



DON'T LOOK BACK

A former flower child revisits her hippie roots on a British Columbia farmstead—and wonders what might have been. *By Barbara Graham*

THE CLOUD COVER IS THICK AND LOW as my son, Clay, and I head east from Vancouver in search of the dairy farm where we lived when he was a baby, more than four decades ago. I want to show him the old farmhouse and the hemlock-studded hills high above the Fraser River where I walked with him peeking out of a baby carrier every day that fall and winter.

I haven't been back since we left, when he was 6 months old, and I'm afraid we won't be able to find the place. Or, if we do, the house will be gone and the land will have been turned into a tacky-tacky subdivision, with no trace of the home I once loved. Looking back, it's hard to know whether my happiness then was due to the place itself or to the time in my life. Still, on my way there now with Clay, who took photographs for this story, I feel as if I might be dreaming.

It was a dream that took us to Canada in the first place, a dream of homesteading. This might have been a swell idea in 1871, but not in 1971 when, five months pregnant, I moved there with my then-husband, Brian. It was his idea

"It was a dream that took us to Canada in the first place."



to escape the stain of the Vietnam War, not to mention the excruciatingly dull lives of our uptight parents, by going back to the land (from which I did not come) in peaceful, bucolic British Columbia. I'd met Brian in my hometown, New York City, not long after hearing Timothy Leary preach from the pulpit of the Fillmore East: "Turn on, tune in, and drop out." Which I promptly did. Brian was the ideal partner for my exploits.

Unlike any guy I'd ever known (or the doctor I was raised to marry), he was a soulful artist with cowboy

California. I was already living so far beyond the borders of my previously known world that British Columbia seemed as good a place as any to have a baby.

We were going to reinvent the world and help transform global consciousness from hate to love by ... raising chickens. And by becoming so self-sufficient that we could opt out of the crassly commercial military-industrial complex. Forget that I had zero talent for sewing, gardening, or any of the other DIY skills needed to do so. I couldn't even drive. This had once been a point of pride, since before fleeing New York with Brian, I'd planned to spend my whole life in Manhattan as a famous stage actress. I'd never need to get behind the wheel.

Reader, I was young.

Brian and I were part of a tidal wave of "freaks" (we never called ourselves hippies), draft resisters, and free-floating artists and musicians who drifted north across the border starting in the late '60s. (The draft wasn't an issue for Brian, who was born in Canada.) And though by the time we showed up, the idea of staking a claim on land in the Fraser Valley was a joke, we were able to rent a farmhouse 45 minutes east, near Mission City, from a Mrs. Hill. Our house was in the middle of the barnyard. Alas, we never got around to raising chickens or becoming farmers ourselves (unless you count a few anemic pot plants), but there were cows roaming right outside our front door, including one named Barbara. While Brian took odd jobs to support us, I spent my days reading *Mother Earth News*, baking bread, and walking the fields picking apples that I turned into

Once a haven for "freaks," Vancouver still offers bucolic rhapsody, artists, funky restaurants, easy escapes, and farm-fresh bounty.

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cred. He'd grown up in California's San Joaquin Valley and spent summers wrangling cattle in the Sierra Foothills. By the time we learned I was pregnant, soon after my 23rd birthday, Brian and I had crisscrossed Europe in a VW bus and crashed in communal pads from San Juan, Puerto Rico, to Boulder, to Topanga Canyon back in

applesauce for the baby. My theatrical ambitions were on hold. I was going to be a mother; that was enough.

Our excursions to Vancouver, about 35 miles west of the farm, centered on weekly prenatal classes. During these visits, I was seduced by the beauty of the city that seemed to encompass nearly as much water as land and was ringed by towering snowcapped mountains.

“It’s strange to imagine the beginning of my life in this place. At first I couldn’t see us here; now it’s absolutely crazy that we didn’t stay.”

Clay and I are spending a few days in Vancouver before we search for the farm. Our first stop is my friend Meg Ida’s ceramics studio. Meg and I—with our respective husbands, now both exes—met in Lamaze class soon after I arrived in Canada. We were all living hand to mouth, with no grand plan on how we would survive. We bonded immediately.

Meg is now a successful artist, as well as a nurse. We’re in her studio surrounded by her brightly glazed salt and pepper shakers, among them Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre, and Karl and Groucho Marx. “Everything we did was kind of crazy,” she says. “But somehow our naïveté carried us through.” Meg, along with her draft-resister ex and their two daughters, never left B.C.

