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Inheriting Mrs. Moutoux's Piano

by Hana Newcomb

Four or five generations ago, in 1941, two moms stood in line outside of a Falls Church elementary school waiting to register their little boys for the first grade. One was my grandma, Carolyn Newcomb, and the other was Rob's grandma, Catherine Moutoux. These two women and their little boys became friends for life and that friendship changed the course of history – for farming in Fairfax and Loudoun County.

In 1948, the Moutoux family bought a big piece of property on Beulah Road in Fairfax County. They planted a peach orchard. They sold eight acres to the Newcombs for a house and a place in the country. A generation later, the Newcombs bought a big piece of property in Loudoun County and the Moutoux family bought 50 acres of that. We have been next door neighbors for 80 years. Our families and our farms have grown up together. Now the

youngest grandson Rob is the farmer and I am the farmer in the same generation, but I am 20 years older than he is so there is an additional generation mowing and building and picking tomatoes on our side of the fence.

When Mrs. Moutoux died and they sold their orchard in Fairfax, her sturdy little spinet was moved to a Falls Church apartment with her youngest son.

Last week, that little piano needed a new home. Rob's mom called me to see if I could take it away, since she knew we might want it. Along with three Moutoux employees and one PVF employee, we wrangled that piano out of a narrow doorway, down a hallway into an elevator, out onto a loading dock and into a PVF delivery vehicle. The piano was crossing over into our family.

And now it sits in the only climate-controlled house we have on the Loudoun farm and it belongs to Ciara who has always wanted a piano. We will have to tell her lots of Moutoux-Newcomb stories so she can become another keeper of the legacy of Carolyn and Catherine (two women who never in a million years dreamed they would be related to farms or farming, but that's another story).



Rob and farm workers exulting in their piano moving success.

Time on a Vegetable Farm

by Julia Kreilkamp

In 1979 a 20 year old arrived to work at Potomac Vegetable Farms. She was one of a cohort of a dozen mostly cheerful college students who were happy to be released from libraries and paper-writing deadlines into the outdoors and hard physical labor. They all worked long hours -- dawn to dusk, six days a week -- slept in ramshackle sheds and shacks in the woods, and ate together in an almost-outdoor kitchen. They walked the dusty farm road, hoes over their shoulders. Or drove the Farmall B, or sat in the trailer it pulled. They piled in the back of a Ford pickup to ride down Rte. 7 to bean or cornfields.

Each day began with Corn Pick. Bleary eyed, they'd pull on their corn picking pants, stiff with the dried sugary dew that had soaked them from the previous days' picks; long sleeves to protect arms from the sharp edges of the corn leaves; tall rubber boots. During the day, tromping over mulch and through tomato plants for mandatory barefooted tomato picking blackened their feet and hands. On a hot afternoon behind the Stand, someone would cut open a large Gold Star cantaloupe and the group of grimy sweaty farmworkers ate the indescribably flavorful sweet slices, juice dripping down chins. Often the day ended with a race against the thunderstorms -- to pick up the rye mulch bales before the rain drenched them, or to get in the ground a few hundred of the 25,000 tomato plants PVF grew back then. Later in the farm season, everyone gathered for evening tomato sorts behind the Stand, stationed along the conveyor belt, sorting according to ripeness and quality, establishing order to the sea of wooden pony baskets. Dinner was always after dark and

often followed with a dessert of peach crisp, fruit collected from the ground at the neighboring sprawling Moutoux Orchard.

That 20 year old learned to love to pick bushels of spinach; the beauty of freshly mulched fields; the easy heavy sleeps to rest the sore shoulders. The impossibly shiny and deeply colored peppers and eggplant. She loved it so much that she ended up spending a few decades of her life engaged with vegetable farming.

One of the most appealing aspects of farming has to do with Time. Vegetable farming is seasonal work, jam-packed with life cycles. On any given day, farmers are seeding, transplanting, tending, harvesting. Some crops like potatoes or ginger settle under the ground for weeks and weeks until they become food. Others, such as lettuce, grow rapidly in full view. Always there is something sprouting, something flowering, something flourishing, something being eaten by pests, something dying.

A vegetable farm inspires optimism and nurtures hopefulness. Each year is predictable; each year is also surprising. We might face a drought; our pepper plants could get destroyed by hail; we could

plant way more sorrel than we planned, and discover that there's a huge demand for it. It really is just one big metaphor for life!

I was that 20 year old forty-three years ago, and this spring I returned to PVF. The Newcombs welcomed me back into the fold to live and work here for 10 weeks. I walked the same dusty farm road and picked spinach in familiar fields.

