



Make Hay When the Sun Shines

One of our first tasks when we arrived here in July of 2005 was to find a local farmer to hay our fields. There were two reasons. Not only are those acres of rolling green hillside absolutely gorgeous to behold, there is money at stake. Taxes. To secure an agricultural discount, worth lots of dollars, we must either rent our fields to someone who does \$10K of farming business a year, or do that business ourselves. Renting was our better option.

We soon met Farmer Larry who lived across the way. The stories that tailed him were legendary. He let his dangerous bulls wander onto everyone else's land. He milked his cows when the cows felt like it—or not. He would give you the shirt off his back. Fact was, Larry told better stories than anyone ever told of him. And he was happy to hay our fields.

To hay a field is the farmer's equivalent of mowing the lawn. Hay is grass—cut and dried and bound into bales. It can be alfalfa, timothy, orchard, fescue or any mix and match that grows. And this basic grass is the foundation of the whole farm economy. The grass feeds the animals who work the land, give meat and milk, and fertilize the soil again. It is a solar-powered cycle interrupted by the use of fossil fuels—as when farmers use tractors to pull their mowers and grains to feed the cows. Still, if you trace that fossil fuel back in time, it all comes down in some time and place, to sun-fed grass.

This year, for the first time, we realized for ourselves how crucial hay is to the farm family. All it took was imagining ourselves in the dead of winter, staring down our four thousand-pound beasts, and trying to explain to them that there was nothing left for them to eat. Our milk production, not to mention our well-being was at stake.

As May ripened, so did the stalks of grass. Walking in the fields, I was up to my armpits, swimming through heads budding pink. It was time to hay. The sun was shining high in the sky. Where was Larry?



All the good weather was making me anxious. When the grass is grown, it needs to be cut, else it starts shedding nutrients, preparing to die and be reborn. When the grass is cut, it needs to dry, spread out on the field, else the balls or boxes into which it is baled start to mold. When the cut grass is drying, it needs a good 24 hours of clear sky to do so at least, for any rain that falls washes its nutrients right into the ground. The sun was shining. Where was Larry? I was feeling like a farmer.

Larry, we heard, had stopped worrying about the weather long ago. Where other farmers had internet connections to follow the satellite forecasts, Larry hardly even looked at the sky. You hayed when you could. You took your chances when you did. It would rain or not. And by the time winter came, whatever hay you had to offer your animals, Larry said, would be better than a snowball.

Then we got the news. Larry had died, in a logging accident. He had been out in the woods, doing what he loved, and was quickly felled. The sun was still shining. It was tragic. We missed him and still do. We miss his unflinching smile, his generous ways, and the stories he told at our kitchen table of wild moose and rangy bulls and the pony he used to ride to school. The line of people waiting to enter the funeral home for his calling hours in this rural town topped 800 people. We had thought we were his only friends. He was buried in the most beautiful cemetery I have ever seen, at the foot of a pine tree too big to hug. What would he think, I wondered, looking up at that tree?

Our hay was still standing. The sun was still shining. We talked to Larry's sons who agreed to hay for him, as they had been doing with him, for years. In their hay days growing up on the farm, they processed over 10,000 bales a year. We would have several hundred.

Then it began to rain. Day after day, one week, two weeks, three weeks. You can't cut hay in the rain. There was nothing to do but wait. June seeped into July. The grass thinned; its buds darkened red, and we waited some more. Those snowballs were looking pretty good.

Finally the sky cleared. Finally the hay was cut, rained on, turned and combed again, baled, and loaded safely into our barns, still green and crispy good, despite it all. Smells delicious. Our animals love it.



Make hay when the sun shines. In general use, the meaning of the words have softened into something like: take advantage of your opportunities when you can. But we have learned they mean far more than that. To make hay is be the link in the farm economy that enables the life of every member. To do it when the sun shines is to honor your obligation to let others live, by aligning your actions with the productive, creative work of the natural world.

To make hay when the sun shines is to do what you can and what you must to be a life enabling link in the universal rhythms of bodies becoming.

Our hay finally falls to the tractor, rake, and bailer. This winter, as we feed our beasts, I know I'll be thinking of Larry and taking heart that whatever we made, no matter how long we waited, is better than a snowball.