

THE AGELESS LAND

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Just a year ago in December, our good friend, Ed White, died suddenly from a ruptured cerebral aneurysm. According to many friends in his adopted state of West Virginia, his death was a great loss, not only to the small community of Union where he lived and farmed but also to the state itself. For many years, Ed wrote a weekly column for the state's largest paper. He had also been active in state politics and in later years occupied officially in its cultural programs and educational system.

He was especially fond of his farm, Walnut Grove, a nine-hundred-acre expanse of rolling pastures, wooded hills and rocky streambeds, which he crop-farmed and on which he bred and raised Angus cattle. The farm had been for many generations in his wife's family, and, after World War II in which he served as a fighter pilot, he and Nancy settled there.

They borrowed funds, worked hard at the unfamiliar, never-ending manual labor of farming and eventually bought the farm from the rest of the family. There was never much money, but they lived comfortably and successfully raised and educated three children, all of whom have a deep affection for the place. The youngest boy, now a junior at Harvard, still intends to return there and take over its management.

Last month, Jane and I spent a week on the farm with Nancy who is trying to hold everything together until the children are settled. Our visit was at that pleasant time of year when the leaves have changed and begun to fall and the nights are cold and the morning fogs and mists last beyond midday. The pears and apples and walnut burrs are on the ground under the trees and the fall rains have puddled the pasture roads. The stream below the Kelly Woods is a twisting ribbon of green watercress and the uncut fields of blue grass are filled with the brittle, brown skeletons of thistle and milkweed. It is a quiet and lovely time of year, a peaceful, fleeting interlude before the hard, dreary cold of winter sets in.

In the living room library, in front of the fire one night, we were reading through some of Ed's columns and came across an old favorite. He called it "This Ageless Land." It was written in the fall six years ago, and it expresses poignantly the love of the farmer for his land.

"After all of the corn has been picked and safely stored in the crib, if nature, in her clemency, prolongs Indian Summer, the farmer finds a period of peace suspended momentarily between autumn's toil and winter's drudgery.

"During these precious weeks many tasks lead him to remote parts of his farm which he has not had time to inspect, leisurely, for months, in some instances, for years.

"He has to move cattle from distant pastures nearer to barns where, later on, they will be fed. Trees have to be cut to make posts for last-minute preparations at the feeding sheds. He accompanies friends who come from cities to hunt across meadow and pasture, seeing each in differing and interesting perspectives. And, for another year,

with his wife, whose gardening and preserving days have ended, he finds time to saddle the horses and to ride over his rolling acres.

“What he sees is land – oddly shaped parcels of land bordered by rows of trees or post and wire fences – rough pasture land cut by streams and spotted with clumps of trees – colorful land from brown to bright green – land which he has plowed, cultivated, planted, fertilized, harvested, and looked at repetitiously, for decades.

“He follows old roads, some still in use, most now little more than eroded depressions covered by a sod which conceals the ruts along which early settlers struggled cross-country with their teams and wagons. They fan out in every direction, like spokes of a wheel whose hub is the ruin of an ancient flour mill.

“From a prominent place he looks across the wide expanse at all of the little monuments to his own efforts – meadows where there were none when he arrived twenty years ago, new silos, new barns and new fences. In every direction he sees evidence of rejuvenation and decay. A few yards away is the spot where he delivered his cow, Mountain Girl, of her dead calf. Far away, from the top of that silo one frosty morning, is the place where he took the beautiful picture of brown and white steers converging upon the barn through a pink haze. In the stream at the foot of the hill a tractor overturned, but Judge was not hurt. And in the nearby meadow a wagon load of silage jack-knifed behind the Jeep and upset both.

“There is hardly an acre where some history of his life has not been written – some successes, some failure, a life or a death, a race or a moment of contemplation, an accident or happy picnic.

“In the dying afternoon sun, he looks at this piece of land long and seriously and thinks. It looked like this when Andrew Beirne came here from Ireland and bought it 175 years ago. Great trees have since grown and fallen and returned to the soil, like mushrooms in time. As he has done, intervening generations have laid foundations and built buildings which have long since disappeared.

“Full of hope and romance, two people will come here again and again to build their life together of brick and mortar, of thoughts and cares, of love and toil. In their time they will make a small impression in the air which blankets the land. They will live for a moment within its flimsy framework trying to make sense and a living. Then they are gone and only the great and ageless land remains. It will be stirred many times again by new feet and new tools. It will grow new grasses, new field crops and new trees. Its color and composition will change kaleidoscopically.

“There is always change, but it is only a change of matter. Where corn grew there are now trees. Where a locust tree fell another young one like it has sprouted to take its place. Where weeds grew there is now grass. The sapling has become a giant. The change is orderly, slow, relentless and repetitive. The earth beneath will rarely change.

“It is a time of sadness. There have been years of joy.

“The cycle of the seasons is closing. The cycle of the farmer’s life completes one more revolution. His proprietorship of this fascinating piece of land where a million new and different things are happening every minute moves one year closer to its end.”