

Neither a tenant nor a landlord be

By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—Being a landlord is among the many things I'm both bad at and hate to do. Making money is, of course, at the top of this list, followed closely by renting out property. Fast-dancing is in third, nipping at their heels.

I also don't care much for being a tenant.

I know that there are people who have made a lot of money leasing out commercial space, apartments and houses. I even know some of them.

Many landlords like their business. Enjoyment, I believe, may rest on having an unlisted phone, along with the ability to deactivate their hearing and shut their eyes at the same time. On the other hand, it could be they have the brains to hire a property manager with this skill set.

My first recollection of a landlord-tenant relationship was the story my parents told about having to pay a bribe to obtain a crummy three-room apartment just after WWII. It was either that or remain in my father's childhood bedroom with just-born me by their side.

My own first-hand experience began in 1971 when a friend and I bought 60 wooded acres in Wendell Depot, Mass., about 40 minutes north of Amherst. The broker-owner assured me he was conveying 100 acres. (The deed he provided included no acreage figure, and I didn't know enough at the time to research the title to find one.)

My partner's brother -- a fellow who spent most of his time doing being rather than doing doing -- quickly moved onto our land and shacked up a cabin in which he molted and muttered like Thoreau. He did not offer to pay either rent or share in the property taxes.

I thought it would be small of me to raise those crass ideas, given peace, love and the considerable existential value he was adding to our property each year at no cost to me.

Next, I rented a farmhouse to a Ph.D. raising sheep in Garrett's Bend, W.Va., at the end of the 1970s. I warned him against hooking up an electric space heater in our old barn to warm his newborns. (I'm speaking of newborn lambs; I had no objection to having him toast his children in the house, which shows my generosity with tenant-paid electricity.)

Our barn burned to the ground in February when somebody knocked over the electric heater that was not supposed to be there. I was sent a

photocopy of a portion of the West Virginia Code where it stated that the tenant was not at fault for damages done by the tenant's livestock to the landlord's property.

His successor paid one month's rent up front and then nothing. He stayed about nine months, adding less-than-existential value to my property at no cost to me in the form of beer-bottle fertilizer.

A few years later, I rented out my three-story house at 812 Rittenhouse Street in the Brightwood section of Washington, D.C. It had been previously owned by Elias Otha Bates, or more familiarly, Bo Diddley. In my basement, he had recorded *Bo Diddley is a Gunslinger* (1960).

Bo also produced a record there for his young valet, Marvin Gaye, who lived in the nearby Deanwood neighborhood. Gaye, I believe, subsequently moved to a Michigan town where he spent years climbing mountains that weren't high enough and listening to grapevines.

Despite the hours I sat quietly in the basement, I did not absorb any left-behind Bo Diddley beat. This put an end to my dance career.

Our move to Blue Grass in 1983 forced me to rent out 812—first to a nice, earnest couple who sublet to a group that was less nice, who sublet to another group that was actively hostile to landlords, who sublet to a biker gang that trashed the bathrooms and threw boots and sneakers into the top branches of the mulberry tree in my front yard. Eviction involved a loaded .357 Magnum.

With 812 finally free of tenants, I discovered that the nice, earnest couple had never switched the telephone from my name to theirs as I had requested and they had agreed. And so on, and so on. As I cleaned the house, I found evidence that certain tenants had been actively engaged in credit-card fraud and deals involving dopes.

When renting out from a distance, it's easy to drift into a tranquil state of mind where a monthly check and no phone calls at your end are taken to mean peace and quiet at the rental end. Maybe it works that way for you.

About 10 years later, we had another house to sell. I left it empty rather than rent it while waiting for a sale. I never make the same mistake more than two or three times...in a row.

Landlords in my experience -- principally me, but including those from whom I've rented -- are reluctant to spend money on their rental property unless it's absolutely necessary. This is perfectly understandable. "Absolutely necessary" has different interpretations, depending on whether you are sending the rent check or receiving it.

