

By Gary Nelson

Remembering Laurel, Oregon –

My parents separated when I was in the fourth grade. My father, as I would learn later, had been an alcoholic for years and at some point during that fourth grade year decided to make his exit. It was the summer of that same year, 1965... that my mother decided to move the family, now minus one father, from the small town of Montesano, Washington to the rural community of Laurel, Oregon. Laurel was, and is still today, a farming community located approximately 10 miles south of Hillsboro, which is in turn, located approximately 20 miles west of Portland, Oregon.

I decided to take a drive back out to Laurel, to the house where we moved to that summer of my 12th year, to see how things looked some thirty seven years later. Now I should say that this isn't the first time I have been back. Over the years I've made the trip probably a dozen times or more, but this would be the first time I have actually stopped to think about how things have changed. Or stayed the same...

As I take the turn from Highway 219 onto Firdale road – the two-lane blacktop that eventually leads to my childhood home, I am stopped by a strange sight...someone has cleared the thick underbrush from the forest on the south side of the road. The stand of second growth fir is still there, but it now looks more like a park than the impenetrable jungle of blackberry, small saplings and dense undergrowth I remember from my youth.

I can now see almost fifty yards into the forest, and to tell the truth, it's rather unsettling. Just a little reminder that things change, I suppose.

The next mile and a half however, is much the same as it was when my mother first drove the family car packed with kids through these woods. For just a moment I'm twelve again, and all is silent in that old Chevy as the five of us, me, my mom and my brother and sisters, try to take in the new landscape.

It's comforting to know that the narrow strip of road that makes it's way from the main highway has kept most of its magic; through a mile and a half of fir trees, through the valley farmland and eventually past the old two-story farmhouse where I spent most of my teenage years – thirty seven years later and it's still a bit mysterious. I like that.

As the road abruptly emerges from the forest, oddly enough, everything still looks the same. The one house that sits just at the edge of the trees, perpetually in darkness under the low boughs of evergreens is still there, dark and dangerous. I don't know if they still have wild dogs that chase any kid that has to run their gauntlet, either on bicycle or on foot, but then I'm not willing to stop the car and tempt fate, either.

Approximately a quarter of a mile further, on the left, there are three homes that at a glance look the same as they did that first day we rode past them in silence. Four kids, two dogs and my mom, all stuffed into that old Chevy. They look the same, but different somehow. There aren't any new outbuildings. No rusting cars up on blocks, no above ground pools taking up space in the front lawns. But still... there is something different.

Perhaps, it's just the remembered anxiety I used to feel when pedaling my bike past these final sentries leading to that dreaded house at the edge of the woods. With each

pump of the pedal my breath coming quicker as I anticipated the attack that was inevitable. My pockets full of rocks, a hastily found stick wedged between the crossbar of my stingray's handlebars, ready to retaliate against those dogs that guarded the forest. I can laugh about it now, but those were some very tense moments as a twelve year old.

Ahead on the right, there is a final house. This house borders the mile or so of wheat fields that that grow right to the very edge of the property where my house sat. This final house is exactly the same as it was that first day. The same pale yellow paint, the same perfectly manicured yard. There is even the same foot high, miniature white picket fence that had all of us laughing that morning in 1965, as we began the last leg of the journey to our new home.

And then it's another mile or so of open farmland, broken only by the occasional remnants of long forgotten fences and weathered outbuildings, and eventually...up ahead on the right, is the old farmhouse. The two story wood frame house is perched on just the slightest of rise, surrounded by acre upon acre of wheat fields. I can't help but smile. What seemed so large, so different, so new when I was twelve years old, is now just a house sitting in the middle of fields of wheat.

The thing is this: it's not as strange to sit and look at it as I thought it might be. That's probably because there are good memories here. While it's true my father was not part of the equation, we survived quite well here in the country. My mom working at a plastic's factory some 30 miles away, my older sisters taking over the duties of ordering us around when she was at work; those summers with all of the countryside as our back yard.

The old garage still stands, if somewhat lopsided, looking like it would rather just lie down for a while rather than list to port as if fighting some unseen storm. The shed

behind the house, connected by a makeshift walkway is still there, too. I don't know if the back room with the dirt floor is still as dark and damp as it was when I had my worm farm in there, but I hope it is.

I hope the small room just off the walkway, with the water pump and shelf after shelf of strange looking, long forgotten jars of canned fruits and vegetables is still there, too – the forgotten treasures of someone else's mother or grandmother who lived in this same old house long before we took up residence.

But it's the house... the house that's most striking. The fact that it's still standing there, standing straight, looking both out of place and completely correct in its location.

It's a little worse for wear. It could use some paint, a little attention, but then after thirty-seven years, who couldn't? It's the one rental house sitting on a quarter acre in the middle of an ocean of neighbor's fields. I like the thought of that.

Even though we didn't own the property, I still feel as much a connection as if we had. And the very fact that it's still here, pretty much as I remembered it, is reassuring. If it were gone, if it had been only temporary, it would have erased much of the magic I have just experienced driving the last few miles of narrow crumbling blacktop. The fact that the house is still here, standing straight, looking almost defiant, somehow justifies the time I experienced here growing up. It gives those memories a certain value of time well spent.

After moving away, as a young adult, there were times I would think back about our family living here, the only renters, living on that island in the middle of our neighbor's farms. I worked on those same farms growing up, knowing full well the kids I went to

school with, the same kids I worked side by side with, would some day own these very fields that have surrounded this old house for generations.

I think it may have bothered me as a younger man, seeing my friends with their futures so well designed, so neatly planned. And if I did begrudge them their inheritance for a while, I realize now those feelings are long since past.

As I sit here, looking at a farm house that holds more memories than I could possibly imagine, I have only fond wishes for those childhood friends who I am quite sure, ultimately inherited these fields that encircle this old house. We all have our own destinies. And it's enough to know that as I start to drive away, I can't help but smile at the memories.

I am quite sure that as I head back home to my house in the city, I will remember more. I may even stop at the edge of the forest to see if there are still wild dogs acting as gatekeepers, lying in wait for some kid that might not have planned ahead. Some kid without a ready stick or a fist full of rocks. I might, but I doubt it.