

From: Bowe, William
Sent: Sunday, May 18, 2014 6:42 PM
To: Walter S. Heffron
Cc: Mrs. Catherine V. Bowe
Subject: Re: Life In The Country

Walt--

What a wonderful set of recollections. Thanks so much for the effort and choosing to share it this way.

You're an inspiration to other family chroniclers.

All the best,

Bill

Sent from my iPhone

From: Walter S. Heffron [mailto:walter.heffron@comcast.net]
Sent: Sunday, May 18, 2014 5:56 PM
To: William J. Bowe
Subject: Life In The Country

Bill and
Cathy,

May 18. 2014

I had occasion recently to put together a rather bizarre family story that might interest you. It is composed of short segments I wrote earlier on different dates (not in chronological order nor timely) plus three photos.

3/26/2010

When he left home our son Stephen said he wanted no part of ticky-tacky suburbia and opted for the alternative life, which for him extended to subsistence farming and three different farmhouses, two of which he had to fix up substantially to be habitable. The third was a two-story structure he designed and built himself, down to the plumbing, wiring, and everything else. He installed a central wood-burning stove on the first floor to heat the whole house by convection.

My secret streak of hayseed allowed me to take vicarious pleasure in the rural activities of my son and his family and to participate a little. At various times they had hogs, goats, chickens,

turkeys, cows, steers, a horse and a bull (Ramrod). Patsy was thoroughly urban, but indulged my tendencies and got involved herself from time to time.

One Sunday the thermometer was in single digits. Despite the cold weather, the skinny wood pile at Stephen's farmhouse in Marengo, Illinois, needed to be replenished. He fired up his ancient tractor, which had to be started by spinning the flywheel by hand, and hooked it to the manure spreader, his only farm wagon. We went out back to find dead trees for felling with our dinky chain saw. After cutting them into logs, we discovered the frozen wood resisted attempts at splitting (steel wedges and sledge hammer). With persistence we were successful, being careful to dodge flying wedges bounced by the sledge hammer. Stephen's six-year-old daughter helped load the manure spreader as we went along, accumulating a fair amount of firewood before returning to the farmhouse. A teenage girl in a group of visitors ice-skating on the frozen pond at the rear of the property had become severely chilled and joined us around the stove to thaw out.

Years later, Stephen had a change of heart, got a master's degree in environmental science and now has completed a contract with Argonne National Laboratory to characterize low-level radioactive waste, which procedure determines how that material is handled, contained, transported, and stored. Marsha, his wife during those early days, was a nurse and went on to obtain a master's degree in midwifery. These days she teaches a course in obstetric nursing at Indiana University East.

3/21/2010

Again this winter, Mother Nature was extremely kind to those of us who may have been Eskimos in a previous life and provided a long stretch of very cold weather with heaps of snow. Following a few days of warmer temperatures, I was happy to awake yesterday to several inches of new snow on the ground and more continuing to fall. That called for a quiet day by the fire.

The snow damped outside noise and the stillness was reminiscent of a time many years ago when I babysat my first two granddaughters – one a baby in arms and the other a six-year-old in first grade – in their farmhouse near Marengo. During the day as I was in the rocking chair with the little one, the only sound breaking the silence came from burning wood shifting in the cast-iron stove that heated the house. Later, my older granddaughter, having returned by school bus, noticed an old pickup truck leaving the driveway of the farmhouse across the road and remarked, "There's farmer so-and-so heading to town." That tranquil farm memory has remained with me.

Now those two girls have become mothers of four of my great-granddaughters, two apiece, and will be visiting here next Saturday with their children. Patsy would really have enjoyed seeing them, as I will.

5/5/2010

In searching for more property in the mid-1980s, my son and his wife could imagine only the possibilities, and bought a badly deteriorated house on 80 acres of beautiful land along Blue Creek in southeastern Indiana. Patsy and I saw only the problems. Access was by fording the creek in a car during dry weather and by walking across a rickety suspension bridge when it rained – I remember mention of this in one of Patsy’s Christmas letters: “God willing and the creek don’t rise.” Soon after the purchase my brother from Denver was visiting at Thanksgiving, saw the house, and jokingly offered to torch it free of charge if it were covered by fire insurance.

Renovation began in early spring the following year. The task was enormous: the house had neither heat nor running water (a spigot from the well was outside the back door); termite damage necessitated replacing some of the underpinnings and flooring; and preparation for decorating the interior required sanding the old lead-bearing painted surfaces, in which I helped and undoubtedly lost a few marbles from breathing the dust (I had none to spare).

Later in the spring I stopped by to check on things, and the weather was chilly. For entertainment in the evening we huddled in front of a small black and white, rabbit-eared TV with a snowy picture, sitting wrapped in blankets on lawn chairs trying to keep warm next to a kerosene space heater. Our toilet was the old outhouse in back that we had to brave regardless of the cold and the resident spiders and wasps. Our only cooking appliance was a small hot plate that heated water for coffee and lots of Chef Boyardee spaghetti, ravioli, Beef-A-Roni, etc. Dishes were washed after a fashion in cold well water at the outside spigot.

