Back to the Island:
The Back-to-the-Land Movement on PEI

Dolly at the Window, 1976©George S. Zimbel

The following essay by Alan MacEachern (amaceach@uwo.ca) uses quotations from a series of oral interviews conducted by Ryan O'Connor in 2008. Audio recordings of these interviews, plus brief biographies of those interviewed, may be found at http://niche.uwo.ca/member-projects/backtotheisland/interviews.html

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1. The Thing to Do at the Time

The 1970s back-to-the-land movement was unusual as far as movements go, because it involved actual movement. People from across North America relocated to out of the way rural places to grow their own food and live more simply, a sort of rubber boot rebooting. Though they shared many of the same influences, they made individual choices and decided as individuals or families what small pockets of the continent would become their new home.

Prince Edward Island was one of the popular destinations for back-to-the-landers, thanks to its beautiful summers, arable soil, and cheap, cheap land. A sizable number of back-to-the-landers — in the hundreds at least — moved to PEI, taking over farms that had fallen into disuse or building homes in forests that had never been cleared. They settled into a society that had, in many ways, never left the land, that was itself trying to join modernity but still seemed closer to the 19th century than the 21st. The back-to-the-landers, in establishing themselves on PEI, simultaneously validated the celebrated Island way of life and brought new ideas as to what that way of life could be.

They came from all over, with unique histories and an individual blend of motivations leading them to PEI. Before moving to Milo and living in a tent, David Sobers was a philosophy professor at the University of Vermont. It was, he remembers, "a very comfortable existence, but it wasn't satisfying. ...We lived in a beautiful home out in the suburbs, just outside of Burlington ... and every weekend, the whole weekend you'd hear lawnmowers going. And I thought, 'Gee, this is absurd.'" Joyce and Mark Arnold were teachers in Montreal, sick of the city life and just discovering that they could be more self-sufficient. "Actually," Mark states, "the real thing that happened to me is I was driving a Volkswagen Beetle and I bought a book ... on how to tune up your Volkswagen Beetle. I bought the parts ... and tuned up my car. I had never done something like that before. And that led to us buying a farm in rural PEI...." JoDee Samuelson, the

conservative daughter of an Alberta minister, became a hippie, and in 1971 saw PEI as a good place to sell beaded jewelry to tourists. Cef Pobjoy joined a campaign against a proposed airport in Pickering, Ontario. A group of protesters there moved into farmhouses that had been expropriated and were now sitting empty. "That was the first taste of land," he recalls. "We were living on farmland by accident." Wendy Ader-Jones had never even heard of a back-to-the-land movement. She and her husband just took off from Connecticut in their Volkswagen van with plans to buy property in Oregon. But their travels kept turning them north and east. "Someone in the Antigonish, Nova Scotia area said to us ’You really ought to see Prince Edward Island before you leave the Maritimes.’ So we did. We took the ferry on September 30, ’72, and two weeks later we were proud owners of a 125-acre farm."

But as individual as these stories are, they share some commonalities. That’s hardly a surprise. The back-to-the-landers were a distinct enough subculture that they tended to look alike: with their long hair and the way they dressed, they recognized one another on the streets of Charlottetown. Those who came to Prince Edward Island in the early-to-mid 1970s were typically baby boomers, born just after the end of the Second World War and still quite young. Most were middle- or upper-middle class. Almost all were on the political left, many were activists, some focused their activism on the Vietnam War, and a very few were outright draft dodgers. They were reading many of the same things, like the Whole Earth Catalog, Helen and Scott Nearing’s The Good Life, EF Schumacher’s Small is Beautiful, Rodale Press magazines, and Harrowsmith. Above all, they shared a sense that there should be more to life than what modern urban and suburban existence was offering. They wanted a smaller, more real world. They wanted to be closer — to nature, to their food, to their work, to their families. This was to be an escape, but it would not be escapist: they would work harder and pay more attention to how they eked out an existence than they would have otherwise.

Peter Richards recalls,

> I was living in Toronto, ... and I don't know, the lakes were polluted and the air smelled bad and it just wasn't fun anymore. I grew up in St Catherines, which is beside Lake Ontario, and we used to go when I was a child, go and swim in the lake. Now you had to go and read the signs which said 'Do not enter these waters.' ... It just didn't feel good. And then I visited some friends, in Quebec, and they lived in the country and they swam in lakes and I thought, 'This is the life. I have to get out of the city.' ... A couple years after that I came to PEI and I found a similar sort of thing going on here where people were trying to become self-sufficient, or at least learn how to ... grow things in their gardens and build houses and renovate old farmhouses. All of that was possible. Houses were inexpensive, old farmhouses were falling down, you could buy them for next to nothing, fix them up. And land was very cheap, and so it just really suited being young and poor and wanting to have your own 'thing'. Renting an apartment in a city was just, you know, the worst possible choice compared to what you could do here.

