Green Revolution

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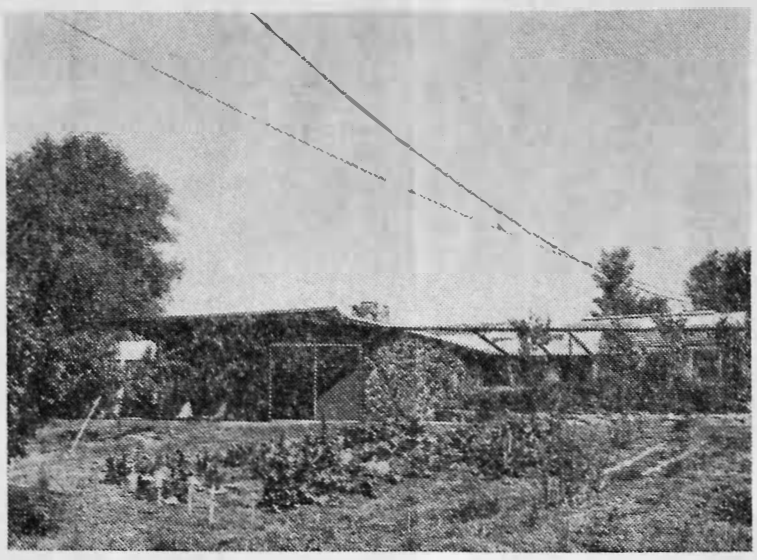
Lane's Endings

Mildred Loomis

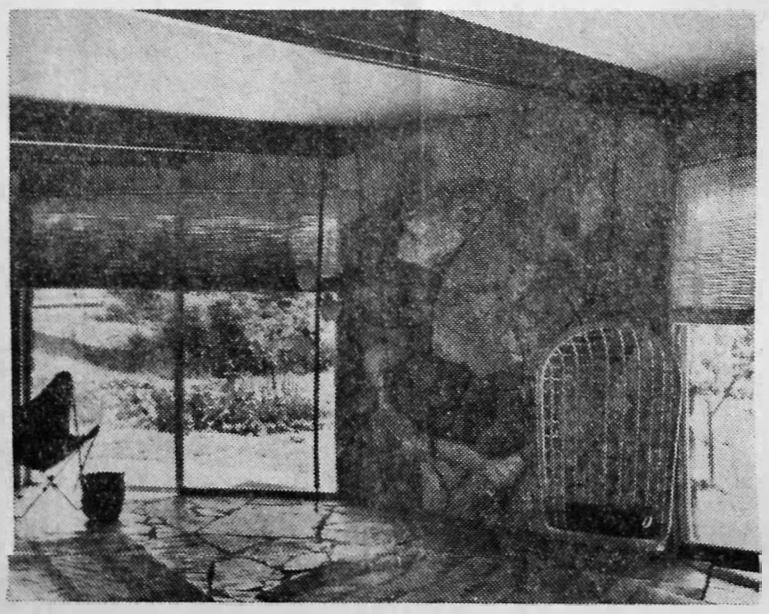
Epilog-Prolog—

Goodbye: Owner-Built Home; Hello: Owner-Built Homestead

By Ken Kern



KEN KERN'S SIERRA HOMESTEAD, built by himself and family from native materials. Cash cost of shell (walls, roof, floor) was $1600; finished, including plumbing, electrical installation and landscaping, totaled $2950—1960.



This epilog to *The Owner-Built Home* series is at the same time a prolog to my forthcoming book, *The Owner-Built Homestead,* now being written. It is idle to speculate on building one's own home in the city or suburb. One would be pounced upon by various officials before the first nail could be driven. Despotic union bosses and mercenary contractors' association scouts would soon squelch any do-it-yourself building activity—assuming the banker and building inspector would go so far as to authorize the work.

The factors that hamper and outlaw the owner-builder project in urban areas form only one small part of the argument for "rural living" solutions. Very soon in the construction process an owner-builder finds that positive resources are required that can come only from a rural environment in a more or less natural and friendly community. The two most important resources are *freedom* and *health.* An urban two-day-a-week, two-week-a-year home building program is next to worthless. One needs a *block* of free time to build a home. One also needs the energy and well-being that can come only with good nutrition, fresh air and clean water.

So a rural setting can verily support an owner-builder in a sort of dovetailing set of circumstances. A family buys an acreage of land in the hinterland where land is not so expensive. Taxes are therefore not so high. Building regulations are almost non-existent; so only moderate construction funds need be amassed. The land can be made productive and so less cash need be earned for foodstuffs, thus allowing more time and money to be spent on building and land development. Nutritious food raised on the land can improve the family health, and thus more energy can become available for greater homestead development.

