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Sling, slang, slung

By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—Doing farm work with kids who are 50 years younger is profoundly depressing and reluctantly enlightening.

For the past month, I've been building cattle fences and planting trees with young labor.

The two 20-year-olds who “make fence” for a living sling nine-foot-long, 200-pound posts around without any of the drama I now bring to the task—visualizing success, breathing deeply, grunting strategically, blaming bad career choices, invoking skyhooks and combining words with four letters each.

They don't pant; they don't wheeze; and they don't grimace.

They just sling.

They kidded me about the oversized posts -- some more than twice the diameter of conventional products -- I had cut from our woods last year.

“Any fool,” I replied, “can put in store-bought posts.” (You need a special fool to go twice the size.)

And so...on a cold, windy, drizzly day I was set to move an upright, 150-pound post into position for driving. I had just peeled its bark, which left it slimy and slicker than snot—a phrase I had first heard applied to a sitting West Virginia governor who ended up in federal prison.

I was wearing old work gloves that provided no friction grip. I assumed the position. I lifted...and the post didn't move...as my hands slid up its sides. I did the same trick several more times.

I no longer had enough compressive strength from shoulder to shoulder to lift that slippery post with my hands. Bear-hugging it into place was embarrassing. The crew looked away.

Each of us probably has a moment like this. Or more than one.

My best slings are behind me. I'm now stuck in the has-been transition of...slang, on the road to telling stories of having once slung.

These kids didn't seem to get tired or out of sorts. They simply moved from one post to the next, with only an occasional complaint about the heat.

I usta could do this.

For the past two weekends, I've been planting 600 black walnut and locust trees with a handful of Senior Fellows from the Allegheny Mountain Institute (www.alleghenymountaininstitute.org).

My job was to drill out the holes with an auger mounted on the back of my tractor. The holes were 10 feet apart in all directions, more or less. The locust trees will force the American walnuts to grow straight and fertilize the soil with nitrogen.

Someone other than me will cut the locust in 20 years for fence posts, leaving the walnuts to grow for another 30 years until they're ready to cut as sawtimber for lumber.

The fence-builders were local kids who had learned and upgraded skills from relatives and neighbors.

The tree planters came to the AMI from across the country after finishing college. They wanted to learn more about organic gardening, small farming, community-oriented food programs and substituting raw kale for baked cookies, among other assaults on old male eating preferences.

The four AMIs planted the seedlings with good cheer and positive thoughts. They were careful and thoughtful in their work. They talked about large matters as they pattered and patted.

I liked both crews.

Most small farmers grow old farming as long as they can. Retirement is not an option, because something always needs to be done, and no one else is around to do it.

You can't tell a hole in the fence that you're no longer accepting fixing assignments.

Holes are never static. Neglected, they get bigger over time, not smaller.

More work is involved in getting escaped cattle back where they belong and *then* fixing a hole than in patching the fence before they go exploring.

In addition to being a routine necessity, farm work is a habit that runs with the seasons. We do this in May, this in August and that in October.

When we don't do what we were supposed to do when we're supposed to do it, we don't feel right. A skip feels like cheating.

The farmer negotiates a deal with a small farm. If you keep up your end of the work, the farm will keep up its end.

If you don't, or can't anymore, then the farm slowly falls apart, buildings collapse, fields deteriorate, soil fertility is lost and the place smells of neglect and decay.

Heirs then sell it to a starry-eyed couple from the city for a second home.

Aging brings both gains and losses.

Gains can be good or bad. Experience gained is usually good; gained weight is usually bad.

Losses, on the other hand, are almost always discouraging. We lose height, strength, agility, quickness, memory and resistance to deterioration. The exception to depression resulting from diminution in my experience was the loss of virginity.

I'm counting on both Republicans and Democrats solving aging's inequitable distribution of gains and losses during the 2016 campaign for the White House. It is, after all, a bipartisan problem.