Or, as Steve Knechtel says, laughing, "It just seemed like the thing to do at the time!"

2. The Future of the Past

And Prince Edward Island in the 1970s was a good place to do it. The Island had a long tradition not only of small farming, but also of rural exodus. The population had shrunk every decade of the previous century (the 1970s would reverse that trend, thanks in part to the back-to-the-landers). There was land to be had. "We bought fifty acres for $2500," says John Rousseau, "and we moved into a community that had a lot of old farming couples and no young people. They had all left. We passed them on the boat."

Morley Pinsent and family had just moved out of a commune in British Columbia, and were looking around for a place of their own. In BC, "What we could afford, we realized we would be about 500 years old before it was really productive." They headed east.

When in the Maritimes, "We said, 'Oh,' looking at the map, ‘we could go on one ferry and drive down and come off on the next one.’ Well, we took the one ferry and never left." Pinsent says, "I would be untruthful if ... I didn't say probably a primary factor was a fifty acre farm for $6,200, half cleared and half in hardwoods. Lovely rolling hills, springs, great building sites." Quite a few back-to-the-landers found such places through Dignam Land, an old Ontario-based newsletter that listed – and still lists – tax sale properties. The places were scattered all over the Island’s three counties. Mark and Joyce Arnold bought 50 acres near New London for $6000; the Ader-Joneses paid $9000 for their 125 acres; Peter Richards rented a farm in Kelly’s Cross over the phone, for $50 per month.

There were deserted farms on or near the shore, but most were inland, with some never having been farmed – the cheapest of cheap Island land. The presence of some back-to-the-landers would then attract more, and two areas in particular became enclaves: the Dixon Road / Breadalbane area of Queen’s County, and the Lewes / Iris /Hopefield / Cardigan area of King’s County. Joan and Gerald Sutton chose to settle on the Dixon Road in 1970 in part because Phil and Jean Corsi’s family ran a commune and hosted parties there. "They were just very interesting," Joan says, "so we thought that this would be a good place to settle. Also, it’s halfway between Charlottetown and Summerside and you can work in both areas. We knew we wanted to grow our food and stuff so we didn't want to be on the shore, because in the winter you don't want to be out there." Steve Knechtel notes with some pride that in an Island phone book overloaded with Macs and Mcs, there was at one point five Ks on the Lewes Road: the Katzes, Koleszars, Kershes, Krauskopfs, and Knechtels.

Beyond Prince Edward Island having good, available, inexpensive land going for it, there were signs in the 1970s that it was developing a sense of itself as a place of environmental possibility. Paying the most of any Canadians for energy, Islanders were hit especially hard by the 1973-74 energy crisis: within a year the price of electricity rose

50% and heating oil 100%. Alex Campbell's provincial government, which in 1969 had introduced a 15-year Comprehensive Development Plan to move PEI to a modern, streamlined economy, now converted to a "small is beautiful" philosophy, preaching the value of alternative energy, decentralization, no growth, and self-sufficiency. The Campbell government created an Institute of Man and Resources to coordinate its efforts, and it brokered the 1976 building of the Ark bioshelter in Spry Point by the US-based New Alchemy Institute with Canadian government funding. Though the IMR garnered some interest – Small is Possible, the sequel to Small is Beautiful, would call it "one of the most carefully planned and well-structured efforst at energy and self-sufficiency in existence anywhere in the Western world" – it was the Ark, with its vision of an ultramodern, ultra energy-efficient single family home, that really inspired people. There were stories in Chatelaine, Maclean's, the New York Times, and the Whole Earth Catalog spinoff Co-Evolution Quarterly. Stewart Brand, the Whole Earth founder himself, came down to swing a hammer when the Ark was being built, and stayed to watch Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau fly in by helicopter to open it.

