

My Neck of the Woods

Roads taken, places lived



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1. 2975 Bradford Street, Gastonia, North Carolina, USA

April 2001 – August 2001

Eric lived in Los Angeles. I lived in New Zealand. We chatted online. We both had reached an impasse in our lives. The textile company that Eric worked for collapsed and Eric was out of work. I'd just left the priesthood and was pretty much at a loose end. We decided we might as well pursue new adventures together. By the time I arrived in the States Eric had got a job at a textile plant in North Carolina. Upon my arrival we rented a house.

Bradford Street was in a Black area of Gastonia. We were the only White people for miles and it was the only house we've subsequently lived in where we didn't have to lock the door when we went out. There were few boundary fences between houses, and some fronts of houses had a covered porch where in late summer afternoons residents would go to relax and call to those who passed by!



The street was full of all sorts of characters. Clover, whose property bordered the back of ours, had a huge vegetable garden where he grew mainly okra. His wife had a strident voice and berated him loudly from dawn to dusk from the back veranda. He loved to lean on his spade and chat. It was mainly about gardening. I too had dug a small garden at the back and planted only tomatoes. The lady in the plant shop didn't want to sell me tomato plants because it was too late in the season to be planting. I said I'd take the risk and I've never seen so many tomatoes on a vine as in that year. Of course, Clover liked to talk tomatoes as well as okra. And Swiss chard (silver beet). And lettuce. And carrots. And cabbages. And rutabaga (swede). And... SQUAWK! SQUAWK! STOP TALKING AND DO SOME WORK!



Left: Out the back - Clover's pickup

Below: My tomato patch



Next door was the loveliest man imaginable – Richard was his name. He was crippled since birth and found it difficult to walk. He was number sixteen of sixteen children. He lived under the aegis of his brother, Caesar. Caesar was the Methodist Minister and enjoyed living off the proceeds that Richard's health benefit provided. Caesar had a giant television in his room. Richard had only one dream in life: to have his own little television in his room so he could watch what he wanted. But Caesar would not allow it.

One day Richard tripped on the lawn and fell over. He hurt his leg and arm. He called out to Caesar, but Caesar called back that he was watching television. We gathered Richard up and took him to hospital. The nurse asked "Are you allergic?" "No, no," said Richard, "I'm American". The nurse explained what "allergic" meant. "Yes," said Richard, "I'm allergic to them big pills". In the long run he was fine and was given some medication that Caesar duly confiscated.

I started to jot down some of the expressions Richard used. Two I remember were: "Look at that man washing his car. Why not wait for rain and let Jesus wash the car?" and "A good morning? I thank my sweet Jesus that I woke up at all."



The street's citizens were strict Methodist teetotallers. Richard would come over for a Coca Cola. "No! No! Not that coke; the red one that comes out of a bottle with a cork!" Eric is French, so Richard wanted to try French food. He had read about it. After we had left the area we thought it would be nice to ask him if he would like to come and stay a few days with us on vacation. We drove to Caesar's house. It was boarded up, and empty. Richard had gone.

We felt so much at home in the street. The only incident was a teenage girl who threw eggs at our window. She had been told by her teacher at school to throw eggs at the Whiteys' house. Richard saw to it that the whole street came to our rescue, and the young teenager was duly corrected. Possibly the teacher was never admonished.

Bradford was my first experience of fireflies. I guess I knew the word but had no idea they could be so spectacular. Whole trees were afire. It made Christmas lights look like an inferior imposter. I don't know why they don't have tourist buses come by the thousands from non-firefly countries such as New Zealand. Honestly, in the evenings I could sit for hours and just look, mouth agape, in wonder!

One day I opened the back door only to find a cat there placing a little kitten on the door step. The mother was clearly hungry. I put some milk in a saucer in a corner of the kitchen and she drank. I went on with whatever I was doing. Next time I looked, the cat was still there, but with five kittens. I gave the mother more milk. They stayed a week before a gentleman from several houses away came storming in. Why was I keeping his cat? I said she wasn't getting fed properly and could hardly feed five kittens when she wasn't fed herself. By now the five kittens were outside and underneath my car. When the man tried to grab them they climbed up into the engine. I watched for half an hour as the man tried to extricate them.

A little basset hound came onto our front lawn. It had possibly been dumped there. It was crying and we gave it some food. The neighbours knew nothing of it. The Charlotte Basset Hound Society said they couldn't take it. I phoned the vet who said they would try to find someone to take it provided I paid \$85 dollars for all the vaccinations it would require. I agreed. What else could we do? The landlord did not permit dogs. I paid the vet. A group stood around patting the "Isn't-it-cute" puppy. Does anyone want it, I asked. Someone took it. The veterinary establishment were not pleased. They had hoped to get a healthy nest egg by selling a purebred basset hound puppy for a comfortable sum.



After five months we got an opportunity to move closer to Eric's work. We were sad to go. Clover from over the back fence summed it up: "You're going to miss the mellifluous voice of my wife."

2. #14 4650 Bright Road, Charlotte, North Carolina, USA

August 2001 – February 2002

Don't get the wrong impression. Despite the address being Charlotte, this house was in the middle of the woods! It was in a spacious mobile home park. The park wasn't the slightest bit crowded and nothing was in rows but tastefully higgledy-piggledy.

We had seen the advertisement in the paper. A single-wide mobile home was for sale. It was rundown and going for \$1800! We went for a look and loved it. It would be fun to do up, so we bought it and moved in.



Well... um... it had cockroaches; not two or three cockroaches but thousands. We subsequently heard that the previous occupants used to tip their fatty frying pan waste on the ground just out the front door. I began scrubbing. All sorts of anti-cockroach baits were used. The numbers decreased a little. In the end we got in professional cockroach busters. It was a miracle! Within a couple of weeks there wasn't a cockroach ever to be seen again.

I began painting inside and sewing curtains. Eric, with his carpentry skills, began making pine window frames and edgings. Gradually, room by room, the place went from a dark brown hovel into a bright and sparkling abode! It really was a lovely house with three bedrooms, a sitting room, a dining room, a kitchen, and a bathroom. Even the owner of the mobile home park came for a look and wanted to know what timber and paints and varnishes we had used to transform the place.



Our neighbours were interesting people. Paul, just across the way, worked at a nearby nuclear power plant. He was constantly high. If you needed to get drugs you could get them from the nuclear power plant! On many evenings he would bring home a prostitute, sometimes two or three, and leave them stranded when he left for work in the morning. With my car I got to know the road to Charlotte fairly well as I dropped them home. Paul would sometimes cook the most delicious "Boston Butt"*. It's a recipe I still sometimes use to this day.



Another neighbour was Virgil. Virgil lived in a small, and from the outside rather rundown, mobile home in the corner of the park. He seemed a pleasant enough man, and would chat away about the weather and other such things when greeted. But you could tell by what he drove that he was rich! In fact he was the Cyclops (which is some sort of important position) in the KKK. He would apparently wear a purple robe. His entrance way was decorated with framed horrific photographs of black people hanging from trees. I saw the photos. The African American woman at the local drycleaners knew nothing of this. She cleaned his purple robe with a great deal of care, thinking him to be some sort of catholic bishop.



Eric not only was a top-class industrial chemist, but he spoke nine languages. The company he worked for was replacing their old fabric-dyeing machines with new state-of-the-art German ones. Multi-lingual Eric was sent to Germany to learn the process of using them. And, said I, having taken a little money out of the bank, take my bank card for the week away. You never know when you might need it.

There was one thing left to do in the bathroom renovations: a decent shower curtain. I got in the car to purchase one. As I hit the road there was a newsflash on the radio. 9/11. I turned the car around and went back home to watch things unfold on television. Unimportantly, but importantly nonetheless, Eric was stuck in Germany with my bank card! All flights were cancelled. Over the days I quickly ran out of money – and coffee. Neighbours wandered past and ask how I was doing. I said I'd kill for a cup of coffee. A large mug of coffee soon arrived!



After days of confusion Eric ended up in Amsterdam, spending his time going to van Gough exhibitions and the like. Eventually he made it back to Charlotte.

There were three small roads in our vicinity: Bright Road, Erly Road, and Bright and Erly Road. Bright and Erly had been settler families in the area. I love that!

