

Excerpts from
A Bountiful Heart
The Life of Bob Evans

By Robbin Evans
With Mike Harden

FOR MY FATHER,

The visionary, the dreamer, the believer,

The “unmoved mover.”

He had the courage to follow his dreams

And the breadth and generosity of character

To lead those around him to do the same.

He refused to be defined by others.

And, throughout his life,

He continued to pursue missions

Greater than himself

In order to effect the improvement of the community,

Of youth, of farming and, of his neighbors

In an attempt “to leave the world a bit better.”

AND TO THE MEMORY OF MY SISTER, GWEN

Remembering My Father

By Wendell Berry

*What did I learn from him?
He taught the difference
Between good work and sham,
Between nonsense and sense.*

*He taught me sentences,
Outspoken fact for fact,
In swift coherences
Discriminate and exact.*

*He served with mind and hand
What we were hoping for:
The small house on the land,
The shade tree by the door,*

*Garden, smokehouse, and cellar,
Granary, crib, and loft
Abounding, and no year
Lived at the next year's cost.*

*He kept in mind, alive,
The idea of the dead:
"A steer should graze and thrive
Wherever he lowers his head."*

*He said his father's saying.
We were standing on the hill
To watch the cattle grazing
As the gray evening fell.*

*"Look. See that this is good,
And then you won't forget."
I saw it as he had,
And I have not forgot.*

Excerpts from the
Preface

From the works of Wendell Berry

What happened, from a cultural point of view, was that machines were substituted for farmers, and energy took the place of skill. As farmers became more and more dependent on fossil fuel energy, a radical change occurred in their minds. ...

The final irony is that we are abusing our land in this way partly in order to correct our “balance of payments”—that is, in order to buy foreign petroleum. In the language of some “agribusiness” experts we are using “agri-dollars” to offset the drain of petro-dollars.” We are, in effect, exporting our topsoil in order to keep our tractors running. ...

To survive, our farmers are going to need a fully developed local land-based economy supported by informed and locally-committed urban consumers. To achieve this will require a long time and a lot of work, but we have begun. ...

Foreword

Alex Chamberlain
Granddaughter

As a young girl, I was fortunate to spend the most formative years of my life in a place of incomparable heart. Southern Ohio was a place where dirt roads cut through green rolling hills, farms marked the way, and creeks and ponds offered the perfect afternoon escape. The easy tenor of voice and cadence of speech was as common as the outstretched hand and congenial welcome. You understood that, even in very few words, much was shared. It was a place where pleasantries carried genuine interest and family matters mattered. It was a community of kind people living and acknowledging all around them. It was a beautiful place to be, and those feelings I carry to this day. This book has been written as a tribute to the life of my grandfather, a man who embodied all of these sentiments and, I believe, infused them with his own passion and enthusiasm.

I had never recognized energy quite like his. Even at the age of 6, I knew it was inimitable. You could hear it in the doorknob even before he entered the room. He was a juggernaut, a whirlwind of ideas coming to action with each step. He was “a visionary on parade.” His whole-hearted personality and generosity of spirit fit him better than his Stetson and string tie. I think the only thing that ever stopped him in his tracks was my grandma.

The round kitchen table in my grandparents' home was a place of many meals for my brother and me. It was a constant hub of action: phones ringing, people coming and going, stopping in to say hello and to share a story or something from their farm or garden. All the while, timers signaled for pies to be pulled from the oven, pots boiled on the stove and the smells of the out-of-doors mingled with the home-

cooked food my grandma prepared. Throughout my life, I found that it would be hard to find a meal, even in the whitest of table-clothed restaurants, that plated a better-tasting spread than my grandma. And, it was on one of those days, sitting at that table in the middle of chaos, that I remembered looking at my grandfather, a sideways glance through the half-circle bite of my bologna sandwich, and being mesmerized.

His stubbled chin and cheeks, always flush with pink, pinched in the corners of his eyes when he smiled and talked, and he was always doing one, the other or both. He spoke big, with an excited voice that implied that he “was onto something” and willing to share whatever he knew with whomever was smart enough to listen. He was like watching a story unfold and, as a young girl, there was nothing better.

Half the time I wasn't really sure where he was going or why, but I knew it would be fun. Along the way, we would surely stop to talk to a couple of people about matters of which I knew nothing, but which would be resolved with a smack on the hood of his truck and my grandpa's three-finger wave. A part for some piece of farm equipment would either be ready to pick up or drop off at the supply store. We would visit someone else's barn, home or business, stop to kick the tires and be on our way. There was never a trip when I wouldn't have to get out and unchain a gate and re-lock it. We drove through rutted pasture fields and scaled steep hillsides that even the bravest of Chevy ad-men wouldn't dare tout as possible. We dragged dead logs and thicket to burn piles, clearing land for the cattle. I often found myself in the middle of a multiflora rose bush, cutting and pruning it down to its demise. I must have really liked him to do all that. And, I did. And, most times, at the end of our trip or somewhere along the way, we were met by the broad, white faces of his Charolais cattle. Bovine who were, no doubt, not surprised to see his blue pickup. He would check that they had successfully been moved from one pasture to the next, eating fresh grass while the adjoining field replenished itself for their eventual return. He tended to them and his land, as he did to everything he loved, with dogged devotion.

