

TALES FROM BUMMERBERG

From an email exchange

Adam Newport-Berra

Sat, Feb 5, 2011 at 9:18 AM

To: Bob Marvich

Howdy Bob,

My name is Adam Newport-Berra, and if you haven't guessed by now I'm the son of Buzz Berra and Pat Newport. The youngest to be exact. I checked out your website, very beautiful work.

I have been speaking to my parents about their time in Oregon, more specifically how they met and under what circumstances. I find it's a pretty amazing story, and the gaps in their memory and knowledge of their life and times on the commune has led me to seek someone else out. My dad pointed me to you, saying you might be interested in speaking to me about the experience. I'm incredibly fascinated by it all, and would love to hear whatever you could tell me. Not to mention I'm just curious what it was like to live and work together. If you ever have any time, I'd love to hear from you.

Thanks and hopefully speak soon.

Adam

Bob Marvich

Mon, Feb 7, 2011 at 12:15 PM

To: Adam Newport-Berra

Hi Adam,

Sure, I'd be happy to fill in what gaps I can, although I suspect your parents remember most of the salient points, and probably share my view that some of the nastier, soap opera aspects are best forgotten. The time that I spent there certainly had a major impact on my life, since it began the arc that led me to become a journeyman boatbuilder and blue ocean sailor, and took me to places as close to paradise as I'm ever likely to see.

I feel a little guilty for having fallen out of touch with your folks. I lived off the grid for many years though, most of them single-handing a small sailboat, and I pretty much gave up on mail. (The website is the work of my partner, Kristen, and is largely redundant, since I stopped making furniture years ago. She practically lives on the grid, and keeps an eye out for e-mail.)

What would you like to know?

Regards, Bob.

Adam Newport-Berra

Mon, Feb 7, 2011 at 1:13 PM

To: Bob Marvich

Bob,

Thanks so much for getting back to me, much appreciated. I'd love to hear of your travels by sea. Are you in stockton now? I'm sure my folks would be real tickled to hear from you, but I know it can be tough to stay connected to people you no longer see.

In all honesty, I'd like to know everything. Of course that's asking too much, but I'd really love to know both the sweet and bitter moments of your experience on the commune. How it began, how you joined, how you all lived, what Peter and Anita were like, what my folks were like. Do you have any photos? Who had the idea to build the boat? How did you support yourselves? Who else visited the commune? What did the locals think of all of you?

I am a writer and filmmaker, and stories are one of the most important and defining parts of my life. I feel incredibly compelled to learn about the commune, not only because it shaped my parents' life, but was also the cause of my own life. Not to mention I think it is simply fascinating, and I feel privileged to have access into a unique story like this.

I am patient, and would be happy to hear excerpts from your memory, so don't feel obligated to put it all down at once. I'm interested in your story as much as the commune's. I would love to hear the beginnings, as well as the ends, even if they are soap opera like.

Let me know what you remember, and thanks so much for getting back to me!

Adam

Bob Marvich

Tue, Feb 8, 2011 at 6:58 PM

To: Adam Newport-Berra

Hi Adam,

Glad to hear you're patient, because I'm an agonizingly slow writer, despite having written three novels. Never really learned the writer's craft, neither in college nor graduate school. One could be practically illiterate and still major in chemistry.

I'll start there. I first met Peter Denton in 1967, when we were first year graduate students in chemistry at the University of Michigan. It wasn't a social scene. We shared only one class, and I never connected the name with the face until the results of the fourth qualifying exam were posted, and he introduced himself. These were required tests, given once a month, and you had to pass six of eight during your first

year or you were out. If you passed the first four however, you were done, and could choose a thesis advisor a full semester early. I got lucky, and was one of the few who did. Peter passed also, but he was bright. Noticeably so.

