

The Donovan Farm



E. Christopher Mare

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Introduction

The Donovan Farm is 6.06 acres situated in Happy Valley, Bellingham, Washington. Padden Creek and Connelly Creek come to confluence at its southern border forming approximately two acres of designated wetland. Lining the western edge is a trailer park built on land that was part of the original homestead. To the north is entrance onto Donovan Avenue, and beyond is mixed housing on previously predominant large tracts and including a cooperative children's school, a llama farm, and ultimately Western Washington University and the arboretum of Sehome Hill. On the eastern rim, just now under construction, is a segment of the city's interurban trail system and wetlands restoration project.

"The Farm" is a virtual haven, a bright green jewel nestled within Happy Valley, with wide, expansive views of Chuckanut Ridge, an eclectic mix of tall, mature trees, wildlife and birds, and the insulating buffer of the wetlands open space. The Farm is sure to have a special destiny.

History

This location was originally an indigenous people's gathering site for the harvest of salmon. In the late 1800s, as the white settlers moved in, a large dairy farm was established here. By the 1930s, agriculture was moving to the periphery of town and The Farm was purchased by a doctor who created a horse ranch. Apparently an eccentric lot, the doctor and his family initiated The Farm's reputation as an oddity, a rarity in the growing districts of Happy Valley and Fairhaven. There are stories of wild parties and the gathering of flippant-minded people. This kind of life continued off and on in various forms until the mid-1980s, when the current owner, Ellis Massey, purchased the twenty-acre tract for speculation purposes. He promptly sold the majority of the piece to a California developer who built the trailer park where Mr. Massey resides till this day. Preserved were the old farm house and the 6.06 acres that would come to be cleverly called "The Farm."

In 1990, The Farm lay abandoned, awaiting the right speculation opportunity. A local resident, Kim Shipman, would come and park in the driveway to meditate in the peaceful setting. Seeing the potential in the place for her own vision of community, she negotiated with the Masseys to become a renter, and so began the most recent version of The Farm. As she and her family moved in, the Masseys were clear to point out, "This

is only tentative; you may have to leave at any time.” She ended up staying on for seven years, and during that time her community was to grow considerably, and her vision was to approach fruition.

The Kim era saw the continuation and enhancement of The Farm’s colorful, eccentric reputation. It became a center for the alternative community in this area and beyond. As an experiment in group living, The Farm’s population would fluctuate dramatically. In the Summer, there could be up to twenty-five people residing in various dwellings: tents, tipis, school buses, ‘rooms’ in the barn, and of course always the core group in the old farm house. People (the extended family) from Eastern Washington, Seattle, and Oregon would come here to stay when they had business in Bellingham. The word even got down to California, and folks on their way to work in Alaska knew they could stop in at The Farm for some rest and a meal. Always receptive, generous, and accommodating, The Farm was a ‘seed’ center for a tremendous amount of community building, whose full effects will never be known. The common bond uniting all the participants was a spiritual focus, a shared vision of a more respectful, sacred, sustainable approach to life and the land.

This vision reached culmination, perhaps, in the spring of 1993, when The Farm hosted a Permaculture Design Course. This was my own personal introduction to both Permaculture and The Farm, and both exposures transformed my life forever more. In Permaculture I instantly recognized my life’s work; someone had finally defined and given form to all my various perceptions and intuitions concerning a remedy for the world’s ills by designing human systems modeled after systems observed in Nature. In The Farm, I saw a group of people attempting to live out a life situation that I was beginning to see as an ideal (community). The Permaculture Design Course also gained The Farm credibility amongst the active, sustainable-minded people in Bellingham and charted a new course toward promoting workable solutions for the local area.

Finally, by last Summer 1996, this new course was blossoming and was showing tangible results. The Farm was well-pared down from its more communal, free-for-all heyday. With just two resident adults and two off-site participants, ten times more work got done than in the populous – though transitory – previous years. All that remained were highly committed, energetic, and talented people working to have the land’s true potential become manifest. Steve Powers had a full acre-and-a-half under till for his CSA business that was impressive to see from the road. Muriel Kehl created a lush demonstration herb garden with 120 varieties that groups would come to see. I was toward the back, filling in my permaculture zones 1, 2, and 3, experimenting with just how much space is needed to fully accommodate the nutritional, etc. needs of a family of four. Kim was active in all areas and, as always, playing the warm hostess for the continuous stream of visitors. With all the excess energy, the central courtyard was

being landscaped and used for social gatherings. A sauna (visible in the front cover photo) was hosting weekly ‘sweats.’ Kids were always running around, either friends of the three young girls who lived there or friends of the family that would bring their kids by to swim in the pool or play in the playground or just be with other kids. The place was alive with positive, productive energy. There were chickens and ducks and goats and bunnies. We had gotten to that preliminary stage where the next season could launch into something truly impressive.

Unfortunately, none of us ‘owned’ the place. This past Winter, the four of us were getting together, excitedly planning strategies for the coming season. I was building a new, improved greenhouse. Steve had his plot ready to grow and expand. Then the word came down: The Masseys had finally gotten to the stage to begin their development – a corporate kind of scheme to fabricate thirty-two units on the four usable acres with profit motive as the only directive. It was to be shabby housing for fragmented lives; the California model fulfilled; ‘progress’ marches on. We knew it could come at any time but when it hit it was devastating. The golden bubble of a tenuous dream was pierced and everybody’s lives were to be rearranged. And yet, the nauseating image of this special piece of land being paved over was so incongruous with the spirit of the place that I could never picture the destruction clearly in my mind.

