

## WHY I BOUGHT LAND IN MONSON, MAINE.

(Written: 2008/2/10 to 2008/2/14, by Stephen C. Van Wyck.)

### Introduction.

About four years ago, I bought 20 acres in Monson, Maine. It is now February, 2008. Over this period of time, I have been faced with incredulity, surprise, disapproval, criticism, misunderstanding, and perhaps a little envy. Even those people who have "agreed" have not been very convincing. Therefore, I have decided to write a sort of "apology" (c.f., Socrates), a defense, and explanation for what I have done, and why I did it. Even if you still do not agree with what I have done, I hope you will at least understand my actions.

There was another article that I wrote a few years ago, called "The Anti-House Manifesto", but it was a bit too polemic in tone. However, I still inwardly agree with much of what I wrote at that time.

In this article, I will try to give a brief history of my "aesthetic wanderings", summarize the purchase and development of the land in Monson, Maine, and outline my philosophy of land-ownership. Finally, I will suggest what direction I will move in, as the years go by.

### Body.

I have dreamed of having a quiet place in the country for many years – about 25 years, at least. When I was seven or eight, I discovered the children's book "*Ferdinand the Bull*", and my life philosophy was largely set. At 15, I came across John Seymour's agricultural self-reliance book "*The Complete Book Of Self-Sufficiency*". I read parts of it many, many times; I also imagined and drew plans of my "dream homestead", time and again. I also traveled to many countries, and took extensive mental notes of the places I saw, especially from the windows of long-distance buses. Once, in Zinder (Niger, West Africa), I walked into a small courtyard, and had an "aesthetic epiphany", on account of the peace and seclusion I found there. I cannot remember the exact details of that place, save that the courtyard floor was of beaten earth, there were small sparrow-like birds in the bushes, and there was a small fountain. The essence of enjoyment, derived from that anonymous courtyard, has remained with me since 1984. While working in P. R. China, I became very interested in courtyards, especially the "*si he yuan*" courtyards in Beijing. To date, my favorite courtyard is in the Grand Mosque, in the old-Hui district of Xi'An. Finally, for me, the summit of natural beauty is at Baltit Castle, Karimabad, Pakistan-controlled Kashmir. The summit of man-made beauty is in Kyoto, in the Zen temples and gardens. In both cases, when I wandered around these places, I realized that I had found something of great beauty.

For many summers – indeed, many years – I worked on my father's land in Massachusetts. Like most sons, I did some of the yard-work – mowing the grass, raking the clippings, and so on. The land was fairly beautiful, but it required a lot of weekly maintenance. Since the perennial bushes were planted in aesthetically-pleasing locations, I had to push the lawn-mower in all directions, so as to mow cleanly around the bushes. The lawns themselves swept in pleasing gradients, and curved in shapes that pleased the eye. However, this meant a lot of time was spent in keeping this "visual empire" in good shape. All over the country, other sons and daughters, workers, contractors, and others were doing the same thing, week after week... and this was considered "normal"!

I also flirted with two plots of land, both owned by my father. For various reasons, I was not really happy with what I had, and the projects died out.

About five years ago, I came back to the USA from my work in P. R. China, and spent several months near my father. At that time, three seemingly unrelated events happened: my father (indirectly) pushed me out of the house, my uncle died, and a long-maturing dream of a place in

the country came into fruition.

At that time (2004?), my father had a girl-friend, and they seemed to be forging a relationship. At some point, it was suggested to me to get an apartment in Portland, Maine, where I could live by myself. To this day, I feel that the girl-friend indirectly "pushed" me out of my father's house, and that my father agreed with her wishes. Whether this is actually true or not is not certain, but I felt this had happened. I rented an apartment I did not really like. However, I was in Maine, which is very different from Massachusetts.

My uncle Henry died, after a period of cancer. His life had been sad, as it was blighted by alcoholism, isolation, and the rejection of his family. That is to say, the people in my family (maternal, and paternal) often looked down on him; as for me, I neglected him. It is a pity that both happened. When he died, he left me some money – not a lot, but enough to begin a dream. Rather than lose the money in a dwindling bank account, or some stock fund, I decided to look for some land. His memory is very much incorporated into my land.