In a sense, of course, none of this had anything to do with the back-to-the-land movement. The houses in Lewes were separated from the Ark in Spry Point by more than just 50 kilometres and $375,000 in construction costs; the back-to-the-landers were not trying to demonstrate anything to anyone, they were doing it by and for themselves. Still, the reputation that the Island built in the North American counterculture community in the 1970s undoubtedly attracted some back-to-the-landers there, and jobs and support from the burgeoning environmental field undoubtedly helped some in making ends meet. And conversely, the arrival of back-to-the-landers early in the decade undoubtedly helped both precipitate and foretell the Island's foray in sustainability. Returning to a 19th century existence, the back-to-the-landers were ahead of their time.

3. The Shock of the Old

It was 1970, and Joan and Gerald Sutton had just moved to the Island, settling first in French River. They had chosen PEI in part because of Joan’s love of the Anne of Green Gables books. The first time they went to Charlottetown, Joan says, "Okay. We were in the middle of town, I looked around, and — we came from Chicago — I said, 'Ger, there has to be more!' So we got back in our car, looked for more, and there wasn't any more!"

Cef Pobjoy tells a similar story, but different. It was 1972, and before starting out from Toronto, he had stuffed his car’s rust holes with bags of pot. "[W]hen we landed on PEI I was driving the station wagon. I was very nervous about the cops and we drove out around Pooles Corner and I saw a car stopped on the side of the road with a cop car behind it, and the Mountie had two elderly people up against the car and he was body searching them. And I was stoned. And I thought, 'Oh my God, where have I moved to?'"

This was counterculture shock. Pulling up stakes and moving to PEI was a grand adventure, but one that offered no escape from reality — just a different, often more difficult, reality. And as alien as the back-to-the-landers were to Island society, the reverse was even more true. Most knew next to nothing about their new home, its history, society, politics, or expectations. For example, Joan Sutton recalls her first experience with real Island weather:

> They were forecasting a snowstorm. I thought, 'Oh well, big deal. So what?' So I went to Summerside and it starts to snow and I'm looking and it's really starting to snow. I call Ger, 'Well, what do I do?' He said, 'Well, whatever you do, don't stop, okay?' So I piled everything in the car as quick as I could and got going. I did stop once — that was when I was off in a field and I couldn't find out where the road was, so I had to get out of my car to find out where the road was again. I drove from Summerside to French River in a blinding blizzard in a little Volkswagen Bug. I went through drift after drift. The only reason I didn't get

> killed was because nobody else was stupid enough to be out there at that time. And our landlady was calling Ger, 'What did you let her go for? You should have kept her home. Don't you know anything?' 'No.'

Or as Mark Arnold puts it, "August in Irishtown, there's no place like it. And February in Irishtown ... there's no place like it."

But it was in growing food that the newcomers' lack of knowledge made itself felt the most. The back-to-the-landers faced more than the typical difficulties that come with relocating, because they were attempting to start a new life that was essentially experimental. They planned to live simply, sustainably, and off the land. And it was a land that they didn't know. The Suttons recall that when they moved to Breadalbane, people laughed at them for eagerly trying to grow every possible kind of bean – but forgetting to plant green beans. David Sobers raised bees and an acre garden his first year, not to mention cows, ducks, geese, chickens, and a pony. "Really, we had too much going on at the same time." Like the Suttons, Rick and Carla Gibbs were entirely new to farming. He was from New York City, she from Montreal, and the extent of their knowledge of agriculture was a brief stint on her uncle’s farm and a worn copy of Richard W. Langer’s guidebook Grow It. Yet they took over a 223-acre farm in Iris, and tried a little of everything, raising cows, goats, geese, ducks, chickens, and horses. And pigs: "We kind of enjoyed the idea of a New York Jew having a pig farm. That kind of entertained us." Rick got rid of the ducks when they attacked him; more generally, many of the back-to-the-landers' experiments failed. "If anybody ever tells you they want to go into business having a u-pick cucumber field," advises Wendy Ader-Jones, "talk them out of it."

But before the back-to-the-landers ever gained such hard-earned knowledge, they relied on the experience of locals. Mark Arnold knew nothing about farming when he bought a tractor, a plough, harrows, and seed, and got ready to plant. "My neighbours were very helpful. I mean, they were giving me lots of tips. 'This is what you do, and this

how you do it....'" Just before Mark was about to start, neighbour Borden McAllister — "a tobacco-chewing, tobacco-spitting guy; salt of the earth" — drove into his yard, ran up to him, and said, "'Mark, before you do it I gotta tell you one thing: if you don't turn the seeds of grain head-down it won't sprout!' And I stopped and said, 'Wait a second. I'm sowing a ton of seed. You mean I got to turn every little head by hand? Every little seed with the head down? I can't do that!' And he smiled at me and I knew he was joking."

