

Who are these people? Where do they come from?

Anita Elkins was born in Oklahoma, grew up in West Virginia, before her father's transfer moved the family to Detroit. Talk about a culture shock. "I was straight out of West Virginia and I felt like a Beverly Hillbilly." She spent her hippie days riding thumb all over the country...alone mostly. "Yeah! It was '69. It was a safe time to go. I never was accosted on the road. I met a lot of really good people." She pauses and reconsiders. "Shouldn't have hitchhiked up north that one winter for the weekend because I had to walk back most of the way in a couple of feet of snow till I got picked up by the snow plow."

She then drifted into exercising racehorses, hence her connection to this area. She got a job at the Twyman barn next door, and that explains why she's a supporter of the Thoroughbred Retirement Foundation. "I decided I would go to nursing school," she remembers of those early days. "It was those Thoroughbreds that I would ride every other day when going to nursing school...I figured they put me through nursing school."

Anita became a neurological nurse. "I wanted to help people get back home. So I went into rehab and was the head nurse there on the unit at Blue Ridge Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation. I still like that. If you've got the will, we've got the way."

Today she's a certified Raiki practitioner. "It's hands-on healing. It's a mind, body, spirit healing and it's kind of a universal life force energy," she explains. "Touch therapy...feels like a massage and it should make you feel better. I know I can't stop death, but I'll make you feel better."

Mark's a local boy with deep running roots: Gooch on one side, Mahanes on the other going back to Germanna's original iron workers of the early 1700s. He remembers his grandmother hauling out the drover's stick that prodded the oxen carrying that Tannenberg organ from

Pennsylvania to Hebron in 1802! He uses the same sauerkraut masher she used as a child when her old folks said it was old. He remembers how "every year, she'd take us out and teach us to make soap, just because she felt we needed to know that."

Mark grew up on a farm, and "worked for a dear old man named Silas Nixon, who was in his 80s when I met him. And I was 15. I worked for him until I graduated from high school." That was in

1981. Then he went to Ferrum College, earning a degree in Environmental Science before going to work for a Dutch concern erecting large greenhouses, "the big glass dudes, like Battlefield Farms."

When he reappeared 15 years later, he worked his way up to being a supervisor in a Culpeper construction company.

But, "as soon as this came

up," he refers to the Montpelier redo, "I said, I'll take whatever job they offer, just to get in on it...Historical restoration is my specialty. I did the heavy timber framing replacement at Montpelier...I had every window in the house so two fingers could raise or lower it. Two fingers can raise or shut every window in that house."

Too bad we'll never witness that marvel; for climate control reasons, they had to seal every window in the mansion. His most recent project was the train station. All in all, he says, "It was a great job. I'll never get to do anything like that again...The people I met were just fantastic."

So now that the restoration is done, Mark Gooch is gainfully unemployed.

Well, not really.

He points to the loft in the barn. It's been converted into a lumber kiln. We walk past a pile of ironwood. "Back in the days when grist mills and wind mills turned on wooden gears, the teeth and spokes of the gears were made out of this." We walk into the "cave," a tarp covered Quonset hut. This is his shop. With only salvaged rugs for flooring and a woodstove for heat, he creates his signature rustic hickory furniture here. He points to a pile of sticks. "This is a



Photos by Phil Audibert
Above, Mark Gooch uses a draw knife to shape a stretcher tenon for one of his hickory chairs. His Quonset hut-shaped shop, known as the "cave," cost about \$400 to build. Below, "I've gone off my rocker," jokes Anita Elkins who has always marched to the beat of a different drum.



chair," he announces. The seats are made from hickory bark, peeled and dried in spring, softened to the consistency of leather before being woven on the frame and treated with linseed oil.

Because this wood "has a mind of its own," every piece he makes is unique. Each mortise and tenon, each leg and stretcher will be different. Mark makes straight chairs, rockers, and stools. "Most of my work is custom," he says

adding he measures many of his clients and makes chairs to fit them. "Even when I build one that's not for a client, it's still going to be one of a kind. There's no way I can make two alike."

There's something about that statement that suits this quirky couple.

Anita walks into the "cave." She has one of his rocking chairs on her head. "I've gone off my rocker," she says innocently enough. All three of us crack up.

...a different drum

Mark had a cell phone maybe a dozen years ago, but no longer. And Anita has never had one... never will.

