

His romantic view of country life turned out to be “utter rot” — instead, frequently filled with “Hobbesian horrors.” Still, the author is now “the happiest of men”

From State Dept.

to State of *Bliss*

by ALAN ZUSCHLAG

Like most city people, I had an overly romantic view of country living. Visiting the countryside on the weekends to hike the mountains, or poke around an antique shop, or bring home a gallon of cider from a roadside farm stand gives one a very skewed impression of what living in the country is about. Doing so on a beautiful spring day in May or a mellow October afternoon filled with golden sunlight compounds the illusion of a carefree country life where the weather is always gorgeous, the apples in the pie are plucked fresh from the tree that morning, and where life is lived more fully in the moment and at a slower pace far, far away from urban concerns such as traffic, crime, and sharp-elbowed competition in the corporate world.

All this is utter rot, of course. Country life is frequently filled with Hobbesian horrors of blistering heat and freezing icy storms, of floods and drought, swarms of flies, gnats, and hornets, and ticks, poison ivy, and copperheads. Life in the country often includes livestock looking for new and unusual ways to die, muddy rutted roads, and ill-stocked country stores filled with nothing more than pickled pigsfeet, beef jerky, twinkies, and malt liquor. Such scenes can make one long for the sybaritic pleasures of a nice office job with climate control at a touch of a button; unlimited food choices at a moment's notice (“Let's see, do we want Ethiopian or Nepalese cuisine tonight...? What goes best with a nice New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc?”); and the ability to entertain oneself at leisure in the evening and put one's head on a pillow secure in the knowledge that one will not be roused out of bed at 3 a.m. to deal with a ewe who decides to have an obstetric emergency in a blinding February snowstorm.

Yet for some of us, that harsh reality does little to temper the romantic fantasy. In fact, it can actually enhance it to a considerable degree.

I came to Washington, DC, like so many young people, filled with ambitions and fantasies that saw me navigating the cor-

ridors of power with such amazing dexterity that, in short order, I would be universally acclaimed as the most accomplished Secretary of State the nation had ever seen. And with the hubristic confidence of youth, it was not surprising to me at all when those fantasies rather quickly started taking solid form. After my freshman year in college there was no need to head home to look for a summer job, for I had one already as a paid intern for my Senator. After college my Senator had become chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee and I was



PHOTO COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR

More rewarding than traveling the world is being a sheep farmer in the shadow of the Blue Ridge.

working for him full time. After grad school I was part of a high-flying consulting firm advising European industrial clients on trade policies emanating from Washington. The streets of Paris, London, Rome, and Bonn were becoming as familiar to me as those of DC. With the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, I found myself in the first Bush Administration's State Department helping to set up aid programs to the newly emerging democracies of Eastern Europe. A few years later, the World Bank had me working on projects throughout the former Soviet Union.

It was indeed the life that I had wished for. While I wasn't yet Secretary of State, I was still only in my early 30's, and so I supposed I could still give myself a few years to get there. Things were on track: a career that was going places, a house in a hip neighborhood, and every night a different dinner party, gallery opening, or play. Yet the happiness that was supposed to go along with the success eluded me. In its place was the constant gnawing fear of falling behind. There was a continuous need to be on top of things, not only keeping up with the competition, but trying to stay ahead of it: the incessant one-upmanship of colleagues, the "must-read" communique's, reports, memos that needed insightful comments (or worse, which needed to be redrafted in the next few hours). In that pressure cooker life, real and true happiness came only on the few occasions when I could escape it entirely. Most often these occasions took the form of a hike in the Blue Ridge Mountains.

I had first "discovered" the Virginia Piedmont as college freshmen freshly plucked from the Chicago suburbs when one of my professors proposed a hike up Old Rag Mountain as a class "bonding" experience. For some reason the rolling Piedmont landscape was as embracing to me as the flat prairie landscape and the stifling narrowness of Midwestern suburbia of my youth had been alienating. The gentle pastoral beauty of it all — the hazy blue mountains, the ragged fields, the ancient towns and villages — was revelatory to me.

