

Free labor gets no free lunch

By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—Two generations back, small farmers had large families to supply the menial labor needed to do the homestead's endless chores.

Today, machines and chemicals have reduced farming's need for unpaid farm hands with functioning backs. Farmers need machines more than kids, who the IRS has never agreed are depreciable assets.

Unlike large industrialized farms, small farms that emphasize organic and "natural" production still require the cheap, unskilled work that farm kids used to do. Where might "free" hands come from in this day and age?

I'm always ready to make farm work available to friends who are visiting and visitors who are not likely to become friends. Both groups are always enthusiastic about dipping a small toe into farm work. Neither, of course, is seeking a full-immersion, permanent dunk.

Any beneficiary of having non-farmers doing farm work for free should adopt a non-Trumpian management style toward these donors.

The first rule is this: if visitors want to sprawl over the front porch eating, drinking, reading and talking among themselves, there's not much you can do to persuade them that weeding 40 acres of corn with teaspoons and nail clippers is a better way to spend a hot summer day. Faced with visitors who want to visit, the wise farmer will sit in the shade and join the conversation.

"Help" should not be assigned the worst jobs around, or the hardest. Keep those for yourself. Exploitation is unseemly and quickly wears thin.

Visitors shouldn't be placed in hazardous circumstances. Keep them out of trees and off roofs even if they argue that they are closely related to other primates. Don't tell them that rattlesnakes are simply noisy lizards.

Dress them appropriately. Provide all hands with work gloves and written instructions on their deployment and use.

Flip-flops are not work boots. Anyone so shod should not be assigned to wood-splitting. The highest and best employment for flip-floppers is making pancakes for breakfast or seeking elected office.

Do not assume that city-dwellers will know how farm animals behave, particularly when they're spooked. Animals in a herd tend to move away from people, but there's always one that's up for a scrap.

City visitors tend to treat livestock in the field as spouses with whom they've having a fight—they tend to get in their way at the wrong time and not get out of their way at the right time. Keep this analogy to yourself.

Visitors should be introduced to farm machinery slowly and kept clear of equipment that has behavior issues and acts out. Keep little fingers and big hair away from moving parts.

It's not fair to expect long stretches of hard labor. Guests are not medieval serfs accustomed to field work or prisoners on work release. The best tasks are those that can be finished between meals.

Assigned work should be more than work—it should be, well, if not fun, then at least, educational or, at worst, character-building.

Working in a group is more enjoyable than working alone. Let visitors find their inner group. Resist becoming the group-process person.

Accept that boys need to show off in front of girls.

Management should be supportive and non-judgmental. Don't be critical when you find someone using a shovel backwards, or even upside down.

Any work accomplished should be praised and rewarded with something more than a low-carb, low-fat celery stick.

Life is good when low expectations are exceeded.

Since 2001, World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms (WWOOF) has connected volunteers with organic and natural farms in need of free labor. (www.woof.org) Neither host farms nor volunteers pay the other. Hosts are supposed to provide “clean, dry accommodations and adequate food” in return for labor on “daily tasks” for an agreed number of hours.

Host farms should be organic producers, or in conversion to organic production or using “ecologically sound methods on their land.” Volunteers pick host farms, based on their interests, what they want to learn, what they want to experience and where they want to be.

A recent article posted on Salon.com recounts the three-farm experience of a Portland, Ore., yuppie couple who felt a “festering distaste...with northern cities...” and were a “...little disillusioned with the ...high-class cafes and cheapo burrito shops..., tired of the hipsters with their gaudy mustaches and flannel shirts, unimpressed with the environmentalists, with their blinkered social concern and preening sense of self-righteousness, disgusted by the corporate shells...and put off by the housewives piling their shopping carts high.”

Woossss! Such miseries!

So Jennie and Alex “woofed” for three, two-week stays in the hostile territories of Republican red states.

First, they landed at a backyard pig farm in Alabama where they were uncomfortable eating the flesh they had been slopping; then to a one-acre garden “farm” south of Austin where they weeded for a “moody, self-absorbed” woman teetering “on several kinds of brinks” who wouldn’t let them use her coffee maker; and, finally, to New Mexico where they yanked bindweed and were fed hot dogs and TV dinners, canned this and canned that and tortillas that tasted like cat food. (Alex Gallo Brown, “Escape to the red states,” *Salon.com*, January 16, 2012.)

The Alabama pig farm seems to have been a decent swap, though a mismatch in lifestyles and tastes. Texas and New Mexico were outright exploitations of volunteer labor by hosts struggling with more issues than are jammed into a season of *Mad Men*.

Free farm labor isn’t free, and shouldn’t be. The exchange should be honorable, and if not that, full disclosure should precede commitment.

I’m considering joining WWOOF as a host, but what would I do if Jennie and Alex showed up, hoping for weeds to pull and a respite from their burdened lives in a blue-state pressure-cooker?

Would I be red enough for these blues?

I better get a bigger belt buckle and practice spitting free-range tobacco juice into a recycled soda can before they arrive.

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