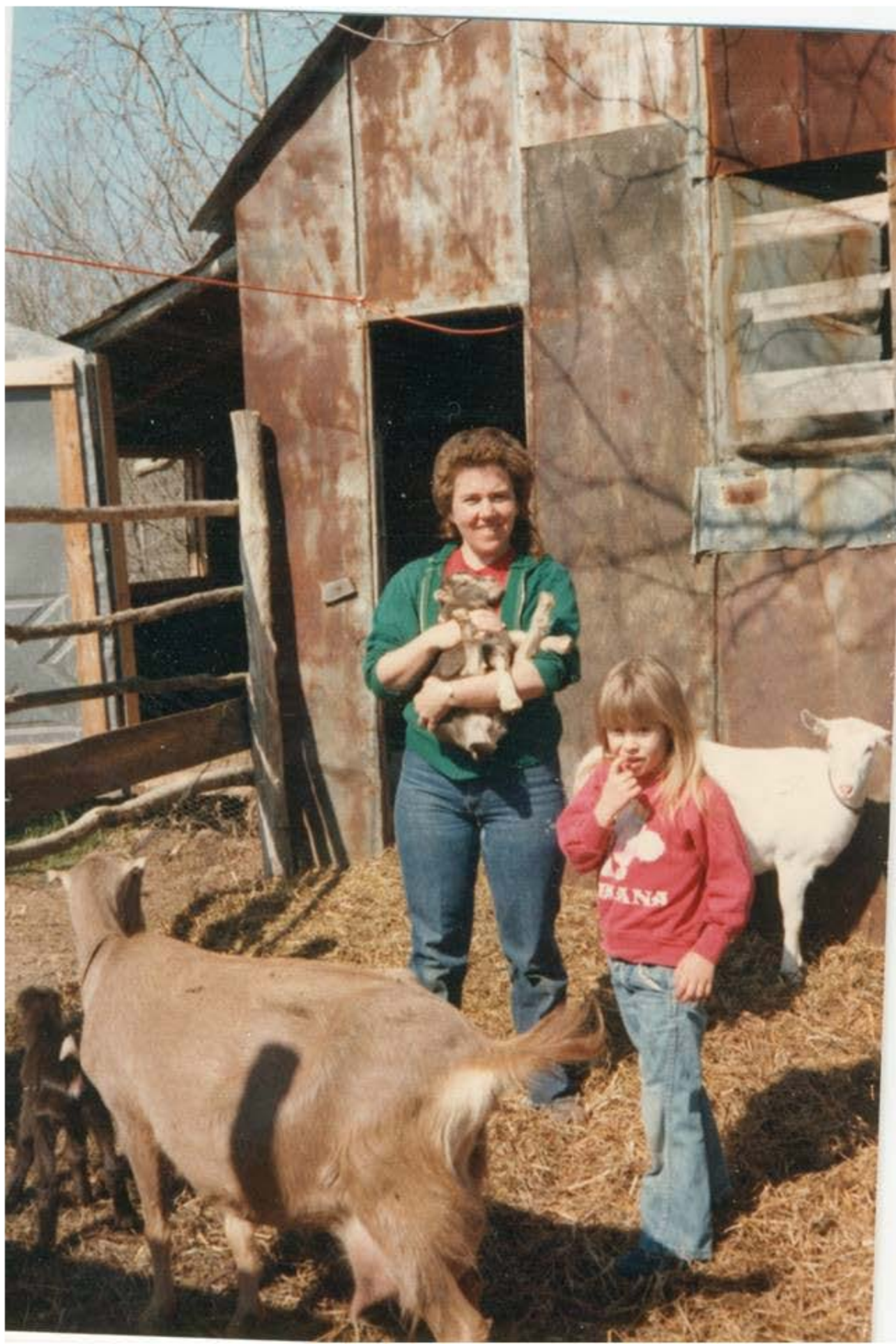
In late summer, after Stephen had put in a septic system, toilet, kitchen sink and stove, Patsy came down with me to help paint some of the woodwork, wash windows, and tidy up. She had an inborn urge to be neat and orderly. With no shower in the house for bathing, we used a three-foot-deep place in Blue Creek behind a fallen tree trunk, on which we rested our bar of Ivory soap (it floats). A scrubby tree behind the house yielded a few apples for a pie. One day, in the course of smoothing the ford for crossing the creek, my son, grandson, and I were in the water rearranging rocks and large stones with a big pry-bar; my daughter-in-law, sitting on the bank of the stream watching us, observed dryly, “Three generations of Heffron males bonding in the creek.”

By winter, kitchen cabinets scavenged from our Sleepy Hollow home (after a major fire caused by lightning in 1984) had been installed, as well as hardwood parquet floor tiles (bought at close-out prices) in the kitchen-dining-family room. There were two wood-burning stoves for heat, plus a small propane heater set to go on at 50 degrees to keep water pipes from freezing in case the stoves went out – and one of those very large propane tanks sat next to a shed in the rear to supply the heater as necessary. Surprisingly, the house had become quite comfortable, and finally a new, properly built suspension bridge completed the amenities.

Continuing my endless tale, here are some photos showing several family members constructing a goat pen down on the farm in the company of their faithful dog Lola, circa 1982 or 1983.







