

*My heart is moved by all I cannot save:  
So much has been destroyed*

*I have to cast my lot with those  
who age after age, perversely,*

*with no extraordinary power,  
reconstitute the world.*

—Adrienne Rich, *The Dream of a Common Language*

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## Bob Benson: Patron of Our Place

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by Richard Plagge

During the middle years of the Great Depression, although they were both very poor, Bob Benson and his father bought 150 acres of near-wilderness land on the southwest slope of the Tualatin Mountains, 15 miles northwest of Portland, Oregon. Bob says he is embarrassed to tell how little they paid for it.

Bob still lives on this land, alone now, in the house his father built during World War II, while Bob was away clerking for the army. The outbuildings are crumbling, vines have overgrown the remains of a picket fence which must once have squared off a pleasant little front yard. Just as his father did, Bob runs a few cattle and sells a little firewood—he is still very poor. The land, however, is worth a fortune.

From a certain hilly clearing on Bob's land there is a dazzling view: two huge volcanic cones (Mount Jefferson and Mount Hood) punctuate the distant skyline; beneath them, 30 miles across the rich soil of the Tualatin Valley, the Chehelem Mountains snake their mild way across the low horizon. This valley—where, until the epidemics of the 1830's killed most of them, the Tualatin Indians hunted deer and gathered camas roots, where the very first Oregon Trail covered wagons finally came to a halt—is presently one of the fastest-growing areas in the state.

Ambitious suburbanites—who have turned the eastern end of the valley into a typical late-twentieth century jumble of jammed two-lane roads and bleakly similar franchise outlets—have made it

clear to Bob that selling his land is a duty. Why then does he remain this odd figure, part awkward hermit, part old-world gentleman, who shuffles through spiffy Beaverton shopping malls in rumpled coat and wrinkled pants, when, with a quick land deal, he could transform himself into . . . a successful man?

Bob was born in 1915 in Portland, where his parents owned a rooming house at East Grand and Davis. His earliest memory is of holding his mother's hand as he toddled across the Sullivan's Gulch Viaduct. In the early '20s, wanting to leave urban life behind, dreaming of "five acres and independence," the family bought a small house a muddy half-mile from the railroad stop at Valley Vista, a tiny community located about halfway between where Bob lives now and the notorious Rock Creek Tavern. Bob's word for Valley Vista's educational edifice, the two-room Rock Creek School which he attended through sixth grade, is "palatial": it had a concrete-lined basement, a furnace, a piano, and even a P. T. A. Bob's parents tried to supplement their income with various ventures: chickens one season, goats the next. Nothing proved to be very lucrative. But then it wasn't a very lucrative town; to be well-off in Valley Vista was to have a retired soldier's pension. On the whole, Valley Vista, a railroad development which had had the bad luck of being subdivided into existence on the eve of the automobile age, turned out to be a

disappointing project for its speculator-backers. Sixty years later the place is still small and still muddy.

Bob's father was a carpenter and small-time contractor who read a lot (Darwin and Kropotkin) and liked, as Bob does, to speculate on "the future of mankind." About the time Bob entered junior high the family leased out their Valley Vista place and moved to a cheap rental house in Oregon City, where his father, strapped for money, had taken a steady job. Bob discovered the nature section in the local library: all sorts of bird books, tree books, flower books. He devoured them all, and while he claims that he has never gained a profound knowledge of botany and biology, being able to identify the flora and fauna has been "a pleasure and a comfort" ever since.

Many years later, speaking so softly that his visitors have to lean close to hear him, Bob will point out "lovely rare flowers" with his pudgy farmer's hand:

*There's the corydalis, an extreme rarity, related to the bleeding heart but quite different in the detail of the flower: it's gone to seed here, but when the whole thing is a spike of these odd-shaped flowers it's quite impressive. That little fringe of vine with the lacy flower, that's the saxifrage. And there's the native waterleaf. There is also a weed waterleaf from Europe which is very coarse-looking. As you can see the native waterleaf is anything but coarse. I didn't know about*



Tree island in the Tualatin Valley

*that colony of tiger lilies . . . see them? There will be quite a show when they get into bloom.*

