



Lessons from Silas and Lona

Several years ago when it became apparent that my mom was failing, I went through a shoebox of photographs she had accumulated over a lifetime that began with a Depression-era childhood in the Appalachian Mountains and will almost certainly end under the loving care of my older sister. I sorted, labeled and burned the photos onto CDs. Among them were the holiday, school and prom pictures of us kids taken 30, 40 and 50 years ago. I also discovered lots of ancient, grainy, black-and-white photos, including 20 or so of my mother's parents, Silas and Lona. Seeing them again caused me to stop and reflect a bit.

Neither of my grandparents ever owned or drove a car. They had electricity but not a television. They drew their drinking, cooking and cleaning water from a well. When nature called they retreated to a drafty two-holer behind their huge wooden barn. They heated their home with natural gas, which their property had in abundance.

My small, birdlike grandmother milked the cows, fed the hogs with scraps from the kitchen table, collected the eggs from the laying hens and often killed, plucked and cooked a chicken for a Sunday dinner. My grandfather, tall and rail-thin, hauled timber out of the mountains, and planted, plowed and harvested corn on the flat bottomland below their mountainside home.

Looking at those photographs of my grandparents, who I loved and who died more than 30 years ago, I weighed how remarkably different their lives had been compared to mine. Less comfortable for sure, but I never got the sense they regarded their lifestyle or lot as unusual or unfair.

They wasted hardly anything, and their impact on the environment, including their use of resources, such as water and energy, was small. They used little more than they needed.

Few, if any of us, would want to return to this level of sustainability. Likely we couldn't if we tried. Sustainability for my grandparents was simple.

It was day-to-day living. Our understanding of sustainability is vastly more nuanced and complex, beyond even the dictionary definition — the process biological systems use to remain diverse and productive over time. We've expanded the definition to include our profit-driven consumerist economy and address the long-term health and growth of our free-market system, as well. People, planet, profits, right?

Indeed, there may be as many interpretations of sustainability as there are groups trying to embrace it. Some of us view it broadly, and eagerly embrace and adopt technology and the products that it has provided to advance our business objectives. Others, inside and outside of our Green Industry, say we've become too dependent upon certain products that technology has provided. They say that too many of us have adopted a short-term, quick-fix mindset that is causing damage to our environment and to our industry.

Can it be that they're both right?

Yes, I believe they are.

While our system rightfully rewards innovation, and we all greatly benefit from technology that provides us conveniences and leisure unimaginable to my grandparents, technology alone is not going to guarantee that we or our industry will prosper in the long term. The example set by Silas and Lona in using their meager resources efficiently may, in fact, be as vital to sustaining our industry . . . as well as our society.

Our understanding of sustainability is now being stretched to fit our profit-driven consumerist economy and address the long-term health and growth of our free-market system.