

● Digging the Greenhouse

Sin Fronteras / Without Borders (April 2005)

One of the reasons I settled on this forty acres of high Arizona desert is that I enjoy being able to go around naked. That's the way I built most of the structures, planted the orchard, strung the barbed wire, laid out the irrigation lines. Getting up in the pre-dawn, having a bite or two and maybe some tea, I'd put on some old sneakers and one or more shirts if it was that time of year, pick up the tools and head to the worksite, taking off the shirts as the sun came up. Braving cancer and censure (of my well-trained superego, if no one else), I'd work all day, breaking once or twice when the heat got to be too much or when the labor raised enough hunger for me to think leaving off the job awhile was justifiable.

Physical work, in those days, was a kind of obsession. Not so much to "get the job done" as to be doing it, to think with my whole body not just with my head, feeling the tools in my hands, the resistance of wood or metal or the earth in the muscles of my arms and legs and back, and, of course, the sun and wind on my skin all over (except for where the sneakers covered, and even they usually had a hole worn through so my big toes were exposed). And sometimes I wore a bandanna to keep in my hair.

I'd had the plan in my head a long time. It was going to be a big eight-sided pyramid, forty feet in diameter, a semi-pit passive solar triumph some four feet deep to the main floor with a pond three feet deeper in the center and a storage pit deeper yet off the eastern edge, under the sunrise-facing door and deck.

The design had been laid out with great ceremony and ritual smoke with the help of some old friends from California one New Year's morning after an acid trip in the early 70s, the bunch of us drawing line, pounding stakes and pulling string according to the three marker poles I'd placed in a row from the solstice sunrise a week earlier, and then, before they all left for home, pulling up the center stake and taking out the first shovelful of dirt.

A couple of weeks later, after refiguring the angles and restaking the corners and restringing the whole thing, I began to dig in earnest, having no idea the job would take the better part of two years.

One early summer morning that first year, digging away as usual but still not very deep, I heard a car pulling up toward the site. I didn't have many visitors in those days (and still don't: I didn't move out here for the company). I looked over the low dirt pile that was someday going to be a wall and saw a black, late model Chrysler bumping over the trail I'd broken through the brush with my old three-quarter ton 55 Chevy.

As I stood there leaning on my shovel, dressed as usual in sneakers, a blue bandanna, full beard and nothing else except a fairly thick layer of red dust, the car pulled up and stopped about fifteen yards away. I could see through the tinted glass that there were three people inside, one behind the wheel and two in the back seat. Ordinarily, to spare everybody

concerned unnecessary embarrassment, I'd have made some effort to put on my cut-offs, but I'd left them back at the bus that morning so there wasn't time. The driver's door opened and a man came out, walked around the front end and started toward me. He was a trim little guy, smaller than me, dressed in a black suit, white shirt and tie, topped off with what might have been a chauffeur's cap. As he got closer, I could see he was probably in his 60s.

He came directly up to me, stopped, and after we exchanged good mornings, without batting an eye he asked if I was the owner of this property. His face wasn't unfriendly despite his kind of formal manner, but after I said yes he still didn't offer to introduce himself but asked if I knew of some property for sale a mile or two to the west of mine.

Now my place was chosen, as I said, because there weren't many people around. Although there are some neighbors to the south and east (and maybe twice as many now as there were then), the north and west sides butt up against several thousand acres of government rangeland, nothing at all civilized to the west for several miles except cow trails to an occasional watertank and windmill until you get to High Lonesome Road up by the foothills and that isn't passable even by four-wheeler some times of year.

I simplified this for him with a "Nope, not that I know of," at which point he turned without saying anything and walked back to the car, spoke a moment to its occupants, and then came back with a topo map. After a couple of minutes of locating ourselves, and his assuring himself he was where he thought he was, he insisted there were ten acres for sale at a spot I finally figured must be the old corral site a couple of miles up from my northwest corner where old man Cowan kept the windmill and tank going to water the cattle he ran out there. I told him I didn't know the place was for sale, but from his township and range description that had to be it.

He started to ask if there was electricity back there and just about then the back doors of the car opened and two women stepped out. They both wore long black skirts and both had their hair done up in buns or swirls or something. One seemed to be about the same age as the gentleman. The thinner one, who wore a broad-brimmed black straw hat and a black long-sleeved jacket over a white blouse, was maybe ten years younger. When they reached us, he turned to them with the map and explained what we had decided.

After a short discussion among themselves, the older woman, whose long-sleeved dress, I noticed, had a lacy expanse below the throat set off with some kind of dark brooch, turned to me and asked if I had ever seen any flying saucers around here. Her voice was almost business-like, and neither it or her dark eyes showed any sign of that kind of nervous intensity or bubblyness the new-agers and other spacecases up in town usually had, so I told her no, I hadn't, but that there were sometimes stories about sightings up in the Chiricahua Mountains across the valley to the east and she might want to ask around up in town.

She seemed a little disappointed, but explained that they had heard there were saucers in the

vicinity and thought maybe what I was building was a landing pad. I considered that a moment before explaining that no, it was just a greenhouse. As if that closed off that part of the interview, her manner became even more business-like, and after noting that at some time in the future it still might become a landing pad, she explained in fairly rapid succession that they were from Pasadena, that they were freethinkers, that they wanted to buy the property up the road so they could build a center for freethinkers, and they wanted to know if I'd be willing to bring electricity onto my place so they could extend from my lines out to their property.

Well, I have to admit I was a little slow to respond. I'd made a decision some time back to let the poles stop at my east property line and not to hook into the grid, primarily because that would mean becoming part of the nuclear power system I had fought against for years, because even though the local electrical co-op had its own relatively clean coal-powered plant up the valley, they still had a deal with APS to buy power from the Palo Verde nuke when they needed extra. And even without that, I didn't particularly want to contribute to the coal plant pollution, either. . . .

After I explained all this, she thought a moment and then said how important it was to them to have electricity for their center, how they couldn't really do much without it, and asked if wouldn't reconsider and at least pay my share to get the lines across to the west edge where they could tie in.

I said I was sorry not to be able to help them, but no, I really didn't think so, I really didn't want the visual and electromagnetic pollution of powerlines always overhead buzzing and poisoning the birds and everything else and if I ever decided I really needed electricity I'd go solar. . . .

I thought I'd been pretty clear, but after a moment she started in again about my share and how important the center was, but at that point the man interrupted in an exasperated tone with "Dammit, Orpha, can't you see the man is a *naturalist*?"

Well, I guess his point was obvious enough because after a brief pause she gave me her card and said if I ever changed my mind to please contact her, then they thanked me for my time, shook my hand, and left. I watched the Chrysler bump away for a minute or so and then went back to digging and wondering if there really were flying saucers in the area.