We were never friends, really. We played handball a few times, I recall, but it was my best sport, and he hated losing. He soon became scarce around the chemistry building. For a brief time, he resurfaced on campus as a leader among the leftist radicals protesting against the Vietnam War. He was a burly guy, and an imposing presence. He could appear menacing, and with his black goatee he rather strikingly resembled Lenin. Then he vanished.

I had been radicalized by the war as well, and having lost my deferment, I was facing the draft. As a symbolic gesture, I filed a claim of conscientious objection and made an appearance before the draft board, even though I was well aware that I had no legal standing, since this claim was denied to atheists. Especially unapologetic ones. Then I emigrated to Vancouver, Canada. Lasted just six months, until my money ran out. I had no employable skills.

So I went back Ann Arbor, and kept a low profile while finishing my degree, thinking that a Ph.D. might prove useful. Didn't really, although it did garner me a postdoctoral fellowship at Oregon State, which facilitated a move back to the west coast, closer to the ocean. I'd pretty much lost interest in the academic life - a feeling which was dramatically reinforced when I learned that my new research grant was from the Department of Defense, and involved the study of nerve gas analogs. I took their money, but under performed. (Failure is not an uncommon result in research.)

Then, even before my one year appointment lapsed, I opened a restaurant in downtown Corvallis with my wife, Naomi, and my friend Richard, from Ann Arbor, who came out to join the venture. Seemed like such a romantic idea at the time. It was pretty successful, too. Then, after we'd been open six, eight months or so, and gotten most of the kinks worked out...it was probably a week night...business must have been slow, at any rate, since I had abandoned my usual spot in the kitchen and was sitting at one of the tables out front when Peter and Anita walked in the front door hoping to have dinner...

To be continued...

If you're interested, I'll ask Kristen to e-mail you the file of my first novel. Just some tales of the sailing life that I wrote while living on my boat in South Africa. In a way, they are all articulations of the same dream - the "why" of it - that leads people to build boats and take them to sea.

Bob

Bob Marvich

Thu, Feb 10, 2011 at 2:25 PM

To: Adam Newport-Berra

I can't recall how Peter had learned that I'd opened the restaurant in Corvallis, but their drive over from Lacombe had been purposeful, and they arrived ravenously hungry. I heard my first stories about the commune that evening, which went on quite late. Richard and Naomi had known Peter in Ann Arbor as well, and had some friends in common, so there was plenty to talk about. Anita was the outsider, and said little. Boat construction was still in its early stages, apparently.

Can't tell you very much about the commune's earliest days. It had originally been conceived as something akin to a Marxist-Leninist think tank. Rosa Luxemburg also featured. I can't recall when I learned these bits of history. Might have been a couple months later when Peter and Anita reappeared at the restaurant, ready for a second meal. Or possibly when I drove out to Lacombe shortly thereafter to see the place for myself. Or maybe even much later. The fragments that I recall are often impossible to put in proper order.

The county road which led to the commune paralleled an easement for a large overhead powerline. A wide swath had been clear-cut either side to accommodate it, and was kept free of underbrush all the way to the tree line. This marked the edge of commune, which shared a border with the easement. A one lane gravel road provided access. The boat shed was at the end of it, and well hidden back among the trees. Inside sat the boat, standing upright on its keel, and supported by two sturdy cradles. No one was about, and I climbed the ladder to have a look inside. It was a bare shell, and completely empty save for a few temporary planks on the bottom. A formidable undertaking, it seemed.

As I'm unaware of what your parents have already told you - I suspect not much, judging from the questions you have asked me - I'll describe the place. The central structure was a large geodesic dome, covered with fabric, and made rigid by a thick, sprayed-on coat of polyurethane foam. Well done, although it bore some resemblance to a cauliflower, and an ambitiously large one at that. There was even an upper deck suspended inside the dome with full headroom, which was used primarily as a dormitory.