The dream of owning some land had always been latent for about 27 years, and I had often drawn "dream blueprints" of what I wanted. Time is a great vessel for the fermentation of ideas, and travel serves to modify them constantly. I chose one of the counties of Maine, and decided to drive around in a great circle, looking at many tracts. My search was not very well organized, but somehow, I "muddled on". After a few days, I came to a real-estate office, and asked if they had any "undeveloped" land. By this time, I realized that working with the tail-end of someone else's dreams was not for me; I wanted to start from "zero", from raw land. The broker showed me many index cards, with the outlines of "lots" on each, and I saw my (future) lot of land... one index card among twenty others, pinned onto the wall. The shape of the "lot" was a rectangle (and not an "amoeba", like so many "lots" here in New England, due to legal influences), and it was arranged on an east-west axis. Moreover, a country road passed just under this lot. It was the "south-eastern quarter" of a larger plot of land being sold by a landowner. I raced over to look at it.

The land had "third-growth" trees on it, and it was very shaggy in appearance. It had rained a few days before, and the trees were still dripping in places. I wandered around, trying to commune with the land, but did not get any strong impression of what I should do. I walked along one of the boundary walls. Here, the stones which the former settlers had torn out of the ground and placed at the edges of their fields were very different than the stones in my father's part of Massachusetts. These walls reminded me of long-forgotten Roman roads, completely forgotten and pressed close to the earth by the passage of centuries. A few weeks later, I returned with my broker, and we looked at it together. Later, we returned again; we also met the man who would become my "general contractor". I bought that 20-acre plot soon after. In the lawyer's office, I felt that I was getting married, the feelings were that strong.

There was opposition. My father and especially my brother were vehemently against my buying this land. However, I went my own way, and to this day, they think I am foolish for having done so. I suspect that, like an "unapproved marriage" to an undesirable woman, their opposition will remain for life. I think that many other family members are not sure what to make of my actions.

So, why did I choose this land? I followed certain criteria that were important to me, and completely different than what most ordinary people do when they buy a house, or some land. They will consider factors such as distance from work, distance from their children's school, resale issues, safety, the neighborhood, the police / fire / ambulance / hospital services, taxes, and so on. I chose none of these criteria... not one.

I chose the land, first and foremost, on account of its solar exposure, the shape of the "lot", the "lot's" ability to be isolated from any human contact, and the "lot's" topography. In short, my decision revolved around the land itself. I will never lack the sunshine, to warm my buildings. I like "rectangular" and "square" things, and this land had these qualities. The

gradients were favorable. I knew I could build something that was completely screened from other people's sight. This part of Maine had less severe laws regulating house / property development, than most parts of Massachusetts. I never forgot the constant feuding, obstructionist "bush-wars", legal bickering, and conflicts that dragged on for years, that existed between my father and his local town government, and certain hostile neighbors. I saw "wetlands" as a curse, as the arguments my father had with his local government usually revolved around wetlands issues. In short, my initial choice was, and remains, associated with "the land" – not other considerations. There is something about land – pure, simple, undefiled, and uncomplicated – that draws the heart of a person to make a decision. Land is indeed a lover (of a sort).