To most people, my grandfather was a successful entrepreneur

and this, of course, is true. He worked for years building bridges and breaking barriers that existed in the restaurant and food industry. He worked tirelessly, creating a company that represented a haven for weary travelers and hungry families; a place that was worthy of carrying his name. He lived by the belief that quality was not just spoken about but carried through in every detail of business, from product to relationship. With each deliberate step he took, he knew that he was creating something much bigger than himself. He was not looking for fortune or fame, rather he had an enormous appetite for the challenges, for the generation of ideas and the possibilities that would come and eventually outlast him and all who read this book. His success was founded in more than gumption and fortitude. It came from the soil on the bottom of his shoes, the faces of his neighbors, the hills that he was so proud to call home.

The greatest thing my grandfather ever did was never leaving where he came from and never forgetting why. He found the most profoundly beautiful of all things right there in the valleys of southern Ohio—my grandmother, the land of Gallia County, his family, his friends and his farm. Looking back over the years, I realize that he never wanted or needed anything more than home. And, it was a home that he, even to his final days, helped to create. Sometimes, as with a willful teenager, he had to use his judgment and be patient with the process; but he never, not even at the darkest hour, gave up on home. He believed more in his community and the people it embraced than himself, than in almost anything. He fought for the underdog every time, but he did so because he knew that, against all odds, there was always a chance. I have yet to meet anyone with this ability and, even as a young girl, I recognized his unabashed love and appreciation for people. He was connected to these things foremost because they resonated within him like the call of wild geese or even a gentle April rain; he knew them well but loved them more.

I don't think, when he started making sausage, that he ever knew the magnitude of success it would create, not only by Wall Street standards, but also in the lives he touched. I think he wanted to make a superior product and sell it with an honest handshake in hopes of

beginning a new and lasting friendship. This was never clearer to me than after his death. The sheer number of people who visited his calling hours was staggering. Not one person, to my knowledge, left early without paying respects to him, my grandmother and the family, even though the line stretched up one hallway and down another, out the door and down the steps into the heat and humidity of a June afternoon. At times these people stood for hours, talking amongst themselves, perusing photographs from his life and articles that decorate the walls of Bob Evans Hall at the University of Rio Grande. Some had worked at various restaurants together; some held pictures and snapshots taken years back with my grandfather at a restaurant opening or at the Ohio State Fair. All of them were personally and profoundly grateful for the life he had led and the opportunities that he created in their lives. I heard, more than once, the humble voices of fellow Ohioans and Midwesterners expressing to my grandmother, “Bob Evans helped put my son through school.” Or, “Bob gave me a job when no one else would.” All of them were teary-eyed and bewildered by his loss. He meant so much to Ohio, and with each face that passed and walked back out into the heat, I felt their love, respect and gratitude for his life and his legacy.

Throughout my life, I have used my grandparents as models of the person that I aspire to be one day. I learned through them both, through their love, that the most beautiful things in life are simple; that an entire world exists in a blossoming dogwood tree; that each creature, no matter the size, has a purpose; and, that beauty is everywhere. To my grandfather, there was nothing more beautiful than my grandmother. She was his confidante, his shoulder of respite and his beacon. In his final days, the entire Evans family was stricken with grief and overwhelming sadness. I know that this was true of my grandmother, but she held more composure than us all. Maybe it was because she knew the best of my grandfather and shared in all of his life: good and bad. She held his hand in the front seat of his truck from their first date to now, over 67 years later, having never let go. The two of them, being best friends and lovers, created their entire lives around and with each other, knowing that no matter the struggle or joy, they had been

side by side. And, throughout our long stays at various hospitals, my grandmother added elegance and beauty to every hallway she strode, each elevator she entered and in each room she graced. Never would she take a wheelchair, but rather, she walked like I imagine the young woman my grandfather fell in love with, down miles of florescent-lit hospital hallways, every moment willing my grandpa to return home.

I guess you could say that he had “beaten death” so many times that I was beginning to think that the Grim Reaper had decided to write him off as a bad prospect. Perhaps Death itself was in awe of his resilience. So, although he was very ill, I was surprised at his death. To me, it was unimaginable. By his sheer nature, by his own generous heart and resolute will, he taught me more about life than anyone. I am eternally grateful.

At your grave I wanted so much to be alone with you just one more time. Even if the moments were filled with silence. Just having you there gave me strength and affirmation that life, even wildly juxtaposed with farm to fame, could still balance perfectly in all its beautiful chaos.