We enjoyed our time very much at Bright Road. (I never knew that all those American deciduous trees could shed so many leaves! New Zealand native trees are evergreen). So many new experiences! Of course I had to occasionally fly to Canada and back to renew my visa. I was a tourist and in no recognized relationship to get residency. Sorry about that kindly American Readers, but that was the reality of the situation and one does as best as one can.



At work, Eric was promoted. The trouble was – it was in distant Asheville. We told the mobile park owner we had to move and he instantly bought our renovated house!

*** Fall-Apart Boston Butt**

1 (4lb) Boston butt pork roast
1/3 cup Worcestershire sauce
3/4 cup light brown sugar
1 cup apple juice

Preheat oven 200°C. Lightly grease casserole or deep roasting dish.

Soak Boston butt in Worcestershire sauce. Coat with brown sugar, pressing down to form a crust. Put in roasting pan. Pour apple juice in pan, not pouring over sugar-crusting roast. Cover pan tightly.

Place roast in oven, and immediately turn the heat down to 100°C. Bake for about 5 hours. If the meat doesn't fall apart easily, cook for another half an hour.

Note: this recipe can also be done in a crockpot. Put apple juice in the bottom of the crockpot and add 1/2 a teaspoon of salt to the apple juice. Place the roast in. Set crockpot on high for 30 minutes, and then turn the setting to low and cook for 8 hours.

3. 84 Piney Mountain Road, Leicester, NC, USA

February 2002 – January 2003

The advertisement in the paper said “Traditional log cabin in the mountains”. I had visions of a log cabin with a productive vegetable garden and a cow. All I need do was ride on a horse to town every six months to get spices for pickle-making. It wasn’t quite like that.



The house, well most of it, was logs. It was on the corner of a not very busy road in a hilly area. It had a terrific-sized veranda and spacious grounds. It was next to a creek, and apart from a couple of houses within view it was set in forest and farmland.



So much was new to me coming from little New Zealand! Snakes and turtles and groundhogs and salamanders and skunks and racoons and squirrels and woodpeckers and bats and hummingbirds and... New Zealand didn’t have any of that. We had sheep and cows with a few native birds nearing extinction. I revelled in it! At least I did until the family of groundhogs I had encouraged decimated my vegetable garden overnight. I was busy purchasing anti-groundhog things from the garden centre when an old man told me he’d dealt with groundhogs in his garden for seventy years, and this is what you do. I did it, and the groundhogs moved house!



Eric made a nesting box for the bluebirds, and I fed the hummingbirds.



We had apple trees that produced apples by the thousands. I made apple sauce and apple pies and quite frankly anything with apples. A bale of turtles set up their living quarters under the apple trees for the duration of the season. A large snake (I don't know what sort but it was fat and long) would bask in the sun on the ledge of the garden shed. A woodpecker that we called Charlie was profoundly attracted to our tin chimney and would wake us early each morning. Rata-tat-tat-tat. Rata-tat-tat-tat. The only drawback was a family of Harley-Davidsons living nearby. I don't know why Harley-Davidson has never heard of mufflers. The creek next to the house had whistling frogs and you knew when they began their evening whistling that it was time perhaps for a pre-dinner glass of wine.



Just up the road a family from Florida was building a two-story log house. Janice and Ted had three children, and young Jed was wheel-chair bound and had been so all his fourteen years. He had a wish: to mow a lawn (what fourteen-year old doesn't?) A lawn-mower manufacturing company donated a specially designed mower that he could pull behind his wheel-chair. It arrived! Dad Ted set it up. Down Jed came to mow our lawn! We were the first clients for "Jed's Earth-Friendly Lawn Care". We gave him a cap with his logo embroidered on the front. And we gave him an envelope with his first pay. I don't want to shock you as we were shocked, but there's no way around it; the next day Jed died. It was profoundly sad.



Janice and Ted remained our good friends for a few years, but over time distance can cause people to drift away.

I had never liked dogs much. Growing up on a farm with sheep dogs we were encouraged not to view them as pets. I had never had a pet dog and regarded those who had them as a bit silly. At the log cabin we had a visitor; a large long-haired dark brown-black dog that looked like a cross between a collie and a chow-chow. It learnt to take the lids off our trash cans at night and would scatter rubbish over our lawn in search of food. The mailman told me where the dog lived. He said the owners tied it up and would beat it. Nonetheless, I took the dog back to its owners. I didn't see the dog for three weeks.



Then one day it was pouring with rain. I was on the veranda. Coming up the road was the dog. He was drenched. He saw me and began to run. He dashed up the veranda steps and all seventy pounds of saturated canine leapt into my arms. He was covered in welts and flea nests and gorged blood-sucking ticks. He never left again, and since we did not know his name we called him Doggie. I started to love my first pet dog! He was the most intelligent dog in the world! And the best looking!



Once again we had the opportunity to own our own home. Our log cabin adventure was to end. It was a time filled with happy and sad memories. But our new place was to be not far away. You know you haven't moved far away when you still buy groceries from the same store!



4. 448 South Turkey Creek, Leicester, NC, USA

January 2003 – November 2003

We were renting the log cabin. Eric and I used to often dream of owning our own home again and would sometimes pop in for a look when we passed a place that sold mobile homes.

We found a house we really liked. It was parked way at the back of rows of mobile homes for sale. It was a double-wide. We didn't have much money but we thought we'd ask the lady how much it cost – just for fun!

"Oh that one! It's been repossessed twice. You can have it for a song." And we did! Little did we know when we left home that morning that we'd come back owning a house! The trouble was we had nowhere to put it!

The local newspaper had a tiny advertisement. "Looking for land for your mobile home? Phone Merton." Merton was a delightful old lady and we arranged to meet. The site was on a farm. Very quickly we had approval. The water and sewerage and power were hooked up! The piles were in! The two parts of the double-wide arrived! All watching were horrified! We insisted they install the house facing the wrong way round!



The main entrance wasn't placed facing the road. The main entrance side of the house had windows galore. We didn't want to look out at the road; we wanted to see the magnificent Mount Hanlon. Once installed there wasn't a single visitor who didn't enter and say "Wow! Look at that view!"



We asked Merton if we might have a vegie garden. Next thing her younger son, Grover, came and ploughed half a field. Our vegie garden stretched to Timbuctoo!



But none of this is what I really want to tell you. I want to tell you who Merton really was.

Merton was one of six daughters (all in their 80s and 90s) of Appalachian Minstrel Bascom Lamar Lunsford.



All seven Lunsford children gather with their parents at South Turkey Creek about 1956: top, Ellen (Mrs. Art Boza of Centreville, Va.), B. Lamar Lunsford of Marshall, Josepha (Mrs. Lou Herron of Lake Junaluska), Miss Kern Lunsford of Morganton, bottom, Nell (Mrs. J. J. Greenawald of Carlisle, Ohio), Lynn (Mrs. Z. Z. Hadley of Wilson), Bascom with his wife Nellie Triplett Lunsford (deceased), Merton (Mrs. Sherrill Brown of South Turkey Creek, Leicester, N. C.)

I believe Mountain Dew named its product after Bascom's song *Mountain Dew*. It was Bascom who saved Appalachian music and dance from extinction. He set up folk music festivals – since popular all over the States. He went around collecting songs that the old folk used to sing around the fire. Living in a strict religious neighbourhood Bascom, his wife, son, and six daughters were sometimes regarded as conspiring with the devil. The dance and music events were a scandal.

[Bascom Lamar Lunsford - His Mountain Music Style](#)



Bascom was long dead when we came on the scene, but the daughters, being our neighbours, took us to every festival and concert within driving distance. I almost learned to dance the Appalachian way! Nelson, Merton's oldest son, became one of our great friends. Occasionally too we'd get an emergency call. Old age can produce a strange complaint: they couldn't get the cork out of the bottle. Could we pop over?

What a wonderful time it was! To be immersed in a traditional Appalachian family (children, grandchildren, great grandchildren) was a great joy and privilege.



Sooner than later Eric's work called us to Quebec. I stayed behind for a month or so to pack things up, to get Doggie's vaccinations and papers, and to sell the house.

5. 13775 10th Avenue, Saint-Georges, Quebec, Canada

November 2003 – May 2004

It was a three day car drive for Doggie and me from South Turkey Creek in North Carolina to Saint-Georges in Quebec. Doggie despised travelling in a vehicle. He climbed into the back seat, lay down, and for the next three days of travel never once looked out the window.

