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Erik Gray

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RADICAL TEACHING: SCOTT AND HELEN NEARING'S IMPACT ON MAINE'S NATURAL FOOD REVIVAL

ERIK GRAY

Though today sustainable living and locally sourced food receive increased attention nationwide, these ideas have been important in Maine for several decades. A key part of the state's agricultural history is a tradition of self-sustaining homesteads. While subsistence farming and self-sufficiency was often a necessity on Maine's northeastern frontier, homesteading has remained a lifestyle chosen by many of the state's residents to this day. In this article, the author discusses the legacy of Scott and Helen Nearing, focusing particularly on the couple's contributions to the "back to the land" movement in Maine and beyond. The author earned a B.A. in History at the University of Maine. He is a proud army veteran and is now a high school educator, where he teaches his students to read, think and write like historians. He has a wife and is an extremely happy father.

IN DOWNEAST Maine stands a unique memorial to a remarkable pair of teachers. Rather than a statue or plaque, their homestead has been preserved for the public. It is not typical of monuments to people or ideas. It is a living monument: the grounds are not manicured; cords of firewood sit in neat stacks under lean to roofs; trees, bushes, and wild grasses are allowed to grow naturally, in whatever shape nature intends. It is the "Forest Farm," the homestead of Helen and Scott Nearing, two educated city dwellers who decided to "Live the Good Life" in the hills of Vermont before settling on a farm along on the coast of Maine in the 1960s. The Nearings' example was the impetus for the natural foods movement that has become so much a part of the state's recent history. Their presence attracted waves of like-minded idealists to Maine's Blue Hill peninsula in Hancock County and to the rest of the state. These new pioneers took root and formed a support network that spans the state and allows the natural foods movement to flourish.



Scott and Helen Nearing at their homestead, Forest Farm, c. 1955. At the forefront of the “back to the land” movement, Scott and Helen Nearing moved to Maine in 1952, establishing a homestead at Harborside. They hand-built their home and dubbed it “Forest Farm.” Scott and Helen Nearing are perhaps best known for authoring *Living the Good Life: How to Live Simply and Sanely in a Troubled World* in 1954. This photograph was taken near the time of its publication. *Image courtesy of the Good Life Center.*

The Nearings and the Back to the Land Movement

Homesteaders are typically organic farmers who strive to attain a life of self-sufficiency and simplicity — ideals that run counter to the prevailing ethos of materialism and consumerism. The homesteading lifestyle provides an escape from crowded cities, smog, crime, and the grind of the so-called “rat race.” It offers health benefits and the satisfactions of raising and consuming homegrown, pesticide-free vegetables and chemical-free livestock, and providing these products for the farmer’s markets or crop sharing associations found in so many Maine communities. For those who chose this lifestyle, a hard day’s work in

garden or field offered greater rewards than slaving in an office cubicle for a higher salary.

It was Scott Nearing's voluntary exile to the fringes of society that allowed him to truly *live* his ideals as a radical writer, philosopher, and educator. The Nearings kept their farm off the grid, in good part as an open challenge to what they felt was a corrupt capitalist system. This lifestyle afforded Nearing time to devote to his writing, which he completed while in Maine. In some ways, he was similar to the transcendentalists, with nature his cathedral. The Thoreau Institute at Walden Woods, in fact, holds a large collection of Nearing papers, but because of he and his wife's communist leanings it is perhaps safe to assume they were not religious thinkers, although they were certainly spiritualists.¹

Education, however, was the Nearings' most important and cherished role and their homestead in Maine their classroom. Scott Nearing taught his entire life, and though blacklisted early in his educational career due to his political affiliation, he found that he could reach his students even in the far northeastern reaches of the country. Hands-on teaching opportunities on the Nearings' Forest Farm taught thousands of young novice farmers and gardeners and inspired thousands of back-to-the-landers to settle nearby.

His presence in Maine also helped spur homesteaders to organize and collaborate, leading to the creation of the Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association (MOFGA). Nearing's speech at MOFGA's inaugural meeting in 1971 jump-started the organization as the champion for Maine consumers and organic gardeners and farmers. His legacy runs deep. Andrew Marshall, MOFGA's current Educational Director, explained that "you can draw a pretty straight line between the vibrance and the vigor of the sustainable food movement now and the seeds that the Nearings planted back then."² The Forest Farm, still a functioning homestead, is home to the Good Life Center, an educational facility dedicated to the Nearings' legacy of changing the world through simple living.