When I was a graduate student in New York City in the late 1960s, I rented from landlords who positioned "supers" between them and me.

The supers I knew were either very large or very dense, and often both. They always claimed small knowledge of English, especially sentences that ended in a question mark, such as “Why is there no heat in my apartment for the fifth straight day?” or a period, such as, “There’s still no heat in my apartment.” They spent their evenings hammering out the Bo Diddley beat on their boilers.

My first venture in New York real estate was a one-bedroom apartment at 510 West 110th that came furnished with rejects from the Goodwill dumpster. The windows had not been washed since Teddy Roosevelt had a dust up near Cuba’s San Juan Hill; the sofa’s cushions did not fit the sofa; and when I approached the kitchen counter, the roaches reared and kicked like angry stallions.

On the other hand, the nurses on one side and the girls from Sarah Lawrence on the other were friendly. It was 1967-1968, and I was renting Apartment 4-F with a roommate for \$115 a month.

Last year, 4-F sold as a condo for \$499,000.

In the mid-1970s, a wife of my former acquaintance and I rented a pretty farmhouse near Charleston, W.Va., that had a septic system of hit-and-miss reliability. When it missed, the landlord assured me that it would eventually hit. He also suggested that I eat less.

The problem was that the line from the house to the holding tank was not sloped correctly. Rather than reset the pipe, the landlord would dispatch two sullen employees to snake it out. He also supplied paint for me to paint his house and materials to repair his chimney and water heater.

It was a nice spot, all things considered, so I learned to concentrate bathroom visits at my place of employment.

When Melissa went to law school in the late 1980s, we rented houses in Charlottesville where we lived during the week. At the beginning of her second year, she found a downtown rental whose bricks and mortar evoked her childhood home in Charlotte.

Fleas from the just-moved-out-tenant -- let me be generous and assume that it was the previous tenant’s *dog* that left the fleas -- attacked her and five-year-old Molly the first night, forcing them to flee to a nearby hotel for several days. (I described their flight as “fleaing,” which did not get the laugh I expected.)

Melissa -- an animal person of the first rank -- is not an insect person of any rank. She did not like being flea-bitten. Molly went to her first day at Montessori school looking like a poster child for Mr. Measels.

The landlord “bombed” the house with insecticide for three days, killing every bug inside, along with our pots and pans.

Several weeks later during a storm, a very large tree fell on the living room where Melissa and Molly were watching television. Melissa has been wary of nature shows ever since.

Since I missed both fleas and tree, it was assumed that I deserved blame for these pleasantries. (You have to be married to understand how this works, not that I do, exactly.) Renting can be rough on marital bliss.

Tenants in my experience -- principally me, but including those referenced above -- want rent as low as they can get with immediate solving of whatever problem arises. Landlords want regular payment, no complaints and their property treated as if it was a Fabergé egg.

While the interests of landlords and tenants intersect in a prickly compromise, the relationship is often adversarial, especially when the return of security money depends on the landlord's inspection of the premises.

Given the choice, I'd rather be a tenant at the mercy of a landlord than a landlord at the mercy of a tenant.

People own rental properties because they hope to cover their carrying costs, wait for value appreciation and take advantage of the tax benefits. Maybe the dollars gained are more than the dollars spent. But I think a multi-dimensional, cost-benefit analysis would show that the time, worry and aggravation expended as a landlord exceed the dollar gain.

Nonetheless, landlords provide a necessary economic service by making available housing and commercial structures to individuals who can't buy them outright. With more Americans being economically marginalized, America needs the rental units landlords provide. Go landlords!

Since I'm no good at being a landlord, I've consigned it to those activities in American life that I now avoid. Twitter's out; Facebook's out; cellphones are on the run; and renting-out is banished to never-again land.

I sleep easier knowing that I am only responsible for three toilets in all the world, and each is within convenient walking distance of our living room.

I don't miss late-night calls concerning plumbing in other states or instructions from law-enforcement officers to remove tenant sneakers from my tree 200 miles away.

But I do miss having fresh stories to pass along.