As Bob grew older the delicate petals of his "lovely rare flowers" would gradually assume the role of threatened protagonists in a dramatic geographic and temporal scenario. Now, in his sixties, he points out that the natural vegetation in his botanical zone is on the defensive, beleaguered by modern technical progress, constantly threatened by monster timber and earth-moving machinery, and by poison spray. The arch villains in this scenario are the sales representatives of poison spray companies whose incomes depend on convincing people, especially officials in Salem, that even if their product should happen to wipe out a native plant or two, there's no reason to join the petty hysteria of the environmentalists. These native plants are just weeds after all, which, when left to their own devices, try to spread their messy way onto (what

should be) neatly poisoned roadsides.

Lesser villains in Bob's vision are certain flourishing non-native plant species which now cover acres and acres of Oregon and Washington. "A few newcomers have made themselves right at home here," Bob says, waving toward a gigantic tangle of himalaya blackberries. "They find our climate to be just what the doctor ordered. We must have a care for the native species or they'll be elbowed out by these immigrants. We crowded out the native Indians; we certainly don't want to see the scenario repeated in the plant kingdom."

Bob likes to explain that the North Pacific Coast botanical zone, which extends from about Eureka, California north to Alaska, is either the smallest or the second smallest of the world's 24 botanical provinces (New Zealand might be slightly smaller). He says that there was a time when we could feel more complacent and say "Oh, even if it is a comparatively small botanical area,

there's still so much land that there are bound to be holes and crannies here and there where almost anything could escape." But these days we can't be so sanguine about it: "With thousands of bulldozers rumbling about, and with all these poison merchants showing their bright shiny teeth, and treating the officials to banquets and giving them awards and medals for their assiduity in destroying weeds—why some of these valuable species might be lost. And that will be a particularly poignant tragedy, because our botanical zone is rather crucial in the evolutionary process."

Crucial in the evolutionary process? "Yes," says Bob, and at this juncture, when he is about to stretch the taffy of one of his ideas to its tensile limit, about to pull its sticky ends into the farthest reaches of time and space, Bob usually stares at a point on the ceiling above his listener's head, and speaks more softly than ever.

*Yes. There is evidence that this botanical zone is the nexus, the most important connection, between the north and the tropics (or subtropics). When the botanical areas of Europe and Asia are pressed southward by ice sheets, as they are from time to time, why the plants are pressed right up against the Alps and the Himalayas with no refuge, no way to get across. Those east-to-west running mountain ranges form an impenetrable barricade. But here, where the mountains run north-to-south, there's easy refuge right down to California for an escape. Then when the ice sheet recedes another age later, the plants can move north again. Eventually they repopulate the northern hemisphere.*

*The redwoods are a good example. At present they only live south of here, in Northern California. But at one time there were redwoods all over the northern half of the world. Given time, the redwoods will perhaps re-tree the northern continents. So you see, if you wipe out a native plant in Oregon you interrupt a rather significant evolutionary cycle.*

Bob's family moved back to their home in Valley Vista just in time to experience the economic terrors of the Great Depression. Too broke to pay for outside entertainment, the family spent its evenings in long discussions with a

recent immigrant from Switzerland. This "Switzer" (as Bob always calls him) was a fanatic on the Single Tax ideas of Silvio Gesell. He knew Gesell's books forwards and backwards, could quote them like a parrot. "In Depression times," Bob says, "almost everyone was thinking somewhat along Gesell's lines. Money wasn't circulating because the big shots were hoarding it. The Single Tax seemed like a wonderful way of forcing money back into circulation." A central tenet of Gesell's philosophy, one which Bob inhaled into his bloodstream, is that all sorts of economic evils stem from a single corrupting root: speculation in land. This is why, for the past 35 years, Bob has snubbed the real estate sharks who come sniffing around his acreage, hoping he will sell.

