

## Mom makes an official school in Mendocino County, California

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*Troll doll collection*

We all recovered [from the serious pickup truck accident], and went forward. By then mom was going by Nicki Petrowski, I think legally. She decided to make the school official, and sought formal paperwork to establish it as a recognized private school.

For this we needed inspections. The Mendocino County fire marshal had us cut a second door, in the east wall of the house, and also insisted we replace the ladder with a stairway to the upstairs area.

Which was fine, we should have done that anyway. A carpenter friend did a great job, and I used the leftover triangular and straight board pieces to make a bookshelf, built onto the wall. This held our Compton's Encyclopedia set, and some other books, which had accompanied us all the way from San Carlos. (We'd brought along little if any furniture, and there was no point in having electric appliances.)

There was also a Health Department inspection, carried out by a relaxed old timer and his young assistant. The cabin had indoor plumbing, hot water, and a regular septic tank system, so that part was fine. To my everlasting pride, I showed them my homemade water system, and they readily approved it.

The regular school kids were named Deva, Dawn, Damien, Danielle, Hana, Ana, Ona, Osha, Isha, Niesha, Kiesha, Kailan, Arlen, Ali, and Alia; also Jessica, Orion, and several others. Inventive names, largely based in New Age and pagan traditions. To this day I am Facebook friends with some of them. Only two other kids our age lived in the Gulch area, a brother and sister, Marco and Della S. They had other things to do, and didn't attend our school.

With a real school going, mom reached out again. A young lady named Vikki N moved in with us, as a helper. For a while, two teenagers Tom W and Landy T, stayed as high school boarding students. Many other friends, and soon their friends, came and went.

One day mom was in Garberville, went by the hospital for something, and came upon the aftermath of a terrible emergency situation. It seems a man had been driving north on 101, picked up a young woman hitchhiker, and also two young men from Canada. Then he made an awful mistake, and let the young lady drive.

She promptly took them down a steep embankment, at high speed. As I recall, the man was killed and the lady severely injured. The two Canadians, possibly in the back seat, were injured. They did not have to stay overnight, but needed to recuperate.

Of course, especially given our own recent experience, they ended up staying with us for a week or so. Later on, in a Eureka newspaper article, our Big House would be described as a commune. Not quite, but functionally, pretty much.

At one point I bought some Tarot cards, a Rider deck and guide book, plus a velvet cloth, and learned to give readings. Pretty soon I hardly needed the book, knew all the cards by heart, and could give an abbreviated reading with ordinary playing cards if that was all we had.

I never took money, but would trade with my clients. I have an astrology chart one man did for me, with a beautiful calligraphic style. Occasionally someone would notice my kit, and literally beg me for a reading. I always obliged, though unnerved by their eagerness, in taking it much more seriously than I did.

I kept a list of each client, then about fifteen years later, impulsively threw the whole thing away. I now wish I'd at least have saved that list. With time, I would compare tarot with the I Ching, which is similar in function but more respectable. Possibly it's a tool to gain insight, possibly a waste of time, maybe even a wrong path leading to a hurtful sorcerous mentality. Everyone's different.

We still had our troll doll collection. My sisters and I considered ourselves more grown up, so we gave them to a newcomer family, friends of Peter and Nancy, which had two younger girls. (I did not see those trolls again, don't know how long they lasted.)

Someone gave us two goats, which we named Jenny and Hannikah (sp?). Jenny was an obvious goat name, and the other was named after the European lesbian woman we knew from the 'est' office. Jenny was older, and she gave about a quart of milk each day. So my long-ago lessons from a North Dakota barn came in handy.

I built a shed for the goats, out of alter poles and plastic sheeting. It had a water spigot, and a wooden fence, also made of alter. We fed them 'cow chow' pellets, and during the day, tied them in various nearby meadows. Goats, of course, will eat darned near anything, yet are smart enough to avoid plants that could make them sick.

Goat milk can turn rancid overnight, long before it bacterially spoils, so we drank it quick. If not, then we made it into yogurt, which somehow forestalls that yukky transformation. Add a little starter, then placing the container overnight on the warm stove (just over the tiny gas pilot light), was just right. We also bought or traded milk with at least one neighbor.

We'd head into Garberville about once a month to pick up USDA Commodities giveaway food. As done nationwide, there was flour and cheese and canned chicken meat and several other items. Some was good, some tolerable; and one item, a spam-ish canned mystery meat, was so awful the dogs would not touch it.

We had one great local source of seasonal food, huckleberries. They love the wet winter and fog-watered summers, and in autumn are covered with blue or black berries. We could easily pick enough, within sight of our cabin, to make pie and jellies and such.

As I should admit, I had a contrary streak, which sometimes emerged as quite unfriendly. One time a neighbor showed up, with two local men in tow. They collected huckleberry clippings, the foliage, I suppose for Christmas wreaths and such. Mom was not there, and it fell upon me to decide if they could do some collecting on our property. It would, they assured me, help the bushes grow better, and it would cost us nothing. Still, I wished it hadn't been up to me, and for no good reason, I declined. I cannot even recall their names, or I would apologize directly.