There were, of course, other considerations. I bought this land for reasons having to do with "life-style". As you know, I have worked in P. R. China for about ten years, and wish to return, probably indefinitely. However, I need a sort of "home-base" to operate out of. There are three types of dwellings – (a) homes, (b) houses, and (c) "global crash-pads". My place is the third. I have long viewed Asia as the place where I hope to live out my life and dreams. Asia is a very big place, and certainly big enough to encompass my dreams. (As for this place, the land of my roots, the "frontier" has long since gone away, and the people have resorted to various forms of "cultural cannibalism", as there is nothing else left to devour, save themselves and their own creations.) However, I have come to realize that in times of trouble, nobody in Asia would take me in, as "one of their own". This realization came to me one day, when I was out "house-hunting" with my (then) fiancée (we never married). We were in a village outside Beijing. We asked to see some land to buy, and the village elders showed us a small area of land, between buildings, that was full of trash! Of course, it was an insult, but I decided that there would never be security for me, as a house-holder, or as a land-owner, in Asia. As a wanderer, an "educated vagrant", a two-year contract English teacher, I have a prescribed place there (and I am happy with that), but not much else: I am a foreigner, and that is that. I thought, "When I come back to the USA between teaching contracts, where will I stay?" I wanted somewhere to put down my baggage, if not my roots. Roots? I do not have them, I do not want them (to a point), and I hack them off whenever I can. Obviously, this makes me appear "strange" in the eyes of my peers.

However, there is another reason that has to do with "life-style". In most of my life, I have not been able to have "my own place", a place where I could do everything, exactly as I wished. That was not possible on my father's land. He offered me land, yes – but on his aesthetic terms. I realized I was not willing to accept this. Over the years, I have also "gotten what I wanted" – not by competition, assertiveness and confrontation, but by stealth, deceit, and avoidance strategies; that too has a price. I wanted a place that could be my own, where I could be "the lord of my own life, and land", and be accountable to nobody. I have never really had this, except in the contexts of rebellion, flight, and stealth. In effect, I wanted my own country. This is perhaps the main reason why I bought my land in the forest, for I knew that nobody would seriously hinder me there.

Of course, money played a part. The price of an acre in central Maine is much, much cheaper than in Massachusetts. I bought my land for \$3,000 per acre. In parts of Massachusetts, one acre of a "buildable lot" can be \$350,000 or more!

In time, I started the building process. Phil Holt, my general contractor, his wife Nancy Maxwell, Travis Carr the roofer, and various other builders all did excellent work. Over these four years, the land has slowly taken shape. I was ruthless, in terms of the initial execution of my vision. Of the 20 acres, I strip-cleared about six acres, to make a central compound and two fields. All trees, stumps, boulders, out-croppings, and brush were destroyed, along with one old stone wall. After all the years mowing my father's land, following the dictates of the land, I decided that land would serve *me* instead. (Perhaps I have too much *hubris* saying that, but this is what I wanted.) I made rectangles of cleared land, and built the various structures I would live

in (more on that, later). The boulders I unearthed were dragged to the perimeter of the cleared land, to make a barrier-wall. The driveway was straight; I despise curvy driveways. If there was a "big tree" nearby my buildings, or near the country road, I destroyed it, so that it could not fall on something, or someone. I wish to try and prevent possible accidents from happening, by destroying their causes ruthlessly, and not rely on "insurance".

I wish to say something about the state of Maine, especially the central parts. Monson, and all the surrounding communities are very different from the rest of the world I grew up in. Almost everything is earned with desperate hardship, there is little money, unemployment is high (40%?), and outside people "pass through", on their way to their summer "second homes", rather than stay. This is not the picturesque and socially-acceptable "down-east" part of Maine. Monson is a place of slate miners, forestry workers, and not much else. It was several months after buying the land that I thought, "Well, what is this Monson? What are the people like?" I never considered those things, things involving people, society, and community. In fact, I was pleasantly surprised. I have decided to identify myself with Monson, even if I am in P. R. China for much of my time, and even if I am considered as an outsider by the Monsonites.

I have also come to like Maine, as it is less "high-pressured" than Massachusetts. People go about their life at a slower pace, a handshake has the value of a legal contract, and there is a little more of the pioneer spirit here. I sometimes call Maine "Alaska, Lite" (as in "Bud Lite" beer). Of course, I will never be considered as a real Mainer; I am yet another "refugee", coming from Massachusetts; besides all this, I have been the consummate "outsider" all my life. As long as the Mainers do not equate me with certain arrogant "Massachusetts colonists", and let me live in peace, I shall be happy. I hope that some friendships will evolve, over time.