For a couple of years Valley Vista felt to Bob like the Concord of Emerson and Thoreau, with spontaneous seminars going late into the nights, with words flying so fast that Bob, a high school student, learned to talk monetary theory with the agility of an unusually coherent economics professor. (Bob's knowledge of the technical intricacies of economics still often startles people.) But then a fly, or rather, a spy, entered the ointment in the person of a nosy retired soldier. "Apparently he had us under surveillance," says Bob, "any time we had a visitor he would make up some quick excuse, maybe bring over a squash or something, so that he could see who that visitor was. I doubt that he was anyone's agent because later on we learned that he had been in an insane asylum, had been divorced by his wife for some sort of paranoia. But, who knows, he just might have had a cobweb right straight to the FBI. Anyhow, it just burnt my dad up, and I think one reason he bought the land up here was to get away from this character."

Bob's ideas, on wildflowers, on the ways 50,000 year flood cycles effect Oregon geography, on the myopia of bureaucrats, on the economic theories of Silvio Gesell, always somehow come around to being about "the land question." He often says that the limited amount of public spirit that the human race is capable of must be used where it counts the most: on the land base of our own civilization. For many years he has studied the land holding systems of the American Indians, fascinated by the way they were able to get along without seriously harming the earth. This is

why the very idea of public officials condoning poison spray so dismays him: in poisoning the land, Bob feels they violate their most sacred responsibility.

This deep concern with land made mapmaking a natural for Bob. Maps were a hobby from early in his teenage years, but he only began to make them professionally when he was in his thirties. There were some troubles in his local fire district. Firemen would fling themselves onto their trucks and roar out, sirens wailing, only to discover that roads marked on the Gay Nineties maps they were using no longer existed. This situation came to a head when firemen watched an old woman's house burn to the ground across a huge un-mapped gulch at the end of Myers Road. Someone on the fire board got wind of the fact that this guy Bob Benson could draw a map.

For about ten years he had a little map business in a rented office in Hillsboro, a blueprint machine, the whole works. He tried manfully, says Bob, to get a successful company going, and did produce a surprising number of maps: of Hillsboro, of Washington County, of Sauvie Island. But somehow, for reasons Bob has never quite figured out, he was never really efficient. Maybe, he says, it was a certain laziness inherited from his paternal grandfather, a Minnesota Swede so captivated by the 10,000 lakes that he focused his life on fishing. "One can't do one thing entirely anyway," Bob says, "unless he's a sort of automatic producer. The boss cracks the whip at eight o'clock and you just keep on producing until five. You know, I can't do that."

But when he closed down his little business Bob did not stop making maps. There is the wonderfully precise map of Indian dialects that was selected for the prestigious Oregon Historical Atlas. And there is the elegant multicolored map that gives such a clear image of the Northwest Maritime Climatic Region: imagine that you are looking south from a point two miles up in the air to the north of Vancouver Island. The island looms huge underneath you in the foreground; the Pacific Coast, with its inlets at the Strait of Juan de Fuca and the Columbia River, is a fine curving pen line to the right; to the left the line of volcanos, each drawn in as a satisfying little mound, disappears toward California. In the upper left the following message appears on a huge cloud, written in Bob's neat, straightforward

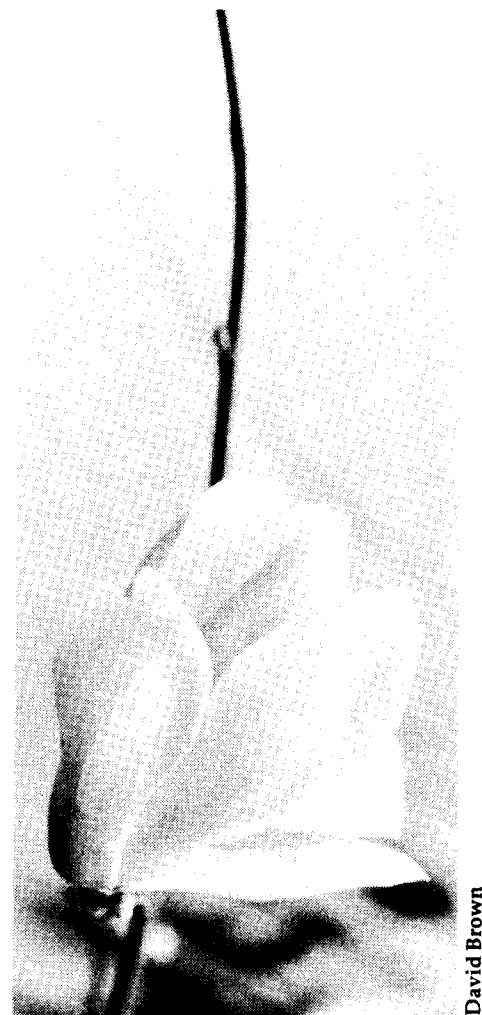
calligraphy:

