

Malabar Farm: Louis Bromfield's Paradise Lost

By ROY BONGARTZ

"It was already twilight and the lower valley was the ice blue color of a shadowed winter landscape at dusk and the black, bare trees on the ridge tops were tinted with the last pink light of the winter sunset. There were already lozenges of light in the windows of the distant house. Like Brigham Young on the sight of the vast valley of Great Salt Lake, I thought, 'This is the place.'"

So wrote the prolific novelist and farmer Louis Bromfield when he came home to Ohio, after his years in New York and abroad. He had found the exact spot to build his permanent home, his working place, his beloved farm, Malabar, named for the part of India that was the setting of his novel and movie, "The Rains Came." When the war in France in 1939 forced Bromfield and his wife and daughters to return to the United States, he was already established as America's best-selling novelist: 34 books in 33 years, the Pulitzer Prize in 1924 for "The Green Bay Tree."

But Bromfield was never satisfied with that fame. What he wanted most was to establish a sort of utopia where he could test his agricultural theories and his dreams of how a small community might ideally be socially structured. At Malabar Farm, in the rolling green farmland of northern Ohio, he tried, and failed.

View From the Top

Malabar is today open to the public and is much as it was in Bromfield's day, 715 acres of dairyland and woods with a producing dairy farm, and the 31-room "Big House" that looks as if Bromfield and his family and his friends and his dogs might have just stepped out for a short hike. Or if not a hike, perhaps a climb up the steep slope of Mt. Jeez, a grassy hill that faces Malabar a mile or so away—Bromfield named it that after first seeing the view of his property from the top and murmuring "Jeez!"

Malabar Farm has been acquired by Ohio's Department of Natural Resources because it is the still-living embodiment of a grandiose and peculiarly American kind of dream. And Bromfield and his farm intrigue us today, nearly two decades after his death, because he made his life into a kind of chronicle of all the good old American legends: the self-imposed exile and the homesickness and fear of returning, the ideal of building not just a house but an entire self-sufficient community, the almost obsessive love of the land. There are echoes of the Transcendentalists in Bromfield's spiritual feelings for nature, and the farm itself was intended to parallel, in some ways, the famous 19th-century American communes. Then eventually came the sourness, and the failure. "Most of all," writes Bromfield's biographer, David D. Anderson, "Bromfield represents the typically American problem that results from the inability to reconcile the American dream with the American reality."

Louis Bromfield was born in Mansfield, Ohio, in 1898. As a teen-ager he wanted to be a farmer, like his father and grandfather, but his mother urged him not to "waste his life" tied to a single piece of land—he must be a writer. Nevertheless, Louis went off for a year to Cornell Agricultural College,

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then came home and ran the family farm for another year, before serving in a U. S. ambulance group with the French Army in France. He worked in New York as a reporter for The Associated Press, married a socially prominent woman, became music critic for Time magazine. Yet later he wrote that his time in the city was "the most unhappy of my life, unhappy because I was bored, despite all the distinguished and celebrated people I knew, and all the supposedly exciting events in which I participated. . . . No city can offer any excitement comparable to what happens when there is a new pure-bred calf."

For 13 years he lived in a roomy 17th-century presbytery in Senlis, France, with his wife and the three daughters who were born to them. He had a garden, too, and despite weekend visits from such famous friends as Ina Claire, Leslie Howard, Gertrude Stein and other expatriates, spent almost all his nonwriting moments trying to introduce American vegetables into French markets. "The honors I valued most," he wrote, "were the diploma given me by the Workingmen-Gardeners' Association of France and the medal given me by the Ministry of Agriculture."

When World War II seemed imminent and Americans were ordered home, Mary Bromfield asked her husband, "Where shall we go?" He replied, "To Ohio." He had a picture in his mind of the lush woods and fields of Pleasant Valley, 12 miles from Mansfield. He bought a small house with an enormous cupolaed barn in the valley and four adjoining farms, the nucleus of Malabar, "a small kingdom which we sought to bring back to life. It was a little like planning the re-creation of a world of our own, secure and complete and apart."

