hit the breaks and go the rest of the way home at fifteen miles an hour (a unit of speed we refer to as 1 Connor). At first it feels wrong going that speed in a car, as though something has broken and you will soon hear little pieces of the transmission falling onto the pavement. But then you look around and realize that at that speed you can see all sorts of details you have never noticed before while driving. You see the flowers on the patch of hairy vetch Ann Connor fought to protect every year from the road crew. You see the old wash tub half buried in the leaves beside the schoolhouse and the dry husks of the ears of corn drooping from the stalks. You see the beans climbing the trellis in Mary Jane's vegetable patch, the tiny fruits on the wild apple trees in the hedgerow and the empty beer cans in the weeds. You see the songbirds flitting amongst the branches of in the old maples beside the Connors' big field and the stone wall in the trees at northern end of Dick's farm. And you understand that what you take in at 30 or 40 miles an hour is just perforce a sort of rough summary of things, a condensed version of the world, useful no doubt, but like all synopses less engaging than the original.

I cannot help thinking that we would take a far greater interest in the state of our world if we passed through it a little slower. At our customary speed it's often little more than scenery, a backdrop easy enough to ignore when the drama of our lives engages our attention. If we hit the breaks every now and then and took a good hard look we might discover a more compelling story, something worth caring about, worth cleaning up. We might learn to look at our world the way an old farmer looks at his fields. And like Smitty and Ad and Bill we would develop an unbreakable tie to the land, an attraction strong enough to keep us in close orbit long after our work was done.