*ON A RARE DAY OF PARTIAL CLEARING, CLOUDS SEPARATE TO REVEAL THE MARITIME NORTHWEST. ON THE EAST, THE CASCADE RANGE PROTECTS IT FROM THE THIRSTY PLATEAU. ON THE WEST IS THE PACIFIC.*

To the right, in the crescent formed by the Pacific Coast, a second cloud contains this message:

*SOUTHWARD THE SISKIYOU AND TRINITY ALPS PALISADE THE MARITIME NORTHWEST AGAINST THE BARE BROWN HILLS AND BURNING PLAINS OF CALIFORNIA. NORTHWARD, THOUGH MARITIME CLIMATE PERSISTS, AGRICULTURE CEASES, TURNED BACK BY MOUNTAINS THAT RISE FROM THE SURF.*

The Maritime Region map illustrates one facet of Bob's mind, the ease with which it can get up above and see the lay of the land, the broad patterns. But he is



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equally fascinated by the specific and concrete, a focus perhaps best illustrated by the astonishing article (published in the Washington County Historical Society Journal) entitled "The Tualatin River, Mile By Mile." Beginning at the mouth of the river (Mile Zero) he takes his readers on an incredibly detailed journey along its banks, giving one paragraph for each tenth of a mile. For example:

*1.7 Fields Bridge, takes Highway 212 across the river. I remember it as a covered bridge, but the modern replacement is an ordinary concrete span. There used to be tree swallows, an uncommon species, nesting in a bank near the bridge. Perhaps they still do. Just upstream from the bridge is a gauging station.*

*3.33 Harris Bridge, where Farmington Road (Highway 208) crosses. The dips where wagons gained access to the ferry can be seen a few rods south of the bridge. West of the bridge a furlong or so was Farmington, with a historic church and store. Both have disap-*

*peared but the community's picnic grove, long owned by the church, still rises forlornly behind the old site. Commerce has fled to the east side of the river, where Twin Oaks Tavern, at the River-Road-Highway 208 crossroads, enjoys an active till.*

Bob's knowledge of the area he grew up in is uncanny. He sees things on several levels at once so that you sometimes feel you are riding in a car with some kind of X-ray machine that is equipped with a time-shift module. "We are now passing over a latitude line," he says. Then, a moment later, "This road used to climb the grade up towards that farmhouse, but in '48 when this new highway went through, the state managed to finagle an easement through here." Or: "That big boulder over across that field is probably an erratic which floated over here in a chunk of ice during one of the post-glacial floods."

Bob loves to make inventories. He has produced lists (often accompanied by maps) of prize-winning trees, water falls, mineral and hot springs, of unique botanical areas, nudist beaches, en-

dangered species. "Non-Parks in Oregon" is a list of still-up-for-grabs places that a sensible society would have preserved a long time ago.

Bob is usually working on several inventories at once. He even has an inventory of proposed inventories. One of his indexes (to Washington County sites of historical or ecological interest) runs to 1100 cards. It's not easy to grasp the meaning of this list-making obsession. In part it is playful: Bob, the kid-adventurer, searching out the highest waterfall, or the biggest tree. He will spend a whole day wandering about a foothill of the Coast Range looking for the remains of a historical road. But in a deeper sense Bob wants his list-items to lose their invisibility so that they begin to appear on the maps used by the bureaucrats and the realtor/developers. He despises the outside developer's perspective of the land, which, he feels, tends to see only the survey lines and the profit potential; which ignores the pretty waterfall, the vestiges of an Indian dancing ring, the 100-year-old farmhouse. The 1100 sites mentioned in his card-file boxes are what, in Bob's view, give his county its texture: erase



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them and you are left with a sprawl of roads and buildings, denatured and without history.

