

Welcome to Vintage Americana. Exploring and restoring rural American culture.

I am your hostess, Holly, and in this first episode, I'm going to take us to the intersection of good stewardship and the spirit of place, why it's important, and how to take better care of the embarrassment of riches all around us.

Which means we probably ought to start with the question of "why"? Why does any of this matter?

Maybe it's something that comes with age? When we got married, my husband and I had intended to do the whole 'house in the suburbs, 2.3 kids' thing that probably would have culminated in a JoAnna Gaines-inspired 3 bedroom house in a development full of houses that all look alike, consuming our time with dance class, PTA, and all the usual trappings.

And then any number of things happened. Baby #1 was a micro preemie. Both of our daughters struggle with Autism. That suburb doesn't look so good when you can't let your kids out to run the neighborhood with the other kids. All the obstacles that had stood in the way of that plan started to look like they'd been there to keep us from making some choices that wouldn't have worked out very well.

Both of us have our roots in farm families. Memories of wandering meadows and building forts out of sticks in the woods. We weeded kitchen gardens, fed the cows, and played in the hay loft, well away from busy streets, neighbor's pools, and other people's property. So, one thing led to another and now we own a little over 10 acres of overgrown meadow with a walnut plantation on one side and a fencerow and sugarbush on the other. The new plan is to make the most of what we now have.

Let's start with the idea of good stewardship. This is one of those concepts that tends to get misused, twisted around, and stuffed into the form that's most convenient for the moment. Stewardship is the art and effort of making the best possible use of our blessings. And by that I do NOT mean getting the best return on your investment. Unfortunately, this is where everything that falls into "prosperity gospel" tends to go off the rails. Yes, good financial discipline is certainly a useful thing. But it's no where near the only thing. And people who go whole hog into any of these systems - whether it's Joel, or Suzie, or Dave, or whoever - fixate on the dollars and cents. And miss the real riches all around them.

Does that mean I'm talking about 'sustainability'? Not really. Sustainability also loses track of things. The idea of sustainability is to be able to obtain something without depleting future supplies. And, in general, that's a good thing. But there is a tendency to get tunnel-vision about what is 'sustainable.' "Well, I bought organic cookies in sustainable packaging, so we're all good." Are we? What did you really do there? You've made a choice that purports to let you have your cookies without harming the ability of your grandchildren to also have cookies. And they were made in accordance with a government approved definition of Organic - which may or

may not mean what you think it does. But how much of that went through your head when you bought them? “Sustainability” is a short hand term that lets us feel good about certain decisions - but maybe we’re not getting what we think we are.

Am I talking about self-sufficiency? Hmmmm, not that either. First, self-sufficiency is a continuum. Nobody is really ever completely self-sufficient. Even the most ardent off-grid prepper probably isn’t weaving their own cloth, smelting their own metals, and making their own tools. Is it a good thing to become less dependent on the extremely fragile web of consumerism? You betcha. And everybody finds themselves on a different point on that continuum. And that’s OK! But I want to think about it a little harder and merge it with some other ideas.

Stewardship means more than making sure your dinner doesn’t mean someone starves in 10 years. It means leaving behind a greater wealth of blessing than you started with. Regenerative farming is an example of good stewardship. The whole goal in regenerative farming is not JUST to get away from the extractive agribusiness model, but also to engage in improving soil structure and treating the farm as an ecosystem. So that the next person to farm it takes on a land more productive than it was when you started.

Maybe that idea goes further than just the ground. Can we also apply that same reasoning to the social and cultural aspects of our lives? Day by day, the constant drone of insipid pop culture continues on and we lose those unique aspects that tie communities and families together. In the same way that regenerative farming rebuilds soil structure, concentrating on preserving culture can help rebuild our social networks until they’re healthy again.

Can we regain the rich tapestry of all the things we used to know, and do, and enjoy? We feel around at the edges a little bit, when we talk about something that’s “authentic.” As much as we like to make fun of all the “artisanal” products on Etsy, part of us recognizes that craftsmanship is more than just making stuff. And that living as and among craftsmen enriches us all. Why do we buy that handmade breadknife that was carved from reclaimed elm? It has qualities all its own, a uniqueness not to be found in the entire display of knives at Macy’s.