When the Nearings moved to Vermont in the 1930s, the number of small farmers across the nation had dwindled in response to changes in industry and in methods of metropolitan distribution. The movement the Nearings inspired has done much to revive the American small farm. It is ironic that Scott Nearing, a radical, would adopt a traditional American lifestyle in an attempt to counter American capitalism. Could the agrarian values which built America once again be the catalyst to change?

Homesteading and Farming: Roots in the Progressive Movement

The concept of the homesteader is as old as European settlement in North America. Anglo-American society was primarily agrarian. Wealthy landowners, especially in the southern and mid-Atlantic regions, could afford to focus their energy and capital on cash crops like sugar, tobacco, indigo, rice, and eventually cotton. However, the vast majority of independent farmers worked small plots of land and usually produced only enough food for their families' subsistence. The quality and intensity of their labor directly affected their livelihoods. Small farmers could not produce a large enough surplus to depend solely on markets, and rarely accrued enough capital to improve their farms. Advances in farm equipment and agricultural science yielded greater quantities of food in the nineteenth century, and larger and more productive farms displaced smaller subsistence farmers, who turned to the cities for their livelihoods in the twentieth century.

Industrialization created the conditions for a mass exodus to the cities. In 1870, nearly three-fourths of the American people lived on farms, but by 1920, over half were city dwellers, while another twenty percent living in rural areas were non-farmers. Only a third remained tied to the land.³ In his book *The New Pioneers*, Jeffrey Jacob notes that the birth of the modern back to the land movement lay in the Progressive Era. This heady reform period saw a renewed interest in a simpler life and time. The number of people who actually returned to traditional American farming was small in proportion to the whole of American society, but the Country Life movement launched several waves of small-farm enthusiasm, particularly during the 1930s.

President Theodore Roosevelt, a prominent symbol of the Progressive Era, urged Americans to resist the pull of urbanization, and his government actively campaigned to support country living as a satisfying lifestyle. The perception of rural outmigration as a national crisis spurred Progressives to action. Roosevelt and his followers stressed self-help in the form of farmers cooperating to make agriculture profitable and agrarian life more fulfilling. Legislators, meanwhile, offered broad social and educational reforms through state universities and organizations like the YMCA.⁴ Interestingly, many of those calling for a return to the countryside were urbanites. Historian Rebecca Kneale Gould described the "nature craze" of the early twentieth century as a reaction against industrialization and urbanization, with urban elites providing the most vigorous call for the return to nature and urban middle classes their most prominent readers.⁵ Other government and industrial lead-

ers, however, felt that turning away from cities ran counter to America's destiny as a global power.

Ultimately, rural outmigration was a trend too powerful to overturn, but during the 1930s another back-to-the-land movement emerged, this time inspired by the "decentralists" in New England, who championed a less metropolitan and federalized vision of America with a movement away from the cities and factories and back to the land. Decentralists believed in limiting the government's reach and authority. It was this colony of independent, politically active farmers that drew Helen and Scott Nearing from New York City to New England.

An Opportunity in Vermont

Homesteading, a regression to peasantry and agrarian serfdom, must have seemed an odd choice for most Americans living in urban America. However, the lifestyle proved popular during the Great Depression in the face of widespread poverty, crippling mass unemployment, and economic stagnation. While Midwestern farmers suffered the effects of drought and environmental devastation, New England farms fared relatively well. According to historian Dona Brown, "New England's long-standing economic troubles now seemed to reveal its underlying strength."⁶ Homesteading in the northeast gained appeal during the Depression as a time-tested and secure livelihood.