Bromfield and a farm manager he hired worked out a plan for a Russian-style collective farm where Bromfield could try out his theories of organic farming, crop rotation and diversification and other conservation practices. "I, myself, as the capitalist, was substituted for the state," he explained.

Aim of the Experiment

He hated the concept of the gentleman farmer, but he was equally set against any kind of cooperative farming helped by government subsidy. "We determined in the beginning to do nothing which the average farmer could not afford to do. Whatever experiment we made, whatever building we did, whatever restoration we undertook would be in the terms of ordinary farming. We sought to prove that run-down land which had become virtually an economic liability to the nation could be turned into an economic asset and that farming, done properly and managed intelligently could provide an excellent investment for capital." What happened was that he kept the farm going on the big money he made from novels and movies.

New York and Hollywood people were always visiting the farm, and during the war Bromfield pretended to be solving the labor shortage by putting some of them to work. Kay Francis stirred apple butter in a churn, Joan Fontaine attended the birth of a calf. Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall were married at Malabar, spending their wedding night in a bright front room with flowered wallpaper, ceramic roosters and Audubon prints (a kind of holy place today for some tourists). The post office of the village of Lucas was promoted from



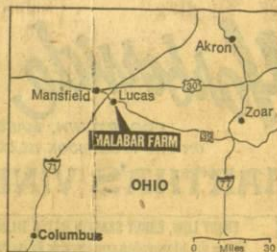
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fourth to third class because of all the mail Bromfield received.

Bromfield was especially proud of the big hall of the "Big House," the mansion he built by extending the original house on the property in all directions. The hall, with its twin stairways, palatial doorways and expanse of pegged flooring, was big enough to hold the 42-piece Lucas High School band in concerts for meetings of the local Farm Bureau. The whole mansion was completed within two years but the connecting parts gave the feeling they were added over many years, with an ironwork decorative grill along one porch, wooden fencing on another, and a variety of chimney styles, roof slopes and dormers or bay windows. Yet the rambling effect is pleasant, and the bright white paint and black shutters unify it all. The dormer windows in the north wing came out of the old inn at Zoar, the site of the long-lived (1817 to 1892) communal settlement 50 miles to the east. As Bromfield built wings and additions he made up a story to go with it of a family living through several generations, enlarging the place over a century or so as they needed more space. "We began to see the house in that fashion," he wrote, "and all of us, family, architect, carpenters and stonemasons, came in a way to believe the story."

A Lived-In Feeling

Bromfield's biographer David Anderson says the house shows a fusion of Southern opulence and New England austerity, "but the house also commemorates the subject matter of Bromfield's best fiction, the meeting and quarreling of two alien cultures as they merged into a new, peculiarly Midwestern identity." A portrait of Bromfield and his wife Mary shows him in a casual beret and striped T-shirt—a Belle Epoque, easygoing French scene—while Mary makes a delicate contrast in a big elegant hat and frilly yet formal dress. Students of writing troop through Bromfield's study these days, admiring the big heavy carved desk with the bookcases in front, which the boss never wrote on, preferring a card table set up behind it. Papers are piled up in workaday fashion and there is the air of having stumbled into somebody's private digs where the boss may turn up at any moment.



Tom Wilcox

Two girls survey the failed utopia of novelist Louis Bromfield from the top of Mt. Jeez. (When Bromfield first viewed his Ohio property from that hilltop, he muttered, "Jeez!") Bromfield, shown in a painting by J. Anthony Wills, created the mansion, below, whose huge hall accommodated a 42-piece band.



Tom Wilcox

The whole rambling place, room after room, gives a feeling of lived-in immediacy: Bromfield's great low sofas in the living room, seemingly still warm from a late-night party and set off by a sparkling chandelier brought from Bromfield's place in France. A mirror wall with an eagle and 48 stars of gold framing an ornate fireplace. Ming Dynasty ceramic horses. Watercolors of Ohio country scenes. Caricatures and line-drawing portraits of Bromfield and his friends. A warm, roomy farm kitchen that always served at least a score of family and guests.

