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## Overhauling A Favorite Septuagenarian

by Benjamin Groisser

The B is everyone's favorite little tractor. Built in 1940, this tractor is junior to only one person on this farm – Grandma herself. This cutegarden tractor never had a proper name. It is just “the regular B.” My grandfather Tony brought her home on a flatbed truck at some point in the 70s to add to a burgeoning fleet of red Farmalls. There was a “racing B,” a “B-narrow,” a “Super B,” a “cultivating B,” but the

regular B was the most dependable one.

Over the decades these stoic tractors have done service towing transplanter, cultivating and pulling wagons across the neighboring townships. The B towed trailers filled with baskets of tomatoes up and down the hills, back to the stand. My mother remembers how she and hersiblingswould have to hop off the transplanter and walk behind to give the poor little B a hope of making it up the steeper hills. “I think I can, I think

I can...”

These iconic machines were the ideal classroom aid for Tony's tractor class. You'll never find a more open, accessible and friendly platform to learn about vehicle construction. True, the carbureted, magneto-fired, convection-cooled technology was a bit dated even in the 70s, but all the better to teach with! It's so simple that all the components are literally sitting on the side of the engine!

So, it was with some excitement that I learned that Mom had brought this 73 year old workhorse into “the shop.” The plumes of smoke billowing out of the engine had finally become intolerable. Mark Trader, our on-call mechanic, confirmed that the compression on each of the four in-line cylinders was about half what it should be. Score! Of course both Mark and Dad would be well occupied with their workloads, leaving me as the only semi-competent mechanic with sufficient

free time for major repairs.

I admit I probably lobbied harder than necessary for the full engine overhaul. I had restored my cousin's BMW but let it slip through my fingers without so much peeking under the valve cover, so I was thrilled to have such a simple engine for my first rebuild.

Thus began the harrowing, exhausting quest to restore this classic machine. Phase one, disassembly, went smoothly—until I broke the crankshaft pulley and nearly had to resort to a hacksaw. Eventually I had the block stripped down to bare metal and engine components strewn around the barn on labeled sheets of cardboard. So much for the easy part.

Sourcing parts was surprisingly easy, once I knew exactly what I needed. Incredibly, nearly every renewable part is still manufactured by third-party shops, a testament

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## Farming in Wheatland, The Early Days – First in a Series

by Chip Planck

When we first started farming in Loudoun, in 1974, the bumper stickers read: “Don’t Fairfax Loudoun!” As time went by, there appeared, “Don’t Loudoun Clarke!” [The next county west.] While a complete phase change from pristine rural to large-lot suburbia didn’t take place, the county does have a far different feel 25 years later.

Driving out Route 7 to do field work in the first seasons, houses and stores ceased almost completely after passing Herndon Junction and Sterling Park. A marker for me on that drive was an old farmhouse not far over the border from Fairfax of the sort no longer housing a farm family, but not yet flattened for a sub-division or renovated by a commuter. Sitting on its porch, instead, were the fellows who ran the collection point we took our trash to farther east in Great Falls. Ratty former farmhouses = affordable rentals for blue collar workers in the neighborhood. That option is gone.

Indeed, the vacant house on the Loudoun farm where we sometimes parked had only recently served that function. Before our purchase, Bob Fletcher, even then one of only a handful of remaining dairy farmers in the county, who milked in nearby Morrisonville, had been running his replacement heifers on the 400 acres and renting the former tenant house to ne’er do wells. (Lest this seem unkind, I cite vulgar graffiti scratched on basement doors and trash thrown out the various first floor windows. Not your classic poor but respectable farm-hands.)

There were feral dogs about, too, scavenging after this occupancy. One dismal day I left the blue Ford pickup door ajar, and disked for several hours. I came back to find my lunch eaten up. Characteristic of the time, I went hungry, having never been to Lovettsville with its convenience store (a High’s, now 7-11), five miles north, or Purcellville, a real little town, five miles south. The PVF ethos of keep-at-it frugality also had influence: I would never have taken an exploratory country drive looking for a sandwich.