Neighbour Jo, one of the six daughters of Bascom Lamar Lunsford, belonged to the Automobile Association. She not only armed me with maps, but also with a list of every hotel and motel along the way that would allow dogs.

We left mid-afternoon. I had planned the first section of the journey but grew tired with all the last minute rushing around. I stopped earlier than intended. Were we in Tennessee? I can't quite remember. We came upon a large hotel. I enquired if they allowed for dogs, and they did. They gave us a room. Unbeknown to me there was a huge (and I mean huge) American Dog Show based at the hotel that week. There were dogs everywhere all manicured to perfection. Here was shaggy, unclipped Doggie amidst them. The head judge for the event was apparently a New Zealander. I must be the spouse – "And what a beautiful dog you have!" Doggie was never so pampered by owners of refined poodles and distinguished Chihuahuas scrambling for favour!



The house rented in Saint-Georges, the town where we worked, was owned by a friend of the boss. He was very rich, spoke immaculate English, and had an Irish surname. I asked about the surname, because Irish names are not uncommon in French-speaking Quebec. He said years ago the British brought boatloads of orphaned Irish children and dropped them off all along the east coast of North America.



The house looked smallish on the outside but inside it was huge. There were five or six bedrooms, two living rooms, a gigantic billiards room (complete with billiard table), and an entrance parlour bigger than most houses I'd ever lived in! It had an enormous boiler to heat the house, which was just as well because we were there for the winter and Quebec winters can be chilly!



The house was furnished. It had beds but no bedding. Work was at a textile mill so we had piles of offcuts, and I used them to sew bedspreads – a skill I didn't know I had!





My French was zilch. I used to smoke and would joke that I could speak French because I would go into a French-speaking shop, say “Marlboro”, and they would hand over a packet of cigarettes. Over time my French stayed remarkably inadequate.

It was during this time that Eric slipped in an icy carpark and broke an ankle. Upon slipping, the car keys in hand flew into the air and went splat into the icy river we were next to. We went to the hospital and I explained in anglais équitale what had happened. The woman in charge gabbled away to the nurse, saying in French, “Bleed these foreigners for every penny they’ve got.” Unbeknown to her, Eric was from France!



Saint-Georges is a lovely town and is the largest in the Chaudière-Appalaches region of Quebec. The Chaudière River flows through the town. I could have lived there permanently!

We were in Saint-Georges for only six months before work called us to uproot and move to the small village of Saint-Victor.

6. 594 Rang Sainte-Catherine, Saint-Victor, Quebec

May 2004 – February 2006



What can be said about the house at 594 Rang Sainte-Catherine? It was a fairly new building, but constructed using plans of an early Quebec settler's house. Of course it had every modern facility. It was set on seventeen acres of woods and lawns, with tracks through the forest. The trees were mainly maples, firs, and pine. Outside the sitting room window was a large lake with trout. Near the lake was a maple syrup building where maple syrup could be processed once extracted from the trees.



We dug a large vegetable garden. What a productive garden it was! With the freezer full there was no need to buy vegetables over winter.



From the fallen pines Eric chopped up firewood for winter.

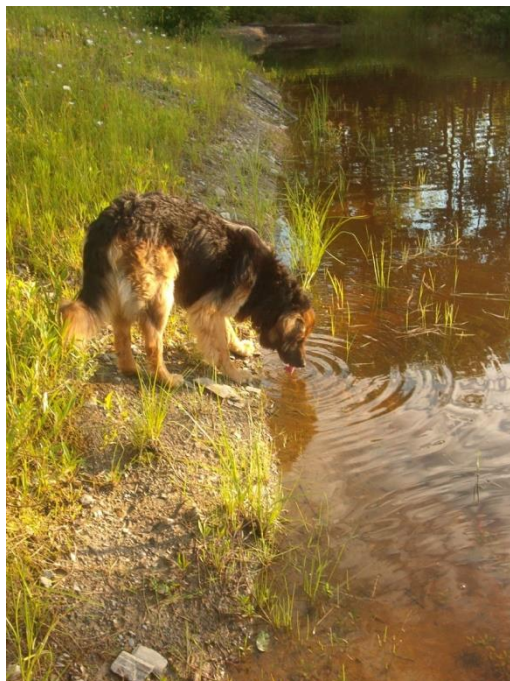


We bought a ride-on mower and mowed the substantial lawns and the tracks through the woods.



The wild life was fantastic. Herds of deer would pass through. An elk came to sniff the firewood. Radio warnings would be given of bears on the loose. How comfy it was to snuggle up in bed at night and hear packs of wolves out on a mission. It's not the howling of wolves that causes the spine to tingle; it's the wolves chattering. What are they talking about? Where are they going? What things are planned? The trout in the lake would crowd to the edge for food.

Doggie was getting old and more comfortable in his ways. We thought he could do with a companion. We went to the animal rescue place and fell in love with the only dog that wasn't barking at us, but was standing on his hind legs as if pleading to be taken. He had been the most abused dog that Animal Rescue had seen in years. Of course we took him. He was a big dog, and we called him Rusty. Doggie understood English; Rusty understood French. The two got on well. They both had free-range of the large property. It was the deer hunting season and one evening Rusty didn't return. We never saw him again. We think he may have been shot by hunters.



On weekends we would often go for a drive around the countryside. On this particular day we went to Thetford Mines. And there it was! A little puppy in the pet shop window! We brought her home and called her Sedona. Doggie's days were filled with teaching Sedona the tricks of being a dog. He would take her out in the snow way beyond the house and send her home on her own. The next day he would take her to the other side and do the same. He taught her to bark at squirrels up trees, and toss a ball, and even to eat the wild raspberries that grew in the woods. He taught her to lie in the snow with only the eyes showing.

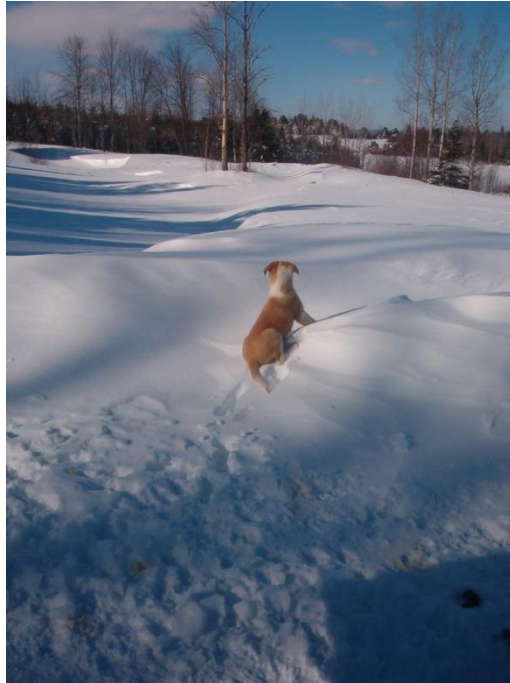


The summers weren't overly long, but were delightful. Winter would come with a vengeance. Usually there were at least three weeks at minus 40 Celsius. If you're going to have a winter you might as well have one! Getting up at 4.30 am to snow-blow the driveway to get to work was a common activity. Once, a big storm came and the snow was piled higher than the garage door. It was far too much snow for our snow blower. Eric stopped the snow plough on the road as it passed. Do you reckon you could do our driveway? If the driver hadn't been kind we'd still be there with shovels.



All things must end. I developed chronic heart disease. We would have to go to New Zealand for treatment. Eric resigned from work. We found homes each for Doggie and Sedona. I can still see the little boy in Saint-Georges with Doggie on the lead taking "the big teddy bear" to show grandpa.

We sold our mower and snow-blower. We sold the furniture. We sold the good car, and kept the old car to take us to the train station in Quebec. The train would take us to Montreal where we'd catch a plane to Los Angeles. As it turned out we decided, once we were on our road, to drive to Montreal ourselves where we sold the car for \$100!



The early morning was frozen. Our driveway was a sheet of ice. We slid down the drive in the car to the road like a skier. The last phone call at this delightful place had come in the middle of the night. It was a brother in New Zealand. It had been sudden. My mother had died.

7. All over the place, New Zealand

February 2006 – June 2006



The flight from Montreal to LA to Auckland was long, uneventful, and boring. We had arranged to stay with friends, Wencheng and Tim, in Auckland for a few days. There we set up a new bank account and Eric got his New Zealand driver's licence. One of my brothers and his wife came to Auckland with a car for us! That was wonderful!