I continued with my little camp, on the ridge above the Big House cabin. The property lines were wholly unmarked, and eventually we figured out I'd placed it within the eastern edge of Peter and Nancy's acreage. They were not going up there, much less using it for anything, so nobody minded this.

One sign of how little wildlife there was, I had a little styrofoam cooler for my food stash. Just some eggs and cheese, maybe a few other items. With a cast iron frying pan, I could easily fix a simple meal over a camp fire. It did not occur to me at the time, but no opossum or raccoon or any other critter, ever helped themselves to that food.

We had hippie bibles such as the Whole Earth Catalog, and dreamed of setting up a more sophisticated, off-the-grid, settlement. With more money and a longer-lasting focus, we might even have pulled it off. As it is, we got a few useful items, and a lot of great ideas.

I noticed a plan for a 'geodesic cabin' and decided to build one, to replace my lean-to and get ready for winter. I doubled the plan they showed, for a rectangular 8 x 20 structure, with triangular sides and a peaked roof.

It's hard to describe, so I hope this book will include a drawing. There are no pictures, as nobody had a camera. Years later, when visiting the Gulch with my wife and infant son, I found the place abandoned and collapsed, so got a photo of the ruins. Sad, but with those incessant winter rains, nothing made of plain wood could survive unattended.

I proceeded to build it, with limited tools, almost completely by myself. Mom purchased 5 sheets of interlocking plywood, two 4 foot rolls of asphalt shingling, a huge roll of 6 mm plastic sheeting, plus some nails. A minuscule amount of material, in the context of home building.

As far as my memory reveals, I scrounged up some 1 x 8 and 2x6 boards. Then through a neighbor, a salvaged old two-page window, wood frame and all.

I gathered round stones from somewhere, and cut maybe nine oak posts, for the foundation. For floor joists, long alder poles in the long direction and 2x6 boards for the width.

Then the plywood floor. Atop that, but connected directly to the foundation (a smart move, as it this allowed leaks to drain down and outside), 20 thin alder poles created the framework. All placed into triangles, narrow or wide. Over that I stretched the plastic sheeting, which is often seen on greenhouses, and a lot more sturdy than you might think.

Later I added the 1 x 8 boards around the edge of the roof, more plywood up there, and covered all that with the roofing material. I made one error: instead of cutting two long-enough new ridge polls I took the advice of a brilliant quirky neighbor and just squeezed the entire frame so the original ones fit. But that tilted the two main side walls inward, and allowed rain to fall against the window continually.

A wooden frame held the lone glass window, which faced west, though as noted, without any real view. More plywood and a frame held a very simple door, just a flap of black plastic, weighted against the wind. It would've been impossible to keep anyone out, anyway, and except for my telescope, there was little of value inside.

On the other (north) side of the building, plywood backed a new little Tin Lizzie wood burning stove. A metal collar allowed the stove pipe to exit. Luckily, before I managed to start a forest fire, I climbed up and trimmed some singed oak tree branches, nearest its rounded cap. Plain old aluminum foil reflected back the heat of the stove, to protect the plywood just behind it.

I'd found a gigantic linked chain, maybe for Paul Bunyan's bicycle, at an old logging site. This went, curled up to protect the floor, beneath the stove. The only wildlife that came inside were some field mice that built a nest within its links. I never saw them, but found their nest when cleaning out the stove one day.



I still had my box of Tinkertoys, though didn't do much with them.

On the northwest side, a very simple shelf, two plywood boards stacked up with alter struts, held my very few items of clothing. On top lived a stack of Scientific American magazines; also a spinoff, the newsletter for John Conway's then-newly-invented Game of Life. Which I could do with graph paper, until it literally wore out, no electricity needed. Plus that one Penthouse magazine, my major concession to puberty.

On the northeast side I made a bench seat and higher table, to sit and eat, or chat with friends. The south half of the place, divided by a V of central poles, had one more table. This held the modern world: a battery powered alarm clock, and a battery powered shortwave radio. Opposite that, on the east, was a sturdy canvas hammock.

All nailed together, and sealed from the incessant winter rains with Henry's roof patching tar. A few leaks, which I could channel with ordinary string, down past the plywood onto the ground. (Until I got them all fixed.)

I'd needed help to carry those two heavy roofing rolls, and a couple of other things, but that was it! The trail up was so steep, I cut footholds into the soil. Even today I am pigeon-toed, probably from those continuing exertions.

For decoration I had some framed art, that mom had gotten years ago from a KQED public television fundraiser. Prints with pretty birds, but the damp air soon ruined them. I also had a couple of old Parisian posters, maybe for popular attractions in that storied city.

Hard to get to? Deliberately! Other than city friends I'd specifically brought up there, and a few planned meetings, in that couple of years nobody showed up unannounced, more than a handful of times.

That radio did great service, and I don't recall ever changing the battery. The only AM station which came in well was KCBS in San Francisco, a news-talk station which had just gone to a 24 hour broadcast schedule. Back then they had call-in talk shows, and our old TV host Art Finley had one of them.