It was like "coming home to a place I'd never been before," to quote John Denver. Ever since that first September day back in 1978, again and again I found myself being drawn back to that reviving scenery. Throughout college and grad school, on those infrequent occasions when I could lay my hands on a car, I'd drive out and sit in my favorite cow pasture on Long Mountain Road above Jessamine Hill and alternately study my books and the landscape spread out before me. In the mid-1980's every October I'd regularly cajole friends to join me on a hike up Old Rag and wax rhapsodic about the views.

The Piedmont called to me more and more as an antidote to the negative aspects of my stress-filled life. Stuck in mind-numbing meetings ("steel production in Rumania has contracted by 3% this year..."), I'd doodle garden designs and dream of the contented chickens I'd seen scratching below a couple of apple trees outside a farmhouse near Sperryville. Trapped in bleak, unheated Soviet-era hotels in war torn Armenia, I'd sketch architectural renderings of the country manor I promised myself I'd build when I eventually retired.

As the call of the country grew stronger, my idylls there became imbued with restorative qualities, so that any setbacks or dissatisfactions with my life triggered the thought that if only... "If only I had a little weekend place in the country so I could putter around in the garden and watch the sun set over the mountains, then I'd be able to

recharge my batteries and be able to cheerfully finish this report/get that promotion/accept the assignment in Uzbekistan, etc."

So it didn't take too long to convince myself that a country place was the very thing I needed to take my career to the next level. It became my touchstone; I felt I needed it to "balance" my life. Nothing special, I'd tell myself. Just a little place for the weekend to decompress. Private. Quiet. Maybe even with a small field or two to look at. Okay, maybe a little stream, too. And what's the point of being in the Piedmont without a mountain view, so yes, a view of the mountains might be nice. Maybe a little bosky woodland where I could carve out a trail or two.

After driving my real estate agent crazy for two years with my ever more exacting fantasies, I found just what my dreams had dictated: a small little private plot of land with a few clearings for fields, a woodland with ancient oaks and poplars, some small little streams that meandered lazily through the bottomland, and best of all, views of the Blue Ridge with my beloved Old Rag in the distance.

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"Now," I thought, as I built a tiny cottage, "I have career-recharging station. With this little piece of earth I have everything I need to become the next Dean Acheson."

But alas, little did I know that instead of turbo-charging my career, my rural retreat would derail it entirely. I was immediately and completely smitten with every aspect of country life. Soon weekends were not enough for me. Instead of allowing me to re-focus my efforts, I found the country utterly distracting. I sat in my office and counted the hours until I could return. Urban pleasures that once helped drive me onward and upward now had little appeal. Georgetown dinner parties were suddenly tedious; embassy receptions were a bore. Who cared about a new restaurant opening when the spring peepers were about to start peeping any day now? Why go to Manhattan for the weekend when you could be in Rappahannock watching the red maples redden in the early spring?

Within the space of six months, my ego had been vanquished entirely. What was the point of this rat race? Is that grand job title going to give me as much happiness as restoring an overgrown field into productive pasture? The more I pondered these questions, the simpler and more frightening the answer seemed to be: Leave and be happy.

Twelve years after I made my abrupt transition, I still live in my tiny cottage and lead a fairly quiet and obscure life. But my little plot of land has grown and grown. There are now 110 acres of hayfields, forests, and pastures, and miles of fencing. Streams and ponds glint in the sunlight. Trails meander through my woods and connect with those of my neighbors. My sheep flock is both my pride and joy and my livelihood. The first thing I see when I wake in the morning and the last thing I see at sunset is Old Rag looming outside my bedroom window. Farm work is rough and unrelenting and brings no outside recognition, but I am the happiest of men. ■

About the Author

Alan Zuschlag's Touchstone Farm, near Amissville, has become well known for its prized lambs. For more information: www.touchstonefarm.org