Incidentally, my mother's funeral had been held. The four days of flight would end in a weekend followed by a series of national holidays which meant the delay of the funeral would go on and on. I said to go ahead without me. So that's what was done.

Before we left Quebec we had organized a "farm stay". In return for meals and accommodation you work on a farm. Margaret in Otane, Hawkes Bay, had a horse farm complete with pigs, cows, sheep, and chickens. We were to stay about three months (we had rooms in the stable) while we did some essential things on the side such as try to find work!



Getting Eric residency was a breeze. It took about an hour. Mainly what we needed to do was to show old bills that proved we had lived at the same address for several years. We had come prepared. Margaret let us leave the farm on the odd day to job hunt. At times she went away herself and left us to run the farm on our own. It was enjoyable enough, but after a time we realized that

we were more and more being used. We feigned job hunt success, loaded the car, and with considerable pretended glee drove off to goodness knows where.

Eric worked in the textile field. The head of Sarah Lee in America (in fact back then the largest textile manufacturer in the world) had described Eric as one of the world's leading industrial chemists. (He added: "If you want to employ Einstein you have to put up with the hair." Eric had long hair!) We should find no problem in getting work for him. New Zealand being a farming economy meant there were textile plants from one end of the country to another. Of course, unbeknown to us at the time, those textile manufacturers who hadn't already moved to China were planning to do so.

We decided to stay in a single-roomed beach house at Paekakariki. Paekakariki was halfway between the two textile mills most likely to want employers. The one in Lower Hutt didn't have a vacancy and went bankrupt and collapsed out of existence about a month after Eric visited. The one at Levin didn't have a vacancy and has since packed up and gone to China.



We moved on, catching the interisland ferry which took us to Christchurch in the South Island.



We first stayed in a small motel in Armagh Street. The motel room flooded when the inhabitants above took a shower.



We found an apartment at 4/50 Champion Street, Christchurch. Yes! Christchurch would be our home, job or no job. We unloaded the car, bought some old furniture and resumed job hunting.



We had hardly put the table together before the phone went. It was a textile company in Auckland that made exclusive fabric for window blinds for the overseas market. You have the job you applied for weeks ago. You will be in charge of the night shift. We dismantled what furniture we could and packed the car to the gunnels. On the way we crossed the Southern Alps to visit a sister there.



Once again we caught the interisland ferry to Wellington.



We drove from Wellington and arrived safely in the City of Auckland; a town where we had started our job hunt four months earlier!



8. 96A George Street, Tuakau, New Zealand

June 2006 – October 2006

After scurrying up and down New Zealand for four months or so looking for work, with every possession on earth packed into the car, we at last landed a job in Auckland, New Zealand. The new job put us up at a very nice hotel for two weeks. That gave us plenty of time to find a house to rent.

We did find a house in one of the suburbs. It seemed quite nice, and would be available on the very Friday that we had to leave the hotel. We turned up at the rental agency to pick up the key.

“Oh, sorry, but we rented that out to someone yesterday. We have nothing else available.”

Needless to say, it was pretty devastating. We went straight to another rental agency and told our plight. The woman said she had two houses available. Have a look at both of them and say which one you want. One was in the suburbs and a bit run down. The other was in a little village called Tuakau some way out of Auckland. We chose the one in the little village. That night we unloaded the car of all our possessions in the world. No chair! No bed! No table! But we had a computer! We sat and ate and slept on the floor!



The next day we purchased a dining table and some chairs.

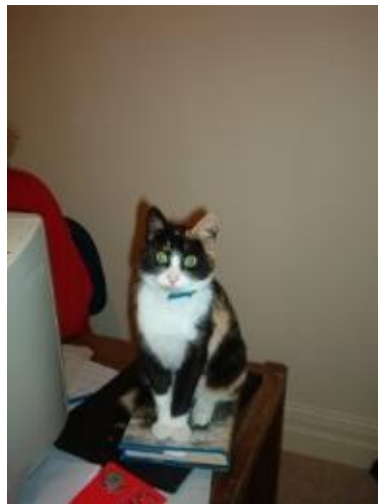
My mother had died several months earlier. One of my brothers packed up some of Mum's furniture and freighted it to Tuakau, including a clothes dryer. With it he had included money to buy a washing machine!

The neighbour had eleven dogs and seven cats. The palm tree outside our back door had a large family of rats living in its branches. (In case you didn't know, rats love living in palm trees). There were snails in the wilderness around the house in the thousands.

The house was a bungalow – as the majority of New Zealand houses are. It had recently been painted inside. There was no heating; no wood burner, no heat pump. We bought a heater. We might as well have tried to heat the Antarctic. It was useless. It was freezing. I've never been so cold in my life. It was damp. When it rained the entire water from the street ran down the driveway and under the house. Quickly mould formed on the newly painted walls.



One of the neighbour's kittens, clearly tired of living with eleven dogs and six other cats, decided to take up residence with us. She was the only warm thing in the house all winter! The neighbours had called her Bali because she had been born six months earlier while they were on vacation in Bali in Indonesia. We didn't think much of the name, so for the last sixteen years we have called her Pussy Cat.



I would manage the Village Bookshop when Penny the owner went away. It was a good way to "meet the locals".

Our house used to be surrounded by a cottage garden. It was now all brambles and weeds. I decided to clear it. In fact I dug over the entire quarter acre by hand and planted a pretty cottage garden all around. It was delightful. In fact it was so delightful that the owner decided the time was ripe to sell – "While it's looking so pretty".



At the final rental inspection the agency declared that “The window in the garage is more broken than it was.” More broken? I said. I simply cleaned it. “It is more broken and you will not get your bond back.”



We left with pleasure and with Pussy Cat. Over the next four months the house was sold four times – each time fifty or so thousand more than the previous sale. As far as I know the “more broken window” never got fixed.

9. 331B Allen & Eyre Road, Onewhero, New Zealand

October 2006 – April 2010

Having survived a winter in Tuakau that felt more freezing than the minus 40 Celsius in Quebec, we were determined not to repeat the experience. There was a farmhouse advertised in the paper: a small two-bedroomed house in a rural setting. To get to it we had to drive across the farm, opening and shutting gates to prevent herds of snorting bulls from escaping.

The house was near a shearing shed, and clearly it once was what in New Zealand we call “The Shearers’ Quarters”. Twice a year a gang of shearers would descend on a farm for a week or so to shear and crotch the sheep. Every farm had its Shearers’ Quarters. These days shearers whizz to the farms in their expensive pickups from motels in town!



The district was called Onewhero (pronounced On-ee-fair-row). The “town” (two or three houses) had a garage for farm machinery, and a school that went from Kindergarten to the final high school year. Every country in the world shrouds the naming and numbering of school years in mystery. In New Zealand this was an “Area School” and went from ages 3 to 18.

Despite being described as “small” the house had a large kitchen-dining room and a reasonably-sized lounge with an open fire. In New Zealand the sitting room is always called a “lounge”. Barb was the liaison person with the rental agency and Neil was the farmer-landlord. Were they generous or what?

Neil was an Exclusive Brethren and would never enter a home that did not hold members of his same church. He would drop off meat for the freezer when a bull had to be put down. For example during a storm two bulls were struck and killed by lightning. Seeing that we were avid gardeners he arrived with fencing equipment and doubled the size of the property. Barb saw to it that a log burner was installed in the dining room, and that Christmas was “rent free”!

One of the house drawbacks was the shower. It was one of those rose head showers that drop water from a great height into a cold concrete cubicle with wooden slats. You used to come across such showers at camping grounds – at least in the old days. And it was right at the door entrance! I dare say a gang of shearers weren't too bothered after a day of shearing sheep to be showering at the door. Water was another problem as all we had was rainwater, and in summer it didn't rain much. Landlord Neil solved the water-the-garden-problem by hitching the garden hoses up to the farm's creek water supply. It was great for the garden but not human friendly. We had to twice buy a tanker load of water.



Eric was working at nights and I had a full-time day job as librarian and general dog's body at the Area School. For example, seven of my forty hours were spent teaching Music and Drama even though my teaching certificate had long expired. Of course, because of that, I only got paid librarian's wages.