Peter had prefabricated all the metal hubs for the dome in a garage in Ann Arbor. He'd even taken the precaution of bringing along the requisite nuts and bolts, just in case he couldn't find the proper sizes in sufficient quantity in Oregon. I suppose the reason I can recall this is because I had done something amusingly similar years earlier, when I headed off for the wilds of British Columbia in my Econline van, carrying an unreasonably large chain saw.

The intellectuals had long since departed, and left behind a small library on the dome's numerous bookshelves. A volume of philosophy by Marcuse. Trotsky and

Hegel...they were all heavily covered with dust. Most of them appeared to have been "liberated" from various university libraries. Another shelf held books that were currently in use and more recently acquired - *Elements of Yacht Design, The Ocean Sailing Yacht*. It was an impressive collection. Peter liked books. (One of these volumes - *Sensible Cruising Designs*, by L. Frances Herreshoff - eventually went into my duffel when I left, since it contained the design that I had already chosen for my next boat. All I really needed was the table of offsets at the back, but couldn't bring myself to tear out the page, and vandalize the book.)

Other transients and visitors to the commune had left their contributions. Most notable was a massive picnic table made from wide, thick planks of red cedar which could seat at least a dozen people. The top was adorned with some impressive relief carvings - wizards, with long, flowing beards. There were a couple of Salvation Army couches flanking the wood stove, but little else in the way of furnishings. Previous denizens had also constructed an array of outbuildings - little private cabins scattered all over the property - as well as a second, smaller dome which was covered with cedar shingles. This served as the workshop.

The Rainbow Family passed through on occasion, and was warmly welcomed, but transients and freeloaders were actively being discouraged, since they had proved to be a drain on resources, and slowed progress on the boat. There had been some angry scenes, all of them involving dramatic confrontations with Peter. Someone had coined the name Bummerburg for the commune, and the appellation stuck.

The romance had largely gone out of the restaurant by the end that first year. It had drained away gradually, almost on a daily basis I suspect, emulsified with bacon grease and all the chicken fat that had to be flushed from the floor each night. Naomi had come to resent it, having traded in her imagined life as the wife of a university professor for the unrelenting drudgery of menial work. She had grown increasingly sullen.

Tempers were short all around, though.

Resentments festered.

Nevertheless, Naomi's timing seemed particularly poor when she announced one day that she wanted to resume a sexual relationship with Richard. They'd been lovers briefly, back in Ann Arbor. I responded badly, although not for reasons you might expect. It was her cluelessness that really set me off. The idea was preposterous. The two were barely on speaking terms. If that weren't enough, Richard was gay, and had just taken a few tentative steps toward coming out. He had become a wholly improbable partner for her. And we were already at each others throats. It seemed insufferably stupid.

So I split. Took most of my tools and a few armloads of clothes, threw them in the back of the van with a sleeping bag, and headed out to the commune. I'd seen all of the cabins on my initial tour, and knew that several were vacant. I felt certain I'd be welcome.

Judging from the ferocity with which Peter and Anita had attacked their dinners at the

restaurant, the commune appeared sorely in need of the services of a decent cook, if nothing else.

I hadn't planned on staying. I had no plans, at all. But realized as I was nearing Lacomb that I was looking forward to seeing Anita again.

No discernable progress had been made on the boat. A lack of funds was blamed for this, although I got the distinct impression that no one quite knew where to start, now that the hull had been plastered. I spent some time out in the boatshed admiring her lines, looking at the hull from lots of different angles. *Endurance*, as she was later christened, had been very well built.

(A fair percentage of amateur-built ferrocement boat projects never went any further than this, I later discovered. The medium had been touted as a quick and inexpensive way to build your own cruising boat. This was probably true if you were building a barge, but in the end ferrocement proved to be neither cheap nor fast when it came to yachts. Abandoned ferrocement hulks littered the marine landscape in the Pacific Northwest when I was up there, and some surely remain, as they are nearly indestructible. If you want to see what the design looked like, I found a nice example for sale online. Google: Samson Marine Vancouver Sea Baron.)