4. Neighbours

Islanders responded in every possible way to the arrival of these new, exotic neighbours. Back-to-the-landers speak of being met with suspicion, friendliness, xenophobia, empathy, pity, derision, open curiosity, and open arms. Mark Arnold can't forget how helpful people were, but neither can he forget that both of his dogs were shot. Laurel Smyth was an out-and-out hippie, who had gone from being "a teenaged bride, the first divorced person I knew, and a failed analyst of Noxema Chemical Company of Canada, all by the age of twenty-one," to a puppeteer. Two of her first Island homes were a school bus and (when pregnant, and having become obsessed with all things aboriginal) a tepee on Panmure Island. She always found it easy to hitchhike, because people were friendly, and it was a way for them to find out about her.

> 'Oh, what's your name? Oh, Smyth? Well, that's not an Island name. ... How long have you been home?' They all knew you're not from here but they still called this 'home', and they still called you 'dear.' And from those conversations sometimes that's where people ended up with a house to live in for free for the next winter 'cause 'Ah hell, we're not using it. You might as well live there, dear.' A generosity that was unbelievable. They'd drive up and bring us fresh catch from the sea and bring us potatoes by the bags. They were just wonderful to us.

She good-naturedly says that "When we first arrived it was like 'Hey, we got hippies! Let's go see them.' There were some places where they'd drive up to see you. 'Let's go look at the hippies,' like we were an amusement park or something." Or something. As

Laurel discovered when house-sitting alone for her sister and brother-in-law, some visitors assumed she would be into "free love," and she had to chase them away.

But mostly, the back-to-the-landers speak of the kindness and generosity; Cef Pobjoy refers to almost everyone being "adopted" by someone in the community. Many rural Islanders were thrilled that these young people were taking over dilapidated farms and rejuvenating rural communities, that they were emulating the traditional Island way of life even while introducing new and interesting ideas. Judith Merrill, who moved with husband Steven from Boston to Gaspereaux, tells of the immediate connection they made with Howard and Gladys Jameson, neighbours who had given up farming. The Jamesons took the Merrills under their wing, to the point that the Merrills became almost grateful for power outages, when they could return the favour, inviting the Jamesons down to sit by their woodstove, drink tea, and play cards.

> There's something about this Island that entraps people who are original and different, and the fact that they stay here and it happens means that the Island really can support these kind of people. And that's what I felt about the Jamesons. It always astounded me as to how much they opened their hearts to us. And it wasn't just being kind. They absolutely loved being around us. They would love to sit and talk with us and we would have great conversations. And anything we were doing, no matter how far out it was, we could tell the Jamesons. ....I don't think the Jamesons are something special that we found. I think that is the Island nature that they have.

Steve Merrill couldn't find a job at first, and at one point they talked of leaving. Years later, Judith learned that Gladys put a rosary on the fencepost at the foot of the Merrills' lane, and prayed that they wouldn't go.

For many in central King's County, Angus MacLean and his wife Gwen were akin to ambassadors between the back-to-the-landers and the local community. Angus was not just a war-hero, long-time politician, and, between 1979 and 1981 Premier of the

province, he was a never-left-the-lander, running a small sheep farm in Lewes. Angus helped newcomers get established, telling them who they should talk to. "He was a really forward-thinking guy," says Cef Pobjoy, "for someone who always said he was a backwards guy." Wendy Ader-Jones tells of going to a funeral in Lewes of a back-to-the-lander. There were perhaps 100 people gathered at the cemetery, when Gwen MacLean came over to Wendy and gave her a $100 bill to give to the widow. That was "a lot of money back in the mid-70s, especially for us. It was just such a poignant moment, I'll never forget that because she could have come and been part of it, but it was all of us hippies that were there, you know, and she didn't want to intrude or make a scene, but she wanted to contribute."