Is that a chicken under the rear of the brown goat?

5/5/2010 (cont.)

For many years our family got together at one of the Indiana farmhouses for a “down home” Thanksgiving. A turkey from their farmyard might grace the dinner table, as always did potatoes from the garden. The bacon and eggs at breakfast were home grown also. The little pot-bellied stove kept us warm. During our visits, we went to a country fair, roller-skated, bowled, danced to favorite recordings, and even played touch-football. An apt Cajun saying at Mardi Gras characterized our Thanksgiving gatherings: “*Laissez les bons temps rouler*,” – “Let the good times roll.” When we ran out of firewood one holiday, a chain of us handed logs, person to person, up from the bottom of the deep “valley of fatigue.” Those great weekends happened some time ago. We cherish the memories and look back fondly on “the good old days.”

My narrative may be too long, but this addendum is necessary. Any assistance from me on projects during my country visits was not selfless. I got a lot of pleasure from helping, and from being with family. As someone pointed out, when the lark was over, I could always return home.

1/20/2014

My son and his wife had to go away one week, so Patsy and I drove down to stay on the farm with two of their children. While the children were in school, Patsy was occupied in the house, mainly reading. Spring was near and the livestock were getting frisky. One day she happened to catch sight of the cows in the pasture mounting one another. That really shocked her. She called out, “Walter, the cows are being naughty. Go out and stop them.” I may not be a farmer, but I know enough not to interfere with large animals engaging in a nature-driven attempt at sex. I suggested that ignoring this behavior seemed the best approach. Patsy thought my response was a tad short of good crisis management.

2/8/2014

Although the task is enjoyable, despite taxing my ability, I became less inclined to write about additional rustic memories – there are many to choose from. However, the following one is in a slightly different category.

While on a business trip years ago, my brother-in-law, Uncle Jack to my children, stopped at Blue Creek one sunny afternoon to see how we were doing. This was his first visit to a subsistence farm and he was unacquainted with its sometimes primitive conditions. I happened to be there at that time assisting with renewal. The approach to the almost fully rehabbed farmhouse

was not exactly prepossessing. It required driving down a fairly long, winding, rough, dirt road from the highway to the rather wide and shallow creek, fording the creek by car and going up the far bank of the stream to the house beyond. (After a heavy rainfall the creek became a torrent and was traversed in those days by walking across on the narrow, swaying planks of an old cable suspension bridge.)

We greeted Uncle Jack, showed him around and had a pleasant chat. He was not aware of the original, decrepit condition of the house, so the considerable progress in its renovation was not apparent to him. Up to this point both the location of the house and its appearance must have seemed less than welcoming. Then another experience may have further disillusioned him and done nothing to improve his impression of the place. After using the bathroom, Uncle Jack had to fill a pail with water from the spigot outside the back door to flush the toilet. Water had not yet been connected to the bathroom. Indeed, for a time it was necessary to be sure the toilet trap was always filled with water in order to block septic odors.

Anyhow, we urged Uncle Jack to stay and join us for a bite to eat. He declined and felt it best to get back on the road.

So much for urban anticipation meeting rustic reality.

5/3/2014

I had thought closing the subsistence farming saga was in order, and may have mentioned as much to some of you. However, in response to my rustic anecdotes, a nephew, Casey Lynch, told me about his experiences. That reopened the subject, and requires a little background.

Consistent with their limited means then, Stephen and Marsha began their great adventure by renting a farm near Marengo, Illinois. It included an old farmhouse that had been unoccupied for a spell. The place was rather uninviting: plaster crumbling off the walls, kitchen unusable, wind whistling through cracks in window frames, no heat, etc. While Marsha's father fixed up the kitchen, Stephen and I did enough of a jerry-built renovation to make the house livable when coupled with Stephen's subsequent installation of a wood-burning stove. Some time later, a frightening fire in the flue caused a flurry of excitement until it was extinguished with water from the garden hose in the back yard. And one night Stephen and Marsha came home to a bedroom flooded by a broken water pipe – I believe their bed was a mattress on the floor. But I digress, and now quote from Casey's email:

Thanks for the memories Uncle Walt! I too have memories of those farms. My 1st car, a 1967 Oldsmobile literally had a ragtop when I bought it and I was too poor to buy a new one right away. Anyway, winter came so I could not use it and Stephen offered his barn for storage. It gets cold in Marengo in the winter and I believe every pigeon in town was inside the barn to keep warm. I had the top down on the car and did not put a tarp or anything over my car. That was a slight mistake as come spring it took hours to hose down the car to take home.

I also stayed at the 1st Indiana farm one weekend (maybe 4th of July as I remember fireworks) very early in the building process as there was no toilet and we slept in sleeping bags. We had fun but could not wait to get back to civilization.

My story concludes with best wishes to you.

Walt

P.S. A little while ago I crossed the threshold from extremely old to ancient. At 91, I am not exactly contesting Methuselah, but the years do make me miss my younger self. Ain't that always the case with old geezers? Taking solace in the status quo, my right elbow still works like a charm.

I hope all goes well. Happy retirement, Bill. W.