



Saint Orvis and Mother Bertha

I NEVER thought my grandparents, Orvis and Bertha, were cool, hip, or progressive. They were poor Dakota dirt farmers when times were tough. They braved the dust bowl years, saw numerous tornadoes shred their farm, had blizzards strand them for weeks from civilization, saw grasshoppers destroy their crops, saw their animals freeze to death and succumb to disease. I wonder if they felt Mother Earth was all that nurturing to them.

Orvis left his family of nine siblings in Iowa when he was 14 to move to the Dakotas. He worked a farm and walked behind a horse-drawn plow for 20 years before he got his first tractor. By the time he was 50, he had literally worn out his hips from walking in soft dirt and was relegated to using canes and a wheelchair 'til he died at the age of 86. Orvis installed a windmill to water his animals, and he cut ice from the Missouri River every year to keep their food stocks cool. Orvis finally replaced his horses with a truck to haul his animals, grain, and family. The horses were then dispatched to carrying his sons to country school. Orvis never traveled much and I asked him once if he'd ever flown in a plane. His response was, "Never been in that much of a hurry to get anywhere."

Bertha grew up in a family of eight siblings on a poor dirt farm not far from where she ended up. Bertha knew how to make do with next to nothing. She had a two-acre garden where she grew organic vegetables and fruit. She fertilized with manure from her chickens, milk cows, and horses. Bertha spent weeks every year canning and juicing. She sewed the family's clothes from grain sacks and any material she could scrounge. She sewed patches on patches and hoped her boys could have a pair of shoes each winter. Really worn out clothes were made into rag rugs, one of which I still have. She wasted nothing. You knew better than not to clean your plate at each meal because you knew that this food mixed with something else would show up again at your next meal. She lived 85 years.

By definition, "to sustain" means to keep up or to keep going. Sustainability is a word I have really come to dislike. It has perhaps become one of those terms like positive energy, paradigm, consciousness, awareness, or progressive—you're really not sure what it means, but if you use it, you feel superior to all the idiots around you. It also seems to have taken on a spiritual meaning in some people's minds. Orvis and Bertha burned hardly

any fossil fuels, they ate their own organic food, they didn't use chemicals on their land, they weren't part of the massive transportation distribution network, and they practiced closed loop living. They would have laughed at the notion that somehow they were smarter or more spiritual than others because of the way they lived. In fact, they were probably looked down upon by their wealthier neighbors because of their backwardness.

Orvis and Bertha certainly kept going. Their sustainable living wasn't necessarily a voluntary choice but it surely was a reality forced by economic conditions.

I just read about a multi-billionaire who is the largest private landowner in the U.S. He is quite outspoken in his environmental beliefs and he practices what he believes is sustainable land management on his properties. Problem is, he has built 20 or so houses on all these properties and flies in his private jet continuously to spend a few days at each one.

It seems that whatever good he has done on his property may be canceled out by his use of natural resources to enjoy his properties. So is the wealth of our society an impediment or a boon to sustainable practice? Are many of the efforts and rhetoric about sustainability just an attempt to assuage guilt from our wealth? Does it really matter that we recycle our garbage when we are part of a whole system that may in fact be unsustainable?

Mankind has made a bunch of course corrections throughout its history to sustain itself to this point in

time. Many of the things we think are sustainable now may prove to be unsustainable in the future. I imagine the guy in Pennsylvania with the oil puddle on his land never thought it could be used up.

It seems to me that economics is often the most reliable predictor of sustainable change. Changes are made more readily when there is an economic engine driving it; that is, money to be saved or money to be made. Wealth generally improves quality of life and I think one of mankind's ultimate desires is to improve its plight in life. Orvis and Bertha were never so glad as when they could sell their farm and move to a nursing home in town. They had money in the bank, Orvis didn't have to eat Bertha's cooking, and Bertha didn't have to weed her garden.

—*Merle Adams*

How sustainable are you?

TO CONSIDER the direct planetary impact of your own life habits, Google **myfootprint**. You'll visit a simple-yet-compelling website which questions you about your lifestyle (mostly in regard to food, housing, and transportation) and then calculates how many Earths we'd need if everyone lived like you.

This revealing knowledge is followed by an interactive demo of how much you can reduce your footprint by changing various aspects of your life.