Some of Bob's projects can seem rather eccentric, what you might expect from a hermit-intellectual-mapmaker-dreamer-farmer-ecologist. Head-in-the-clouds stuff. Once he got curious about whether or not a replica of Stonehenge (built by the son-in-law of a railroad magnate, it sits on a bluff high above the Columbia River) possesses the mathematical qualities of the original. His 50 or so pages of calculations indicate that it is a few degrees off. Another project was a chart illustrating the location of star constellations for the next five hundred years.

But when he learns that one of his beloved places is threatened he can move into the valley with practical authority. A 1971 letter to Riviera Motors, a large Portland Volkswagen dealer, begins:

Gentlemen:

*One of your officers was quoted in the press as seeing "no problem" in the fact that the Five Oaks tract along the Sunset Highway in West Union is prime agricultural land. Your Volkswagen installation on this acreage, while welcome from many points of view, forms an entering wedge for the destruction of one of Oregon's very few areas of highly productive soil. There are people who do not look on this as "no problem."*

Bob goes on to point out that "nobody in your organization seems to have made any public comment" on the presence of the Five Oaks—"the gathering place of the earliest independent farming community of Americans in the West"—on this tract of land. He suggests that the trees, "if left standing as a center of attraction, will pay developers many times over [in favorable publicity] for the small space that they occupy." Riviera Motors responded by naming their development "Five Oaks Industrial Park" and agreeing to preserve the trees. "This is about the best you can expect," says Bob, who feels that a sensible society would have turned the area into a state park.

An inventory that Bob made up in 1968, "Notes On Natural Areas, Trails and Landmarks in the Portland Area," has this entry:

*BIG CANYON is mostly Bureau of Land Management (BLM) land; the tract was logged in the thirties, but the bottom of the canyon was*

*only lightly damaged and many big firs were spared. A group of botanical enthusiasts, reinforced by some local botanists of standing, are pestering BLM for a ten-acre natural reservation to preserve the canyon-floor flora, once so common, now so rare. Access only by special permission through private property.*

Five minutes to three, a misty afternoon in 1978: Bob Benson removed a shapeless brown hat from his very round head as he shuffled into a gray barracks-like building in Tillamook, headed for a BLM hearing on the fate of Big Canyon. He was feeling "nettled" that he had been notified too late to attend a previous meeting which, he has heard, was attended by many loggers and no botanists.

Wedging his roly-poly body uncomfortably into a retired school desk at the very back of the meeting room, still holding onto his hat, Bob took a look about the room. Three or four BLM guys, sharply dressed in cream-colored shirts and wide neckties, bustled self-importantly about, carrying cups of coffee. The other desks were empty. Standing next to a map of Big Canyon, which was ensconced on an expensive-looking easel, one of the young men began the presentation, talking more to the other BLM people than to the plump man in the back row, whose socks seemed to be slipping toward his battered old shoes.

When Bob raised his hand he looked like a large round fifth grader. "Yes?" said the lecturer, a tinge of impatience in his tone. Looking not at the young man, but off to the side, Bob, in his soft, clear voice, began to explain that there were a few problems with the map. The road at E-6 wasn't, he didn't think, there anymore, though there was a road near there until a mudslide washed it out around 1928. And were they aware that there was a nice little waterfall on that creek at about F-9? He went on in this vein until, in a couple of minutes, he was talking to an absolutely quiet room.

A couple of people padded over to join the lecturer at the map. They stared at it curiously, as if they hadn't seen it before. A man hovered next to Bob, waiting to ask if he wanted his coffee dark or light. Bob was asked a lot of questions. He explained that his organization, The Tualatin Valley Heritage, felt that it was important to protect

certain rare wild flowers which grew along the streambed in Big Canyon from the logging companies. The young men assured him that they shared his feelings, that the BLM would make every effort, etc, etc.

Later, on the drive back to Portland, Bob was asked if he thought the BLM people were sincerely concerned about the flowers in Big Canyon. "I believe that there's enough of a leavening of really dedicated people that quite a bit might be done," he answered. "But you never know because there's always the other moiety that has its eye only on the main chance, which in this case means pleasing the big shots, the big timber producers." When it was suggested that his manner at the meeting had really wowed them, Bob said, "Oh sure, they have a certain respect for me in a small way, but it can't be a very big respect because I'm sure it didn't escape their notice that my group is rather small and weak. In the report they turn in on this meeting about Big Canyon a notation hidden in the fine print will make it clear that disapproval from the Tualatin Valley Heritage is not something to lose much sleep over."

