









The Dome Chronicles

Garry Leeson



Plate F.

W. W. B. D.

Heading Back to the Land

I'm not sure when the notion of pulling up stakes and moving east first occurred to me. I know the idea of getting back to the land was something that had been floating around in the back of my mind for a very long time—a yearning I'd inherited from my parents. I was only five years old in 1948 when they finally gave up trying to farm a dusty piece of land in Saskatchewan and moved our family to Toronto.

The new lifestyle in the big city suited the three of my seven sisters who came with us but my parents were never really content picking up their lunch boxes and heading out to their nine-to-five jobs every morning. We'd hardly settled in when my mother and father started talking about finding a nice little farm somewhere. With me in tow, they started driving our old Hupmobile, almost weekly, out to see available properties north of the city. I really thought we might be moving one day but it takes money to buy property and our family had precious little of that to spare. Even with my sisters working and contributing, we were just getting by.

We continued to live in the semi-slums of the city and the years dragged on but my parents kept the dream of returning to the farm alive by making those regular trips to the country to look at places they knew they couldn't really afford. These weekend excursions went on for years and, as I realize now, they weren't just useless exercises. My dad occasionally got the opportunity to shake the dust and grime of the city off and yarn with farm owners who were hoping to make a sale. I think that for brief moments during their conversations about crops and livestock, my dad could envision and even feel himself living on those places. But time after time reality would set in, the dream would end, and we would find ourselves in the old car heading back to the city.

It was a long time in coming but in 1964, with my sister Phyllis's help, my parents did manage to acquire a little farm on the Blue Mountains near Thornbury, Ontario. Spending my weekends out on that land helping my father stirred something in me. I was twenty-one years old with a good job working as a policeman in Toronto but I began thinking seriously about getting away to a place of my own. Most of the productive farmland in Ontario was very expensive and well out of my reach but stories of all the cheap land available in the Maritimes was starting to get my attention. Unfortunately, true to family tradition, I was forced to put the idea onto the back burner for several more years. In the meantime, I started a riding school right in the centre of Toronto, but the

yearning persisted.

Many changes in my life and a lot of emotional water passed under the bridge during that time but in 1971 I met someone who was reckless enough to share my crazy dream. Andrea, now my wife, and I threw caution to the wind and one morning in early fall we jumped into my pickup truck and, ignoring Horace Greely's advice to "Go West, young man," I took the wheel and we struck off east for Nova Scotia to look for some land.

The Maritimes

In 1971, Andrea and I sold my riding school with the intention of starting a new life in rural Nova Scotia. Arriving in the province, we had a quick visit with my sister and her husband in Dartmouth and then hit the road, newspaper in hand, to see what property was available. One listing in particular caught our eyes; it was located on the North Mountain above Kingston in the Annapolis Valley.

Wanting to see some of the local scenery, we took the old shore highway to Bridgewater before heading cross-country toward Middleton. The term 'backwoods' must have been coined to describe most of the country we passed through on that lonely spur. With the exception of a few one-horse hamlets like New Germany, it was trees, trees and more trees. It explained the low price of property.

We were just debating about turning back when the road ahead dropped dramatically to reveal an incredible panorama of lush green open land spotted with neat little farmsteads. I think the sun must have broken through the clouds at that very moment and I wouldn't have been surprised to hear the "Hallelujah Chorus." It was breathtaking.

We took the old highway toward Kingston, found the Dodge Road and headed up the North Mountain, thankful to be driving a pickup truck as the road disintegrated into a rocky cow path. A bullet-ridden real estate sign swung back and forth in the breeze where the original lane had succumbed to a tangle of alders. Beyond those were the house and barn. They were sunk into the ground, but the land was cheap and we planned to build anyway so we headed back to Kingston to find a phone and put in an offer.

We were stopped on the side of the road into town trying to get our bearings when I noticed a sign on one of the stores that read: "Tack Shop & Real Estate." Luck must have been on our side. Not only could we

negotiate the property purchase, but I also had a side business wholesaling horse gear and this could change a frivolous vacation into a tax-deductible business trip.

We went in. Andrea duly struck up a conversation with Mary, the shop owner, casually mentioning that we were also looking for land. A man appeared from a shadowy doorway to our right.

He was a slight, handsome little devil in his early forties with prematurely grey hair. He was so soft-spoken that we had to lean in close to make out what he was saying. After introducing himself, Arthur Ritchie smoothly steered the conversation over to property. We'd already decided that we wanted the North Mountain farm, but I thought it wouldn't hurt to string him along a bit.

Handing him my card, I said, "I tell you what, Arthur, if you ever find a nice little piece of land with a bit of clearing for pasture and hay and some decent wood, you give me a call." He took my card and said, "Jump in your truck and follow me."

I replied, "Oh, we're in a bit of a hurry today. I don't know..." But he cut me off, saying, "C'mon, it's only fifteen minutes from here."

So we abandoned all notions of doing some business in the tack store and followed Arthur up South Mountain. A sign that pointed to the top read 'Harmony' but we turned off before then, onto a narrower road beside a large old farmhouse. That road, if it could be called that, petered out at the edge of a small brook. We left the vehicles behind and Arthur strode purposefully ahead, on a path that was a tunnel of green.

After a few minutes of silent trudging, the light in the tunnel grew brighter and the path expanded on the edge of a wide open space of about fifteen acres. This was no overgrown farmstead covered in alders, moss and twitch grass like the North Mountain property. A well-kept hay field spread out before us, surrounded by mature stands of pine, spruce, hemlock, and several varieties of hardwoods. It was perfect.

Trying not to sound too eager, I asked, "So, how many acres are there?" "Around seventy-five, give or take a few," Arthur replied.

I waited a while, scratched my head, looked at my boots, yawned, and then asked the big question, "What do they want for it?"

He whispered, "Thirteen."

I thought I was having trouble hearing him again so I got him to repeat the number. I couldn't believe my ears. In Ontario, thirteen thousand wouldn't even get me a house lot. To hell with bargaining! I was ready to give him a deposit.

Back in Arthur's office I strove to look nonchalant as he filled out an 'offer to purchase' form on the farmland on South Mountain, hoping like crazy that he hadn't quoted me the wrong price. He finally passed me the paper and said, "Check this to make sure it's in order." Arthur had made a mistake. The purchase price on the form was thirteen hundred, not thirteen thousand. I ventured a condescending chuckle and handed it back to him saying, "Arthur, you wrote thirteen hundred."

He sat there for a moment staring at me, seeming really miffed. Then he slammed his fist on the desk and, in the loudest voice he had used all day, declared, "I'm sorry, Mr. Leeson." I'd been plain Garry up until then. "The price is firm. It's thirteen hundred and not a cent less." Then, even louder, he shouted, "There is no room for negotiation!" So I wrote a cheque for the full amount and have never regretted it.

We purchased our little slice of heaven for the tidy sum of thirteen hundred dollars...and were only slightly taken aback when our new neighbours informed us that they could have got it for eight hundred.

Oh well, you win some, you lose some.