

A RELUCTANT AQUARIAN AMID SANDPOINT HIPPIES

BY STEVE BUNK

I moved to Sandpoint for a while years ago and shared a property with a couple who had descended upon the hippie concept like politicians on babies. Conversely, I regarded the decade-long Summer of Love with skepticism that nevertheless dragged behind it a kind of gunshot hope. This difference became evident upon my arrival at the property, when I deposited my few things in the little cabin and moseyed over to the big house to say everything looked grand. Kami, the young woman who lived there, stood beside a garden hose that gurgled into the dirt and said, with the bliss of someone freshly dropped on her head, “We’re about to have our enemas. Do you want one?”

My vision panned from her to the coughing hose and back. Much as I approved of the open-heartedness and idealism of hippiedom, this invitation underscored that not only did I not know how to participate, I couldn’t even visualize it.

I had arrived to become sports editor of what was then the *Sandpoint Daily Bee*, a meandering step on a path difficult to describe as a career. A more conventionally ambitious young journalist wouldn’t be in Idaho, yet I wanted to be here because it wasn’t the city, it was Nature, it was, yeah, all that hippie stuff, with a sunburned nape. This property was in a great big meadow surrounded by great big trees. The edge of the meadow declined into a bowl where ingénues who probably wore gossamer and their admirers whom I like to picture in jodhpurs pirouetted amid the wildflowers.

They were Sufi dancing, spinning around, I

recognized the vogue. Could I do that? I did hatha yoga, I used a mantra sometimes. Could I go down there and join the meditative whirl, become one with the big pines that moony writers call sentinels, look up to them looking down at us? Or the squirrels and birds looking, anyway. Could I join in under the sun and sky? Oh, sure, just let me trot

back to the cabin and throw on my striped djellaba.

I trotted back to the cabin and threw on my sweatshirt. It was early autumn, cooling down. The fireplace was unsafe because it had no apron or retaining walls to block the sparks. Jann, who was Kami’s partner, said I should build it out. I looked at him as if he were making a proposal



RIGHT: Sandpoint as seen from Schweitzer Mountain.



STEPHEN BARN



MIKE GOREN

involving a garden hose. Such handiwork was not my forte. I was a loosey lefty, tighty righty sort of guy.

The next day, Jann drove back from town and parked his pickup in front of my cabin. The bed was full of bricks. And a bag of cement.

"You realize I have no idea how to do this."

"You'll figure it out."

I spent a good deal of time looking at the fireplace, the bricks, and the bag of cement, the latter of which was particularly unhelpful. It didn't occur to me to look at a book in the library but I'd seen plenty of things made out of bricks. How hard could it be? At last, I snatched up the fearsome garden hose, mixed the cement, and raised the trowel Jann had provided. I had to start over once or twice in the early going, and completion of the project required, let's say, more time than one might expect. I summoned Jann for the unveiling. Maybe I'd break a cheap bottle of bubbly on it.

He entered and folded his arms. He was a pretty big guy, about six feet, but of course he didn't present in an imposing way, because he was a hippie. He wasn't really a hippie, they were long gone, but it was my mental shorthand for him. Anyway, he stood there regarding my craftsmanship. I didn't say anything. Let the work speak for itself.

"OK," he said at last. "All right."

He went over to the new construction and felt it in a few places.

"No problem," he said. "It isn't completely dry."

And he proceeded to take it apart.

I went to the office downtown and typed, which I could do very well, I was fast. I could type as fast as you could talk and I could spell amanuensis.

Did anyone read the *Whole Earth Catalogue*? Was the Age of Aquarius anything more than a lame attempt to cash in on the cashless hippies? If all you needed was love, why would a hippie make you build your own fireplace? Still, I think we can detect glints of that time's idealism even in the shade of implacable materialism. Those days may not have permanently changed the substance of many lives but perhaps they had an effect on the way people looked at their place in the world. Maybe we developed more empathy, and maybe that helped enact the social changes that made things a little more fair.

At the newspaper, I didn't have to worry about such matters. I typed bon mots about playing marbles when I was ten, and covering Little League baseball when I was fifteen, and the screenplays for sports movies I would write some day, which I actually had no intention of writing. At night I returned to my one-room cabin, cozy now that Jann had built a proper fireplace.

The mice were a form of entertainment, especially with no TV. From my overstuffed sofa, I fired paper clips with a rubber band as my quarry scampered across a shelf. The clips pinged off jars of basil and oregano that gave the prey sporting coverage, like elk in the forest. It was a brazenly anti-Aquarian pastime, better suited to the armchair liberal.

One day I went to an even bigger meadow outside town for a rock concert that Jann and Kami did not attend, because unlike the Sufi dervishes, they thought music interrupted the calm state to which we should aspire pretty much always. Wandering around shirtless on that unseasonably warm afternoon, drinking a beer, listening to the bands out in the middle of northern Idaho, it wasn't Sufi dancing, but I'd say

it was communal. There may have been flowers in people's hair, at which I probably would have cringed or at best smirked.

The show's headliner was the flamboyant Dr. John, who didn't resemble a hippie so much as a greater sage-grouse in courting season. Even so, I thought his performance was out-strutted by a band from Seattle who played the rocking bluegrass popular at the time. When the band returned later for a gig at a Sandpoint bar, I went. In this smaller venue, I became aware that one of the musicians was the most awe-inspiring siren since the dawning of the age.

When she came over to the pool table at the break, we struck up a banter, and at the end of the night, when she returned from the stage exhilarated by the crowd's response to the set, she urged me to jump into the van and rattle back to Seattle with the band. Could I do such a thing? I had a job, I was a responsible person. I would miss a day of work, at least. Who knew what consequences might swirl up from the depths of such a reckless act? Only one way to find out.

Yet in the end, I declined. Nobody but a hippie could be so cavalier, or perhaps so free. And hippies were extinct.

When winter came, the father of a friend said I could stay at his empty geodesic dome outside town if I wanted to. I said so long to Kami and Jann, and moved into the place, which was like a giant observatory. It had a mezzanine walkway all around beneath the curved ceiling, which was made of glass panels. The stars were endless. They did wonders for my irresolution. Looking up, I reflected that I wasn't missing out. I hadn't been misled by the cant of anti-materialism. I just wanted other stuff.

Nowadays, I would counsel young people to look closely and you'll see that each road, taken or not taken, is well traveled. The point is to choose with care and don't look back. Opt in, by your rules, under the dome of the world. ■

OPPOSITE (top to bottom): Endless stars; Sufi dancing.