Today 20 guides are on hand to take tourists through the place. Carmen Strickland, a lively redhead who is secretary to the director and in charge of tours, will point out Bromfield's place

at the dining room table, saying, "Louis always took care of his correspondence here in the morning, right in the way of all the traffic between here and the kitchen and pantry, and his papers would always blow all over the place," or "When anything went wrong Louis would just get up and go out and mow some hay." You would swear she must have been an old friend—but she never met him.

Anderson says that at Malabar Bromfield "began to see himself as the complete man in the tradition of Jefferson, Franklin, and the other sons of the Enlightenment." But his wife withdrew into herself more and more, never having been given a real role to play in Bromfield's master plan. "How lost she must have felt in our midst," writes Ellen

Bromfield Geld, the youngest daughter. "Her smile became more fixed. Her conversation, once so charmingly candid, became cautiously banal, for she lived in terror of saying the wrong thing and causing a scene. She was a pathetic, ghostly figure, lost in a world of vigorous, ambiguous, busy people who never understood what it was to be helpless."

Mary Bromfield died in 1952, and when George Hawkins, Bromfield's longtime friend and secretary, died shortly thereafter, Bromfield began to fall into bitterness. His daughters all left home—Ellen to found her own Malabar in Brazil. By 1954 Bromfield had turned sharply to the right politically and was propounding, in a book entitled "A New Pattern for a Tired World," a "Malabar Farm Plan to encompass the entire world." His own cattle-raising business was not unsuccessful, but, as Anderson described it, "instead of the self-sustaining farm that would produce a full, rich life through diversified agriculture, Malabar Farm actually became a specialized venture, as Bromfield ruefully acknowledged, a factory in which grass was turned into the meat and bone of marketable animals."

Government Aid Opposed

Bromfield began a weekly radio program and newspaper column in which he fought government subsidy and welfare, and scolded a liberal friend for the country's ills in these words: "I came away from Europe because it was being destroyed by dishonesty and rottenness and greed, and there was nothing I could do about it. I came home to find the security I thought existed only in America. I haven't found it. I think it has been destroyed by people like you who think that subsidies and old age pensions can be put in its place."

Now that the state of Ohio has taken over the place, there's a new manager for the farming operations, a young employee of the State Department of Agriculture, Dana Bass, who says, in a phrase reminiscent of Bromfield himself, "We hope to be self-sustaining very soon." The staff inside the house has stayed on. Rangers from nearby Mohican State Park patrol the grounds to protect against vandalism. Nothing within the house has been disturbed since Bromfield lived here. Dana Bass is selling the milk of the 100-head dairy herd to Borden's and there is a program for bringing children in from Ohio inner cities for wagon tours and a taste of farm life. A vegetable stand is open in summertime.

A mile away on Pleasant Valley Road the pretty old Malabar Inn, dating from 1820, with its great oaks shading a broad porch, features proprietor Polly Kunkle's home-made bread, Amish baked chicken, home-made noodles and grass-hopper pie. On warm days lunch is served outside at tables under awnings. Both lunch and dinner run from \$2.25 to \$4, and reservations can be made by calling 419-938-5205.

Malabar Farm, in Lucas, Ohio, is open every day from 9 A.M. to 5 P.M. Admission is \$1 for adults, 50 cents for children 6 to 12 years of age. Wagon tours every Sunday at 2:30 P.M. (\$1 for adults, 25 cents for children under 12) visit Mt. Jeez, Bromfield's tomb in the farm's cemetery and a barn where the farm manager gives a talk on running the dairy farm.

Thinking back over the building up of the farm, Bromfield once wrote: "I am struck again by the curious dreamlike quality of the whole adventure, in which the elements of time and even of space seemed confused and even suspended. It was as if the valley had been destined always to be a fiercely dominant part of my existence, especially on its spiritual and emotional side. It has always existed for me in two manifestations, partly in a dreamlike fashion, partly on a plane of hard reality and struggle. Perhaps those two manifestations represent the sum total of a satisfactory life. I do not know."

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