Archeology of the Garden

Last spring, in the process of digging out a new garden bed, I turned up the rib bone of a horse. It was about two feet long, yellowed with age, pocked and scribed, and much gnawed by mice, and it had been weathered by soils and long winters. Hefting it absentmindedly there in the spring sunshine—it suddenly struck me—I think I knew this horse.

When I first moved to this property nearly thirty years ago, the land in this section was a dark forest of white pine, a veritable desert, it seemed to me, where nothing other than a few starflowers and sarsaparilla grew and no birds sang. One day shortly after I moved onto the land, a large red-haired man of about 60 showed up at the front door and asked if he could have a look around. He said that he had grown up in the house as part of a large extended family. One night in the mid-1930s, when he was about 16, he and a cousin lowered themselves out of an upstairs bedroom window and hit the road. This was his first time back in forty odd years.

We took a walk around the land while he reminisced about his childhood years on this small subsistence farm. The greatest shock to him was the white pine stand. In his time that section of the property had been an apple orchard. Among his many stories was one involving a half-wild white horse that no one could saddle. He and his friends used to jump on its back and go dashing bareback through the orchard while the horse would try to dislodge them by running under low-lying branches. Later, the horse went blind and spent its last years grazing under the apple trees, and when it finally died his family hauled it up to the back wall and buried it.

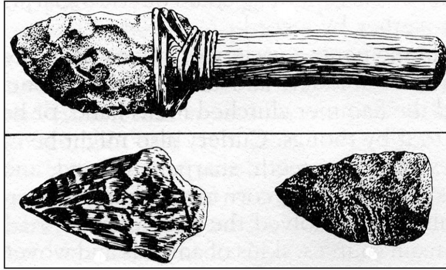
Over the thirty-year period that I have lived on this land, little by little, stone by stone, I have slowly cleared the stand of white pines to make room for new gardens, a decidedly unenvironmentally sound practice save for the fact that there now seem to be more birds and more wildlife in the gardens than there were in the dark pines. In the process of all that digging and delving, I have turned up much evidence of the various families that have lived on this land

since 1810 when the house was built: shoe leather, old tools, medicine bottles, ink bottles, buttons, shards of willowware, shards of Canton china, bits of glass, bits of stoneware, pottery, clay marbles, a doll's foot, knives and forks, and leaky tin pots. Also arrowheads. This was apple country, the Nashoba Valley, one of the oldest extant farming regions in New England, having been worked by the English since 1654, and for nearly 3,000 years before that by the Indians. In fact, Christianized Indians planted the first apple trees in the valley: Roxbury Russets brought over by John Winthrop in 1630.

The first arrowhead I found was a nondescript modest point from what was known as the Late Woodland culture, a very recent group as far as Native American history is concerned. But just over the hill there are two working farms (the last of the five that remained when I first came here). The new farmers—which is to say, the English, Germans, Italians, and Greeks who worked this land over the 352-year period—would turn up arrowheads during spring plowing. Some of these were saved at the local historical society, and, with a little care, you can work backward through the buried layers of Native American history, ending with a singular point that now resides in the collection, a so-called Paleo point, about five inches long with a fluted groove down the center.

In the time of the Paleo people, the garden patch where I found the horse bone was a dry grassy hill at the eastern end of a shallow lake. Moving across the landscape were mastodons, giant elk, barren ground caribou, and other species of Pleistocene megafauna, all of which the Indians hunted. Slowly, over the millennia, as the climate changed, the human uses of the land changed. Hunting and plant gathering declined, and about 3,000 years ago was slowly overtaken and eventually replaced by agriculture. Now agriculture is in decline. Most of the old orchards are gone, save for one publicly owned patch that was acquired by the town. The farmers who still work these agricultural lands might as well work for nonprofit agencies, such is their income, and slowly, farm by farm, field by field, and lot by lot, new houses and small electronic-based industries have moved in. Nothing new in all this—it's an old story. Changes in the land.

But in our time the old story is also a new story since there are now also



changes in the climate, which is what drove the original cultural evolution of this part of the world. And yet, in an ironic and atavistic twist, old patterns endure: there are still horses here. In fact, there are a lot of horses.

This too fits a land use pattern.

One of the phenomena of the so-called edge cities—the burgeoning computer-based development patterns at highway intersections just beyond the old core cities—is that just outside the edge cities, in the nation of the great mega-mansions, there are also horse pastures for the weekend entertainment of executives of those industries.

Furthermore, in spite of the changing economic conditions, there are still—somehow—real farms. In fact, according the USDA, one of the fast-growing segments of American farm economies is the peri-urban agriculture, that is, small specialized farms within thirty miles of big cities.

And finally, in those few small patches of private and public woodlands and fields, where they are permitted to follow their primordial tradition, there are, ironically, still a few hunters. One of the heralds of autumn in this section of the town is the early-morning sound of duck hunters' gunfire from down in the marshes of Beaver Brook, which runs east of my house.

And all the while, things accumulate in the soils beneath: car parts, farm equipment, bottles, china plates, horse bones, arrowheads. Walk the woods in these parts and you walk over history. And walls, of course—walls everywhere. But also foundations, forgotten roads, beds of daffodils, patches of vinca, and, in one corner I know, a fine stand of flowering peonies. Custom lies beneath your feet. But custom appears to accumulate in the human psyche as well as in the form of hunters and farmers, and gardeners who feel the need to clear land to grow vegetables and flowers.

Ultimately, perhaps a long memory saves land.

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