Eric and I bought lawn-mowing equipment and began working on weekends mowing people's lawns and tidying their gardens. We had quite a number of clients, including a school property with large playing fields. And then disasters began to strike!

The textile plant where Eric worked was cutting out its night shift. Eric was jobless. Earlier my heart disease had so deteriorated that I could no longer help with the lawn mowing. We had sold the mowing equipment. The hospital phoned to say a vacancy for a heart operation had become available and I had an hour to get into hospital! There was no money coming in and things had happened so fast that we were unprepared to live off the \$2.60 that remained in the bank account! That was when Eric found a job online to translate a Chemistry document into French. And then he found another, and another. Of course, at the start, money from overseas doesn't happen instantly. For my part, five days after a triple bypass I was back at work with a catheter bag strapped to my thigh! I didn't qualify for the sickness benefit said the government agency, and in fact I had been

paid for the week I had away from work and that would be deducted from the next pay. Suddenly \$2.60 seemed like a windfall!

There was a story behind my heart operation. The heart operation co-ordinator had phoned that morning and said you are way down the waiting list but sometimes things could be speeded up if you are prepared to go on another list. That other list is where you are operated on without much warning if someone dies or pulls out. I said that would be fine. At six o'clock that evening the phone went. It was the heart operation co-ordinator. The heart surgeon had phoned her and said a gap in tomorrow's operations had occurred. Who is next on the list? She said she was at a restaurant and didn't have access to her list. But wait! I have a phone number here in my purse of someone I contacted this morning. And that is how I jumped the queue – by months!

Eric got a job for about six months with a gardening company that maintained the gardens of mansions owned by rich Americas Cup yacht owners and cosmetic surgeons and the like.

The boss at Eric's textile plant phoned to plead with Eric to come back and join the day shift. Eric thought about it and in the end said no. His translation business was growing and he did it all from home! Well actually he worked from the tiny laundry room no bigger than a cupboard, and had now bought a British-founded translation company that had a group of translating chemists around the world in 82 possible languages!

I kept chickens, specializing in the Faverolles breed; a variety of French chicken where the hens have earmuffs and the roosters have beards. (Now you know in the Twelves Days of Christmas Carol what a "French hen" is!) Eric built a fowl house of which Neil said: "When you asked to build a fowl house I had no idea you intended to build the most luxurious hen house in the country."





Most years I was the chicken judge at the school's annual "Calf Club Day". Children would bring to school their lamb, calf, kid goat, or chicken they had hand-reared themselves to be judged by us professional breeders! There were very strict rules such as date of birth of the creature and the breed. Mum and Dad could help of course, but the care for the animal had to be the child's own doing.





Flocks of wild turkeys by the dozen roamed the area and mingled with wild peacocks. In springtime the turkeys would nest around the property. I got half a dozen turkey eggs and a bantam hen hatched them out. When they grew their loud gobbling was constant and their turkey poo was gargantuan. Fairly quickly they became inhabitants of the freezer.

We got a middle-sized dog which we called Delia. Delia would parade the property with the rooster to make sure no hen flew over the fence into the garden. One day the rooster's authority was challenged by a young upstart rooster and the old rooster lost the fight. Delia bit off the old rooster's head. He was no longer in charge or of use. Now and again Delia would bring home a wild turkey she had killed and we would have a feast. She would circle a turkey, around and around in ever diminishing circles. The turkey would turn and turn following the dog's movements. The turkey would become giddy and fall over and that was it. I make it sound like she was a violent dog, but in fact she was the loveliest of the loveliest.



We became well known in the area and farmers unable, sometimes in years, to take a break from caring for their farm would call on us to look after their farm for a week or so while they went away on vacation. We would swap dahlia tubers and raspberry plants and plums and pears and such gardening things. At community parties Eric was always asked to cook the turkey. Not only could he cook a turkey to perfection, but they knew we had a convenient source. The cat thought so too.



We would harvest firewood together with others from the community. I attended a year of once-a-week night classes in cooking Indian recipes. Often on a Wednesday evening upon returning home there would be a neighbour or two waiting to taste my latest Indian creation. A neighbour kept ducks so my broody chickens were employed to hatch out and rear ducklings for them.

One of the loveliest things about the property was the peach trees. Self-seeded peach trees produced hundreds (and hundreds) of the most succulent peaches imaginable.



Thus we lived for four years. Eric's translation business had so grown that there was no space - even for a filing cabinet. Barb came to our rescue. I think I have just the place, she said. Indeed she did!

10. 174 Morrison Road, Pukekawa, New Zealand

April 2010 – January 2012

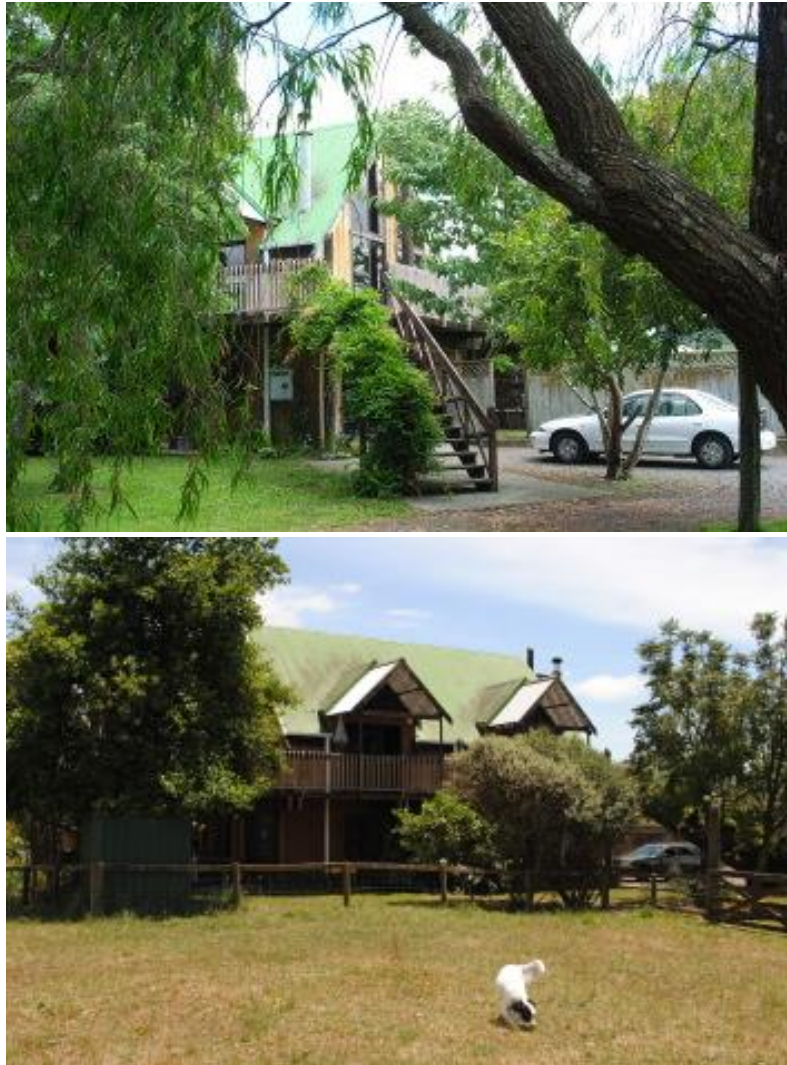
This home was fifteen minutes' drive from the previous house, and we moved furniture and belongings ourselves. Never again!



Of all the houses I have lived in this would probably be my favourite. It was built by a man who had only one leg, was a friend of the Rockefellers in America, and had sold the house to a family that bred exotic parrots and let them fly freely around the mature trees that were growing inside the three-story house. The trees in the garden outside grew close to the windows. You could almost reach out and touch the many bird nests. It was like living in a tree house, and the trees weren't ordinary; they were spectacular flowering exotics. My favourite was the heavily flowering lacy pepper tree, but the China Doll trees, especially their straggly seed pods, were a delight. Flowering cherries abounded.



The house was huge. The staircase was so grand one almost felt it would be a travesty not to don a ball gown to ascend and descend. All was set on quite a few acres of land, some of which was rented out to a local farmer to graze cows. The carpet inside where the pots for the trees had stood was in a grotty state. But things had been majestically planned – even the balcony that surrounded the house on three sides. There was a huge fishpond that leaked and was empty, over which went a rustic bridge.