Excerpts from

Chapter 4

*“How to Win Friends
and Influence People”*

Dad was a Golden Rule egalitarian, a disciple of the notion that everyone who passed his way in life was as forthright and honest as he was. Some would prove themselves unworthy of such trust, but, in large measure, the actions of those who became partners in his life’s successes simply confirmed what he believed about the inherent goodness of humankind. Over time, I came to understand that while the earth and all that it produced and sustained was the mother church of my father’s spiritual ideology, people represented its enduring articles of faith. In his own peculiar way, dad was an unwavering proselytizer of people. He didn’t knock on their doors and ask them if they knew where they would spend eternity, but he could be tenaciously persistent in enticing them to come take a seat beneath the spread canvas revival tent of his vision for the future. When he was first starting out in business, he tracked down his friend Harold Cregor all the way to a steel mill in Youngstown.

“He’d find out where you were if he liked you,” Harold said. “He called me up in Youngstown and said, ‘I need you. I got a job for you back here.’”

Dad knew that having vision without well chosen people was like faith without works.

“Your dad’s right-hand people were the true salt of the earth,” Bob Wood said of my father and those who came to work for him, “and he cared about those kind of people more than most people did.” My father understood that natives of Appalachia are sometimes sold short by

more urbane and cosmopolitan city folks. Dad counted on them, these people from the heart of his home country as a treasure and a blessing. They worked in the sausage plants, ran the truck routes. So many doors were opened to them that Bob Wood said of the joke around the company, “If you wanted to be in management at Bob Evans, you had to have been born south of U.S. 40.”

When my father met people, issues of status, social position and relative degrees of economic standing neither affected nor interested him. He believed, as Ralph Waldo Emerson had said, “Every man I meet is in some way my superior.”

Excerpts from

Chapter 5

A Steward of the Land

My father's wish was to know the land.

Once he had purchased a new parcel, perhaps a subsistence farm of 60 or 80 acres, one of his first steps was to halt continuing erosion by filling in the gullies through which topsoil was carried away during the rains. Gallia County's longtime game warden Kenny Tomlinson recalled of the next step, "He used lime to sweeten the soil. Putting the lime on also destroyed the broom sedge."

Excerpts from

Chapter 14

The People's Homestead: Farm Festival Days

“Your father wanted to share with people who had never grown up on a farm, first of all the value of farming as a part of the growth of America. Second, he wanted them to appreciate the many sacrifices of the small working farmer today, and he wanted to represent that group because he felt he was one of them. The whole idea was to provide a service to the public that would give them a greater appreciation and a sense of value of farm living both from an historic and a small-farmer perspective.

Dad never minded surrendering that piece of the home place where people could tap their toes to Foggy Mountain Breakdown, taste the yield of the sorghum press, sample the kettle-cooked apple butter, be awed by the nimble produce in quilts turned out by local hands, or ponder the cabins of Adamsville while marveling at the fortitude of the first settlers to the area. All of that, he surrendered, knowing that he still could travel to the woods and be held spellbound by the work of another visionary genius: Mother Nature.

The poet Wendell Berry said, “What I like about the woods, what is consoling, is that usually nobody is working there, unless you would say God is.”

Excerpts from the

Chapter 15

Once More to the Woods

Dr. Brian Griffin, an Irish-born cardiologist who practiced at the Cleveland Clinic is a man who, quite literally, came to know my father inside and out.

“I got on well with him,” Griffin said of dad, “because he was Welsh and I am Irish. We were fellow Celts.

“Everybody who worked with him here at the Cleveland Clinic found him to be an incredibly engaging person. He was very down to earth. In Ireland, we say of such people who made it big but remained unchanged, that he never lost the run of himself.

“We made a decision to operate on him when he was 85. It was a very high risk procedure in an older person, and your father was somebody you had to present something to in a very definite manner. As long as you had good reason on your side, he would listen to you. I explained to him that we would be putting in a new heart valve made of cow tissue. Your dad being your dad, he wanted to know what breed of cow it was. That was his glory.”

He took great pleasure in the fact that the American dining public had bestowed such favor upon his family restaurants. He considered it no small accomplishment that he had been able to take a sausage he was told he would go broke trying to sell and make it the first choice of consumers wherever people shopped for groceries. It was rather that he knew in his heart that while, in a world suddenly absent of Bob Evans Restaurants or the many grocery-store products that bore his name, people would find alternatives. For the family farmer in America,

though, struggling to keep a head above rising water, the widespread adoption of rotational grazing might be the only chance for survival. It was not an idea requiring budget-busting outlays of tax dollars or the establishment of a massive and unwieldy bureaucracy. It was as simple as sun, soil and seed, as fundamental to nature as making chlorophyll, as stated in Wendell Berry's works.

“My love for the land has always been a driving force in my life,” dad had told a reporter for Land and Water magazine. “I haven't invented anything new. All I'm trying to do is heal the land with grass, let the cattle harvest their own food and make it possible for small farmers to make a decent living. This system makes it possible for young farmers, who may not be able to afford to buy expensive machinery and equipment, to save money, labor and business. The only equipment you will need is a bush-hog, a tractor and some electric fence.”