Scott and Helen Nearing recognized this and established the Forest Farm in Vermont during the Depression. The state's decentralist movement made northern New England an ideal location for this type of farming, and made the region appealing to the Nearings and other social radicals. Historians have lumped the Nearings with the "decentralists," who were mostly academics and city dwellers who became committed back-to-the-landers based on the argument that "economic democracy depended above all else on a widespread return to self-sufficient homesteads."⁷ Decentralists were radicals, and Vermont in the 1930s was staunchly Republican. However, the state's conservatism was tinged with an open-mindedness and libertarianism embodied by many of its leaders. Republican George Aiken, a progressive farmer turned governor and senator, stood up against the Republican Party's Old Guard during the Franklin Roosevelt administration and supported New Deal endeavors focused on farming and rural development.⁸ This unique political atmosphere attracted people interested in alternative lifestyles and radical thinking.

World War II forced dramatic changes throughout American society,

as young people left rural areas to join the military or work in the war-related industries. Even the Nearings noticed the war's impact on American society from the vantage of their little farming community of Pike's Falls, Vermont: "Community enterprise, such as it was in the valley, became largely centered on dances and beer parties. There was no community economic enterprise and little social enterprise. People wanted to escape thoughts of wars past and impending."⁹ When the war was over, Americans yearned for normalcy, convenience, and prosperity. The war drained the energy from the back to the land movement, but the hiatus was short. The next wave of homesteading emerged in the midst of the Civil Rights and antiwar movements of the sixties and seventies — a time of tremendous social unrest and political activism — this time as an offshoot of the environmental movement.

The Environmental Movement

Following World War II, American living standards improved tremendously and the population boomed. These conditions created an exponential rise in consumption.¹⁰ Industry expanded in response to this societal shift, and the rise in production and consumption taxed America's natural resources, altered the natural landscape, and significantly lowered air and water quality. These environmental changes stirred discontent, primarily among the booming population of students in colleges and universities. In the 1970s, the environment became a rallying cry for those alarmed at America's increasingly materialist society.¹¹

A new generation of activist scientific studies gave the budding environmental movement fuel for its political campaigns. Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* highlighted the dangerous effects of pesticides and challenged America's agricultural practices, its dependency on chemical fertilizers and pesticides, and the safety of its food supply. The new homesteading movement was an offshoot of this environmental concern. Many people turned to sustainable farming to help the environment: "neo-homesteaders see themselves as making an equally important contribution to the overall goals of the environmental movement: actually demonstrating . . . a sustainable way of life on their small-holdings."¹² Homesteading became a lifestyle choice for proactive environmentalists who internalized their beliefs — who "wore their ethics on their sleeves."¹³ Socially conscious Americans found that the original homesteader's maxim of self-sufficiency, simplicity, and sustainability blended nicely with the aims of environmentalism. New homesteaders paved the way for the natural food movement in Maine.

According to Russell Libby, a former executive director of MOFGA, the new homesteaders did not come to Maine to practice commercial agriculture or produce large yields to turn a profit. Homesteading was not a financially profitable venture. "The commercial aspects of small organic farming are pretty marginal. You do it because you love it."¹⁴ Back-to-the-landers pursued this lifestyle because they valued control over their own lives and freedom from society's emphasis on monetary wealth. Homesteaders chose to avoid the market economy, as did the Nearings, whose ideology clashed with capitalism.¹⁵ Many homesteaders, however, rejected consumerism simply because their aspirations did not include chasing economic gain.

The Nearings "taught a generation a more responsible way to live with each other and the natural environment" by setting a standard back-to-the-landers could reach.¹⁶ The couple's move to Maine may have inspired many others to follow suit, but there were other reasons why thousands came. By the 1970s, according to Barbara Riegel, there was "a new awareness of the values of farm life, both socially and environmentally. The young people have been expanding their ideas in rural areas... and are in real communication with their neighbors."¹⁷ By the end of the decade, the movement numbered over a million members. The Nearings were the seeds from which the back-to-the-land movement grew, but Maine was the ground in which those seeds were sown.