Neither did my childhood best friend, Nora Blanck, Clay’s godmother and an artist from New York who came to visit me on the farm and who has lived in Vancouver ever since. “I actually got paid to paint, which is one of the reasons I stayed,” says Nora, also a friend of Meg’s. “Being here then was like living in a golden age.”

In the early ’70s, British Columbia was especially hospitable to artists, musicians, and other creative types. You could score a grant through the Canadian government, then collect unemployment when the funding dried up. I even heard about an American expat who missed baseball and got a grant to start a team.

People who meet me now have trouble believing my stories. You lived on a farm?

they ask, incredulous. You moved with a baby from the farm to the woods where you had no plumbing or electricity and your nearest neighbors were bears? All true, I tell them, though when I look back on those years, I think maybe I had some sort of psychic lobotomy. (Luckily, it was reversible.) Still, I can’t help wondering who I would be if Brian hadn’t wanted to hightail it back to California after just one year—if I too might have wangled funding and stayed forever? Would I be more recognizable as the “freak” I once was, instead of the nicely dressed, thoughtfully accessorized grandmother I am now? And of course I wonder, who would Clay be if we’d stayed in B.C.?

Impossible to know, but in a certain sense, both Clay and Yarrow—Meg’s daughter and the reason Meg and I met in prenatal class—carry the baton for the alternative lifestyle we once yearned for. “Vancouver is nothing like it used to be. We call it Hong Kouver,” Yarrow says, referring to the thick cluster of skyscrapers that clog the city’s downtown, spreading out in all directions. In fact, Yarrow left Vancouver four years ago for Gabriola, a smallish island off Vancouver Island where life is more laid-back, and where she raises chickens and honeybees.

Even though Clay and Yarrow haven’t been in the same room since they were babies, they hit it off right away and have a lot in common. Food. Art. Yarrow is the produce merchandiser for Vancouver’s East End Food Co-op, and Clay is a photographer specializing in food. Both are devotees of farm-to-table eating; both are serious travelers. Before we leave the studio, Clay invites Yarrow to visit him in Italy.

Watching these two connect is sweet. So is this trip—bittersweet, really—because a month from now Clay, with his wife and two young daughters, will leave their home in the Bay Area, where I live, to spend the next year in Italy

THIS WAY IN

Vancouver’s hippest hood, Kitsilano has grown up a lot since the Summer of Love. You’ll still find traces of its 1960s roots, just with a more refined twist. Here are a few spots we dig.

CANADIAN BRUNCH

Rustic **Oakwood Canadian Bistro’s** menu is sustainable and completely Canadian, meaning it serves food sourced from area farmers. The confit tuna Benedict with dill hollandaise and the asparagus omelet with truffle crème fraîche are both good ways to start your day. \$ \$ U.S.; 2741 W. Fourth Ave.; theoakwood.ca.

JUICY GREENS

Part alternative grocery store, part farmers’ market, **Greens Organic + Natural Market** offers everything from fresh produce to

gourmet sandwiches. Swing by the recently added **Indigo Food Café** juice bar for a Summer Breeze—a blend of apple, cucumber, cilantro, lime, and pineapple. **Greens:** 1978 W. Broadway; greensmarket.ca. **Indigo:** indigofood.org.

SLEEP LIKE A LOCAL

With lush foliage and a pitched roof, **A Suite @ Kitsilano Cottage** looks straight out of a storybook. If the remodeled 1910 Craftsman-style bungalow with garden views and patio does not sway you, the central location will. From \$187 U.S.;

sleeps7.asuiteatkitsilanocottage.com.

COOL BEACHES

Kitsilano Beach, or “Kits Beach,” as locals call it, is a 600-yard stretch of pristine sand and crashing waves. Kick back on the shore or pick up the seawall path for a nearly 14-mile walk along Vancouver’s dazzling waterfront. But if you want to re-live the days of free love, head to the western tip of the city to bare it all at **Wreck Beach**, Vancouver’s famous nude beach. Photography is allowed only with permission. **Kitsilano:** vancouver.ca.

ca. Wreck: wreckbeach.org.

