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Land matters: Resentful sugar maple attacks The Cluckery
By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, VA.—In foreign policy, I've always tried to be friends with more trees than I'm enemies with. Differences of opinion have, of course, appeared in these bilateral relationships over the years. One yellow locust recently tried to pound me into the ground like a tent stake after I cut him off at the stump.

I admit to meddling in their internal affairs. I've taken their lives -- well, hundreds at one time to be honest about it -- so that I might pay down a mortgage and create a more peaceful and prosperous world in my living room. On the other hand, I've encouraged them to be fruitful and multiply. Each fall, I tidy up after their wild parties.

I confess to dropping maybe a dozen trees each year to warm my hearth and keep my wife's thermostat stuck in her tropical happysphere. I cull crooks and bullies for firewood. In that work, I feel that I am bringing western civilization to a prehistoric tribal culture which seems focused on snuffing out those who are different.

My interventions, I believe, are as much about helping them as helping me. Despite my good intentions, I've heard that they consider me to be an unwelcome cultural meddler. And despite the progressive example I set, their male parts continue to treat their female parts as sex objects.

I've grown accustomed to their insisting on doing things their own way, like refusing to fall where I want.

Occasionally, they act out.

This week a huge sugar maple attacked The Cluckery, my old chicken house that hasn't cooped a chicken, old or young, for decades. The two never exchanged a cross word for almost a century. The maple had, however, leaned toward, and eventually over, the coop, which did not respond in kind. It could be said that the maple was bent on revenge.

Other than playing hard to get, The Cluckery had never done anything to deserve having 2,000 pounds of tree top dropped on its head.

When the Arbogasts built our place during WW I, they also fashioned a state-of-the-art, salt-box chicken house about 200 feet north of the kitchen. It is 12 feet wide, 26 feet long and 12 feet high at the ridge, with enough space for at least 50 birds. It has one full-size door, two hen hatches, five double-hung

windows and a standing-seam metal roof. The Cluckery was never a show-off Cadillac, but it did lead one to think of something above average, like a Buick.

In all of our farm buildings, the carpenters used American chestnut that they cut and milled on the spot. Chestnut was plentiful, straight-grained, strong, light, decay-resistant and easy to work. It was the practical wood for frugal farmers. An Asian fungus wiped it out during the first third of the 20th Century, leaving the Eastern U.S. with half its forest value.

No one back then thought to put wheels under chicken coops, which is now a Best Management Practice among the free-range fraternity. In 1916, the Arbogasts figured that their chickens could move themselves on their own two drumsticks and did not need assisted transport from bug to bug. Their birds returned voluntarily to The Cluckery each night where they roosted and engaged in other fowl behaviors, none of which need to be spelled out for the sophisticated reader.

Since neither Melissa nor I ever had any interest in a flock of chickens running around like chickens with their heads still on, I used The Cluckery to store useless-but-necessary junk--old metal barrels, wood boxes, Molly's third-string stuffed animals and her portable crib from more than two decades ago that she's now a little big for.

The Cluckery added a humble measure of history to our show.

But now the top 50 feet of the Jihadist maple lay heavily on its broken roof. The ridge line looked like a saddle. Rafter ends waved gaily inside. A stub of a limb had plunged into the coop, skewering a pink plush giraffe with floppy-neck syndrome.

The building was uninsured, unneeded and worth nothing in its tighest-topest shape. I sized up my two practical options. I could remove the entire roof and replace it with a new one—about \$2,000 to \$2,500. Or I could dismantle The Cluckery and sell the chestnut—maybe ending up with \$500. Either made sense, given that it was storing stuff that should have been thrown away. I do not plan to share this opinion with my wife who has always suspected that two -- rather than 10 -- rusty and unusable barrels would more than satisfy my future needs for rusty and unusable barrels.

Instead, I decided that patching an unwanted chicken-less coop would be plenty good enough for continued storage of items that would certainly enlighten future anthropologists.

First, I had to get the tree off the roof, which was now as bouncy as a bad mattress. And as soon as the chainsaw bit into the wood, I began sliding

around on sawdust like a hockey puck on resurfaced ice. I couldn't decide whether falling through was preferable to falling off.

Farms, like life, often present situations like this. You match your judgment against both an unknown probability of something bad happening and the degree of penalty if you're wrong.

The White House at this moment is sitting on the broken roof of Afghanistan, trying to calculate the probabilities and penalties of doing more, less, different, the same or getting off before it collapses.

I spent two afternoons messing around with the maple and another two cleaning out The Cluckery to the point where I could work safely inside. Some damaged roofs are worth the price of saving them, but others aren't.

If you're not willing to shovel out the old litter and remove the stuff that's blocking the repair, it's better to let Nature reclaim any "improvement" that's become more trouble than it's worth.

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