

skipdemuth (2011-09-13 01:16:29)

bbuzz9 (2011-09-13 17:57:59)

1.8 October

Makin' Hay with the Gabeleins on Whidbey Island – 1972 (2011-10-07 21:09)

After years of student-hippy-radical-no-money living, and a few months on Whidbey, we were pleasantly surprised when Raymond Gabelein offered to mow and bale the twenty-acre pasture on our rented “old farm” on Maxwelton Road. The deal was we could keep a third of the bales and sell them for a couple bucks each. This was 1972. Today the place is divided into ten and five-acre parcels and is the site of the Assembly of God Church with its mega-size rec hall dominating the spot where the classic high-loft red wood barn once stood.



[1]
Albert Gabelein, about 14, running the big tractor during hay season.

Although more accustomed to the brown hills of California, that first spring on Whidbey I saw the pasture grass grow knee-high and then waist-high, gracefully undulating on breezy days, budding and seeding, and cycling through its greenish hues as the months passed into the summer haying season. Ray and his crew mowed, raked, baled and hauled off the hay, but the funny thing was that I ended up on the hay crew for the rest of the season.

“Newcomers” arrive daily on South Whidbey, but that first wave of post-Sixties alternative types rocked some worlds around here. For sure, we were a motley bunch. On that first wet February day we coaxed our dying VW bus off the ferry only to find a scruffy little commune of former Seattle hippies still occupying the farm we’d rented (on the phone) from California. After a week I pitched a fit and Rick and Cindy finally started up their flatbed-truck with a wood frame “house” on the back and drove over to “Mama” and Frank Laye’s trailer down Crawford Road. I hadn’t met the Layes yet, but “Mama” Laye eventually taught me that pancakes for dinner are a good thing.

Once settled, we were pretty excited to buy eggs from Mrs. Patton down on the corner of Maxwelton and Sills Roads. Our hippy hair and overall attire startled her. Right away she told me and my four-year-old daughter about a recent crime wave involving a stolen color television. On another law-and-order note, we were equally shocked by the sight of big Jack Peters, providing a lot of shade at about 300 pounds, fully armed and serving as Langley Marshall—especially considering our own accumulated tangle of legal

loose ends following us from the Bay Area.



[2]

In the '70s it was about wood, fish and hay. Robby (1) and me on Maxwellton Rd

I could get lost writing my memories of this era, which would include a best-commune award to the so-called “Sand Pit” off Saratoga Road, unofficially ruled by Bill Logan, an original from Aberdeen (same as Kurt Cobain). Bill stayed in a trailer and welcomed any itinerant hippy with a tent, teepee, or camper. Ray Gabelein told me the sheriff found a dead hippy at the “pit,” some pure fiction I’m now sure he told at my expense.

For most of us this rough-living period didn’t last long. Like when Sue Ellen White, then arguably the doyenne of independent hippy women, rented the now-gone Jewett farm on Thompson Road, and regularly cruised to the Dog House in her to-die-for 1953 Chevy pick-up.. The Good folks Leonard and Linda, already well established on their own place off Coles Road, generously provided residence for several newcomer friends like Russell and Shirley. But life remained pretty basic. Blake wouldn’t show the movie on Friday night if only five people showed up. Mrs. Anderson, Mrs. Steele, and Mrs. Dexter ran the sole check-out at the Star Store. Whidbey Tel founder Dave Henny drove around like a God in this bad-ass Tornado or some-such vehicle, with a really long phone antenna. Country Joe came up from Berkeley for a visit, and played for an hour at the Soup Coup grand opening in March of '72. Nobody was sure who he was (a few years later he bought a place on Goss Lake).



[3]

Sue Ellen shared this photo of her back in the day

My first Whidbey job that spring was helping the elderly Jay Thomas at his nursery where Ro Purser now caretakes the Camano-Whidbey Land Trust reserve above Miller Lake on Maxwellton. I could walk there from where we lived by the elementary school. Jay had me pulling weeds in his prickly juniper rows for \$2.50 an hour and we needed that paycheck. I dug up and delivered big rhododendrons to his customers. The best task was shoveling rotting sawdust for mulch into his pickup from the giant piles at Fred Frei's old sawmill site at the east end of Brainers Road.

Supplementing Mrs. Patton's eggs, we got our milk from the Gabeleins' back-porch refrigerator in gallon glass jars with wax paper under the lids. Heavy cream layered the top inch or so. When I picked up one day, she asked if I wanted to help haul hay bales, and I accepted—same hourly rate as the nursery.

The Gabelein family manifested a way-of-life on South Whidbey. Their daughter Sandy, who was ten-years-old and the youngest of the five siblings, drove the tractor. Ray, Jr., in his mid-teens and assertive even then, was all business. The oldest, Gary, showed up regularly and I remember he was a little bossy. The youngest of the boys, Albert, tells me that Eva May and Ray recruited any able-bodied male they could find, especially Langley High football players, shirt-tale relatives, and the random good soul like Bobby Burrier, a local farm boy who knew it was important to help. Some recruits just walked off at the first lunch break and didn't return. Broke and culturally adventurous, I stayed on.