Maine's Homesteading Roots: Cheap Land and Geography

So why Maine? Why would Scott and Helen Nearing leave their sustainable maple sugaring operation in Stratton, Vermont, for a rundown farm on Penobscot Bay, and why did thousands of back-to-the-landers follow them? C.R. Lawn, a MOFGA member and owner of FEDCO Seeds, an organic seed cooperative, offers an example of the type of person who came to Maine in the early 1970s. In his interview for the MOFGA Oral History Project, he explained that he felt he was a part of a huge migration of like-minded people pouring into Maine. Educated at Yale and a practicing lawyer, Lawn did not have any expertise in farming, and when he bought his farm in Canaan he knew only that he wanted clear land, a well, and good soil. Lawn looked for land in New England, primarily Vermont, but chose Maine because of the lower price of land. He moved onto his twelve-acre homestead with the intention of "returning to the land" and "growing organic."¹⁸

Low start-up costs were so important to back-to-the-landers be-

cause the goal of homesteading is not to achieve large profits, but rather self-sufficiency. High land prices would lead to high debt, requiring homesteaders to focus more on generating income than self-sufficiency. Maine was sparsely settled, heavily forested and relatively large compared to other northeastern states, and long, cold, snowy winters give Maine a very short growing season; all of these factors drove down farm prices. Many homesteaders, in fact, bought rundown, abandoned farms with exhausted soil, hoping to rejuvenate the topsoil and making the land productive again. As they explain in *Continuing the Good Life*, the Nearings had almost given up on their search for a new home in Maine when friends mentioned an “exhausted” farm along the coast that came on the market during the final day of a visit to the state. It was a place that could be rejuvenated with hard work and know-how.

In addition to the low cost of farmland, Maine was also geographically ideal for homesteading. Scott and Helen Nearing explained: “between its minor river valleys, [Maine] consists of a succession of secondary mountain outcrops that divide the landmass into relatively small areas of well-drained soil and considerably larger areas of rugged slopes that make open cultivation difficult and emphasize the usefulness of hill pastures. Such broken landmasses lend themselves to the homesteading that has played a significant role in New England’s history.”¹⁹ Any student of agricultural history understands the impact of geography on human development; in order to survive, people adapt to the land and climate, or they or move on.

Homesteading in Maine

Despite favorable prices and geography, Maine’s soil is rocky and sandy, and it often takes significant amounts of compost and manure to supplement a vegetable garden or flowerbed. This did not detract from Maine’s attractiveness to homesteaders. While it is true that Maine’s climate, soil, and isolation complicate its commercial farming, these conditions were less concerning for the small self-sufficient farmers. Maine has been home to homesteaders instead of largescale agri-businesses throughout much of its history, and many back-to-the-land homesteaders were attracted by the state’s pioneering legacy.

Maine’s earliest agricultural ventures were along the coast and rivers, where groups of farmers from southern and central New England found ample land for their large families. “Before statehood . . . out homesteads . . . typically produced enough food for survival.”²⁰ This indeed was the



The inaugural issue of *Farmstead Magazine*, 1974. The publisher, George Franoulis, was a member of the “back to the land” movement often associated with Scott and Helen Nearing. Written primarily for other members of the movement, the magazine contained a wealth of information on “Maine Gardening & Small Farming”. *Image courtesy of the Blue Hill Historical Society.*

primary aim for those who carved farms out of the forests and established a foothold on the frontier. Well into the nineteenth century, these farmers lacked a home market for surplus goods. Maine’s remoteness and isolation made it unlikely that its farmers could compete with those in Pennsylvania and New York, who had easier access to urban centers. These obstacles forced farmers to adopt a “typically New England strategy of growing a broad range of subsistence crops to hedge against market or crop failure.” Farmers grew market and subsistence crops in a form of “mixed husbandry, whereby farmers raised the greatest possible variety of products for home use and export.”²¹ Due to a lack of capital, they became adept at producing almost everything they consumed on their farms — furniture, clothing, linens, food, soap, candles, and the like. “In general, however, farming was carried on not as a business, but for the satisfaction of the needs of the farm family.”²² Mixed husbandry

fostered a sense of ingenuity and self-reliance, two virtues that modern homesteaders held in high esteem.