There is no satellite dish in the yard, no cable service running underground. They do have a regular dial phone and just recently added a computer to the household, "but we can't use it because we're just dumb," shrugs Anita. "We can't get connected." Then Mark blurts, tongue in cheek, "I was just waiting to see if they were going to catch on before I really invested the money in them."

There's a TV antenna on the roof, which is ironic in light of the current switch to digital. What TV stations trumpet as "progress," has sent thousands of country folk with analog sets into broadcast purgatory. But the real irony here is that there's no TV to connect to this now-obsolete antenna. It's used as a wild bird perch.

No TV...hasn't been one here for eight years or so. "It's by choice," confirms Anita. "We listen to the radio and we read."

Good Lord, you do what? You listen to the radio and read??? That's your evening entertainment???

Wow, times must be tough for these poor folks. He's without a job since the Montpelier redo and train station renovation projects were completed. She's without one too, having read the handwriting on the wall. She recently resigned from her part-time position at Montpelier before she could be laid off.

Yet, this hapless, jobless couple couldn't be happier.

Meet Mark Gooch and Anita Elkins a couple marching to the beat of a different drum.

Some would say drums have nothing to do with it; they're crazy as a pair of hoot owls.

That suits Mark and Anita just fine.



Photo by Phil Audibert

Owning no credit cards, Mark and Anita save up for the things they need. Their next purchase will be a green house, followed possibly by a portable wind mill.



Photo by Phil Audibert

Referring to her as a "900 pound dog in the back yard," Mark Gooch adds that Moo is "a great investment," as she converts grass into milk.



Photo by Phil Audibert

Most of the vegetable gardens are all dried up now, but down in their basement, Anita Elkins and Mark Gooch have 160 quarts of veggies put up.

We are. I am, I know," says Anita matter-of-factly of the insanity charge. "Actually I'm crazy and talk to myself. I have an invisible friend," gleefully confirms Mark. But on closer look there is a method to their madness, from which we "normal" folks might learn a valuable lesson.

For example, everything in the cluttered yard around their odd little cinderblock house in Montford has a purpose, even the TV antenna bird perch.

Take the rubber-lined frog ponds for example. There are two of them; one out front, one out back. "Yeah," explains Anita. "Green water for the gardens." She says "Yeah" a lot. "Anytime anything drips," she points to the roof gutters that are connected to the frog ponds by rain barrels and plastic hose. That water eventually makes it to the gardens, "already fertilized," smiles Mark.

He points to eight-foot-tall Okra plants, beds of edible nasturtiums, and a Christmas tree-sized tomato bush, all of which have benefited from this fertilized water. And, despite a perfectly good well in the middle of a bounteous aquifer, they save every drop. "We have potable water, we have flushing water, we have cleaning water saved in the basement, that kind of stuff, put away in five gallon jugs. You have to have that. Yeah!" Anita acts as if it's obvious.

"Just three acres, not enough, but we're staying out of the grocery store with milk and vegetables and meat," she continues. She's talking about their sustainable farm. "I go to the store about every week and spend maybe 40 bucks," off-hands Mark. "We don't buy food and have a little surplus to sell."

Actually this is the wrong time of year to be showcasing this place. Although the basil, peppers and Okra are thriving, the eight rows of pole beans are dry and brittle. Poke berries and other weeds have finally taken over the squash patch...and the cabbage and the asparagus and the strawberry and the raspberry and the blueberry and the cantaloupe and the pea and the beet and the carrot and the butter bean and the corn ...well, you get the idea.

To one side of the house, underneath a huge maple tree, Mark shows off a summer kitchen with its beat-up old formica table and chairs, turkey fryer and two grills. "If you showed up in July it would look like a little Guatemalan village in here," he laughs.

In the modest indoor kitchen, they carefully sanitize and seal the Ball jars, putting up 160 quarts of everything from pickles to sauerkraut, beans to beets. On the wall hang rows and rows of cast iron cookware. "I love Teflon for the first six months and then after that it doesn't work anymore," observes Mark. "But the skillet that I use on a day-to-day basis, mostly were wedding presents to my grandmother. A year of using Teflon you're ready to make a chicken feeder out of it," he says disdainfully. "That stuff," he points to the heavy black pans, "80 years later, it works fine."

