

Trip to Pownal June 2016

Tony was going on a golf trip, and I had a week to myself at home. I had recently decided to wind down my web design business, the garden was planted, our kids and grandkids had yet to arrive for the summer. What to do with this little gift of solitude? I was shocked by what popped unbidden in to my consciousness - Go back to Pownal and try and find David and Wendy's cabin.

The idea seemed ridiculous at first. So much of my life had been based on too many jobs with not enough time. Could I actually "waste" a precious 3 days on an impulsive, possibly fruitless trip into the past? Yes, yes I could. I let my mind drift back, something I had trained myself not to do too much.

My older brother David had passed away in 2000 at 58 of an alcoholism related pulmonary embolism and I was finally past the haunting. He had always been in my head, brilliant, inspiring, fun at first, drunken, troubled, volatile later on. I finally turned my back on him towards the end - a desperate act of self preservation. But now I finally could watch that movie or read that book without crying, the one about the family with the damaged person who sucks so much energy out of a family. I was past most of it. But of course I'll never be past it all.

Something bid me to walk again along the trails and through the woods of one of his many dreams, this one hatched 45 years before, in 1969, the summer I graduated from high school. He was newly married to his second wife Wendy and we all adored her. David was 10 years older than me and it took me a long time to think of Wendy as the age she was, almost exactly the same as me. I started out thinking of her as "older", married to my big brother. She was a student at Bennington College and once they moved in together they lived in nearby Jacksonville VT while he taught in Worcester Mass. She was smart and upbeat, ready with a laugh. She was a new wife and taught be her recipe for "Beef Stroganoff" made with egg noodles, sautéed ground beef, ketchup and sour cream.

Before long they got the grand idea of buying land near Bennington and building a cabin. I was so excited to visit the land they found, a 65 acre woodlot on the south side of a mountain in Pownal, Vermont. I visited the land the next winter when they had started building the cabin. Wendy met me at the bus station in Bennington and we drove down Rt 7 past the Green Mountain Race Track, turning off onto a series of narrower and narrower roads, and finally onto a winding dirt road through thick woods that climbed a seemingly endless hill. It petered out at a rough, snowy parking area. "Now we walk. I'm so glad you're here!" Wendy said, as she pointed to a narrow trail. We walked through the woods, coming out into a rocky right of way where electric transmission lines towered over our heads. We scrambled up a rocky road and turned onto a smaller woods trail, continuing to climb. We arrived at the cabin site where David was working within the post and beam frame putting up rafters. He gave me a hug and a kiss on the forehead, then showed me around, pointing out the steep slope where the cabin frame perched, a small stream flowing underneath it. He mused about how great it would be to share this spot with a bubbling brook. Wendy showed me their temporary dwelling, a tiny rickety trailer deeper in the woods. That night I had a chilly sleep punctuated by a sawing crunching sound coming from somewhere under the trailer. David later laughed when I asked about it, saying a porcupine was chewing holes in the trailer every night.

I think I visited 2 or 3 times. He eventually finished the cabin, but within a few years he and Wendy got divorced, breaking many hearts in our family. The land and cabin went to her in the settlement and she sold it.

So now in 2014 I planned my adventure, trying to figure out how find the land and cabin again. Had his dream survived? The rest of them were long gone, the 2 goat farms, the vegetable farm, the row boat building business, the 2 30 foot sailboats, or was it three?. At home I looked at Google Maps and at a Vermont Geological Survey map to try and find the area, but I couldn't remember any road names and failed miserably trying to drive in my mind from Bennington to the mountain in Pownal. Was it a left off Rte 7, or a right? I could remember land marks, the racetrack, the gift shop on Route 7, the turn where their friend Mary Fussell lived, but direction and distances were a mystery. I would have to go to the Town Clerk in Pownal and ask for help doing a title search. I was scared of that process at first, thinking the Town Clerk would be frustrated dealing with this clueless person who only knew my brother's name, nothing more, but it turned out that Town Clerks are used to this kind of ignorance. Within an hour I had the name of the current owner and a map of the area with the property outlined in yellow hi-lighter, along with copies of 4 deeds. The map had a little square indicating a building. It was easy because the owner Peter Lindley seemed to be the son of the couple who had bought the property from David and Wendy.