The vegetable garden stretched from one end of the section to the other and it was a wilderness. Next to the garden was a hen house and run. It was there that we stored our firewood because I had given away the poultry in the house move. We needed all the firewood we could get because the house had two greedy log burners.



When we took the property we had been assured that mobile phone coverage and high speed broadband were available. Once we came to set things up there was no such thing. Even from the roof of this tall building the broadcasting masts could not be seen. We wrote to the Minister of Broadcasting, who replied that they had no intention of laying cables down Morrison Road. The only thing for it was to pay for expensive satellite coverage.



The house being made of unpainted wood was a great attraction to paper wasps. Paper wasps would dance along wooden bannisters presumably collecting cellulose to make their bulbous nests. Once a week I would tour the “estate” with a can of fly spray to destroy newly created nests.



The house was made for Christmas! And we had many a celebration and many a guest.



In the meantime the dog and the cat were enjoying their new territory. Pussy Cat was entered into a weekly pet food photo competition, and her photo won the weekly competition six times in all, and that paid to feed both cat and dog for a year. She had the advantage of being photogenic because the white markings on her face were balanced on both sides. Delia the dog had her own popular website and would message her fans. “Please don’t tell my owner that I’m using his computer in the middle of the night.” Delia had quite a following!



One side of the house opened directly onto farm paddocks so we were not infrequently spied upon by inquisitive viewers.



The grounds had been let go to ruin a little, so it was a lot of work recreating almost a park. These days, having a peek at satellite online imagery, the trees have been cut down and a swimming pool has taken their place. It has somehow lost its wonderful charm but can now be seen and admired and fawned upon from the road.





People from our former road of Allen & Eyre came to visit. They lived just up the road from where we had lived. They had a proposition. The husband had been offered a farming job several hours away from where they lived. The new job came with a house on the farm. Would we like to rent their house for a price no higher than their mortgage? Their isolated house now had broadband. It was a tempting offer. We had long been wishing to save to one day get our own home. This was an offer, plus the thought of not paying expensive satellite connectivity, that called for common sense. We said yes even though we were reluctant to leave this wonderful place in Morrison Road.



11. 228 Allen & Eyre Road, Onewhero, New Zealand

January 2012 – February 2014

Despite vowing never to move our own belongings ever again we had not learnt our lesson. We made 13 trips with a loaded down ute (pickup), 16 trips in the car, and 6 trips with a large borrowed trailer. Thank goodness for kind friends to help out, especially with the piano.



This house was an old farm house and had been the childhood home of the current owner who was moving to run a farm several hours drive away. The husband and wife owners wished us good luck and set out for their farm job. The property we had moved to was a few acres of hilly land, and had an implement shed, a fowl-house, and a large barn and pigsty. It also had a lawn tennis court and an overgrown large bank garden designed as a rockery. It had wonderful pear and orange trees. The owner kept his four cows on the land. The neighbouring farm was a cattle farm, and Molly the cow enjoyed cavorting with the bull when it jumped the fence. There is no stopping a determined bull. The first time resulted in the birth of Prince – which the owners said we were welcome to rear and keep. We did that. Prince was short for “Prince of the Freezer”. The second fence jump resulted in a little girl called Lexie.



Prince and Delia



Lexie

It was a typical farmhouse set up. The house sort of meandered with no particular plan. This room had been added over time, and that room had been altered over time. It had an excellent log burner.

Eric cleared the rockery and grew wonderful vegetables. The watermelons were the tastiest ever!



I kept a new-for-me breed of chicken called Coronation Sussex. They were very pretty chickens; white with a silver neck and tail. But after several months I learnt that they were violent. I couldn't go near the hen house without walking backwards to keep an eye out for the attacking rooster and, believe me, he could peck and draw blood like a vampire. Anyway, they were lovely to look at and even lovelier to eat. I replaced them with ducks; a creature I had never kept before.



These were called Magpie Ducks – black and white. They were enchanting. At school a parent was one of the few breeders of these ducks in the country. She was delighted when I asked if I could breed them as well.

The property had sections where wild blackberries grew rampant. Blackberry in New Zealand is classed as a noxious weed. When I was offered a goat at school, left over from the Calf Club Day by the headmaster's son, I said I would take it. It would eat the blackberry, and after it had done its job we would put it in a stew. Billy arrived. Have you ever kept a goat? They are totally loveable and utterly affectionate. Who would possibly ever want to put him in a stew? That was years ago, and to keep this narrative brief, he now eats the blackberries on the property of one of my brothers.



Billy learnt to escape the fenced field. He learnt to ring the doorbell. He learnt to open the door. He learnt to go into the bathroom and eat the toilet paper. Not knowing how he escaped his field, Eric watched him for an hour to determine the method of escape. All with no luck. Eric gave up and

returned to the house only to discover Billy sitting on the sofa. The goat, the dog and the cat were inseparable. Billy taught the dog how to climb things. "I never knew I could do that!" said the dog. Eventually we got Billy a long chain for his own safety.



I was given a greenhouse for my birthday – made in China. The assembly instructions were atrocious. It took us three days to put it together. It was wonderful for about a month. And then a wind came and blew it into a crumbled heap. It wasn't our fault; it was simply poor quality.



I played the organ at the local Anglican Church for weddings and the like and for their choir and sometimes on Sundays when the Anglican bishop visited.

Eric was able to cut up and stack in the barn a huge amount of firewood.



Disaster often lurks in many guises. We were about to run out of good luck.

The headmaster at school (I shall call him Arnold to give the bastard anonymity) thought he was thoroughly modern and considered the future with the internet meant libraries and books were obsolete. He was keen to do away with the librarian and save money. He frequently came to the library on the pretext of doing something else but really it was to check to see if I was hopefully doing nothing so I could get fired.

Our next door neighbour, a horse-loving housewife, decided to hang herself from a tree. She had a son at the school. I was asked to play the piano during and after the funeral. I asked the headmaster for permission to attend and that was fine. A good number of the teachers were present as well. The next day I was having a cup of coffee in the staff room and I said to another teacher that I was a bit surprised that Arnold hadn't attended the funeral of the parent but went to a rowing regatta. She said he was usually great when something like that happened, and I said yes, that's why I was surprised he wasn't there. Another staff member had overheard the conversation apparently.

A short time later I was called to the headmaster's office. Had I criticized the headmaster behind his back? Had I undermined his authority? He ranted and raved and foamed at the mouth. I left his office without a job. I began looking for another job. Fortunately I had several pipe organ and piano students that I continued to teach privately.

Now some goats don't like rain. They can't get wet. They have no fat. They get cold and die. Occasionally Billy's chain could get caught in blackberry and if it rained he wouldn't be able to get into his little house. The weather began to spit. I went to check on Billy who was on a steep hill. My footwear slipped and I went arse over kite down the bank. I had broken my ankle. They kept me in hospital for a week waiting for the swelling to subside before they operated with three screws in the ankle. It was a slow recovery, which included stays in hospital for pneumonia, and hernias, and clots on the lungs. It was almost a year before I could walk again without crutches. It's when I started this blog with "A Story a Day".



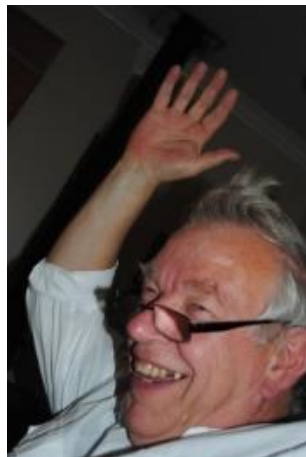
The next thing the house owners turned up. The man had been sacked from his job on the farm. Would we mind ever so much if they stayed in the house for two weeks while things were sorted? We asked if they wanted us to move out but they said they wanted us to stay. Two weeks was all they needed. We cleared out the main bedroom for them. They set up their gigantic television in our living room. Seven months later we were still paying their food, their internet, their phone, their electricity, and their heating, as well still paying the weekly rent. Picture me trying to vacuum the house with crutches while they sat on the sofa with the television turned up high and massaging each other's feet.

Eric asked if their daughter, who worked on a farm and came to stay regularly, could stop saying the F-word ten times in every sentence – especially when we had visitors. Neither of us have much against swearing but this was over the top. The mother explained that the daughter worked on a farm and such things were normal. My father was a farmer and I never once heard him swear.