PEACEFUL COCKTAILS

Once a meetinghouse for Greenpeace, **The Bimini Public House** remains a hub for forward-thinkers. You’ll find a menu of cleverly named cocktails like the It’s Complicated—a robust concoction of bourbon, pressed apple juice, and cinnamon syrup. Or simplify things and order a pint of one of the dozens of craft beers available on tap. \$ U.S.; 2010 W. Fourth; donnellygroup.ca/locations/pubs/the-bimini. —Alexandra Deabler



Homestyle USA-meat treats!

All-natural bacon, meatball and sausage treats that look and taste like the real thing because they're packed with high-quality ingredients – starting with real USA meat first – and nothing artificial!



Travel

working and restoring an old farmhouse. To have this time with my son, in this place, is precious. I sense that Clay feels the same way.

“Since I was born in Vancouver, I thought I would feel some deep connection,” he tells me. We’re strolling the beach in Kitsilano, a neighborhood once considered the Canadian equivalent of San Francisco’s Haight-Ashbury, but which has been gentrified beyond recognition. “I even thought I might want to live here someday,” he says, sounding both surprised and disappointed. “But I’m not feeling it.”

To get a taste of the good old, bad old days, I drag him to the Museum of Vancouver’s exhibit on the 1960s and ’70s called *You Say You Want a Revolution*. Though it’s unnerving to see my youthful cohort presented in a historical context, the display of psychedelic posters and album covers, patched bell bottoms and fringed jackets, anti-war buttons and news stories about the “hippie invasion” is evocative.

So is The Naam Restaurant, which opened in 1968 and has been offering homey, vegetarian food 24/7 ever since. In Kitsilano, The Naam is arguably the last remnant of “The Sixties,” which to my mind took place from about 1964 to 1974. Although the fare doesn’t quite meet Clay’s high foodie standards, the vibe is good and the joint is packed. From there, we head to Third Beach in Stanley Park—once a gathering place for our tribe, where Brian and I sometimes took in the sunset. Clay is struck by its beauty, but it doesn’t resonate in any big way. “The last time I was here, I wasn’t born yet, Mom,” he says. Point taken.

Michael Kluckner, author of *Vancouver Remembered*, has told me that there are still parts of town, notably in the East End, where the progressive, countercultural ethos lives on. We decide to head there our second day in town. On our way, we check out the vegetable beds at Sole Food, a nonprofit urban street farm where you can feel the spirit. You can also feel it at the bustling Trout Lake Farmers Market, where even on a hot, sunny day, it’s impossible to buy a bottle of water. (Plastic!) And you can really feel it in the Grandview neighborhood along the ironically named Commercial Drive. That’s where Yarrow’s food co-op is located, along with the People’s Co-op Bookstore and a United Nations of ethnic restaurants. I think Clay starts to grasp what I’ve been talking about all these years. “It’s like Berkeley with amazing mountains,” he says.

Early the next morning, we pick up Nora and head east. I’m feeling anxious and unsettled—and not just about whether we’ll find the farm. This is the last day of the trip, probably the last day Clay and I will have to spend together before he takes off for Italy. Miraculously, as we near Mission City, I begin to recognize a few landmarks: the bridge across the Fraser River, a right turn here, a left there, then the road that leads up a steep hill to the property. Best of all, the place is undeveloped, wild and overgrown. The three of us crawl under a metal gate that blocks the entrance and see that the farmhouse and barn are missing. Only a gnarled old black walnut tree marks the site of our former home. “I can’t believe we’re really here,” Clay says. “Wow.”

Wow, indeed. We set out along a dirt path through fields spattered with weeds and wildflowers, the same path I used to walk with Clay on my back. I’m grateful that the place is deserted, and we don’t talk much on our way up the hill. When we reach the crest, the sun slices through the clouds for the first time all day.

“So what do you think?” I ask Clay.

My son is pensive and takes his time answering. “It’s strange and interesting to imagine the beginning of my life in this unfamiliar place,” he says. “At first I couldn’t see us here, but now it seems absolutely crazy that we didn’t stay.”

“I would have stayed,” I tell him. And I would have.

But from this vantage point, it’s impossible to say for how long. 

Barbara Graham has written essays for National Geographic Traveler, More, O the Oprah Magazine, Time, and many others. Her latest book, Eye of My Heart: 27 Writers Reveal the Hidden Pleasures and Perils of Being a Grandmother, was a New York Times best seller.