It was late in the day, so I drove down Rte 7 to my hotel in Williamstown, Mass just across the border. I got a quick bite at a restaurant and spent the rest of the evening in my room, studying my maps and gaining confidence that I actually was getting somewhere with this weird adventure. There was no-one asking me why I was doing this and I didn't know either, but felt a pull to finish what I started. Rereading the title copies that night in bed I got a clear idea of the time line. They had bought the land in 1969, gotten divorced in 1971, transferred to the land and cabin to Wendy in 1971 and she had sold the land to the Lindleys in 1980.

The next morning I drove the route to the land in a strange dual dream: the 1969 place and the 2014 place took turns leading the way. I drove towards a mountain ridge rising from hay fields. This area was dotted with farms. I passed a white house on a curve and wondered if that was Mary Fussell's. I took a wrong turn or two before I was confident of the route. I hadn't remembered houses along the dirt road, but there were plenty now, and as I drove up an increasingly winding and rutted muddy road pulled over and parked, afraid of not being able to turn around if I drove further. I put my papers in my backpack and locked the car. I hadn't seen anyone outside any of the houses, and felt decidedly isolated and a little nervous, especially when I'd been walking for 20 minutes or so and the road became icy, not something I had expected. I kept to the muddy edge of the road and began passing small hunting camps, some with hand painted "name" signs over front doors, but none of them looked like David's. I had some pictures with me, the only ones I had of the cabin. In them it's just a plywood deck with the beginnings of a single story post and beam frame, and David is hefting the rafters into place. I kept the plot map out and tracked my location by the camps I passed. According to the Geological Survey map I was now at over 2000 feet in elevation. There was some comfort in being close to "civilization" as I knew my route would go off-road eventually. Surprisingly a pickup truck bumped up the hill and passed me. The driver waved, the way Vermonters do. In a few minutes I saw the truck parked next to another car at a camp. The man was on unloading boxes out of the back as I approached. This man might be a hunter, might know that land ahead. I pushed down my gut fear, middle of nowhere, strangers. But I was white haired, 63, past the age of certain kinds of self protection. We started chatting and when I explained my mission he brightened and beckoned me into the cabin which was cheery, funky, tidy. I relaxed as the man, Ben, introduced his friend inside, Larry the owner of the camp. Larry was excited to finally get electricity in the camp. They were installing solar panels, do it yourselves. They were happy to take a break and help and examined my Geological Survey map and Town Clerk plot sheet. Larry was indeed a hunter and I could see his mind scanning the land he know so

well as I stumbled through fragments of memory: We parked before a power line right of way, then walked to the right along it and then turned left into the woods up a trail. The cabin was built over a brook. It was one story. "You know, there IS a cabin up there towards the top of the hill. It's in a wet area and juts out where the hill falls away to the south. It looks abandoned. Maybe that's it." I thanked him and shook both their hands, apologizing for invading their little neighborhood, but they laughed and waved off that thought. Apparently the Appalachian Trail runs through the State Forest just to the east and through-hikers frequently pass by on their way get supplies.

They gave me some landmarks to follow, where to cut off the road onto a trail, how far up the power line to go before looking for the smaller trail, and I set off. I quickly entered dense woods and sadly said goodbye to the little hunting camp community. The woods were beautiful, with that fresh green look of springtime when the leaves are newly open to the sun. It had been rainy the night before and everything was damp and freshly washed. As I hiked though, I started thinking about what good bear habitat this was and battled a bit of primal terror, reminding myself to breathe. I hadn't thought to bring my sharp climbing poles, so found a sturdy stick to carry in case I had to poke out the eye of a raging mother bear. This feeling passed and I could feel I was past the steepest terrain. But no cabin yet, no sign of any person. and I had been walking almost a mile since I felt the road. Was I on the wrong trail? I slowed my walk and peered into the woods on either side. On my left I saw a road cut of some sort, then a rusty gate and some fencing dotted with NO TRESPASSING signs. I stopped, getting my breath. I didn't remember the cabin I was surprised to glimpse through the woods at all, but it matched Larry's description, standing perched over the hill dropping off to the south, and he had said this was the only cabin in the area north of the power line. This was it!! Maybe.

