

Country Real Estate, #294: August 15, 2013

Make hay when the sun shines, which it hasn't

By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—It rained on Monday. Again.

It's rained here almost every day this summer.

We had a short, hot-and-dry spell in July, but most days have been wet and cool.

Yet our average temperature is running just a bit *higher* than "normal," because night temperatures have not fallen as much as usual. Trapped gasses in our green house are said to be responsible.

Another anomaly. Despite the last several months of above-average rain, our total precipitation from January 1st has been about average. A very dry winter has been offset by a very wet summer.

Averages over time are useful to show trends, but within any specific period an average can conceal quirks and extremes.

When I lived in New York and Washington, I didn't think much about weather. When it was cold, I wore a coat; when it snowed, I drove slowly; when it was hot, I sweated; and when it rained, I got wet.

On a farm, however, weather -- rain, sun, wind, ice, snow -- rules.

Our well-watered pastures and hayfields are now thick with grass and clover. Cattle are fat; corn is high.

But each time June or July hay was mowed, tedded to dry or raked into swaths for baling, rain fell before it could be stacked in the barn.

A little water on grass hay won't harm it, but a deep soak will lower its nutritional value making it harder and more expensive to feed cattle over the winter. Legume hay, like alfalfa or clover, is more vulnerable to water spoilage.

Rain teaches patience. You just have to wait for hay to dry in the field. Bailing it damp will lead to either a ruinous barn fire set off by spontaneous combustion or ruinous mold that can't be fed to livestock.

Last year, the calendar seemed to have been kicked forward in a way that warmed everything a month or so ahead of schedule. This year, August has felt like April. We should have dust in August, not mud. I'm intending to write a letter to the Editor. If that fails, I intend to visit the Returns Department and demand a refund.

Weather is a non-negotiable, take-what-you-get farm rule. The other farm proposition I've learned is different. Everyone is better off when you lend a hand to a neighbor and accept one when it's needed.

Since Melissa and I have no family back up, occasions arise when our own hands and equipment fall short. When I've asked for help, I've always gotten it, even from neighbors who don't like me.

While no one keeps a running tally, I've noticed that these swaps tend to even up over time.

There's nothing compulsory about mutual assistance. It just works to everyone's benefit.

The more formal version of mutual assistance is the agricultural cooperative where producers band together to control costs and market their product in quantity for better prices. American farmers also formed coops to provision themselves with equipment and supplies, as well as to finance their operations.

When stripped of its voluntary underpinning, mutual assistance was turned into a strategy whereby the State exploited agriculture for reasons of ideology and rapid industrialization.

Soviet and Chinese Communists imposed their versions of mandatory mutual assistance in the form of rural communes and collectives that owned all the land and equipment. The individual farmer was forced to work for his assigned group and share in whatever fortune -- good or bad -- it achieved.

Forced collectivization in the Soviet Union and China cost on the order of an estimated 14 million lives in the former and 20 to 43 million in the latter. These are huge numbers.

Both systems might have been less awful in their efforts to modernize agriculture through collectivization had they not been reacting to the exploitative landlord-and-serf systems that preceded them.

Our own landlord-and-serf system -- sharecropping, whereby landowners provisioned landless tenants in return for a share of what the tenants produced, which kept the tenants permanently in debt -- had mostly petered out by the 1960s. Sharecroppers fled to the cities for jobs and freedom from indenture. It became more profitable for landowners to mechanize production than to squeeze tenants.

The Communist model of agricultural organization ran counter to what seems to be a transnational human preference for individual land ownership. When rural collectivism has worked, it's been rooted in voluntary association based on shared culture, religion or ethnicity, not force.

The Soviet and Chinese collectives eventually increased production of most agricultural goods, mainly because they purchased machines that

created scale efficiencies. But production shortfalls always plagued both systems, and neither conserved natural resources. Today, about 10 percent of China's agricultural land is contaminated with heavy metals, and depletion of its water resources crimps crop production.

When I visited several Chinese collective farms in 1981, I saw their members working just enough to satisfy their quotas, which, in turn, allowed them to be fed, housed and cared for. After 30 years of forced collectivism, it seemed to me that many of these farmers were willing to take the risk of working their own land, selling their products and keeping whatever profit they made.

During the last 30 years, the Chinese have evolved a form of state-approved capitalism where stealing, cheating, adulterating products, externalizing costs, corruption and bribery have replicated the American anything-goes model of the 1890s. Government money props up this economy whose foundations can't support it.

Pop!—will go this bubble.

The Chinese have redistributed some collectivized land back to about 200 million households in plots that average about 1.6 acres each—essentially big gardens. Production quotas remain while individuals are now allowed to sell their surplus. In good years, China with its relatively small amount of arable land can feed itself; in bad years, it can't.

The informal mutual assistance practiced around Blue Grass helps out around the edges, which is where it's needed. We, too, have substituted machines for labor, making the occasional helping hand less necessary.

Our small grazing farms are set up more for self-sufficiency than to be as productive as possible. Few of us, for example, have invested in rotational-grazing systems, which, in the best of circumstances, almost double the number of pounds of beef our pastures produce.

I've noticed that in some mutual-assistance communities where everyone is more or less in the same economic boat, some are resentful when one passenger climbs into a bigger vessel. There seems to be a common view that bettering oneself is a good idea, but those who try are not particularly encouraged or helped. Mutual assistance appears to be comfortable with everybody staying pretty much the same and where they are in relation to everyone else.

Today, the sun's out, the air is cool and the hay is dry. Perfect.

Tractors, tedders, rakes, balers and wagons are at work.

Someone, somewhere will need a hand, and someone will help out.

I like this part of life in the Allegheny Mountains of Virginia, in a county of 2,100, with only two functioning lawyers (one of whom is married to me, the other of whom is not), one red light capable of blinking and no problem that's above average.