

I have been thinking a lot about neighbors and neighborhoods today. This isn't the first time this topic has occupied my mind. Years ago I wrote an article about the concept for a hand spinning magazine. I remember writing that in the farm community of decades past, the people who occupied our vicinity were usually folks who were living the same kind of life—farming or working very locally, growing gardens, sending their children on the yellow bus to the area school.

But, that is not the case these days. Although the people living around us are perfectly nice folks we like and enjoy, they are often people who have recently moved into the area and are not as familiar with all of the old customs, activities, and needs of a rural community.

In the article I mentioned, I wrote that we need to include the people around us in our neighborhood, for sure, but we must expand the concept to include others with whom we can exchange views and information who do not live close to us. We need a new definition of “neighbor.”

So, I began thinking of our beekeeper friend and family who live at least thirty miles away as neighbors. I soon added friends in Norway and Sweden who were sheep raisers and wool spinners. I included the wool handler where we left our wool to be picked up for delivery to the cooperative in Ohio. The young man from whom we bought our most recent ram lives an hour away—he's a neighbor. And the folks who keep some of our yearling ewes each year at “summer camp” a couple of counties north are neighbors. So, instead of a rural community that has lost its connections—with the land, the forests, the lakes, and the farms—we have found a new, vibrant neighborhood.

But, that older, traditional definition of “neighbor” also still has great meaning. And it is one of those neighbors we lost this past weekend.

There are people we have known for a long time, and new friends we have become acquainted with in the past few years, and then, there are those we have known forever.

I remember when Matt Canfield and his twin brother Max rode the school bus with us. They were three years behind me in school, and I remember thinking how unusual it was that these boys looked—to me, anyway—exactly alike. They were cute little fellows, too.

And, although his brother moved away after they graduated from high school, Matt stayed here, living in the home where he'd grown up. He worked with his dad, a well driller, and Matt eventually took over that business.

From this vantage point he became the person that countless local people contacted as soon as they had “water trouble.” He spent time here working on our well, too, and fixed up for us a hand pump we can use on our shallow well if we should lose electricity for a period of time. He told Runo, “I think I can find you something that will work.”

A lot of Matt's friends knew him as “Boone” for his outdoor skills and hunting ability. And, he always knew where the brook trout were. I remember asking him where he was going fishing on the first day of trout season.

“Oh, I probably won't go at all,” he answered. Too many people around. But when I do, I will go to _____”. mentioning a creek that only the

longtime residents of the area are familiar with.

In the spring, Matt and Susie often made maple syrup, and in the fall, they were sure to be busy with their cider press. For years, we would find jugs of some of the best sweet cider I have ever drunk waiting by our gate on a fall afternoon.

Somehow, we “know” folks we have always known in a different way. We may not spend time with them. Our interactions are mostly of a short nature confined to what is going on right now or, conversely, take place because we are trying to remember who it was that did something, where somebody lived, or whose cousin or uncle or aunt some particular person was. This is the function of “old neighbors,” and we are mighty sorry to have lost one of the best. And, we think of him today on the first day of deer season. Matt and Max Canfield were born on November 15th, and Matt always looked forward to his birthday and the beginning of deer season as one and the same. We are sorry he won't be out hunting this year.