As I said earlier, I like the inward-looking appearance of a "compound / courtyard home". Most American buildings are designed to look outwards, over their lawns, to the "lot-lines"; if you fly over any city, you will see that most people's homes look like this. I feel that such homes have no real privacy. I decided to "explode" a house (which is really a collection of rooms, of different functions), and scatter the rooms around a square perimeter, thus making a "compound / courtyard home". From the road, you cannot see a single window; all you see are walls, silent and grey. The heart of this place is the actual central courtyard, which will one day become a vegetable garden.

Each building is not very big, and they are all very narrow; this is because I need my buildings to be a "perimeter wall" first, and an actual "dwelling place" second. They have different uses – such as garage, workshop, art studio, office, bedrooms, bathroom, storage room, and so on. I rely on the sunlight to heat many of them by day; they are allowed to become cold at night. In fact, I have come to realize that, if I move from place to place during the day, I can follow the natural heat; in the same way, if I move from place to place, I can follow the shade, so as to stay cool. All this is possible, because the cleared land has an almost perfect solar exposure, in both summer and winter. By the way, if it is possible, I would like to be independent of water, gas, electricity, and so on, even though there is a working town road at the bottom of my land, along with a power-line. However, I would like to have Internet access, so as to communicate with my friends in Asia.

I should also add that my buildings are largely re-conditioned "shipping containers". The workers painted them grey, put in some windows and doors, and added a green metal roof. Almost nobody in the country has done this, save a few avant-garde architects – and they were trying to present them in an "artistic" fashion! For terrace walls, I used large, one-ton pre-cast blocks of concrete. The dominant colors in my compound are : green (roofs), grey (walls), blue (sky), and brown (earth). In short, I ruthlessly chose "function" over "form".

There are about three full courtyards, two patios, and a few "semi-courtyards" built into my compound. Each one has its own special character, and is at its best at certain times of the day. There are only two heavily-insulated and heated rooms; the rest can rise and fall in temperature

as they will. One of the heated buildings is the master-bedroom. The other is called the "wet-room", as the toilet / shower / basin are there. It will be a relatively easy place to keep warm in winter. In the "wet-room", there are two water-cisterns, for holding toilet and shower water, a toilet, a shower, a large wash basin, and a very small "kitchenette".

### Conclusion.

I do not know what will come of this venture. People expect me to do things their way, but I have not done so. I probably never will. Yes, I have done some very strange things. I have spent a fair amount of money on the work so far. Of this money, about one-fifth could have been saved; due to my inexperience (and sometimes, plain folly), I lost money. Of the four years that I have owned this land, I have actually dwelt on it for a total of about eight days. However, there is not a day that goes by when I mentally walk my land, regardless of where I am. I do not intend to sell it, and "buy up" to another, more expensive house. I do not want to sub-divide the land. I wish this to remain stationary in my life, as my career takes me all over the world. In a sense, I am like a comet, and this land is like the sun, in that I keep on coming back to it. I doubt that any woman would want to live there with me, and I am glad that I designed my place without any "philosophical reference" to a woman. Since it is "Marriage, Mortgage, and Maintenance" that is the bane of most of middle-class society, in that they often "hobble" people of their life's potential, I have tried to develop a place that is free from debt, and excessive upkeep (the first criterion I will not comment on).

Having this land has also changed me in another way. Through owning a "piece of the Republic" (as a landowner), I have discovered, for the first time, what "love of country" means. Before, I had no idea or interest.

I have always viewed this land, not really as a dwelling place, but as a "philosophy book", written in concrete and steel. It is my wish that, whatever people think of this project, they may see something of the "compound / courtyard house" mentality, for America does not have this way of building, and much of Asia and Africa does. As for me, I want to live in "a land of my own design", made with excellence by my contractors according to my inmost dreams, and to be happy there - either in person, when I am there, or in my mind, as I wander the face of the earth. If I cannot pursue "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" in this way that I have chosen, then why should I live at all?