Although Maine sits on the nation's periphery, it was not isolated from progress. The same economic, social, and scientific phenomena that spurred the growth of commercial agriculture in more temperate climates impacted farmers in Maine as well. Despite the rich history of homesteading in Maine, commercial farming has also had a long history in the state; Maine wheat and produce fueled the initial westward expansion and provided for the newly created urban centers that grew out of the Industrial Revolution. Improved railroads to Aroostook County introduced Maine potatoes to the world. Access to markets spurred differentiation and specialization, even on many small scale farms. Maine farmers specialized in potatoes, poultry, apples, and blueberries. These products provided the capital for further improvements, and new markets and railroads improved trade. At the same time, market production stimulated interest in agricultural improvement and strengthened social ties among farm families, who shared information at fairs and through the agricultural press.²³ Farmers formed cooperatives for buying seeds and tools, combined capital to purchase equipment, and formed the Maine Board of Agriculture in 1857 to encourage scientific improvements in Maine farming. The Maine State College was founded in 1868. The Maine State Grange and Patrons of Husbandry offered rural Mainers and farmers opportunities to organize politically and form purchasing cooperatives.²⁴

Scott Nearing, a student of history, must have recognized Maine's farming legacy and saw this as an inducement to settle there. In *Continuing the Good Life*, Helen Nearing explained that isolation and a pleasant climate sold them on coastal Maine as their new home. But theirs was more than a decision of necessity; it was a way to continue teaching and providing authentic learning experiences for students who would travel across the country for his lessons on simple living.

Nearing's Roots as an Activist and Educator

Scott Nearing began homesteading in 1905 in Arden, Delaware, when he built his first home, which he named Forest Lodge, and planted his first organic garden.²⁵ It is no surprise that Nearing located in Arden, as it was a hub for artists, pacifists, and socialists, and Nearing was all of these. Frank Stephens, a crusader for the "single tax," founded the community and called for the nationalization of all lands and for one flat tax

on the land in order to prevent landowners from exploiting non-owners.²⁶ It is fitting that Nearing settled in a place that allowed him to link his political beliefs with homesteading. While Nearing learned the rudiments of homesteading in Arden, he became radicalized as a teacher in the classroom.

After earning his doctorate in economics in 1909, Nearing became an instructor in the Wharton School of Business at the University of Pennsylvania. While teaching freshman economics, he found a captive and captivated audience, as his classes were mostly full. At Wharton, Nearing became an impassioned critic of child labor and acted on his beliefs by publishing pamphlets, leading demonstrations, and delivering rousing public speeches on weekends. In 1915 Nearing volunteered as the assistant secretary of the Pennsylvania Child Labor Committee, taking an active leadership role in attacking one of the unfortunate consequences of early American capitalism, the exploitation of children.²⁷

Nearing's campaigning triggered a strong reaction from Pennsylvania's Republican elite. Pennsylvania politician Joseph Grundy, a "textile magnate . . . and kingpin Republican," threatened to block an increase in state funding unless the University of Pennsylvania dropped Nearing from its ranks, and in 1915 the Board of Trustees decided not to renew Nearing's contract after nine years of service.²⁸ Despite legal proceedings reported in the national press, Nearing could not retain his position, but he moved on to teach at the University of Toledo in 1916. True to his pacifist ideals, Nearing published "The Great Madness" in 1917, denouncing America's involvement in World War I. In the passionate forty-page piece, he argued that the war was an attempt by "plutocrats, or wealth lords" to play on American patriotism to fight a war that "promised greater foreign markets, the destruction of foreign competition . . . and a longer lease on life for plutocratic despotism."²⁹ Nearing was indicted by a federal grand jury under the Espionage Act. While socialist leader Eugene V. Debs was found guilty and given a ten-year sentence, Nearing became the only dissenter to be acquitted of his charges under the law.³⁰ Blacklisted from academia, he joined the Communist Party in 1925.³¹ Nearing never again entered a college classroom, but he continued to teach and inspire to the end of his days.

Nearing the Educator and Homesteader

In 1932, Helen and Scott Nearing moved from New York City and began homesteading in Stratton, Vermont. Both took a hiatus from their

professions, he a teacher and she a dancer, to adopt a strictly regimented lifestyle immersed in nature and embracing simplicity. They tilled the soil with hand tools, developed methods to grow food and feed themselves all year long, and took from the land and farm only what they needed. They read literature on agriculture, and each chapter in their seminal *The Good Life* contains quotes from these books, many from the colonial and revolutionary era. In an interview, Scott Nearing recalled, "I decided to make my living by what I call bread labor . . . making the things necessary to feed, clothe, and house the population . . . to provide my share of the necessities." He described his farm as a "self-contained homestead society" free from the market economy and largely self-sufficient.³² This economy freed the Nearings from putting too much time and effort in raising money or seeking profit.