In a few years a family should be happily situated on its own land, in its own debt-free home. How it should go about developing the land (garden, orchard, pasture, woodlot), water supply, fencing, barns and outbuildings will be the subject of *The Owner-Built Homestead.*

The idea of a family earning its economic necessaries from a homestead (with a part-time money income to supply amenities which cannot be family produced) goes back to depression years when Roosevelt's Federal Security Administration dabbled in "subsistence farmsteads." But a much more significant contribution to this back-to-the-land movement was made by pioneers like Ralph Borsodi and Milton Wend.

Ralph Borsodi and the books he wrote in the 30s (and since) helped shape the homestead trend. Economist Borsodi established his family homestead 25 miles above New York City in 1921, and saw the need for small-scale technology to help revive productive living. In 1929 he wrote his famous critique of modern culture *This Ugly Civilization,* and suggested that the small homestead was a human and constructive way out of the urban pressures he saw developing. All this was popularized in his *Flight from the City* in 1938 (and later printings).

Borsodi, in effect, dropped the idea and reality of the modern homestead into the social pool in the 30s. The ripples of that act have spread far. Some of those affected, who have since spread the idea, included Milton Wend, Ed Robinson, J. I. Rodale, Paul Keene, Agnes Toms, Elizabeth Nutting and Mildred Loomis.

Borsodi established the first School of Living near Suffern, N. Y., in 1937, to de research in how to live, to build homesteading communities, and to develop a curriculum for a new education for living.

Milton Wend, now of Edgartown, Mass., was a trustee of the first School of Living. His experiences and ideas were reported in his *How to Live in the Country Without Farming.* The book has been widely read. Wend is still active in his Human Engineering Institute.

Ed Robinson took over the idea from a School of Living brochure entitled *Have More Vegetables,* and developed his famous "Have More Plan" and country life bookstore. After a flourishing business, this was discontinued in the 50s.

J. I. Rodale visited the School of Living in 1938, and there saw the composted gardens, the use of whole foods, the grinding of grain into flour and cereal, and the regular baking of wholemeal bread. He went back to Emmaus, Pa., and later changed his publishing emphasis to gardening and homesteading. The magnificent growth and influence of the Rodale publishing enterprises are well-known today.

In a letter (June 17, 1966) to the School of Living, Robert Rodale, editor of *Organic Gardening* magazine, wrote:

> "I was present back in the late 30s when my father visited the first School of Living in Suffern, N. Y. Although I was only eight or nine years old at the time, it made a distinct impression on me. I especially remember the bins of whole grain flour. They must have smelled pretty good to stay in my mind that long."

Paul Keene was an assistant director of the School of Living in the early 40s. He later bought his present farm near Penns Creek, Pa., and established there his whole-food, mail-order business, one of the first and still one of the most successful in the country.

Agnes Toms and her husband, Robert Toms, were co-directors of the Suffern School of Living in the mid-40s. She has been a teacher in California schools for years and is the author of the widely-read *Eat, Drink and Be Healthy*—2,000 recipes, which she began collecting at the School of Living in 1945. She says, "I began to really cook the right way after I knew Mrs. Myrtle Mae Borsodi, and after Bob and I were in our first seminar with R. Borsodi in 1945."

Elizabeth Nutting, a former director of the Suffern School of Living, helped found the American Homesteading Foundation in 1944, from which grew the very attractive, experimental Melbourne Village, a community of 300 homes near Melbourne, Fla.

Mildren Jensen (Loomis) was assistant educational director of the Suffern School of Living (1938-40) and later continued that work avocationally at her home, Lane's End Homestead, near Brookville, Ohio. Her editing of journals (*The Interpreter, Balanced Living,* etc.) began in 1944 and continues in 1966 with the monthly *Green Revolution* and the bi-monthly *A Way Out.* The numbers of people who have been influenced to the homestead way from these, and her book, Go *Ahead and Live!,* are uncounted. Some of the successful homesteads which have grown out of this work will be described and detailed in *The Owner-Built Homestead.*

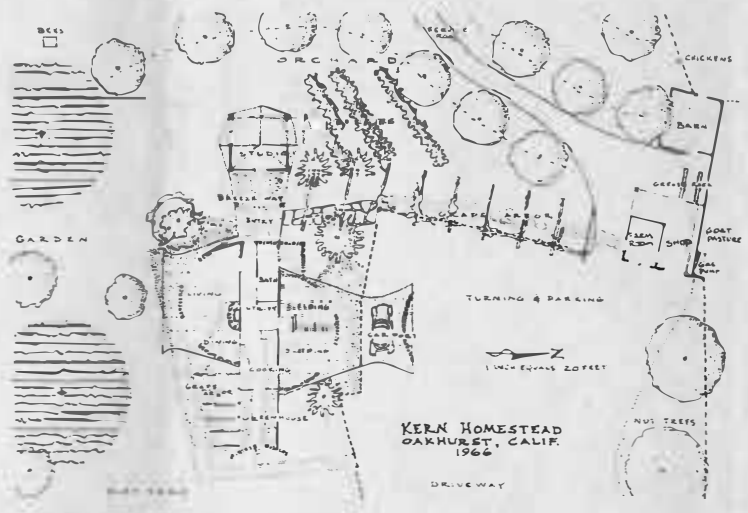
During the depression of the 30s and 40s, books like *Five Acres and Independence* carried on Borsodi's early emphasis. But unfortunately these early writers and promoters of country life did not produce a dominant trend in our country. Why?