Eric and I began to occasionally go away for the weekend. Secretly we were looking for another house. We would return to hear from neighbours that rowdy parties had been held in the house, one even with a huge marquee erected on the tennis court.

And then they went, with daughter, on a three week vacation to tropical Rarotonga in the Cook Islands! How wonderful is the unemployment benefit! They came back for Christmas. We had put up the Christmas tree. They erected their own Christmas tree in front of ours. Enough is enough! We said we were going in a week or so. They packed up everything of theirs in a huff and ostentatiously moved into the barn. We packed up our things except for the firewood and calf which they would not let us collect. In fact they covered our firewood with a tarpaulin and tied the tarpaulin down.

We left for Palmerston North where one of my sisters lived. We arrived, Eric and I, with a cat, a dog, a goat, and the remaining ducks that the mad landlord hadn't killed.



Farewell!

There are some lovely people living in the Onewhero area. But after all this, and the gossip promoted by the “lovely couple”, our name was dirt.

12. 434 Tennent Drive, Palmerston North, New Zealand

February 2014 – December 2014

By now we worked from home so it didn't matter a great deal where we lived provided there was internet access. But as you know from the previous narrative, there was a reason why we wanted to move house fast.

We had searched the internet and newspapers all over the country and there was nothing suitable. The problem was we had a dog. These days rental agencies and land lords and ladies don't like dogs.



One of my sisters lives six hours away at Palmerston North. She has a deer farm next to farms owned by Massey University. Massey University is primarily an agriculture university that specializes in animal and plant research. These university farms all had houses that were rented out because farm managers rarely lived on the farm. They were not resident farmers! Who my sister didn't know wasn't worth knowing. Yes! There is a farmhouse available on a university farm! And yes! It is two minutes away from where I live so you can visit me often!



The removal lorry (truck) was loaded. I set out in the car with one dog, one cat, and six ducks. Eric set out in the ute (pickup) with the goat. Six or seven hours later we arrived.

It was a typical farmhouse, quite small; in fact so small that none of our furniture fitted. We stored our furniture in the garage and bought some smaller stuff from second-hand stores. But a house is a house – especially when you don't have one. There was only one electric plug in the kitchen, so we had the microwave, the kettle, the toaster, and the bread maker, on a bench in the narrow corridor!

There was a henhouse to house the ducks at night. During the day I would let them out and they would waddle down to the nearby river and mess about all day. They would return for the evening meal, following me across the fields like I was the Pied Piper. These ducks were a breed called Magpie Ducks – quite an uncommon breed. They were developed in Wales (this is true) by a man called Mr Drake.



We had the use of a field for the goat. Eric made a goat house. The field couldn't be used on the farm because it was a farm water system experiment and there were plastic funnels here and there that could not afford to get trampled on by livestock. Billy, our single goat, was okay. A fence is no barrier for a goat, but Billy had a long, long chain. It didn't of course stop every other goat on the university farms from coming for a visit.





We had a good vegetable garden.



Being in the middle of spacious farms we had field after field of wild mushrooms which my sister explored with grandchildren, teaching them which fungus is poisonous and which is edible. It's a skill one takes for granted!



Twice a kamikaze blackbird smashed into a bedroom window, killing itself on the bed and scattering shards of glass from one end of the room to the other. They must have been attacking their own reflection.

We had always regarded the place as a temporary abode. The office was in the bedroom. The dining table was in the lounge! It had a wood burner but the wind sneaked in through ancient window frames. In winter I had taped up every window to stop the draughts! The house was next to a huge woolshed which was not only the scene of erudite lectures, but was the venue for hordes of aspiring country bumpkins to hold their raucous parties.



Even though we quite liked it, the place had its limitations. We quietly began to look for a more amenable lodging; and an amenable lodging we did indeed find! Although I had to sell the ducks!

13. 12 Tui Glen Drive, Levin, New Zealand

December 2014 – August 2016



We instantly fell in love with this place during the open house that the rental agency staged. Other people attended besides Eric and me so we behaved as super nice as possible to the rental people. In the end we were lucky enough to get selected.

We met the owners. They seemed a nice couple. She was a New Zealander and he was originally from Vanuatu. Their work was one and a half hours drive away and they were tired of travelling. They would rent somewhere closer to work and rent their own place out to us via the rental agency. We signed a year's contract.

There were several acres of land made up of three paddocks and an orchard, as well as the lawns around the house itself. The owners had half a dozen cows and about a dozen sheep; far too many for such a small property. They would feed them hay all year. Fortunately they took the livestock with them. Billy the Goat's house was placed in one of the paddocks and he was very much at home.



We purchased a young Aberdeen Angus cattle beast that we called Blossom. When she reached about eighteen months of age we would call in the butcher. Several months before the butcher's engagement we bought another young cow, a Simmental, that we called Truffle. Truffle would replace Blossom.



The owners were keen that we keep the place tidy. We were permitted to have a vegetable garden under the tall trees at the entrance gate. It was infertile and shaded. The garden wasn't overall particularly successful. We did have success with tomatoes however, as there was a concrete path all around the house and about six inches of soil with no grass growing edged the path. We planted tomatoes all along the edge of the path. Not only did the mature tomato plants flop all over the footpath making it impassable, but they produced literally thousands of tomatoes.



It was a very happy year and the translation business was going well. Such was the amount of work required that I volunteered to format the documents to be translated. I still do that to this day.

The house was modern and comfortable. I had taken up practising the piano with a vengeance. The Levin Public Library held concerts every Friday and I was invited seven times to give an hour's concert. It was great motivation to practise the piano daily. I think the library viewed keyboard works from the Baroque and Classical Periods to be more suited to a library environment!

At one stage I had a heart attack. The ambulance arrived at the same time as the guy arrived to clean the chimney. He said he'd come back later. They put me in hospital for a week or so. The heart specialist said the arteries are so gunked up they couldn't even do a stent. They sent me home with pills that thus far seem to be doing their job.

We got the ute (pickup) fixed while we lived here. It had become a rust bucket. And what a great job they did! It was cheaper to get it done up and made road-worthy than to buy another.



Usually a Rental Agency will come and inspect a house every three months or so and report to the owners. They were always pleased with the care we took. We signed a contract to rent the property for a second year. The day after we signed, the owners withdrew the property from the Rental Agency. They would look after the rental agreement themselves. There's a phrase Rental Agencies have for clients who take over a contract once the paper work is done and the contract signed. I can't remember what the phrase is but it's not polite.

On the first Saturday after the takeover we had a six hour inspection. Every nook and cranny, every cupboard and shelf, was examined minutely. They left, giving us a list of things to be improved. They reappeared to do a similar inspection the following Saturday – and every Saturday. Eric and I would take the dog and go to the beach for the day. If it was raining we would sit in the car until sunset.



A list on the kitchen bench would greet us on return:

- There are water droplets on the board behind the kitchen faucets.
- The waste bin in the kitchen is in the wrong place.
- There is dust on the window sill in the dining room. (They would have had to have climbed under the table to see it).
- Who gave permission to plant irises in the vegetable garden?



On and on the inspections went and we still had six months to go on the contract. Things got worse. We came home after a day of sitting in the car and they had stripped every fruit tree of its fruit. The orchard was part of the rental agreement. The next thing a lawn mowing company moved in and cut

down all the grass in the fields that was intended for the cow and goat. We had to quickly buy some hay. The fields were looking uncut and untidy, said the landlords. We were presented with a bill from the lawn mowing company for \$180. The only thing we could do was to rent another house altogether and pay two lots of rent until our contract ran out. We made a submission to the Rental Association who ordered a hearing for the case. We were well prepared. Would you believe? We got the month wrong and missed the hearing.

The landlords seized the occasion. They took us to court for abandoning the contract and destroying property. They wanted \$6,000 in compensation. They had first gone to another rental agency so that new renters could be found. We had a letter from the new rental agency saying we had abandoned the building and had broken the contract which will now terminate officially in a week. But we still had stuff at the house – such as Truffle the Cow and Billy the Goat! We quickly had to finish packing and moving. Billy went to his new home – to be cared for by one of my brothers.



The sole butcher in town was away on vacation. We couldn't take the cow with us into town! I found the butcher's son who could cull it for the freezer before 7 am when we had to hand over the keys. Have you ever held a light for a butcher while he guts and quarters a cow in a field in the middle of the night? Then we had to clean the house. We made it out on time yet still the court case loomed.

