

Irish Ballads, Organic Food, and Mud Houses: A conversation with Harry Warner

OCTOBER 11, 2011

by theragingrhyno

There are a lot of interesting characters on Salt Spring Island and a lot of interesting stuff happening. I was drawn to Salt Spring to visit my friends Jackie and Ryan who are PhD students at York preparing to do fieldwork in India and Bangladesh.

While I was there, my friend found a place to stay on the Island through CouchSurfing.com. That is how we came to meet Harry Warner – an Irishman and former Ryerson professor, now happily settled on the Island. Warner successfully quit drinking before he resettled, but he has been no less a colourful character since his arrival. From being one of the first to sell organic produce to recording music with Randy Bachman and MCing the prestigious zucchini race at the annual Fall Fair, everyone on the Island can tell you a story about Harry.

At the end of our visit with Harry – I sat down with him to have a chat about his life, the farm, and some of the awesome natural construction projects happening on his property courtesy of a collection of girls known as the Mud Girls.

BR – What inspired you to begin hosting Couch Surfers?

HW – Two of my landmates at the time, were flying into Mexico City at night, and I asked them if they had a hotel.



They said no, they we're Couch Surfing. I said 'Couch Surfing? What's that?' So they told me what the organization was and I thought 'wow that sounds like fun' so I signed up right away. My first surfer was in June of last year.

BR – For how long do Couch Surfers stay and generally what do they contribute to the community here?

Usually, regular Couch Surfers stay one or two days and then they're gone. Then I get wonderful people such as yourself and Florian. Actually the first Couch Surfer here stayed for five weeks.

BR – Let's talk about Salt Spring in general. What is special about the island and how have your impressions of it changed over time?

I've been here 21 years and in that time the only real unpleasant thing has been [issues concerning] the market which the vendors used to run and that was a bit of a battle. And then there was the Texada logging (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IOrCr79ha7Y>). That was nasty. But other than that life just ambles along.

There's quite a flow of younger people like yourselves come through, either just travelling, camping or whatever. The Island has for its size a bit of everything, certainly everything that one needs. There's a theatre and it's fairly good. There's a cinema and a hospital. There are some music venues, places like the Treehouse (www.treehousecafe.ca/).

It's surprising to me, given how many rich people live here, how few good restaurants there are.

BR – From what I understand music and performing, has always been an important part of your life. What role does music play in the life you live here now?

I had my first band shortly after I came here, so I was fifty when I had my first band. Before that when I was drinking I used to stagger around with a guitar playing alone.

“It kind of happened that way. Being sober after years of abuse made quite a difference. I remember the first time I was going to sing in public, and it was down in Centennial Park, and just before I was due to go on, I thought God no, I’m not going. And then the group that was singing at the time was so bad, they were singing off key and I thought, Shit I can do this. And that kinda got me going.”

[Since then Warner has been a notable musical presence on the Island performing with Black Velvet Band (<http://www.savesaltspring.com/bvb.html>) and Spanner in the Works, before releasing his own solo album Galway to Ganges.

BR – How concerned are you about the impacts of climate change on the Island?

There’s no question we’re polluting the environment, but how much of climate change is due to what man has been doing or the fact that the sun is closer to the earth than it has been in many many centuries, I certainly wouldn’t want to take a guess.

Just over a hundred years ago, a reputable magazine called Scientific American forecast that the streets of London would become impassable on account of the amount of horse shit. Then out of nowhere came the automobile, so the prediction never came true.

So when scientists predict things I always look at it with a dubious questioning. Just today in fact they think almost definitely they’ve discovered that a neutrino which is a tiny

tiny sub-atomic particle small particle has moved faster than the speed of light. If that's the case, it will cause a lot of questions.

BR – Tell me a bit about some of the challenges that you face as a homesteader trying to live sustainable off the land.

One of the challenges of course is going to be gasoline. We raise meat birds and some laying hens. The reality is there probably isn't enough food that we could grow to realistically have meat (without importing feed). Although there is a chap up the north end who has introduced a thing called the Chicken Tractor where essentially what you do is put the chickens into a great big enclosure and you move that every couple days and let them eat the grass. That would answer the questions of getting food for the meat birds and for laying hens if indeed they'd do well enough on just grass.

BR – What is your philosophy of growing food?

There's a book called Anastasia which was published about ten or fifteen years ago about this very strange woman who was found in a forest near Siberia. In the foreword to the book the author points out that in Russia over 50% of food is grown in backyards. On Salt Spring which has certainly a more favourable climate, less than 5% is grown locally. So obviously the more food we can grow here the kinder we're being to the planet. And there's no question that locally grown food is healthier for you. It would be lovely to sit down at a meal and say that everything on the table came from this property.

BR – Have you ever thought about experimenting with alternative methods of growing food such as permaculture or bio-dynamics?

One of the things that I've seen is a documentary called

Rebecca's Farm (<http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=2750012006939737230>) and there because of the increasing cost of fossil fuels they no longer do ploughing so they just let grass grow as it is. They also forage their animals in forests. Now that's in deciduous forests, here we have mostly fir trees. But it's definitely the right direction.

BR – How did the Mud Girls come to be here and maybe you could explain a little bit about what they are doing here?

The Mud Girls is essentially a collective of younger women who started out on Lasquite Island and started to build sustainably. A site well worth looking at is MudGirls.ca which tells the story of how the Mudgirls got started. I had met (a woman named) Molly years ago on the beach and would bump into her once in a while. Just two years ago, I happened to be sitting in a restaurant talking to her and she mentioned to me she was house sitting and looking for a place. So I said why don't you come and build a place here? So she did and built a wonderful cob house – cob being a mixture of sand, clay, and straw.

Many people think that because of the wet environment here that it's not a suitable climate – but in fact there have been cob houses or the equivalent of them in Ireland for centuries. Now they host workshops where women can come here how to build a shelter out of natural materials and know at the end of it that they can do it themselves.



BR – What are your thoughts for the future? What kinds of things would you like to incorporate here?

What I'd like to see is more of the land used. For instance, right in front of the house here is grass, a lawn. So if we could put things like nut trees there, we could grow more food.

It would also be delightful to get away from using electricity from Hydro. There's a chap here on the Island who has designed a wind turbine that looks like the inside of a sea shell and it's amazingly effective. It will

generate electricity in as little as four to five kilometers of wind. I'm trying to talk him into putting one up beside the cob house – it could certainly provide enough electricity for that.

I'd like to see us get to the point where the place is legal. If we could get a statement from the local government here that what we're doing is acceptable, then I'd like to see a lot more people visit here and take the message out because it's the only hope we have for the future.



Article by Brett Rhyno. Photographs by Floriane Danezis.

For more information on Harry Warner's music check out

<http://www.savesaltspring.com/hjwmusic.html>

Like

Be the first to like this post.

from → Uncategorized

One Comment **leave one** →



1.