

THE Home

SECTION

C1

lower right hand corner of first page of "HOME" ↓

A Country Place: It's Far From Paradise

By JOHANNA GARFIELD

A PLAGUE on both your houses," says the wicked witch in the Broadway version of "The Wiz," and the lion's horrified rejoinder, "Not my country place!" never fails to get a knowing laugh from the audience. The fantasy of a peaceful, bucolic retreat where one can "get away from it all" — a "little place in the country" to which you and yours will blithely depart every Friday at 6 to return refreshed and renewed on Sunday night — has become part of the American Dream. But the "mountain greenery myth" is one that badly needs debunking.

Many otherwise rational couples, who might weigh at great length the value of a new color television set or a dishwasher, plunge into this far more radical investment with joyous abandon, convinced it will bring a quietus into their lives that has so far eluded them. They are wrong. Too late they discover, as we did, that, like motherhood, a weekend place is a very mixed blessing.

The basic problems, as I see them, fall into four categories: A) children — one's own and others; B) friends and neighbors — native or otherwise; C) animals — domestic and wild, and D) work — indoor and outdoor. Many of these categories, of course, overlap. The extreme reluctance of A (children)

to do D (work) is a case in point. Outraged cries of "But you said we were supposed to have fun here!" frequently echo through the peaceful mountain air at Sunday cleanup.

Let's begin with the kids. You bought the place, at least in part, so that they could benefit from the fresh air, escape the "idiot box" for a few days and escape some of the social pressures that often accompany city/suburban life. If your place is a good drive from the city, you're soon in trouble. Johnny, your son's best friend, is having his birthday party Saturday afternoon. Either you have a gloomy, morose son on your hands in the country from Friday night to Sunday, or two gloomy, morose parents remain in the city on a bright, sunny weekend.

If your children are young, car sickness is a common hazard of the journey. As they get on in years, the question of "friends for the weekend" arises. If you have three children, you soon find that you are also dealing with three friends ("If he has one, why can't I?") and there you are, playing short-order cook for eight.

Which brings us to "friends and neighbors." In an attempt to provide companionship, we'd invite families with parents who were friends of ours.

Continued on Page C6

Drawbacks of a Country Place

Continued From Page C1

but who also had children roughly the ages of our own. Sounded ideal and often was fun — on Saturday. By Sunday, having served approximately six meals to groups of no less than 10, we were exhausted.

Even friends who helped out on Saturday often had to leave early on Sunday to "get organized for Monday." (So did we, but it seemed churlish to bring that up.) The final cleanup, now more than doubled due to five extra house guests, fell directly upon us.

Friends and relatives often regard their weekend invitation to the country as a chance not only for themselves and their children to enjoy a romp in the fields, but for their cherished pets to do the same. The arrival of these furry guests is sometimes preceded by a request — but not always.

Which brings us to animals. The search for our cat, who almost invariably disappears the minute we begin to even think about packing on Friday afternoons, has been known to delay our departure for more than an hour. We are loathe to leave her in the city, however, since she is our strongest ally in the endless struggle to keep native wildlife from our door.

By that I mean particularly the field mice, who seem to regard our attic as their winter home away from home. Lethal doses of D-Con (we buy it in bulk) are some help, but many nights I have awakened with a shudder to hear

the "wee cowrin' beasties" scurrying about overhead.

Evidence of their mid-week presence below the attic floor is regularly found in clothes and pantry drawers; clearing out these nasty little pellets is one of our less pleasant tasks on Friday evenings, along with sweeping up comatose flies from the floors.

But of all the categories, the one that can most dampen enthusiasm at the prospect of a glorious weekend in the country — in one's very own house and on one's very own property — is work. Besides the dishes and other chores one would have to do anyway, there are the additional tasks peculiar to the weekend stay.

You must shop for food on Friday and pack up leftovers from home that, you become magically convinced, will take on new appeal in the country. Cheeses that are hardening around the edges are usually included in this group. And you must do this shopping and packing so as to have just enough to last through Sunday noon.

By Sunday, having inevitably miscalculated in some area, and probably not having attacked with relish the city leftovers, you find there are all kinds of odds and ends that seem unworthy of long-term storage in the small country freezer. These must be transferred from little bowls and plates, re-wrapped in aluminum foil or Saran Wrap, and refrigerated with ice packs to go home again. Then, of course, the sticky little bowls and plates must be washed. And so forth

Grounds must be cared for, and you either find yourself paying exorbitant prices for local help or spending much of Saturday on the lawn mower. If you or your mate likes to garden, hours are spent in weeding around plants that invariably bloom on weekdays when you are not there.

Trying to get repairs and improvements done via long distance is like trying to handle a stage full of marionettes from two feet away. A small example: We decided, in a burst of decorative courage, to break a 20-year pattern of white house and green shutters with the innovation of a red door. During our absence, the first red was applied: a murky brown. The apologetic painter, who mixed paints between Mondays and Fridays only, brought a sample card and we tried again. The next week, while we were away, the muddy shade was replaced by a shiny and startling Chinese red. The sample card had lied, but we are living with it.

We are, in fact, living with it all: the mice, the work, the company (or lack of it) and, of course, a certain measure of pleasure. For sentimental reasons we probably won't give our country place up. But my advice is: Take that money you were going to use for a down payment on a weekend place and if "There's a Small Hotel!" — go there!

Johanna Garfield, a freelance writer, has been going to her country place since she was 8 years old.

REMEMBER THE NEEDIEST!