All around us, everyday, our things and places are becoming relentlessly homogenized. We wear the same jeans from the same mall store. We live in houses with the same floor plan made by the same national building company whether we’re in Dallas or Duluth. And all the while, real uniqueness slips away. Not the fake kind promised by politicians. But the real differences in art, architecture, flavors, customs and people that make up the Spirit of a Place.

That’s an important concept for me. Different places have different essences. And sometimes it feels that the older a place is, the richer that essence. In fact, I’ll link an article in the show notes called “The Ghosts of Place” by Michael Bell, that fleshes out the idea.

There was a time when a dog trot porch told you that you were driving through the Deep South. Or that it was obvious those steeply peaked rooflines were there to help shed the snow, with

smaller windows to minimize heat loss in the cold and snowy North. The wonders of technology mean that we can throw all those old architectural variations to the wind! But should we? Do we lose more than energy efficiency when houses in Tuscon look just like houses in Bangor?

Are we poorer in something to live in a society that no longer features cake walks and community cookbooks? My parents both tell stories of the town where they grew up - and the tradition of a parade of all the costumed children down mainstreet on Halloween. How many small towns still make time to come together for these simple rituals? They're still there, dwindling quietly away in small towns scattered around the country. Little tastes of vintage Americana.

There is so much out there to rediscover and hang on to. Will you come with me? Are you ready to explore the places, spirit, skills, and history?

If you come along on this trip, what will you see?

We're going to talk about slow food. How food traditions help us hang onto our culture and infuse our communities. You can bake with me. We're going to bake in season. You might get some of my family recipes. And some that I've managed to reconstruct from my husband's. Some of it will likely even be gluten-free, because my oldest daughter is sensitive.

We'll talk about where those ingredients come from. And why eating local might be more important than any of the labels at the grocery store.

You can't get more local than your own backyard. So we'll do some gardening, plant berry patches, and start an orchard. Come along while I try to improve my grafting skills and listen to me rant about apple varieties, genetic diversity, and why heirloom varieties are so important.

We'll talk about finding lost apple varieties, and with luck go on a field trip or two hunting them.

Can you tell you're going to help my husband and I set up our little independent farmstead? Maybe we'll even get out of design and financing-hell and you'll get to come along on our house-building journey. Hey, a girl can hope. Right now, I have a beautiful plan on my desk for a Swedish farmhouse that I'd love to make a reality.

As things go forward, and we get moved, we'll be adding livestock. We'll talk husbandry, ethical raising of animals, and we'll be getting back into heritage breeds, genetic diversity, and how to support the work. Can you tell this is a hobby horse of mine?

In the meantime, there are lots of other things to explore. Remember that walnut plantation? Yeah, we'll be talking management of those sorts of long term resources.

And all slow food and cute critters does not a farm girl make.

I'm on a bit of a mission to pull away at least a little bit from fast fashion. I really have an issue with dressing my teenage daughters who are developmentally much younger than their years in the sorts of junior-hooker-wear available on the market currently. And for my own part, I'm at that awkward age where those same mall fashions aren't something I can wear without looking like I'm in denial. But on the other hand, I don't feel old enough for polyester pants and sweatshirts with flowers and birds on them.

So, prepare for some history bounding adapted for farm and town. And come along as I make use of historical pattern and fashion materials, changing things up to make adaptive clothes for my kids.

Nor is the family the only thing that needs to stay clothed. Expect to see a little quilting, some knitting, and all of the useful, homely skills that bring spirit and comfort into a home.

While we're pretty focused on trying to get our little place in the world straightened out, it's not an island. If we're being good stewards of our farm, we should see a result in an increase in biodiversity, too. Keeping some wild spaces will be a priority. I'd even like to plant an English-style hedge, using American species. Over time, it should serve as both a barrier to weather and livestock and a shelter for birds and small animals.

We're not an island either - the farm is part of the environment and we're part of the community. It has a history, and we'll explore that, too. I'm probably going to take you antiquing with me. We'll go visit old one-room school houses, and take a peek at old family homesteads.

Family history is communicated down the generations in keeping with traditions. And I love traditions. We'll try to explore some - and maybe even make some new ones.

Now, most of what I have planned for you is based in my little corner of the world, and draws on my community, my culture, and my interests. But I'm hoping that I can inspire you to explore your own place, find its *genius loci*, and help hang on to your own flavor of Vintage Americana.