The dark crooked cabin stood in a stand of young hardwood trees a hundred feet from the trail. I found a rock to sit on and dug into my backpack for the pictures. This cabin had the right roof line, although I didn't recognize the porch. I ate a banana. I honestly had no idea what memories I had of the cabin. Had I seen it finished? Or were my memories of it finished just from David and Wendy's vivid descriptions? I don't think my parents ever saw it, but they had only seen our hand built Vermont house once after Jesse's birth. My sister had visited once.

I donated the banana peel to the leaf litter at my feet and studied my options for approaching the cabin. I saw no sign of recent human activity, no tramped paths. I crossed the fence and pushed through the brush, but as I got closer I ran into a series of 3 foot deep 5 foot wide muddy trenches ringing the cabin like a moat. I went around them and found a path to get closer, but almost hit my head on a guy wire that stretched from the cabin to a large tree 30 feet away. I kept my eye out after that, finding 2 more. The roof was alarmingly out of plumb and level, but the cabin was somehow intact, with dusty windows, padlocked doors, 2 porches. I peered inside the dark interior and mainly saw building materials, coils of guy wire and one green rocking chair. Could that be one from my parents house on the St Lawrence? He was always "borrowing" our things. The rafters matched my picture. This really was it. Who would hear me WOOHOO! The bluejays hopping around in the tree tops. I wondered off in the direction of the trailer, stopping to crouch in the bushes for a pee, thankful for my treated tick clothes. Finding no trailer, no debris, I went back and took some pictures of the cabin, struggling with reflection as I tried for some shots of the interior. Before I left I put my hands on the padlocked front door and contemplated the remote history here.

So it was still standing. I had found it. I had more questions. Why was there so much evidence of someone trying to save the cabin from the forces of nature, from the soggy unstable unsuitable ground it had been built on so many decades ago by my dreamer of a brother? Why were there no signs of habitation? No furniture other than the lone rocking chair?

I went back to the trail, following it further up the hill until I could see the land level out. I was at the top. There was a gentle breeze and riffing of leaves in the birches, maples, beeches around me. Reluctantly I went down the hill and made my way back to my car, picking up a few pretty stones from the trail as I walked, since the trail was more like a stream bed.

Back at the hotel I decided I was ready to talk to Peter Lindley. It took him a minute to adjust to this surprise phone call, but soon he told me how his parents had bought the land with an abandoned cabin on it, which they rehabbed and expanded, saving it from falling down. They brought their kids up there on weekends since they lived nearby, and Peter had fond memories of playing in the woods in this remote spot, cool and quiet in the heat of summer. Peter inherited the cabin and now mainly went up there to continue the battle with nature and physics. He didn't stay there any more, just fixed guy wires and dug deeper trenches.

Peter told me they had added another road to replace the washed out older one I had used. I asked him about the chair, whether it had been there when they bought it, but no, it was from his family. I told him a little about David's mental health issues, and hoped that might explain why the cabin was built on such an unsuitable hillside

So the story was getting wrapped up. I packed up the next morning and went to the hotel desk to check out. A middle aged man took my room key and printed me out a receipt while I rambled a bit about my mission in the area, how I had been up in the wilds north of County Rd near the transmission line right of way. He stopped and looked at me. "I own a cabin up there." "Really?" I said, "What is your name?" It wasn't like I could tell him an address where I had been. "Peter Lindley" he said and we both broke into smiles, shaking hands. What were the odds? He was the part time overnight clerk at the hotel. We sorted it all out and he was very gracious, answering a question or two. We exchanged emails and he gave me some more info in the next month.

So what had I learned? The process had been delightful actually. David's cabin had survived thanks to the dedication of the next generation of dreamers. Peter looked at the floor and chuckled when I asked how long he could hold off the forces of nature.

I imagined a life on that hillside, what it would have been like to live up there so far from town roads, with a long stretch of driveway to maintain in a damp environment prone to turn stream-like. I saw the irony of having an electric transmission line so close, but no actual power available to houses. I wondered if you could have put in a septic system, and guessed it was all too wet up there. But the main problem had been that mountainside which politely refused the offer of a dwelling on its slope, shaking it off in slow slow motion. David had made a good building, the first of several he built in his life, just in the absolute wrong place. Dreams be damned.