At what is now PVF “East”, or the original farm near Tyson’s Corner, rented sweet corn patches were the largest we had, running from 5 to 10 acres. Suburban roads ran to them, and suburban houses flanked them. Loudoun was 400 acres in one rectangular block, 1 mile by 1/2 mile, a shed and shop on one end, accessed by a couple dirt lanes. It was huge, it was the moon. All but about 40 acres on the SW corner was in grass so tall it exhausted you exploring it.

The 40 SW acres had been in Bob Fletcher’s corn, and we proceeded to disk that stubble for field and sweet corn during our first full season of ownership.

I started around it one morning with a Farmall M and a 6’ offset disk, and at the end of the day could still not see my work on the opposing pass. We were not in Vienna anymore, if not yet in Kansas. Susan learned to cultivate corn on those long, long rows.

The farm wasn’t actually unpopulated. In addition to the dogs at the old tenant house, Nancy Aronhalt, a single mother of Tammy and Ronnie, apparently unemployed, rented an old log cabin on the northern border. A nice family. And near the shop and equipment shed on 287 lived Johnny and Marianne Spangler, with sons Kenny and Danny. Johnny was a construction equipment mechanic at Whitmore and Arnold’s IH dealership in Purcellville. Friendly, competent, always ready to use his percs at the shop to borrow equipment for tasks beyond us, like finding a water main leak. Marianne was the German bride of Johnny from his military days in Europe. Matter of fact, a good gardener, charmingly cynical: “Now ze fun begins!” When we began occasionally swimming in one of the two big ponds, she would have none of it: “Der’s turdles in dem ponds!” (Which of course was true, quite large snapping turtles, but they went deep into the mud when we splashed in. No one was ever snapped.)

A 200 acre farm might need 3-4 tractors. Once subdivided, it might require 20-30 riding lawn mowers. As farmland was converted, and the Browning showroom was taken up with these lawnmowers and other tools of suburban production, many farm tractor parts were stored in open bins. If the lines at the parts desk were too long, we would sometimes just abscond with the part we needed and pay later.

An attraction of the Loudoun land to former pilot Tony was the half mile flat straight field that would

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## Living on Old Soils

By Ellen Polishuk

I've been travelling a bunch this summer, twice out to Wisconsin. Boy, do they have some beautiful soil out there. As a good friend says about that deep, black Midwestern ground, "just throw some seeds down and get out of the way!" Well, here in Virginia, we aren't so lucky. Turns out we live on some very old soils, and most likely all our topsoil was eroded away back in the 1800's. The Appalachian mountains are so smooth and low because they are OLD, and so is the soil that formed from that parent material. We never got glacial activity or lovely silt blown in from the west either. So we're stuck here with our thick Virginia clays. Working with soil like ours requires patience and TLC (tender loving care). As evidenced by the delicious vegetables in your shares each week, some of us have managed to figure out how to coax great plants from these old soils.

TLC for our soils looks like this:

- Add missing minerals – rock phosphate (for phosphorus), greensand or KMag (for potassium), compost/manure, lime, boron etc
- Manage air – this is what tilling is all about. Plant roots need air just as much as plant leaves. Open up the ground, and then don't compact it with equipment



Notice a difference between the plants on the left and the plants on the right? The plants on the left have much better soil.

or feet or vehicles.

- Invite biology – the good microbes we need in the soil need that air also, and they need food. Microbe food is called "organic matter". That means dead plant materials, including compost and/or manure.

When you do all of the above, you've set the stage for plants to be able to grow nicely. There are other considerations for getting a crop to thrive (irrigation, pest control etc), but this is the basic recipe as far as soil care is concerned.

I want to share with you the importance of the second aspect – managing soil air. We've noticed a couple of areas on the farm where some plants are seriously and strangely underperforming. Further thinking and remembering brought us to the conclusion that these poor growth areas are where we know there have been soil compaction issues. In one

instance, just a few plants at the end of a row, at the corner of a field were looking terrible. Casey remembered that each of us had driven over that corner after initial tillage, but before planting, with heavy tractors to avoid running over an irrigation hydrant. What we had done is to compact that soil – we crushed it and squeezed all the air out of it. Now the plant roots were starving for oxygen. This is the cardinal sin in farming – compacting moist soil!!

How to remedy such a situation? Well, time and TLC as above, and perhaps some special tillage operation that will attempt to undo that crushing (called ripping or subsoiling). Mostly time and TLC will actually fix the problem.