## It Wasn't Ever the Flowers

Not the delicate jowls of the opium poppy.  
Not the wax goblet of the burgher-economy  
tulip. No more than it was the starry blue  
of the great camas meadows, but when  
the settlers plowed under the lilies, it  
touched off the Nez Perce War.

—Vi Gale

## Bob Benson on the Tualatin Indians As Told to Richard Plagge

A common tongue, not political organization, united the 20 or so tiny Tualatin Indian villages that were scattered about the valley: on the rare occasions when the whole linguistic group did want to discuss something they would meet on the western edge of the valley, at Gaston, next to a huge oak tree. This tree lasted until just a few years ago, when it was bulldozed to make way for Highway 26, the main route from Portland to the coast.

The Tualatins knew how to hammer stone wedges into cedar logs, or even into live cedar trees, in just the right way to split off the nice planks with which they built their houses. A bride who could offer a dozen tried and true planks as a dowry was considered a real catch because her groom would have half of the great labor of building a house behind him.

The Tualatins were on good terms with the Chinooks, river Indians who lived just over the Tualatin range, along the Columbia. One hears of Tualatins going across to the Portland area to fish and pick camas bulbs. Friendly, too, were the coastal Tillamooks who allowed the Tualatins a little vacation campsite near Nestucca Bay. (The campsite was not quite on the open ocean though, for these were inland people who would not have known how to predict high tides.) The Clatskanai were another story: unsociable and clannish, they would sometimes attack and kill the careless Tualatin who wandered a little too far north into their Nehalem Valley territory.

Though they lived in a valley that, upon the arrival of the whites, would soon become a nexus of economic and political power, the Tualatins were a poor, unaggressive tribe, mainly worried about where the next meal might come from. In a world without agriculture a great rich-soiled valley doesn't mean very much. The power center in Indian times was a couple hundred miles northward, around Vancouver Island and coastal British Columbia, where the Nootka's and the Kwakiutls garnered a food surplus from innumerable inlets packed with easy-to-harvest protein.

The Tualatins probably didn't have to pay tribute to the powerful northern tribes. Nothing formal like that. But

they did have to worry about slave-raids, about being captured and sold to the middlemen who operated a complicated slave economy which served to carry inland victims to the chiefs of the coast.

On rare occasions the Tualatins would cash in on the slave trade themselves. Bob tells a story of a young Tualatin chief who, just bursting with ambition, frantic to impress his Chinookan in-laws (he had just married into the Chinookan aristocracy), rounded up a gang of young rowdies and led them on an up-state slaving expedition. They managed to capture a number of victims whom they dealt to the British Columbia traders.

The first major disruption of the Tualatin way of life was in the early 1830s when a Yankee trading vessel dropped anchor at various points along the Columbia. On board were several active cases of malaria. There were plenty of local mosquitoes of exactly the right type to transfer the disease to a few Chinook Indians on the shore; somehow—the Tualatins did, to a certain extent, intermingle with the Chinooks—the germs were then carried over the low mountain range into the valley.

This first epidemic was devastating. Within a few weeks more than half of the Tualatins were dead. And the lucky survivors were not home-free: four out of five of them would perish later on, uncomprehending victims of other white-introduced microorganisms.

The remnant Tualatins tried to maintain a going way of life, but it was hopeless. Weak with fever, confronted by greedy, vigorous white people telling them they had no rights at all that had to be respected, they retreated first to their ancestral center around Gaston, and then, finally, to a sour-soiled plot of unwanted land in the foggy valley of the South Yamhill River. In this sad environment, the Grande Ronde Indian Reservation, most of Western Oregon's inland tribes faded out of history. No one, today, speaks the Tualatin language.

Thus the early settlers of northern Oregon, the farmers and the missionaries, proved themselves to be almost as skilled at the task of erasing Indians from a landscape as were the ruffians and jailbirds, the gold hunters, who first settled southern Oregon and Northern California.