



The Bunkhouse Chronicle

Craig Rullman
Columnist

'Peter and the Farm'

The Montana writer Richard Hugo, spoofing T.S. Eliot, wrote in the opening line of his mystery novel "Death and the Good Life," that "April is the cruelest month, my ass."

He meant that after a hard Montana winter any sign of spring, however tenuous, could only bring psychic and spiritual relief to the seasonally aggrieved.

Come April and May we often feel that same way here on the Figure 8. We laugh at weather forecasts because we all know that it might be — as it was just the other day — 80 degrees inside the greenhouse, raining on the south side of the barn, and snowing sideways on the north side all at the same time.

And anyway, we love it.

And, whatever the weather, I've been taking advantage of breaks in the annual spring toss-up to build a new turkey run (we are raising eight Thanksgiving birds this year for friends and family) re-rigging irrigation in the garden, planting seeds in the greenhouse, and prepping a small new orchard of apple and pear trees.

In the meantime I wanted to share a discovery I made last evening. "Peter and the Farm" is an extraordinarily gritty and honest documentary film about Peter Dunning, a 68-year-old organic farmer living on the Mile Hill Farm in Vermont.

Dunning, a former Marine who lost a large portion of one hand in a sawmill accident, is a hard-drinking, hard-swearing Yankee wild man who strikes me as a fabulous cross between John the Baptist eating locusts, Walt Whitman reading to wounded Union soldiers, and R. Lee Ermey manning a water-cooled machine gun.

I like that because there is a combination of agrarian imperturbability and manic spirituality at work in Dunning that, combined with an impeccably honest appreciation for the music of the farming spheres, reveals an intelligent, passionate, and complicated man.

That grand mix of energies shows up when he quotes from Wendell Berry's thoughts on the importance of affection while climbing a barn ladder, or speaks one of his own really good poems while drunk on cider and arguing with the filmmaker, or points out the place he will likely die: at the foot of the basement stairs, he tells us, after tripping and smashing his head against a stone wall — which as a side-note will probably also ruin the potatoes stored there.

Dunning waxes to anyone who might be listening while butchering a ewe, fixing his bailer, running his sawmill, reading, writing, drinking, and launching a non-stop delivery of f-bombs aimed at the madding world.

The film was directed by Tony Stone, and was originally proposed by Dunning as a film to document his own suicide. They declined that offer, but Dunning's original idea is in keeping with the question he asks during a particularly engaging rant against the incorporated and enforced fragmentation of modern life: "How many organic farmers go insane?"

Dunning is Everyman with a foul mouth. He is

See **BUNKHOUSE** on page 13

A new sign...



PHOTO BY JIM CORNELIUS

A work crew installed a new sign at BBR, replacing one destroyed in an accident on the highway last summer.

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