The reasons are many. The technological drift of the modern day had attained a momentum that could not be stopped by a trickle of counter-ideas. And the form and content of the discourse about rural living in the 30s and 40s were of a pre-depression vintage. Traditional living-patterns were dressed up in a "country living" format and presented as a bonafide original. Many would-be homesteaders became disillusioned.

There was no qualified, professional or educational assistance in the homestead movement. One exception to this was an architectural competition for a productive homestead, sponsored by the early *Free America* magazine.

So the first wave of homesteading interest in the late 30s and 40s diminished. Some leaders in the movement seemed to drift into specialized aspects such as organic gardening, nutrition or craft production. This was probably aided by the seemingly narrow and limited nature and understanding of homesteading. People thought that no earth-shaking revolution—or revelation—could ever come out of a potato patch!

Moreover, the high employment and Social Security benefits offered by the Great Society of the USA, with its war-making "power elite," tend to dissuade people from a life on the land. Government handouts in the city appear to be easier to accept than living by one's wits in the rural margins and "cracks of an affluent society."



GROUND PLAN of Ken Kern's Sierra Homestead. Kern is architect, surveyor, builder, landscaper.

But the urban culture of the war-making, land-owning, and money-owning "power elite" is now riding to a fall, as anyone who reads the newspapers can see. The overpopulated sinks of the city's poor naturally spawn riots. There *must* come a change. The homestead and village-community type of life that was disrupted at the dawn of history by the ravages of hunter-chieftains and warrior-kings from their city strongholds will have to be

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Heathcote, cont'd

Press and a vigorous new journal to challenge the public with decentralist and School of Living ideas and practices. Younger members argued for a smaller, experimental, more personal discussion of ideas among our members, similar to current issues of **A Way Out.** An editorial board, appointed for a six-month, three-issue trial period, includes members of both groups.

Saturday night, we had an enthusiastic presentation of **Ecology and Radical Thought,** by Murray Bookchin, New York City. (This is Lewis Herber, author of **The Crisis in Our Cities.**) Here was a synthesis of voluntary action and rural culture, an approach new to social-change and social-action groups. Here were our familiar, acceptable ideas from a new source, and we rejoiced in new allies and coworkers.

On Sunday afternoon, A. P. Thompson of the well-known Front Royal, Va., organic orchard, talked to us on soil restoration via earthworm culture. He brought a box of breeder worms, showed us the steps in producing 6 to 8 million worms per acre that will completely eradicate fungus and bacterial disease, and make unnecessary the use of sprays, fertilizers and pesticides. One young man said, "Thompson's approach, presentation and rationale were the best of all." Sorry if anyone missed the Sunday session. Mr. Thompson will appear frequently in activities at the new Center, with his important information and philosophy.

Space limits our report of a film on member participation rather than dependence on a leader; of the fun we had under Grace Lefever's skillful direction in folk dancing; of the good discussions on community and personal relating (of which we need more); and the two-session deliberation in the annual business meeting on Saturday afternoon.

The following committees were

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Lane's Endings

July is a month of pre-harvest fullness when the work tempo slows down and we enjoy a daily intake of vegetables and fruit. In August and September we're in the midst of food processing: canning apple sauce and tomatoes, putting corn, beans and greens into the deep freeze.

These are also months of visitors. From Aug. 1 to Sept. 15, 69 persons had come for discussion and exchange of ideas. Three of them were groups — 8 Antioch College students studying community with John Christian of the Vale Community; 7 from Amity Community in Indianapolis; 5 from Humanist House in Yellow Springs.

Others included School of Living folks crossing the country: Leo and Mary Koch from New York, Ken and Hansel Kern from California, Ken and Dee Sprague and family from Maryland, Eleanor Woods from Oregon. Some were young couples like the Dwight Gearys from the Chicago area, or the young professor from Colombia, S. A., seeking the homestead way. One was a Pittsburgh electronics engineer staying through a midnight discussion of the "technological society." One was a granddaughter of our mentor, Benjamin R. Tucker. Many were friends from nearby. All were seekers, and much enjoyed.—M.J.L.

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