5. The Nature of the Work

What won over many rural Islanders was that, like themselves, the back-to-the-landers were committed to hard work. Work, says John Rousseau, was what made the movement a religion: "you had to believe in this, that it was a good thing to do." Rick Gibbs, the New York Jew turned pig farmer, found that "[T]he old farmers, what they respected was a good day's work, a hard day's work. If you worked hard, they thought the way you looked might have been crazy, but they didn't mind .... The first few years we were farming we did all kinds of crazy things, you know, that didn't work out and the old timers would tell us how to do it better...." Having conceived of their new life as a grand adventure, Rick and Carla found the reality more prosaic. Their first winter, 1975, the water stopped working. "By then we had a cow and goats and horses in the barn. We'd have to go to that old empty house across the road, there was a hand pump behind it, ... and we had to cross the road with buckets. I still remember it took 55 pumps to fill a bucket of water. Haul it back across and then the cow would just — slurrrp — she'd drink the whole bucket. It was tough." And yet Rick and Carla speak of that time not so much with nostalgia as gratitude, that it taught them about themselves. In their interview, they keep coming back to the work. Rick says,

If you cleared the field, you know, and really worked hard on it ... you would have a cleared field that you could feel proud about. Or build a barn, or a herd of cattle that you started with one three-teated cow and ended up with ten real milk cows. You could see something and it felt honest .... The key word for me was that it was honest work. I felt honest about it. I totally didn't know what I was getting into, for sure, but I felt good about those years anyway.

Given the life the back-to-the-landers were attempting, they could hardly help but be bound to their work. Almost from the moment he and his family arrived, Gerald Sutton was not only building their own house with wood hauled from their own forest, and growing their own food, he was teaching high school. He believes that while there were a lot of hippies who were really just slumming graduate students, "the people that stayed were those of us that bought land and didn't mind doing the work. ...Most of the hippies I know weren't real workers. You know, to go back-to-the-land you have to do the work."

It was an unusual mix of work. Some of it was just the regular work of setting up a farm in 20th (or 19th) century Prince Edward Island; Christine Stanley building the barn with her baby in a backpack, and her two-year-old handing her lumber, is perhaps an extreme instance of that. Some of it was deliberately premodern while some of it was forward-looking and untried; Morley Pinsent, who lived in South Granville without power, did all his farmwork with draft horses, and taught himself how to butcher, serves as an example of one end of the spectrum, and Roy Johnstone supplying power with a windmill — and so, in wintertime, climbing the 55-foot tower to chip ice off the blades — as an example of the other. We tend to think of back-to-the-landers as anti-technology, but that is a real mistake. Some were intent in developing new technologies, many adopted the lifestyle because it promised closer engagement with traditional existing technologies, and for all it demanded knowledge and a clear focus on how the technologies on which they depended worked.

There’s a thread of great satisfaction, even joy, running through the back-to-the-landers’ interviews, when they talk about what work they found themselves able to accomplish. Having given up a secure way of life in Vermont, David Sobers was living in a tent and, without any experience, began building his own house. When their well was dug,

> We thought, 'Wow, that's all you need! We have water — that's just fantastic!' So we lived for a few years without electricity. ... Without electricity, without a phone. We couldn't even afford an outhouse.... I think if we had gone from living in our comfortable suburban existence to an old farmhouse, we might have felt as though it was a come-down. But going from there to a tent, everything we got after that we were so grateful for. To have some walls to shelter us from the wind. We pitched our tent inside. [laughs] Everything we had then we were grateful for, we appreciated, and it was progress for us.

Some weekends, there would be 30 or 40 people from the community watching the house slowly going up. "We built our house and poured the cement.... We did all the framing and everything by hand. We built the roof trusses. I loved putting on the roof. That was kind of neat. It was so satisfying to shingle a roof. You really had a feeling of accomplishment."

6. A Sense of Community

Marion Copleston grew up in Toronto, where she developed a love of the outdoors through the Girl Guides. After a few visits to Prince Edward Island in the 70s she decided to stay, with the intention of building an energy-efficient home and living off the land as much as possible. The house would be south-facing for passive solar heating, it would have thick walls and even firewood all around it for extra insulation, and water would be heated on the woodstove. On the Island, Marion signed up for a Department of Forestry woodlot and chainsaw maintenance course. So did Tony Reddin, an Islander who

thought the same way she did about a lot of things. "That's our romantic story," Tony says, in the Bonshaw home they have lived in for almost thirty years.

The back-to-the-landers developed close ties not only with the local communities, but with each other. That is hardly surprising, given that many had similar backgrounds, similar interests, similar needs. They often even looked alike. Cef Pobjoy states, "When I say this it's almost like we were another race. But you could go in to Montague and recognize people by the long hair and weird clothes at that time, that they weren't from here. We knew each other right away. 'Where you from?' 'Oh, I'm from Indianapolis.' 'What are you doing here?' 'I'm just living up in a shack up in the Seal River.'" Joan Sutton laughs, remembering that people assumed she was Phil Corsi's sister just because they were both from away and had dark curly hair.