Good luck out there with your soils. In your home garden situation, avoid driving on and walking on moist soil as best you can, to keep it light and full of air!

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to the longevity of these early tractors. The trick of course is figuring out exactly which model clutch you've got, and will these overbored cylinders be compatible... And criminy! How long do I have to wait for my crank to be machined

(apparently a mysterious and dark art, practiced by only a few aging masters who may well take their secrets to the grave)?!

Reassembly proved a straightforward but nerve-wracking travail. What if I failed to properly lubricate some tapet or bearing? Would I be responsible for

the destruction of this beloved machine? The pile of parts dwindled slowly as I reinstalled shafts, gears, rods... Finally the time had come, when the oil had been refilled and the radiator clamped on and the gas tank filled: nothing left but to push the button... and... nothing!

I'd forgotten to disconnect the magneto! After solving the grounding issue, the tractor rumbled happily to life. What joy! What bliss... until the engine stalled 10 minutes later. Time to clean that carb again, or maybe pull open the governor...

# Notes from the Field

## The Joy of Pigs

by Hana Newcomb

When we were growing up on the farm, we had lots of farm pets. There was always a pen in the front yard – sometimes it had box turtles in it, sometimes a family of skunks (my father was partial to skunks), and one year there were ducks and a bathtub. In addition there was our goose, Rhody, who wandered freely and acted as a guard dog.

But we never had pigs. Dad didn't want pigs because it offended his senses to have a being that intelligent in captivity.

Many years later, long after Dad was gone, we got three little pigs as a barnyard attraction for the October school groups. We borrowed them from a local farmer and returned them at the end of the month. This

routine went on for a bunch of Octobers. There was the occasional pig escape, which taught us that we can only manage small pigs. Catching and carrying pigs is a slippery and athletic exercise.

It eventually dawned on me that pigs are extremely entertaining and fun to have around – and we didn't have to limit our pig time to one month a year. So last summer we expanded

our pig horizons and welcomed three really friendly little brown ones for a few months at the spa. We borrowed them from Mike and Ansa at Lost Corner Farm – Mike delivered them in the back of his Subaru station wagon.

These pigs had such a great time, eating loads of vegetables every day. We got spoiled with Athena and Juanita and Big Willie, unusually

scratchable pigs, bottle-fed as babies. Our friend Bev Eggleston of Eco-Friendly Foods made huge fun of me because the pigs got so fat from constant eating.

The pigs are here for rest and relaxation and also to keep us from dumping our surpluses in the compost pile. They are so delighted to run around in their pen, rooting in the mud, looking for hidden treats. The current residents are a bit skittish but they still warm my heart with their sincere appreciation of squash and tomatoes and corn and watermelon.

Before they get too big to pick up and carry, we will send them back to their own farm and get a new batch of youngsters. In the fall, my mom cooks sweet potatoes for them – these pigs get the royal treatment here at the spa.



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have made a perfect runway for small planes. Tony no longer had a plane, but Lani's friend Paul Benton did. He once landed on the field when Susan was picking cucumbers and took her up to view the farm.

Our worker Buzzy Teiser, locking his bike outside the bank in Purcellville, was told by a teller, "You don't need to lock your bike here." (Maybe you still needn't, but no one will step out to let you know.)

So, Vienna had small fields and big crews; Loudoun, big fields and small crews. No 267 toll road to Leesburg, no Leesburg by-pass, no stop lights at the Waterford Texaco, 704, or 287. My favorite sign was the hand-painted one in some bushes at 704, for the county animal rescue site: "Human Society".

But for all its relative emptiness, and our workday

isolation, Loudoun had even then ceased being a predominately rural economy. Thirty to forty per cent of people commuted to work in Fairfax and DC. The high school in drowsy Purcellville had its AP courses. In the 1940's, long before the first wave of suburbanization, preservationists had enacted the first sign ordinance and established a planning commission. When the Sterling Park subdivision of affordable, small lot houses leaped over the Fairfax boundary to take advantage of Loudoun's lax residential zoning in the early 1960's, there began in earnest the long-standing political struggle between conservation and growth.

Delightfully, the three housing models in Sterling Park, from modest to really teeny, were the Middleburg, the Leesburg, and the Wheatland. Keeps you humble, this setting.