We walk down to the barn and are greeted by Belle,

the "Jergus" calf they are raising from an Angus sire and a pure bred Jersey cow, named "Moo." Fondly referred to as the "900-pound dog in the back yard," Moo utters her name from a corner of the small pasture with a view to the Blue Ridge. At her feet lies the milk before she's made it, a stand of the prettiest, longest, greenest fescue grass you ever saw at this time of year. Just wait till the first frost; it'll be even sweeter.

She grazes. That's her job.



Photo by Phil Audibert

Every piece of hickory furniture that Mark Gooch makes is "one of a kind." Here he shows how he uses a spade bit to score a stretcher tenon.

Why is this grass so rich, when all about them, pastures are nibbled to the nub, sprouting pig, beefsteak, and ragweed? It might have something to do with the sheep who aerated this ground earlier this season with their hooves. They're in the freezer now. "I never grew up with sheep," admits Mark, "but as soon as I saw one look up with wire grass in his mouth, I loved them." Mark looks appreciatively at the rich fescue stand.

Back to "Moo," who Mark calls, "a great investment. We get something out of her." But, if he's late for her 5:30 a.m. milking, she's going to let him know about it. "If I wait too long I get fussed at. There's always some woman calling me," he jokes.

Mark milks twice daily; making yogurt, churning butter, feeding Belle, making her fat. The plan for Belle is to "let

her have a baby, and hope it's a boy." He won't make cheese though. "What it gets down to is a matter of time. I don't have 12 hours to dedicate to making five pounds of cheese."

Still, there's too much milk, cream, and butterfat around here. They're getting a hog to help with the slops. No vegetarians here. "These teeth are for a reason," grins Anita, baring her canines. Round the corner comes a passel of Barred Rock chickens. They convert overripe veggies into

she had dived in on top of both of them and pulled the chicken out. And the cow and I said, 'What in the world. Did you see that?'"

"Moo," mumbles Moo. Miraculously, the chicken with the white spot, where the fox bit her, seems none the worse for wear.

Mark says predators are few and far between because of "homeland security," a rather protective dog. Concerning six- and eight-legged predators, "I lean towards the organic, but I will keep a bag of Sevin dust handy. I try to go organic as often as possible, but if that fails then I'm going to save my crop."

What's next? "Aw, bees and hogs," says Mark adding, "I don't need much honey, but it's just nice to have the pollinators. And bees are in so much trouble right now." He adds, "I loathe inflicting pain upon any living creature, so I'm not a sportsman, but I'll put meat on the ground."

"Usually with one shot," chimes in Anita. Asked what's on her wish list, she says dreamily, "I want a portable wind mill." Mark rolls his eyes. "You don't see them out here; there's a reason for that." But, he adds, "solar, I'm all for." They both agree a greenhouse is next so they can have fresh veggies year round.

And how do they pay for all this stuff, especially since they are both unemployed. Of course, it depends on what you mean by 'unemployed,' because getting up at 4:30 every morning and spending all day growing and putting food by and building furniture is not exactly what you'd call being a useless layabout.

Mark and Anita have one basic human need well taken care of: their groceries. "That's how you get food, you plant it and you care for it," says Anita. Mark adds, "I know people who will lie, cheat and steal to get a \$10,000 pay raise. All you have to do is plant a garden, and you've got ten grand in your pocket right there."

They also don't spend. Mark says he might drop \$40 a week at the grocery store. For what? "Beer," they laugh simultaneously; that and salt and pepper, orange juice, coffee. They substitute honey for sugar, and they don't bake bread because it wastes energy. Their electric bill maxes out at \$80 a month.

And, hear this: they buy nothing on credit. In fact, they have no credit cards...none. "I've bought everything with cash," says Mark. "Yeah, it's the only way to go," counters Anita. "Just work and you get what you need, and you make sure that you need it. We're not lacking for nothing."

Then she blurts that she has saved 25 percent of her income...for decades. "You have to. You just have to," she insists passionately. "You make a goal to try to live on a dollar... If you want to grow up and have something, you put it away. You just have to learn to save. And you can do it," she insists. "Yeah! You don't have to have everything, and if you don't have it, you shouldn't get it. If you don't have the money to get something, that credit stuff, you should not get it."

Sounds like some of us should have been marching to their different drum.