What nasty things had we done? "They, your Honour," said the landlords, "have made holes in the ceiling with a broom handle, all along the corridor. And here are photos to prove it taken during the rental agency's final inspection." Eric pointed out that apparently they were not overly computer literate. The date and time is recorded in the photos on a computer. The photographs were taken the day after the inspection and at seven in the evening.

We knew we would get an unfavourable judgement. The judge had been efficient and curt. She clearly didn't like us. We were dismissed with a wave of the hand and were to be informed of the

outcome by letter. The landlord's son had been murdered several months beforehand in a domestic dispute. We didn't have such a heart-rending story to sweeten the tale.

It was the day of the presidential election in the United States. Hillary lost to Trump. The letter arrived. We have since referred to the landlord-losers in this case as "The Clintons".



14. 27 St Annes Street, Levin, New Zealand

August 2016 – November 2017



This house is going to be largely about dogs – canine and human.

Even prior to being ousted from the previous place we had found a house in town to live in. In fact, although we would spend part of each day at the previous place we had shifted most of our belongings to the new address and slept in the new place at night. We still had the cow and the goat at the old place. The end came suddenly and before you could blink we were ensconced at 27 Saint Annes Street, Levin.

It was a large two-story house with a steep staircase that had no bannister. To get to the main bedroom you had to squeeze past the staircase, which suggested that the upstairs had been an afterthought. Outside in the front were two gigantic trees; a gum and a copper beech. Next to them was a fairly busy road. At the back of the house was a substantial lawn with a large, but old, garage and workshop. We put in trellis gates to keep the dog at bay.



We always regarded this place as being temporary. It would give us space to search anywhere in the country for as near-perfect a house as possible. We made a list of what a rented house would have to have, and a list of what would be nice but not necessary. Every day we looked online at the houses available, from the top of the country to the bottom. In the meantime we got on with living a life.

We were permitted to have a dog, so of course Delia came too as did the cat. Delia didn't like the place much. She was used to expansive rural settings where she could roam at whim. And then she was diagnosed with bladder cancer. Luckily an expert dog surgeon was visiting the town. He said an operation would be touch and go. We held our breath, but within a week Delia was happily home as large as life. Six months later we went for our daily walk. We came home. Delia sat down and died – tail wagging.



A month or so later we had the opportunity to get a puppy – a black and white Springer Spaniel. We named him Bubble.



On one side of the house were neighbours Pearl and Norm. They were an older couple, and delightful. They would frequently pop in for a chat, as indeed we too would pop over to their place. Norm was into making home brew and I wasn't beyond making a brew myself. Norm was a car mechanic and was called upon several times to fix our car. Pearl cared for half a dozen homeless cats.



There was a neighbour on the other side also called Norm; Norm and his partner Chelsea. All day, and for a good part of the night, you could hear them screaming obscenities at each other. (You get the idea). They had seven dogs; half a dozen fluffy lapdog yappers and a vicious Rottweiler. The Rottweiler knew how to jump the fence into our property right at the back where Norm had his marijuana garden. We were at times scared to go out on the back lawn, and little Bubble wouldn't go there to pee. Luckily, Levin had a dog park of about ten acres. We would visit the park each day and Bubble would play and run with packs of other dogs of all shapes and sizes.

I continued to play the piano at the Levin Library when invited to give a concert. Usually I would play Scarlatti Sonatas or Haydn Sonatas. I loved it, and the library users appreciated it too.

Another thing that happened was a 7.8 earthquake. It was a biggie! It went on and on. In fact it was two earthquakes following one another without a break.



Rainwater had no escape from our back lawn, and the water from the roof of the house also gushed there. The back of the house with the wretched running Rottweiler became a muddy swamp. We made some raised beds to grow vegetables.



Then disaster struck. Norm-of-the-obscenities dropped dead at his front door. The body was taken away and the partying began. Crowds revelled at the house and a few stayed the nights. A second Rottweiler made an appearance. Chelsea could not control any of the dogs. They ran amuck. A month or so later their landlord called to ask why the rent had not been paid. He booted all out. The house had been trashed.

Peace at last, but we'd had enough of the place. With greater urgency we searched for a house we could call a home. We drove several hundred miles to view a place, but that is the next story. Eric went ahead to set up the new abode; internet and power and phone and so on. I stayed behind to

supervise the removal truck and to shampoo the carpet. Three days later, with dog and cat, I set sail and left the wretched place behind.



15. 422 Stanley Road, Stratford, Taranaki, New Zealand

November 2017 -



We had been looking for a home for some time. We had a list of necessary attributes a rental house must have. For example, allowing tenants to have a dog automatically cut out 95% of the houses. It must have space for a garden. It must have access to the internet. It wasn't an impossible list, but it was impossible to find!

A house for rent came online. It was near a town called Waitara. It seemed to fit the bill. We expressed interest and drove the four hours to see it. Contrary to what the photographs conveyed, you had to turn sideways to squeeze past the dining table to reach the front door. And then the crunch came: of course the owners will be storing their furniture in the garage. Uh-oh! That was a warning sign. This would be a fleeting and temporary abode. We began the long journey home.



As we passed Mount Taranaki near a town called Stratford, Eric commented that in all the searching over the years for a place he had never once seen a house come up for rent from Stratford. Travel-weary, we decided to stay in Stratford for the night. The motel had a complimentary "Village Newspaper". In it was an advertisement for a house to rent. We drove for a look. It was perfect. The next day we went to the rental agency. The woman who had responsibility for the house was away. We filled out an application form and left.

Not long after arriving home the phone rang. It was Maureen from the rental agency. The house we applied for had already been rented out, but she had another if we cared to come for a look. We arranged a meeting time and once again began the long journey in our old ute.

Maureen wasn't there at the house. We hadn't come all this way not to look so we went around the house ourselves. I remember commenting, "If they knew we were coming for a look you'd think they could have made the beds." We went back to the ute and phoned Maureen. "Where are you?" she asked. "We're here," we said. Except – we were at someone else's house on the wrong road!

Quickly we made it to the correct house and loved it. It filled all our conditions, except it didn't come with any land for a cow. It had room for a garden. It was a fairly new house on a beef and cattle farm. It had a double garage, three bedrooms, and a spacious open sitting-room-kitchen-dining-room. It had a log burner. We said we'd take it, and would move in after the current tenants moved out in a month's time.



So that is where we are today – four years later and the longest we have lived anywhere! Much has happened over that time. COVID19 struck and the business collapsed that Eric had spent years building up. Clients went from 112 down to 2, and those 2 didn't pay. We were not an essential service. Friends helped – even blogging friends helped out. Yvonne from Australia for example sent a gigantic box of wine! What a wonderful thing to have done! We have survived! Linda and Barry, our wonderful landlord-farmers, said if things get tough forget the rent for a time and we'll sort things out down the line. So far we have managed to pay each week if sometimes a little late!



I have never in my life had anything published and then out of the blue, resulting from the blog, two publishing companies – one in Britain and one in the States – asked for poems to go into anthologies. I am a published poet! Not many from New Zealand seem interested. In fact, as far as I know, the only person from New Zealand who follows my blog is Sylvie from Nelson – and Sylvie is French!

About two years ago our wonderful Springer Spaniel, Bubble, developed epilepsy. How terrifying to see such a lovely dog throw an uncontrollable fit. He went on medication which controlled the epilepsy. Then one Friday night he had a seizure. And another. And another. We phoned for an animal vet. Didn't we know it was the weekend? Animals don't take ill on Saturdays and Sundays. No vet was available. The next ten hours were the longest ten hours of my life as Bubble had over forty seizures. And then he died. We buried him in his favourite garden spot where he liked to sit and watch the farm animals pass by.



The farm is huge as is the neighbouring farm. During lockdowns we can wander maskless over hundreds of acres. There's always something new and something different to see and do. There's firewood to chop and gardens to weed and lawns to mow. There are preserves and jams and breads to make and new recipes to try. There are walks to take and TV and internet to watch. There's a piano to play and books to read and blogs to maintain. There are poems and stories and music to write. There's work to do – although sparser than we would hope.



What an adventure it has been! It is a ridiculous thing to ask “Who knows what the future holds?” But there has been a Providence directing these adventures in the past twenty years, and I have no reason to doubt that Providence has further adventures up its sleeve.



Out the window as I write