The Nearings did have some expenses, however, such as property taxes, concrete for building projects, and gasoline for trucks. Therefore, in both homesteads, they used "cash crops" like maple sugar in Vermont and blueberries in Maine to supply necessary funds. The Nearings explained that they felt a "responsibility . . . as members of the human race . . . [to] help our fellow citizens understand the complex and rapidly maturing situation; [and] . . . to assist in building up a psychological and political resistance to the plutocratic military oligarchy . . . sweeping into power."³³ Their political and social beliefs influenced their choice in becoming more self-reliant, but it was also an opportunity to continue educating people on how to fight an unjust system.

After they had moved to Maine, the Forest Farm became a social science experiment in which Nearing could model methods and techniques his students could learn then do on their own. Visitors who made the trek to the Forest Farm learned by helping in the garden and offering expertise or muscle power in building projects, landscaping, or any other type of work in maintaining the homestead. Many of these visits were unannounced and unplanned, and one would think that having to deal with an influx of people would be an inconvenience. Nearing's goal, however, was educating people on simple living, and therefore he welcomed visitors, but expected them to participate in the learning. If the Nearings were splitting wood, visitors were compelled to swing an axe. While the labor was certainly appreciated, the conversations with two master gardeners, stonemasons, builders, and champions of self-reliance must have provided students with incredible learning experiences.

Not everyone could make the trek to Cape Rosier, so the Nearings also wrote about their lifestyle. Scott Nearing was a prolific writer, pub-



Professor Scott Nearing, c.1914-1917. Scott Nearing began his career as an academic, teaching at the Wharton School of Business at the University of Pennsylvania. Despite being a popular lecturer, Nearing was dropped by the university in 1915 — around the time of this photograph — after state Republicans responded to Nearing’s politics by threatening the institution’s public funding. He then taught at the University of Toledo until he was blacklisted in 1917 due to his opposition to US involvement in WWI. *Library of Congress, Prints & Photograph Division, LC-DIG-ggbain-25524.*

lishing over thirty pamphlets and books throughout his life, but two books, both co-written with Helen, became their most famous. The “Good Life” books, virtual how-to guides for homesteaders, are best described as “extended lab reports on the experiments that the Nearings undertook.”³⁴ Students across the country learned from the original back-to-the-landers, and the emergence of the back-to-the-land movement in the 1960s and 1970s triggered a re-release of *The Good Life*. Nearing’s publications were his legacy to thousands of would-be organic farmers and gardeners around the world who have drawn knowledge and inspiration from the texts.

Nearing’s greatest gift to Maine, perhaps, was his support for MOFGA at its inception meeting over forty years ago. Scott and Helen Nearing were the keynote speakers at the organization’s first meeting at Thomas Point Beach in 1971. Today, MOFGA holds the Common Ground Fair, has over 6,000 members, sustains an organic certification program that has certified over 350 farms and 15 percent of Maine dairies, prints a quarterly newspaper, *The Maine Organic Farmer and*



Good Life Center, 2014. After Helen Nearing's death in 1995, Forest Farm was converted to the "Good Life Center," a non-profit organization designed to preserve Forest Farm, educate the public on the philosophies of the Nearings, and provide resources for those connected to the homesteading movement. *Image courtesy of the Good Life Center.*

Gardener, promotes crop sharing associations and local farmers markets, and lobbies the state government for more stringent food and agricultural laws to protect consumers.³⁵ It is in the organization's educational programs, however, that one can see the greatest impact of Scott and Helen Nearing. MOFGA emerged as a peer-to-peer learning network for people who came to Maine to rediscover rural living and homesteading.

