

George, our Dad, had a feel for land. He'd been looking for property for over 10 years, just looking for the right place to farm grapes, raise chickens, settle into his late middle years with some small projects and big dreams. Realtors just couldn't figure out what he wanted. They showed him sturdy farms, flat and happily productive. They showed him pretty houses surrounded by tidy acres of prunes and apricots. They showed him tame, they showed him wild, damp, dry, high in the mountains, low in the valleys. No, no, no.

But when he set eyes upon the rolling Sonoma hillsides, muscular and golden in early autumn, 1974, he knew value when he saw it. This was the place. The Place.

Fresh out of college, I'd tagged along. "Dad! There's a creek!" Miraculously, it still flowed with fresh cool water even though it was a dry year. For me, it was the creek. Tangled vines of blackberries lined the banks, and I spotted crawdads poking around the bottom of deep still pools.

How many picnics did we have down there, Dad with a bottle of wine and a hamper of French bread, salami, and cheese from the local dairy? When our first apples and grapes came it, the feast was complete. Afterwards, we'd rest in the sand before heading back to the fields. For me, it was the creek.

Later, my children would catch things down there, like water spiders, frogs, even a turtle or two. They were allowed the pets for maybe an hour or two, they gave them names like Slow Moe and Croak-A-Cola, then were told to put them back where they were found. "They belong in the water," Dad said.

Wandering around the property, we'd find all kinds of treasures. They held clues about the land and we were excited to discover who came here before us. We picked up shining shards of arrowheads and put them in our pockets, along with rusty square nails and bits of blue pottery. Larger relics were collected too, like an old plow, a clawfoot bathtub, and many horse shoes. Dad made a small museum of these artifacts in the barn.

"Can you guess what this is?" he'd ask, holding up something rusty and mysterious. Every moment for Dad was a teachable moment, up at the ranch.

More clues about who came before us sprouted from the ground in early spring. Most notable were the bright green spears of the amaryllis bulbs some pioneer had planted long before our arrival. By summer, the foliage would melt away, only to give birth to the long-necked 'Pink Ladies' that appeared in late August. Graceful and swanlike, in no way were they native to the land. They were deliberately brought to the property and cultivated. We loved thinking about the farmer who had the notion to bring something so lovely to such a rugged hillside. So pink. So romantic.

The land is full of such surprises. When the new people come, they'll wonder about the frolicking daffodils under the oak trees which appear every February. Who planted them? Why? (One Christmas Dad told Mom she'd have to wait for her present. Then, in late winter, Mom saw all the brilliant yellow daffs in the old cherry orchard. "Oh George!" He'd planted hundreds of bulbs for her, crawling on his knees and digging in the dirt for days!)

Dad build the ranch house himself, with the help of my uncle's crew. It's a big-boned home, befitting the scale of the property. The veranda is shaded with wisteria. We'd take naps out there in the summer, drink endless bottles of wine, entertain guests. Breakfast, lunch and dinners just tasted better when we'd eat them outside on the old picnic table. Mother would spread out a red checked table cloth and Dad would barbeque steaks—"in your honor," he'd say to just about anyone.

Evenings were special, all year long. In the winter, the family would gather around the huge stone fireplace and discuss everything from the price of Zin in the valley to the current show at the old Sonoma Theatre. We'd play dominoes and sip martinis. Someone might strum a guitar. The dogs and lazy old cat would be so happy indoors, until Dad put them out again.

The high ceiling was perfect for over-sized Christmas trees. We'd lean over the upstairs railing to decorate the top while the youngest grandchildren took care of the lower branches. Whatever we had on hand we'd throw on the tree—strings of popcorn and cranberries, stuffed animals, fistfuls of tinsel. Nothing fancy. It's a country house, after all.

Bracing breezes from the faraway Pacific Ocean would cool the house in the summer. After the frogs and crickets would quiet down at night, we'd listen for hoot owls and coyotes. These were soothing sounds, and quieted our souls. In early morning, the birds were well-awake by 5 AM, and soon, so were we. Nothing seemed to make Dad happier than squeezing his own fresh orange juice and setting out a glass of it for Mom.

