



Times-News

The Last Cow in Brooklyn

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ECO NOTES



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I remember the last cow in Brooklyn. My folks took me to Sunnyside Farms occasionally to visit her, a lone Holstein in a small barn surrounded by an industrial park and high-rise apartment buildings. I doubt the cow gave milk, given the surroundings, it was more than likely she filled buckets of asphalt. Yet, aside from the occasional stray pack of dogs, this was as close as it came to feeling like country. The farms were long since gone and the closest trip to any rural community was hours away.

Growing up, farms and farm animals were the subject of my storybooks, not my reality. That lonely cow stuck in the garage was the last vestige of a rich agricultural past of a place known more recently for traffic jams, not farming. In moving to this neck of the woods, my child has the opportunity to learn the value of farms and the hard labor provided by those who tend the soil. It has been said that riches do not delight us so much with their possession, as torment us with their loss. Living in concrete canyons for much of my life has certainly influenced my respect for rural character as well what it means to lose it.

We are in the midst of a change in seasons as the cycle of life turns once again. It's as if nature pushes the universal snooze button, thereby putting the natural world in a state of suspended animation. For a few more days, crimson and gold leaves still adorn our hickories, maples and oaks before they're shed to enter the land of sleep. Crickets and katydids are singing their final chorus. And four legged creatures are scurrying to and fro filling the pantry for the long winter ahead. Like the natural world, overdevelopment is in hibernation in the mountains. We have a temporary respite until our current economic freeze thaws. And it will. Just as voracious black bears will awaken from their long sleep in spring to gobble up the crumbs of winter, so too will development overrun our remaining sacred spaces.

With the stillness of fall, a thousand questions about our future rise to the surface, like a well that floweth over. Will the City of Hendersonville become better stewards of our public water and treat it less as a cash cow and more as a precious resource that needs to be conserved for generations to come? Will Etowah prevent itself from becoming the poster child for rampant overdevelopment? Will Green River prevent any further approval of public water that threatens its community character? Will Crab Creek be able to prevent another assault on the order of the Glen and Highlands? Will Edneyville find a way to balance the needs of law enforcement to have a training ground and the profound effect an outdoor firing range might have on the community's quality of life? Will Mills River find a way to strengthen its rules in protection of its farms and waterways? Will historic Flat Rock find the backbone to put a code in place to protect the last of its open space?

My son spent the summer catching frogs, lizards and snakes. He'd feed them and let them go. As he grows, he's begun to understand what I do as an environmentalist. Jonah asks me, "When I have babies, will they be able to find blue-tailed skinks, corn snakes and green frogs everywhere just like me?" Should I tell him that the land is worth more graded and cleared than abounding with native flora and fauna? Should I explain that our green spaces are being turned into gold for out of town builders because we have few rules to protect the last of our natural heritage? Or do I tell him that I have faith that my fellow residents of Henderson County will not allow this mecca of watersheds, mountain ridges and farmland to disappear? To protect these natural wonders is perhaps the best way for us to leave a legacy to future generations.

ECO has spent this year working with communities to help them find a way to take control of their destiny. We are working with planners, water experts, geologists and more to create a "green map" of the county and researching better land use rules that we will propose to our commissioners on how our precious natural resources can be conserved. And ECO is developing programs that encourage accessible and convenient recycling, energy conservation and watershed protection. Investing in ECO is an investment in our mountains and in our future as a testament to the many generations of farmers and others who treated this land with dignity. As stewards of our natural resources, they gave our land the respect it deserves.

We have launched our Mountaintop Campaign to help ECO reach the next level with a goal of raising \$100,000. Economic times are tough all around. But what is the cost if ECO is not able to fulfill its goals? How much more will it cost when our waterways are filled with sediment and our stream banks are eroded? What will be the price when tourists stop coming (they bring \$200 million annually into our local economy) because our ridge tops are filled with ticky tacky? Please help protect our mountains by supporting ECO as generously as you can. Tax deductible contributions can be made online at www.eco-wnc.org, or mailed to ECO at 121 Third Avenue West, Suite 4, Hendersonville, NC 28792. For more information, call ECO at (828) 692-0385.

David Weintraub is Executive Director of ECO, the Environmental and Conservation Organization, a non-profit environmental advocacy organization that for 21 years has worked to protect Henderson County and the mountain region's natural heritage.