Present

The present could include all this past Spring and Summer (1997), the pivotal transition period witnessing the gradual and inevitable disintegration of The Farm as we knew it. First was the big garage sale; then the month-long giveaway on the sidewalk of all remaining resources; then the barn dismantling and removal; then Kim and the kids left; then my school bus home left; then the three-week plant giveaway; of course all the animals had to find new homes. I facilitated the process by clearing out every last bit of trash, fully cleaning out the farm house and workshop, moving every last bit of stagnant energy off the premises. A ceremonial fire continuously burned for a month. All that remained was the infrastructure of a farm-to-be-made. I cried often. Of course, I was to be cleared out too, but as the self-designated caretaker I thought it necessary to see the transition as clean and honorable and final as possible. From my perspective, a precious jewel was being buried. As The Farm exhaled all its previous life-force, I consolidated my energy into my Volkswagen van and stayed on to see the transition complete.

Yet, even amidst the disintegration, The Farm retained its vitality. People would still come by regularly, in the old tradition, to visit, chat, or let their kids run around. I reached a point where I decided, “All life is in the present moment,” and so began gardening like crazy, trying to restore the place to its original splendor. As a student of Fairhaven College, I even initiated a community building class I called “Group

Manifestation.” Throughout the Spring of 1997, every Thursday evening, the class would meet here at The Farm for a pot-luck, discussions or exercises about community building (based on the Findhorn model), and finally, by sunset, a sauna. The sauna/sweat itself has commenced every Thursday for twenty months, approximately ninety consecutive rounds, and constitutes itself a formidable component of community building.

Since the word to vacate came down, we’ve seen a large (supposedly) final party with lots of live music, a memorial for a friend who passed on, a Beltane/May Day festival, and a couple of birthday parties. Even amid the disintegration the land has remained alive with its unique potential: a gathering place for flippant-minded, starry-eyed individuals with a positive, transformative, earth-centered vision for the future. I am fully convinced that all this positive energy generated by so many positive people has either helped to maintain the magical integrity of this land, or else the magic is intrinsic to the land and has generated all these people. More probably, the two are synchronistic.

This notion became clearly apparent as Spring progressed into Summer and The Farm situation evolved even further. At some point in the process, the Bellingham CoHousing group entered the picture. First, with speculative curiosity, then with renewed interest, and finally as things unfolded, with firm commitment, this very capable group has become heirs to the land (!). At some point, the Masseys abandoned their original development plan as being too much work for their already busy schedules. And then, almost miraculously, they rejected a cash proposal by a corporate developer in favor of aligning with the emerging proposal of the CoHousing group. Was it public relations? A spiritual awakening? Or the destiny of the land? One can only speculate, but this much is fact: at the present moment the CoHousing group has already put down their ‘earnest’ money; they are proceeding energetically and very professionally toward their vision, and there are no other competitors. They have until the end of September to come up with the 80k down payment, and they are prepared to do so. They have begun preparations for restoring the farm house, one developing member is moving in October 1st; they are actively seeking new members and have commenced their site design process. It is really going to happen! – the first CoHousing community in Bellingham will be situated right here at The Farm. What appeared to be a tragic loss six months ago has turned out to be an innovative, positive, transforming occurrence for the future. This land will retain its community-oriented, spiritually-focused personality.

Future

The future of The Farm (and it won’t be called The Farm anymore) depends largely now on the goals and successful implementation of the vision of the Bellingham CoHousing

group. They will have the title to the land and it is through their management that the future development of this land will depend. They are inspired by the Danish CoHousing model but there is apparently a cornucopia of ideas as to the actual form that this model manifests. As stated previously, the design process is now just underway.

CoHousing by definition is the group process of creating owner designed and built residential communities. As such, it is inherently a tremendous lesson in compromise, assertion of values, and synthesization of each participant's special needs and wants. It is an elaborately delicate fusion of each resident's vision of an ideal living situation, tempered by the zoning and coding limitations of the city. The final outcome will be a complete integration of all these qualities into the day-to-day life of the participating members, perhaps for the rest of their lives. So the design process need not be hasty but should allow time for the complete unfoldment of the considerations of each resident's needs and wants. In that way, harmony can be preserved and designed into the community.

As an 'affiliate' member who may or may not become an actual resident but who may participate in the design process, I will be attempting to influence the development in the following directions:

- 1) Ecological Design, and the beneficial integration of the development into the overall landscape, maintaining and enhancing the vital relationships between the development and the human and other-than-human networks in which it is embedded.
- 2) Permaculture Design, within the community, to create an organic (organismic) living network of relationships modeled after natural systems that will enhance the living potential of the community.
- 3) Sustainable Community Design, increasing the self-reliance of the community on the land and including: the options of alternative building techniques and materials, renewable energy systems, passive solar design, extensive food and medicine production both in the community gardens and throughout the landscaping of the development, integration of cottage industry and right livelihood within the development offering income opportunities, a vibrant social and spiritual life, etc., etc.

Of course, the final outcome will be a workable synthesis of all these considerations, and especially influenced by the developing member's capabilities and requirements. Here, it seems, the most formidable compromises will be based on financial realities. Building a new world will have to take place on the decaying compost of the old, one project at a time, within the framework that currently exists. In this

regard, I see nothing but positive potential for the future of "The Farm." A highly energetic, talented and capable group of people with a positive vision for the future has decided to pool their resources and become stewards for the land, providing a foundation for the manifestation of their dreams. Once successfully implemented, this project will serve as a demonstration, an example for the rest of the sleeping society around here, a positive statement that we can have the life we want, we can lead happy, healthy, fulfilling lives in close communion with our neighbors; we can live harmoniously with the natural world, and, we can do it all ourselves. As always, The Farm is sure to have a special destiny.