My brother John and his wife Marjorie chose to build their own home on a sunny site just above Mom and Dad's house. How wonderful it was for all of us to have John and Marjorie literally 'watching over' Mom and Dad as they aged and became more vulnerable. Their children were raised on the Ranch, and brought so much delight to us all. Spirited and care-free, little Helen would romp through the tall mustard with the dogs, singing as she went. Evan crashed his first car against an oak tree on the driveway and emerged shaken, the car totaled, but the tree barely scratched. The Ranch was perfectly made for families (plural). It held us all.

For many years, Dad held what he called "The Breakfast Club" on Tuesday mornings, to sure Helen and Evan loaded up on his idea of a big Southern-style breakfast before trotting off to school. Johnny cakes (somewhat like cornbread pancakes), bacon, hot chocolate, orange juice. That became the menu of choice. Dad also served grits, sausage, toast, and eggs. Ham, waffles, and fresh berries. And everything, everything was loaded down with honey and butter and salt. Like I said, Southern style cooking. Calories don't count at breakfast time. Not when you live on a farm.

The land itself seemed so happy to be loved. The orchards and vineyard came alive when cared for, offering a bounty of peaches, figs, cherries. Grapes, walnuts, apples. Persimmons. Pears. Like true pioneers, Mom and Dad wasted nothing. Dad would grow green peppers and Mom would stuff them with rice and meat, then freeze them for the winter. We'd feast on sweet tomatoes, squash, cucumbers and raspberries, right off the vines. My boys loved pulling carrots and potatoes from the ground, and ears off the tall corn stalks. Nothing tastes better than fresh, absolutely nothing.

And nothing delighted me more than the flowers, wild and cultivated both. Before plowed under in late spring, the hillsides were purple with lupines. Patches of poppies, shockingly orange, sprang up everywhere. Milkmaids and wild honeysuckle.

In the garden close to the house, Mom and Dad favored geraniums in large terracotta pots, bold reds and pinks. A shoulder of fragrant roses by the driveway, and oh, the giant zinnias! There they were, greeting friends and family with such good cheer, in the bed closest to the front door.

The Ranch was made for celebrations. Weddings, funerals, birthdays and baptisms. We celebrated everything. One of the highlights was the annual 4th of July Kenwood footrace. The runners would lope through our property, part of the course. We'd be waiting with a hose that squirted cold well water on them. They'd cheer and laugh, and we'd cheer and laugh too. Then we'd go back to the veranda and eat watermelon while other family members cooked pancakes at the church downtown. Yes, a small town in America is still Smalltown, America. Sincere and unpretentious, caring of it's own, year after golden year.

Sometimes on hot summer days we'd take the kids down to the pond. Dad would have a truckload of sand dumped under an old pine tree on the far shore. We'd spend hours there, just wading around with the dogs and children, splashing, catching small fish. An older cousin would swim out to the raft, someone else would paddle around in the old boat.

Next to the beach, Dad planted table grapes instead of wine grapes. They were seedless and sweet. After finishing the bag of Fritos Mom would inevitably bring down for the grandchildren, we'd all be jonesing for something cool and juicy. Those bunches of grapes were so dense that we'd eat them like apples, just taking huge bites instead of picking off one grape at a time. How sticky! But no problem. We'd just wash off in the lake. Eventually we'd amble back to the farmhouse, tired but happy, counting kids.

At the Ranch, there was no best time or worst time. Time wasn't measured in hours and minutes, in obligations and meetings and chores. The land ruled the calendar in a way every farmer knows, but few others can fathom. What time is it? Time to plant, time to water, time to prune, time to harvest. Time to cultivate. Time to worry. Time to relax. Time to celebrate. That's land time.

Like the First Americans, the Spaniards, the farmers and the families that came to Indian Springs Ranch before the MacLeods, we'll also leave clues about who we were, what we dreamed. When you hear laughter, think of us. The churn of a distant tractor. Or the faint music of windchimes. When the pale purple wisteria first blooms on the veranda, we're there too, under the eaves, wishing you a sweet spring. How lucky we were, how lucky you are, and how lucky you'll be. This is our blessing.

Our warmest regards,

The MacLeod Family