It took awhile to get to know everyone, although most of what I recall of those first days are long discussions with Peter. He was keen to show me the boat plans and engineering drawings, which he spread out atop the great table, several days in a row. A host of decisions needed to be made before construction could begin, and I began to appreciate how daunting the task became, trying to integrate all the various systems. An armload of books would accumulate on the table as we spoke. I had done a fair bit of carpentry, building the tables for the restaurant, and the take-out counter - lots of square stuff - but nothing with curves or complex bevels like the woodwork in those classic boatbuilding books.

Anita had a full time job as the secretary at the paper mill in Albany, and her salary had been the commune's only income for months. The crew had pooled their resources, and there was no private money. In theory, anyway. This stricture was a throw-back to the commune's more ideological days, I suspected, and was now looked upon as more of a guiding principle. Peter was clearly receiving some sort of allowance at any rate, since had the requisite funds to go nightclubbing in Portland. He got all dressed up Friday afternoon - think John Travolta, in Saturday Night Fever - and left as soon as Anita arrived home from work, and tossed him the keys to the car. He didn't return until late Sunday.

I hadn't expected this, and felt a flush of excitement, watching his departure. It meant I'd finally have the opportunity to spend some time alone with Anita.

Gary Skeele was the youngest of the crew, and a bona fide local. His parents lived in a double-wide mobile home, which was parked all by itself out under the

powerlines, alongside the gravel road that led to the commune. Gary's older brother, David, had helped build one of the commune's earliest cabins, but had gone north to seek his fortune, and landed a lucrative job as a carpenter on the Alaskan Pipeline. Their father, Leon, was a millwright, and had always earned what he considered a pretty good wage, but it was a pittance compared to what David was raking in, working overtime in Alaska. Having been eclipsed in this regard by his eldest son filled him with pride, though, and Leon gave at least partial credit to the commune.

Gary took me down to see the pigs, as I'd missed their enclosure during my grand tour. It was just inside the treeline, right behind the double-wide. There were just two of them, and they were well past the cute stage, with a couple months of feeding left before they could become bacon. Their diet was being supplemented by USDA government-surplus evaporated milk, which seemed a little mysterious. At least twenty large cases of it were stacked alongside the fence. Since there were no longer enough food scraps being generated at the commune to feed them, they had been reduced to eating kibble. Not that they seemed to mind. I had never had the chance to watch pigs eat before. One of the marvels of the nature. Surely.

Then, Bill Madigan, who had practically grown up in the surf in Southern California, and wanted to find out what the ocean felt like, further offshore. He had been incarcerated for nearly a year for simple possession of marijuana. An honor farm, he called it. Harsh, in any case, and the experience had temporarily derailed his life, and set him adrift. And Buzz Berra. All that I can recall is that he'd gone to college back east. Pennsylvania, perhaps. He'd been there the longest, and had already distanced himself from his prior life. He was probably the quietest member of the crew. I'm not a particularly talkative person either, which might be one of the reasons why we got along.

All of us had made a sharp break from the past though, and were now, I suspected, facing a wildly uncertain future.

I recall helping Buzz with some woodwork, very early on. Some of the earliest timber that went into the boat was salvaged from Japanese motorcycle crates, so it was most likely that. Bill had spotted them outside a Kawasaki dealership in Albany, and ended up scoring more than a dozen, as they had just received a shipment of big bikes. The lengthwise timbers were the best - a hard, dark red mahogany, but because of all the slats, you had to pull close to fifty nails in order to salvage a single decent-sized piece. Wouldn't do, obviously.

I began pouring over the boatbuilding books. Cramming, I suppose. Gaining a degree of mastery over that material would require years of craftsmanship, and in my case, several more boats, but we weren't trying to build a fancy yacht, back then. More of a pirate ship. In fact, Peter envisioned it flying the black flag. (I doubt he actually went through with this, though. The Customs and Immigration officials that I crossed paths with were hardly the type to embrace symbols of anarchy.) We did in fact paint her hull black, though. (Not the best color choice, turns out, if you're planning to cruise in the tropics. It was repainted white in Hawaii, I think.)

