Tribute to an American Farmer
By Dean Moberg, December 2000

A friend of mine, John Melugin, died last week.

I called John's wife, Dora, who is 91. She said John had collapsed at home and told her he was dying, so she called an ambulance. The hospital docs thought he'd be up and around in 3-4 days, basing their diagnosis mostly I think on John's lively chatter. John was a great talker. But he knew he wasn't going home. When John's three daughters and many of his grandkids came to visit, he told them that he didn't want to die on Dora's birthday, which was Wednesday. So he died on Tuesday.

John's youngest daughter, Stella, is the chair of the Botany and Plant Pathology Department at Oregon State University. Back in the 1970's, she taught at Denver University where I was a Biology major. Stella arranged
for me to work on her parent's 23-acre farm in Ceres, California, and suggested I transfer to UC Davis to study agriculture. I worked on John and Dora's farm, in between quarters at Davis, for three years.

The first week I was there, John, Dora, and I headed toward the north end of the farm to pick cucumbers. A crop duster was spraying the neighbor's sorghum field, but a fair amount of the spray was coming onto our side of the fence and landing on the cucumbers we wanted to pick. John told me and Dora to stay back while he went up to the fence line, climbed to the top of an orchard ladder, and tried to wave the crop duster off. On the crop duster's next pass, he flew right over John, dousing him with pesticide. John was pretty mad as he strode out of the field and back toward the house. I was 20 years old, standing next to Dora that morning, and feeling very far away from the world I knew. Two minutes later, John stomped back passed us with his 12-gauge goose gun. I asked Dora "He's not going to shoot AT the plane, is he?" Dora answered, "I hope not," which wasn't the reassuring response I expected. John marched out of sight into a field of sweet corn next to the cucumbers. Dora and I stood silently as the crop duster banked and began a descent to make another pass.

Later, John told me that he never pointed the gun *at* the plane; he just "showed" it to the pilot. The plane climbed sharply, flew away, and in the future always sprayed the sorghum field east-west so he didn't violate John's air space.

John supported any little guys fighting against what he called "the establishment." He would have made a fitting character for a Steinbeck novel. When his family lost their Oklahoma farm in the Depression, John
migrated to California where he worked making grape boxes for pennies apiece.

I don't know how he met Dora, who had a Master's degree from UC Berkeley (unusual for a rural woman in the 1930's), but I do know they ran off to Carson City to get married. I think

Dora's parents never entirely approved of John. Still, John and Dora inherited part of the family farm, including the old white two-story Sears Roebuck wooden house that dated to the 1800's. When I worked for them, I slept in that old house and John and Dora lived in a small house they had built nearby.

The farm was a magnet for singular personalities. For example, Nellie Riggs (Dora's sister) and her husband Arlis would stop by once a month throughout the summer. Arlis, during World War II, had welded battleships in the California shipyards. Later, he designed and built gyrocopters from VW bodies. His nose was all pushed up and misshapen from the crash landings. When I was working on the farm, Nellie and Arlis were over 70 and had given up on the gyros. They spent their summers in the mountains prospecting for gold, using dredges and hoists that Arlis invented. Arlis sometimes donned scuba gear so he could go after gold in the bottoms of deep cold mountain rivers. Arlis would go on at length about gold, inventions, the problems with the world, etc., and John said I should stop work and listen whenever he wanted to talk.

John was incredibly knowledgeable about a variety of subjects. We always listened to an AM radio news station at lunch and John gave running commentaries, providing biographical info on obscure congressmen, American history lessons, or geography trivia. Then he'd pause during a news account of some cruel incident and ask me if I could explain why people acted the way they did.

I remember John once told me he would be happy if he could get through life without causing any cruelty and without going blind. The cruelty part was because he believed in kindness. Maybe the blindness thing was because he read a lot.

He seemed to remember everything he read, which mostly consisted of National Geographics, the local Modesto Bee newspaper, and Reader's Digest book collections. Socially conservative, but politically liberal, John was a bit of an enigma to me at first. He once told me he thought mixed race marriages were a bad idea. Then he voted for Jesse Jackson for president, saying Jesse was the only candidate who was telling the truth. He liked the idea that Jesse was fighting "the establishment."

John's farming practices were also hard to figure out. He didn't believe in pesticides, so he used black light traps to kill hornworm moths in the hothouse tomatoes. When nematodes and verticillium/fusarium wilt threatened his crops, though, he reluctantly fumigated by injecting chloropicrin into the sandy soil with a gadget that looked like an oversized metal syringe.

John loved animals and his farm was over-run with geese, chickens, rabbits, ducks and cats. His favorite duck was named "Dorothy," his favorite goose was "Petunia" and his favorite cat was "Silver." When I worked there, Silver was older than I, and John fed her raw eggs because she wasn't very good at catching gophers anymore. Irrigated land in the San Joaquin Valley is hugely expensive, but John left a few acres of overgrown peach orchard in the back of the farm. He knew a family of gray foxes had a den hidden back there and he wanted to give them refuge.

John taught me that if you spit on a nail, it's easier to drive into a stubborn board. He favored nails and bolts over glue, which he claimed never worked well. He taught me to choose the right hoe for each weeding job (he had three or four kinds) and showed me how to sharpen it with a file before going to work.

He also showed me the importance of allowing people, especially less fortunate people, to maintain their dignity. He knew a logger who was out of work because a load of logs had fallen on him, crippling him, I suppose, for life. The logger's family came to the farm and John let them have bushels of fruit and vegetables. Then John invented some minor job the family could do on the place so they felt like they earned the produce.

John Melugin (and Leo Tolstoy) helped me learn the privilege of a day's work. When I first came to John's farm, the work seemed impossibly difficult and the days interminably long. After my first summer, I read Tolstoy's "Anna Karenina" and was especially interested in the descriptions of Levin throwing himself wholeheartedly into work in the farm fields. I resolved to do the same. The next summer, even though I worked physically harder, the days grew easier. Each day had some blessing. Each row of cucumbers growing lush and green was a source of pride and gratitude. Each bucket of harvested tomatoes was a source of strength. A mid-morning break to eat a fresh peach from the row of Elbertas over by the hothouses was a gift.

John noticed the difference in my work that second summer. I knew that he appreciated my work. He knew that I was becoming part of the farm and the farm was becoming part of me.

And, although I grieved when I heard John died, the grief isn't lasting very long. Now, already, the shadows of grief are fading in the light of pride and gratitude that I was lucky enough to know John Melugin, work with him in the tomatoes, hold boards while he nailed straight and true, laugh with him about the antics of geese feuding in the apricot orchard, ponder life with him at the dinner table. Often, these past few days, I feel like he's right here next to me, or actually deep within me. His presence gives me strength.

I am grateful.

-Dean Moberg