The back-to-the-landers tended to find one another by gravitating to the same places. The Charlottetown library was one such place, the School of Visual Arts – where, according to Judith Merrill, only 2 of the 30 students in her first crafting class were Islanders – was another. The Root Cellar, the Charlottetown health food store opened by JoDee Samuelson and her boyfriend in 1971, was something of a spiritual hub. And, of course, there were the parties. Phil Corsi of the Dixon Road became renowned for his big summer parties, with musicians like Lennie Gallant and Speed the Plough playing. Down east, a Montrealer named Jack Miller who had bought a lobster license held huge end-of-season parties that drew back-to-the-landers, and everyone else, together for lobster and beer.

Morley Pinsent, who had experienced the hippie scene on both coasts, found the PEI back-to-the-landers considerably more laid back. In BC, "there were perhaps more in people's faces and there was more confrontation. It was much gentler and more pleasant here." They became, in fact, quite close knit. Some of the back-to-the-landers had started out in communes, and found that overwhelming, but they saw the value of

working together. They helped each other build their houses or on any other projects that came along. They shared cars, tools, tips, and child-care. In central King's county, they started a Rudolf Steiner school as well as the Wild Oats Food Co-op, saving money by buying food by bulk. They even put together good softball teams, the Lost Dogs and the Iris Cowpies, in the Montague rec league. Self-sufficiency doesn't mean you don't enjoy the company of others.

7. Mod Cons

One might assume that the back-to-the-landers eschewed all elements of modern life, but the truth was more complex than that. Some gratefully accepted the technologies that came their way while others renounced them. Some of those interviewed seem to have been as conflicted about material possessions as are the rest of us today. Wendy Ader-Jones operated 50 beehives, a greenhouse, and the first organic strawberry u-pick on PEI, yet didn't accept invitations to the local Women's Institute for several years: "I was afraid to," she says. "Because everybody had to take a turn hosting all the women at their home and I had no running water, no electricity, and no telephone at our farm. But everybody else had gotten all those 'mod cons', you know, years before, and I was embarrassed to bring them to the house." Compare that to Christine Stanley, who says, "I was really strict back then because I didn't want any electricity. People would give me things like electric frying pans for Christmas and I rejected all of that. I wanted no electricity. I wanted a hand pump. I've sort of given in a little bit but now that my kids are gone I can see myself going back to - I don't want any of that. I want to live a simple life."

In a society devoted to time-saving, throwaway conveniences, the back-to-the-land movement was in essence redefining (or re-redefining) what the simple life was, and how it could be achieved. Yet back-to-the-landers either knew or quickly discovered that the simple life was a lot of work, and so few were dogmatic. They took up the

technologies that made sense for them, that were available, that they could afford, and that made their life simpler.

Not surprisingly, indoor plumbing was a matter of importance. The Stanleys had moved into a cabin with no electricity or running water, and installed a flush toilet only when their son Michael was starting school; his grandmother was convinced "he'd be traumatized at school if he didn't know how to use a flush toilet." Both the Gibbs and the Suttons speak of always having had indoor plumbing – the Gibbs because it came with the farm they bought, the Suttons because "We were never that back-to-the-land" – and of sharing it with back-to-the-landers who didn't. Joan Sutton recalls that the Corsi family had an outhouse, and "sometimes his kids would run up here in the winter to use the bathroom. That tells you something!" Peter Richards of Kelly's Cross was not ideologically opposed to running water, he just couldn't afford it when he built his own house. "We were willing to live at that standard for a while, but it was a great day when I lay in the bathtub and turned on the hot water tap the first time. It was one of the greatest days of my life."

Going without electricity was equally difficult. The Pinsents eventually succumbed because they were having trouble with food storage, and because their growing market garden needed a reliable supply of water. And there were other factors. Morley Pinsent notes that "We missed music, and the kids missed the television." They tried using a windmill for a while, and then a Belarus tractor with a big global battery that he would drive down to the neighbours and recharge. "It made it really selective for the kids watching television," says Morley.

The arrival of modern technologies wasn't necessarily welcome. Cef Pobjoy remembers feeling closely attuned to the older generation of Islanders, who were well-accustomed to living without electricity or indoor plumbing. He states,

> It was the middle generation that was going 'What the fuck are these guys doing? We're just getting running water and indoor plumbing.' I had no indoor plumbing for six years, and I loved it. Outdoor toilet, no running water, no lights. ... No sound in the house. The day that we finally – we got two kids – ... and I bought a fridge and I couldn't believe how invasive the sound [was]. The whole fucking house was vibrating, and it was a newer fridge! It's just hmmmmmmm. It's very disturbing. And when the light came on, I just felt invaded. But on the day we got running water I almost went on my knees and thanked God. Six years of pumping water in the winter.