One day I heard a report about a man named Ted Patrick, who was taking money from worried parents, to kidnap and forcefully "deprogram" unconventional young people. As a sort of idealistic radical myself, I was outraged. By the very concept, and that anyone could possibly get away with such an imposition on idealistic young people.

Little did I know, that soon I'd hear a lot more about deprogramming (or faithbreaking, a more accurate, if less utilized term), and then see its effects upon people I knew, and even in the year 2022 still be debating its merits.

My satellite cabin wasn't alone for long. That same genius neighbor built mom and Jan a small cabin, just across the creek which bisected our land. It was octagonal, and made of redwood saplings instead of alder poles. He also utilized clear (and thicker) vinyl, instead of the more common translucent plastic sheeting. Very nice, and I did not go over there often.

For my sisters we built a simple cabin, with a second level like a miniature Big House, also of alder and sheeting. As it happened, they did not make much use of it.

One of our local friends, Patty L, had a boy named Orion, who attended our school. She was a single mom, in a stormy relationship with a young man named Stevie. We allowed her to build a two story cabin farther up the creek, almost up to where we'd had our summer-long camp. I'd hang out there, some evenings, just to chat.

One time, upon an invitation letter from mom, Gary P's parents arrived, with a camper in tow. The father, Hank P, had (as I later discovered) been in the Coast Guard, so he was no wimp. However, they were devout Catholics, and neither prepared for or appreciative of the lax counterculture atmosphere. Later, my sister Elaine mentioned that some of the locals may even have goaded them, as (supposedly) uptight "straights."

Meanwhile, I missed an opportunity to get to know them better. They soon departed, and wrote mom a mild letter of remonstrance.

My dad remained single for several years, and was getting to know a teacher at a nearby school. Elsie V was a widow who lived in San Mateo, up in the Highlands neighborhood of distinctive Eichler houses. She had a son, Richard, who is a few years old than me.

They decided to marry, with no big ceremony. Dad could help with the budget, allowing Elsie to keep the house. A very smart move, as the neighborhood later became a favorite of tech workers, and those simple 1950s houses increased in value by a factor of fifty times! (Even higher now, as I write this.)

It's a purely residential area, with the nearest shopping center about half a mile downhill, and tight-knit like a small town. Every 4th of July the Highlands holds a popular parade, and all year they support a busy recreational complex.

The streets are mostly named after Revolutionary War battles, dad moved to Ticonderoga Drive. The first time I visited, I made some snide leftist-type remark about a "patriotic zone," and dad, ever calm and patient, simply replied "don't knock it." I wasn't all that committed, so I did indeed drop the issue.

Elsie was older than dad, and very kind. Always was, also a favorite of her school kids. We have a little school bell she was given upon her retirement.

Dad had moved closer to his Elks Lodge, which was also good. All my life I visited there, every once in a while. Sometimes to use their big swimming pool, sometimes for holiday themed breakfasts, sometimes for special events.

In the 1990s dad and Elsie celebrated a major wedding anniversary there, catering and music all done in-house, with plenty of friends and relatives in attendance. Elaine came from back east, and Marilyn from locally, also that was the last time we saw our reclusive cousin Janet.

Elsie's son Richard was attending Stanford, then he got a very good software programming job with IBM and a place of his own. So, we didn't get to know him well until much later.

Oddly, I wasn't getting to know a lot of people in the Gulch, at least not well. Along the Usal Road lived one older couple, and everyone called the man The Professor. I never did learn, of what academic field. Of course I was curious, yet somehow, never did go over there.

At the top of the canyon, you could see one house, and I was told the place was associated with the Rurban School. Which, as I'd heard, might have merged with the Daily Planet school. Another point of interest, and again, never followed up.

I can't remember how long our boarding students, Tom W and Landy, stayed. A few months, at least. As I recall, Landy was a Native American. Somehow, while they hung around together, I was always busy with a project, or simply enjoying my quiet cabin.

As a fairly regular teenager, blood maybe half testosterone, I might have pursued some of the local ladies, including Della, the only one my age. There were "party girl" types around, and we were all friendly, but I knew enough to avoid getting serious with them. For emotional and even medical reasons. One such girl got drunk and badly injured, then moved into a vacant cabin nearby. We were friendly, then alas, she committed suicide with a gun.

The nearest bar was on the road into Redway and Garberville, and I only went there once. The rock music was so loud, the building would literally shake. Painful! I chatted with friends, when possible, and got a hug from an inebriated lady. That was the one and only time I went there.

Little did I suspect, less than three years onward, I'd be going into more bars and pubs and taverns and clubs and roadhouses and saloons than almost anyone on Earth. But not to drink, we'll get to that later.

As I've mentioned, it was a beautiful friendly area, but no paradise. The same family who'd accepted our trolls, and later Jenny's two goat kids, experienced a major tragedy when the father murdered a young neighbor. I'm not sure how it came down, but it was a surprise, because the young man, both of them really, always seemed nice enough.