Some things have changed: the farm crew does not live at PVF, nor do they work long hours -- instead, workers are encouraged to pursue their other interests and preserve their energy and enthusiasm. There are no daily early morning corn picks because the Newcombs are committed to farming without using the dangerous chemicals that corn requires. Tomato production has been slashed to a pleasant fraction of its former insanity. Large housing developments have replaced the Moutoux orchard and the lovely front field behind the stand where Tai Tai the Jersey milk cow used to graze. Workers pick into plastic pony baskets and crates instead of wooden ones. Everybody zooms around the farm on golf carts. These days, you'd be taking your life in your hands to drive a tractor on Rte. 7.

But the essential things remain. Young people are trusted and given responsibility to do tangible meaningful work (and inevitably allowed to make mistakes). Delicious and nutritious food is raised. Decisions are made with an eye on sustainability and integrity. Weekly shared meals help to develop a sense of community. Young folks still love getting muddy and hot and sore, and eating good food.

PVF has been evolving for fifty years, and continues as testament that change and constancy exist in tandem.



photo courtesy of hana newcomb

Generations

by Leah Fenster

Many times during the past few weeks, I have found myself thinking about all the farm workers I will never know, generations, or just years before me, who have done the same exact jobs on the same exact piece of land. And I don't just mean all the people who've ever worked at PVF. I mean the people who picked squash in the same row, or mulched tomatoes in the same patch, or pulled garlic for a whole afternoon in the same field, and then washed everything down with a freezy-pop, or whatever the equivalent was before Red 40. I know that crop rotation leaves multi-year gaps in between vegetables being grown in the same place, but I think that makes this phenomenon all the more poetic.

How many people have stood where I stand, bent over the zucchini in the same spot, admiring how the bees make themselves at home in the great big squash flowers? And how many people have the shared experience of accidentally wearing sandals while mulching this very patch, and wished for closed-toed, rubber protection against the tiny thorns in the hay? What about all the people who have been mystified by the brilliant blue of bachelor's buttons growing among the garlic, just as I have, in the exact same field? I could go on and on. And I don't only think about this while doing farm work. How many hundreds of people have the mulberry trees along the fence lines fed their fruit too? How many people have leaned across the ditch at the edge of the parking lot just to get the reddest wineberry? I'll spare you the rest; I think you get the idea.

Sometimes, thinking like this makes me feel small. I am just one person in the lifetime of this beloved farm, and in generations, or just years after me, the farm workers who do the same jobs in the same places as I did will not know my name. But in quite a different way, these thoughts deepen my connection to this place I call home for the meantime. I feel like I am an important part of something that will last forever. Even if I don't know the farm workers who came before me, the land will never forget, and I can still somehow feel their presence while I'm here. It's a beautiful thing.



photo courtesy of hc

Recently hatched Song Sparrow chicks wait in their nest cradled amongst old tomato vines.

Reader Comment: Your newsletters have been fantastic. I am really enjoying reading them, especially these last two! So creative and well-written and edited. Thanks for doing them! -Leslie

Meet the Neighbors: Sassafras Creek Farm

Sassafras Creek Farm (St. Mary's County, MD) is a USDA Certified Organic vegetable farm in Leonardtown, Maryland. They take great pride growing 60 varieties of delicious, healthy vegetables, grains, and fruit from spring to winter. They grow lettuces, spinach, tomatoes, potatoes, carrots, beets, strawberries, sweet corn, oats, and many other tasty foods. Sassafras Creek defines their work as 'farming that is environmentally responsible, economically viable, and socially just.'

www.SassafrasCreekFarm.com



Farming in Wheatland, the Early Days

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 48 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 anchoring an agricultural operation, 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 farmhouses = affordable rentals for blue collar workers in the neighborhood.

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 well sorts. (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 farm ethos of keep-at-it frugality also had influence: I would never have taken an exploratory 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, bisected by one dirt lane. 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 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 weren't in Vienna anymore, if not yet in Kansas.

The farm wasn't actually unpopulated. In addition to the dogs at the old tenant house, Nancy, a single mother of Tammy and Ronnie, 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, with sons Kenny and Danny. Johnny was a construction equipment mechanic at Browning'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.

A 200 acre farm might need 3-4 tractors. Once subdivided, it might require 20-30 riding lawn mowers. Before the Browning showroom was taken up with these lawnmowers and other tools of suburban production as farmland was converted, 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 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.

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 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 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 grand to modest, were the Middleburg, the Leesburg, and the Wheatland. Keeps you humble, this setting.