It is worth noting that in many of these stories, children figure prominently. Morley Pinsent wryly calls his children his "labour force," helping make living back-to-the-land possible – but they also made it more difficult. By virtue of going to school, kids drew the family daily into the mainstream. They were on the one hand forced ambassadors for the movement and on the other hand agents of modern life infiltrating the back-to-the-land homes. Pinsent's children, for example, faced some stresses because they were considered "different" at school and because they didn't have some of the material possessions that other kids did. In something of the same vein, the Arnolds' daughter was teased on the school bus for having such healthy lunches. The lifestyle tested families, Joyce Arnold concludes: "you could either become reliant on each other, or it could pull families apart."

For many people who had made the deliberate choice of becoming back-to-the-landers, it was very difficult to impose that choice on children, so kids often precipitated not just the arrival of modern conveniences but the eventual abandonment of the back-to-the-land way-of-life altogether. This may speak ultimately to how fragile that existence really was – how difficult it is in our society to seek the simple life, and how simple it is to be pulled back into that larger society. Laurel Smyth speaks of how razor-thin the margin was for Prince Edward Island back-to-the-landers:

> It’s really hard to support yourself at all unless you're extremely competent and have a very wide-ranging sphere of activities to support yourself back on the land. You know, you still need your heat and your light .... If you don't have electricity then you're going to either buy a lot of candles or you're going to be making them or you're going to have lanterns – then you have to buy the kerosene for them. So everything, you have to spend money, no matter what. There's no getting away from the money economy without very, very serious group application to achieving that goal. I just can't imagine it, and certainly I wasn't about to embark on something that rigorous when I had a child. I mean, there were ones who did, but those ones weren't really here on PEI. This is not a place that truly lends itself to such harsh realities. Surviving winter alone, and mud season, that was enough of a harsh reality.

8. Getting by, getting out, and getting on

"I left the woods for as good a reason as I went there," wrote Henry David Thoreau at the end of his 1854 book Walden. It was not too far a trek, in that Thoreau’s cabin at Walden Pond was just a few miles outside Concord, Massachusetts, which he often visited during his wilderness sabbatical. Likewise, the Prince Edward Island back-to-the-landers – many of whom lived within a half-hour’s drive of the provincial capital – were never truly separate from the broader world. And they did not claim or need to be. They were not so much escaping as experimenting, seeing whether living small, simply, and self-sufficiently would be as fulfilling in practice as it sounded in theory. And we must remember – especially when hearing the back-to-the-landers today, people in their 50s or 60s – that a great many were (like Thoreau) in their 20s at the time, and figuring out what to do with their lives. That is why we should avoid the temptation to judge the back-to-the-land movement simply by whether or not its practitioners stayed on the land, and with the same lifestyle. Some found what they were looking for in that life, some didn’t, and some found it the source of other opportunities. As Thoreau went on

to say, "Perhaps it seemed to me that I had several more lives to live, and could not spare any more time for that one."

David Sobers was perfectly content living a life of what he called "hedonic poverty," making due with very little and growing most of his own food, to the point that his food bill was less than $5 per month. He says,

> We would have been quite happy to live with virtually nothing. We didn't mind not having electricity. We didn't mind having to pump our own water .... If we needed clothes we'd go to army surplus and get them for very little. We didn't mind. We didn't feel at all deprived at not having money, but we needed a little bit of money. We had to have money to pay our taxes. We had to buy some things, not very much, but in order to make that money we had to have a car - a vehicle that worked. But now as soon as you have a vehicle, that represents an enormous increase in expense. So once you have a vehicle then you have to support the vehicle.

As a result, Sobers took to doing something he had been interested in doing for some time: selling pianos. It was a bold move, given that he lived on a dirt road impassible half the year and would be showing the pianos by kerosene light. Since he had no phone, he advertised using a neighbour's number, and had them take messages. "I would call people back and say 'Gosh, I'm going to be in Charlottetown tomorrow anyway, why don't I stop by and ... tell you a little about what we have? So pretty much I sold them out of a brochure." Amazingly, Sobers Music became a success, and he soon opened a store in Summerside, still thriving today. But David no longer runs it. He and his wife had never liked the Island winters, and, as a pianist, David found that the cold weather affected his joints. During a Florida vacation in the early 90s, they realized they weren't obliged to return. Eventually, they resettled in New Mexico. "But it was with great reluctance that I would leave the Island," David says. "It was only the severity of the winters and health that caused it."