While the organization offers workshops for its members covering a variety of gardening and farming topics, the Apprenticeship Program and the Journeyperson's Program help people hone their organic farming skills and become homesteaders. According to Andrew Marshall, the programs have enjoyed significant growth over the last ten years, attracting so many non-Mainers that the state has emerged as a net importer of learners. MOFGA's Apprenticeship Program pairs organic farms in Maine with people who want experience and training. The Journeyperson's Program is designed for those who have made a commitment to organic farming and who seek a deeper learning experience by immers-

ing themselves in the work and the community in order to develop relationships with other Maine farmers.

Andrew Marshall describes MOFGA's philosophy on education as a "peer to peer . . . [or] farmer to farmer model." The model embodies the spirit of community and collaboration that the Nearings established in Vermont and Maine. In its educational programs, the organization has been able to codify the informal learning that farmers have always used to pass on information. The model, established a half century ago by the Nearings, "is still people learning by doing and people learning by other practitioners."³⁶ Scott Nearing's profound impact on MOFGA's educational programs easy to see, and the Nearings' endorsement must have encouraged Mainers to join and support the organization. However, visitors to the Good Life Center at the Nearing farmstead might feel that the couple's greatest legacy is what still stands on the end of a one-lane road on the tip of a cape on Penobscot Bay.

Forest Farm and The Good Life Center: Scott Nearing's Educational Legacy

By the time the Nearings settled in Harborside in 1952, they were skilled at building and maintaining a small organic farm. Perhaps the most impressive aspect of this migration is that Scott and Helen Nearing, seventy and fifty years old respectively, hand-built the Forest Farm with rocks from the land and lumber hewn from its trees. Thousands of people visited and learned from the Nearings; they observed and immersed themselves in the lifestyle in order to experience daily life on a self-sustaining parcel of land and to witness the peace of mind the Nearings had achieved.³⁷

Though Scott Nearing passed away in 1983 and Helen Nearing in 1995, the Forest Farm remains a fully functioning homestead and education center. It is currently home of the Good Life Center which, according to its mission statement, has a goal to "perpetuate the philosophies and life ways promoted and exemplified by Helen and Scott Nearing . . . practitioners of simple, frugal and purposeful living . . . [while promoting] active participation in the advancement of social justice, creative integration of the life of the mind, body and spirit, and deliberate choice in living responsibly and harmoniously in an increasingly complicated world."³⁸ A Board of Directors, (which includes Nearing scholar Greg Joly and oral historian Studs Terkel) guides the efforts of the organization — and one of the efforts is to keep Forest Farm running for the public.

Two beautiful stone buildings dominate the Farm's forested property while a surprisingly small stone-walled garden and greenhouse are maintained year after year. The Center has volunteer gardeners working in the gardens, and visitors can actually help out with weeding and other garden chores. A working stone outhouse under the shade of large trees has a small sign that explains the benefits of using human fertilizer for shrubs and flowers. Apple trees grow in little stands on a lot surrounded by flowers. One can follow "the fairy trail" through the woods which leads to two smaller wooden huts known as yurts. One can imagine the Nearings sitting in their shelter, relaxing and meditating in the shade of the forest, the screens from the roof, door, and circular windows holding back the swarms of black flies and mosquitoes but letting in the cool air. To the left of the home is a small manmade pond, referenced in their books, and one can imagine the couple shoveling and wheeling load after load of mud and stone from the pond to the road — which they also built.

The Good Life Center hosts guest speakers and meetings throughout the summer, has an excellent bookstore, and invites schools and organizations for tours and educational opportunities. The Center allows caretakers to live on the Forest Farm year round, truly a capstone experience in a serious homesteader's education. It is the farm itself, though, that is Scott Nearing's greatest legacy. An exemplary product from a master teacher, it stands as evidence that successful homesteading is possible. Students who visit Forest Farm leave with a feeling of hope; they may never hand-build a home with rocks and timber from their own land, but their organic garden or their compost piles are a step in the right direction. They may never dig a pond with a shovel or build a yurt in the woods to commune more directly with nature, but maybe they will work with neighbors in a community garden or buy produce at a farmer's market. The Nearings' words and teachings speak through their literature. Their impact is felt at the Common Ground Fair and at MOFGA's Common Ground Education Center in Unity. But most of all, their example lives on at the small home in Harborside.

NOTES

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