Peter had been narrowing down the choices for the boat's engine, and decided that a return trip to Portland was in order, to have look at a few different models, and acquire some literature. He left again Friday night. Same outfit, but with a different vest.

My fate was sealed shortly thereafter, when Anita came to fetch me, and led me back to her cabin. Over the years, I've considered the possibility that Peter might have put her up to it, as a way to recruit me. But that's probably giving him too much credit. Anita proved perfectly capable of recruiting me all by herself.

Anita and I had fun together. The mill was scheduled to close down for routine maintenance, so she took a week of vacation, and we set off on a road trip. Her older sister, Vicki (Sanchez), had just earned her first feature film credits as a costume designer, or wardrobe something, and Anita wanted to help celebrate her success. We were offered the keys to their vacant beachfront house in Malibu. A posh house full of splendid photography, as it happened, as Vicki was the long-term partner of Vilmos Zsigmond - whose filmography you've studied I'm sure.

Even though he's the only truly famous person I've ever met, I can't recall much of the meeting. All I remember is that we threw them a lovely little dinner party, and I roasted a duck. With orange sauce.

Our fun ended abruptly, just a few days after our return, when the big dome caught fire, and burned to the ground. Anita and I were asleep in my cabin when the fire erupted, and we awoke to the sound of shouting. Then, instead of the usual pitch black, saw the reflection of flames, and a growing orange glow filtering through the trees. Our cabin was well back in the woods, and the path seldom used, so a flashlight was usually required to navigate it. But not that night. Anita was frantic, and quickly sprinted ahead of me. We covered the intervening ground quickly, but were still the last ones to arrive at the scene. The heat was intense, and I stopped well short of the building. Then watched it burn, transfixed. It was all flammable stuff - the cedar and pine - but once the foam became fully involved, the dome lit up like a roman candle.

Anita had found Peter's embrace, I noticed. They were on the other side of the clearing, and illuminated rather dramatically by the light of the intense fire. She was sobbing in his arms. But more than that. She was clutching him tightly, with an almost grim determination, as if she would never, ever let go. I had always suspected that this would ultimately prove to be the case. Yet it was still a sobering moment, seeing it foreshadowed so vividly firsthand. I had to look away.

Someone had already called 911 from the Skeele's. The fire trucks arrived in minutes, it seemed.

The fire captain concluded rather quickly that the woodstove in the sauna was to blame. Woefully inadequate fireproofing around the exhaust, apparently. Bill and Gary had guests, and fired up the sauna early that evening, and made their final exit around midnight, unaware that there was smoldering wood behind the stovepipe. The residual heat in the stove helped this gain traction until it finally burst into flames several hours later.

Dawn had just begun to break by the time the last fire truck left. Sleep was impossible. I recall just milling around, half in shock, waiting for first light.

There was surprisingly little of it left. The floor of the dome had been erected atop a foundation of crude cement pillars, which raised the platform almost five feet off the ground on the downhill side. The sauna had been built-in underneath. The washing machine was tucked down there as well, and its scorched sheet-metal chassis was still recognizable amid all the rubble. Only the ugly pillars remained. Blackened, and now freestanding, these misshapen monoliths ended up leaving an indelible stain on the place. We made no attempt to remove them. Peter thought they might prove useful.

Took some effort to get that dome burned down. It's been fun, so far. This marks a turning point in the story, and I'm quite sure where to go next. Mostly, the next few chapters are pretty much a continuum of non-stop work - either on the boat, or one of a half dozen pole buildings we built to finance it all. That, and the grim sticky mud of Oregon winters. But what to include before the endgame, which has the most drama? Might be a good time for a question or two. Give me a clue of where you want to go with this.

A correction: my note at the end of the previous email should read "...NOT sure where to go next."