Whereas some like Sobers see circumstance as pulling them away from the back-to-the-land lifestyle, others walked away because it was not for them. Mark and Joyce Arnold found it ultimately tedious. "We were, more or less ... educated-kind of pseudo-intellectual city types that thought we could learn how to live sustainably and wanted to experiment with that. And after four or five years of discovering that when you plant a mixture of oats and barley, all things being equal, and the rains come, it grows and you get grain, the thrill kind of left." Mark Arnold took up a succession of jobs to make ends meet, including becoming a self-taught chimney sweep. (His advertisements promised "Cash or Barter", and he recalls being paid a roast of beef for one job, and giving the owner a chicken as change.) Within a few years, he had to tell his regular customers that he wouldn't be back again because he was off to law school. The Arnolds live in Toronto now, and admit that things have changed a lot. Their house is worth $1.5 million, they own a Lexus. "We are backsliders, big time," Mark says with a laugh.

And then there are those who stayed, though not always with the lifestyle they had first envisioned. Symbolic of this might be Judith Merrill's chicken coop, hauled onto her property but never cooping a single chicken. Instead, Judith and partner Steven ended up focusing on bees and woodworking. The couple, who had built their house on the very spot they got married, are divorced now, and she's a Charlottetown-based massage therapist. Malcolm and Christine Stanley found their back-to-the-living existence supported by crafting, he as a potter, she a weaver. But Christine also was and remains a serious farmer: goats, ducks, chickens, and sheep. "You can see I'm obsessed with it," she says, "I love farming, and I'll never give it up." Cef Pobjoy, and Marion Copleston and Tony Reddin are others still living the life, or variations of it.

But the times they are a changin'. Malcolm Stanley speaks of fellow back-to-the-lander Phil Corsi as "my guru, as far as living simply. I aspire to how he lives. I was just down there last night. I paid $5 for a...bag of salad stuff, but you get the conversation." On the

one hand, his comment expresses a continuity about the back-to-the-land movement. It was about self-sufficiency but never just about self, it was also about meeting other interesting people with some similar interests; it was about the conversation. That conversation continues among and between back-to-the-landers, farmers, rural people, artisans, environmentalists, activists, and others on Prince Edward Island, and elsewhere. On the other hand, it's hard to miss that the bag of salad stuff is now $5, David Sobers' monthly food budget 30 years ago. We have organic produce in our supermarkets today, solar panels on our roofs, and even windmills dotting the landscape, and some small credit for this is due to back-to-the-landers' individual experiments in self-sufficiency in the 1970s. Living the simple life has become a little simpler, and with that comes all the attendant benefits and drawbacks of joining the mainstream.

This is a history that is still being written. Over time, Morley Pinsent's farm tucked into the woods of South Granville got power, running water, a septic system, and an oil furnace. Some of these amenities were to accommodate an increasingly-successful market garden, some to accommodate a growing family. Through Premier Angus MacLean, Morley got involved in the provincial Small Farms Program, and he worked there for many years. His kids eventually grew up and moved away, and his wife died nine years ago. After that, it could be said that Morley went back to back-to-the-land, making the farm once more largely self-sufficient. He has since moved to the relative urbanity of Rustico, but still speaks lovingly of the South Granville property that he bought for $120/acre, land that "afforded us a pretty incredible life for thirty plus years."

I end with Morley Pinsent because he has always struck me as the archetypal PEI back-to-the-lander, undoubtedly because he was the first I ever met. My family has owned a 90-acre farm in New Argyle since the 1820s, and when the back-to-the-landers were arriving on the Island in the 1970s, we were still working with horses, were still milking

by hand, and had only just acquired indoor plumbing. My father arranged to buy a foal from Morley, and our whole family piled into the truck to bring it home. We went from sheer curiosity, wanting to meet these people-from-away who were living a 19th century existence, in the middle of nowhere, on purpose. I can recall driving down a narrow lane unguided by telephone poles, hay swishing at our truck's undercarriage, into a wooded valley and finding, magically, a home. In my memory it was a meeting of the back-to-the-landers and the never-lefts (the children planning-to-leaves), and it was a real pleasure. And why not? We were two families not all that different, waving to each other while travelling in what we thought were opposite directions. ●