I cherish a bale of memories from that summer of hauling hay. We picked up bales in niche island locales, all new to me, driving up and down the highway with fluorescent triangle signs on the rigs, at 15 miles an hour, our legs dangling off the end of a flatbed. My first ever journey up East Harbor road was to clear bales from the old Clark pasture, which sloped majestically from the road clear to the bluff—the harbor shimmering in sunshine in the near distance, the mowed field cluttered with bales.

Albert making bales on a big field. It looks like Sunlight Beach.



[4]

Albert making bales on a big field. It looks like Sunlight Beach.

We headed out to Sandy Point, also new to me, where Eva Mae's brothers Earl and Milt Smith owned places with small hayfields. The biggest fields lay by Useless Bay Golf Course, and the old Siefert place (a Gabelein uncle) behind the Jehovah Witnesses on Millman road. Possibly the biggest field belonged to Tom Kohlwes at Sunlight Beach, where we loaded bales for days, delivering them to the giant storage sheds off Bayview Road by the cemetery.

Ray and the family mowed, raked, and baled thousands of bales, each weighing 40 to 60 pounds. Albert told me his dad made 500 tons of hay every summer. We used hooks to lift the bales, or just grabbed the strings. We traded jobs between the ground and the bed of the truck or trailer. I marveled at the snakes and other critters baled up with the hay. The job was hot, dirty, buggy, repetitive and boring and, with dirt and grass always in our eyes and mouths, and occasionally demoralizing. Back then it was actually hot in July.

One day, well into the season, my friend and housemate Robby Stern asked if he could join the crew. He lasted a day and was not happy, announcing, and I remember his words, "I don't need the money that bad."

The job offered a few perks. Sometimes I sat with old Ray in the cab of the truck, and he'd regale me with his political views, which were all extremely local. He feuded with Doc Purdy over some nasty school board business. He had issues with Dave Henny, his neighbor on Bayview road. He ran for Commissioner that summer while we were putting up the hay. I mostly enjoyed his rants because they gave me a unique window into my new community. Like a kidnapped prisoner with Stockholm Syndrome, I secretly sided with my master Ray against the "summer people" and his political "enemies," not fully aware at the time of my own highly suspect identity as a "newcomer hippy."

Eva Mae always provided lunch. We ate sitting on bales in the field or occasionally in the family home overlooking Sunlight Beach. I remember Ray in the living room with binoculars, basically spying on the "summer people" on the beach. If rain threatened, we worked into the night, illuminated by truck headlights. Eva May brought a late dinner to the field.

Only two slightly sour memories remain from this summer of hauling hay. Ray worked himself into a frenzy over our inability to "tie" the bales together at the corners of the 10-high stacks, so they wouldn't tilt or fall over. Glaring at a bad corner, he'd scramble up and rip the stack apart, bales and expletives flying. One day, tired of this scene, I simply walked away, down the road toward the cemetery and home. Within five minutes Eva Mae pulled up in her long sedan and talked me back in. Ray, slightly calmer after that, didn't want to lose a willing body.

One Sunday, Albert, who was 13, wanted the afternoon off for a 4-H party. His mom was ready to take him, but dad said no. There were some pleas, but Ray remained adamant that Albert work. I watched the exchange in disbelief at Ray's rigidity. There would be no party for Albert, and we all headed back to the field to bring in the bales.

Albert told me he helped his folks during the haying season until his early 30's, when his dad was older and they made less hay. I'm still friends with Albert and his brother Ray, Jr., and sometimes hire them and their equipment for work on my own place which happens to include a 20-acre hayfield. Every year for more than two decades Myron Gabelein—a cousin—mows, rakes, bales and hauls off our hay, which keeps the grassy field in natural pasture and a visual pleasure. But this year, Myron doesn't need our hay—demand is down, and the big fields farther north and west have filled his sheds. He has trouble finding help. He's retired and likes to go to summer "tractor pulls" east of the mountains. But Myron's agreed to just mow our field this year, and he says that the cuttings left behind will "fertilize" the grass.



[5]
Jim Gabelein, a cousin and Navy Veteran, raking our field. He passed 3 years ago.

In many ways, I've remained a newcomer. This community reveals only in random asides the stories of its old families. But over the years I've learned that the Nicholls are related to the Thorsens, the Gabeleins to the Smiths and in turn to the Maynards, and that Bud Waterman's kids went to school on the other side. Gloria Goldthorpe Craig at the bank in Langley grew up on the place on Craw Road where I live now. We also didn't know until later that Dick Scriven and Larry Leidholm were recently back from service in Viet Nam, and that Jim Porter finished his tour as a helo pilot in '70, and didn't return to Langley and the insurance business until '73.

Looking back, I can see that my summer hauling hay with the Gabeleins put me on the right track with at least a hint of sensitivity about South Whidbey people and places. I remain enriched, and grateful for the experience.

1. <http://skipdemuth.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/10/albertTractor2Skip-1.jpg>
2. <http://skipdemuth.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/10/fishing.jpg>
3. <http://skipdemuth.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/10/sueellen.jpg>
4. <http://skipdemuth.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/10/albertTractorSkip.jpg>
5. <http://skipdemuth.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/10/jimcropjob.jpg>