

MEETING DEVELOPMENT HALFWAY

By **Wes Smith, Chicago Tribune**
CHICAGO TRIBUNE

MAY 27, 1986

Eight years ago, John Sizer looked to the east, across a road called "Bliss" and recognized the charge of the neon lights brigade.

Suburbia was advancing on his 135-year-old family farm.

"I knew it was coming and there was nothing I could do to stop it," he said.

To the east of Sizer's Blisswood Farm, near Sugar Grove, rural Kane County has been slowly surrendering to suburban sprawl for more than a decade. It began in the mid-1970s, was stalled by recession in the early 1980s and is now on the march again. Armed with lower interest rates and supported by troops hungry for the spoils of nature, the real estate development corps is back.

Sizer, a Chicago businessman turned gentleman farmer, decided to meet the charge on his own ground. He had seen other rural landowners simply surrender and walk away, and he didn't want to do that.

He put together his own development plan for a portion of his land and personally directed it through the cautious bureaucracy of Kane County.

Now, like hundreds of other farm owners, he sits with arms folded and waits for the suburbs to cross Bliss Road. But unlike many of them, he is prepared.

"I could hold out and just make them build around me when they come,"

he said. "But I won't be around forever and what would happen to this land after I am gone? I wanted it to be done my way--with a little integrity and romance--and not some other guy's way."

With the death of his wife, Patty, in 1980, Sizer was left to guard her family's farm. Homesteaded by Peleg Young Bliss in 1844 on rolling, wooded land, Blisswood Farm is now a third the size of the original 600-acre tract. But it's the history Sizer wants to preserve.

Peleg Bliss was born in Strafford, Vt., on April 8, 1806, according to the Atlas of the State of Illinois, 1878.

"On account of the death of his father and second marriage of his mother, he was 'put out' at the age of 6 years. At the age of 17, he went to Boston; worked in a glass factory during the summer and taught school in the winter seasons," the atlas reports.

He moved West in 1837 and became one of the first settlers of Kane County. He opened the first store in Sugar Grove, where his farm now sits at the intersection of Bliss and Merrill Roads.

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sold out and has since been engaged in agricultural pursuits,"

Peleg begot Jedidiah, who begot James Harris, who begot Patty, who married John Sizer and begot John Jr., who begot Shay, 13, the sixth generation to live on the family farm.

Shay, whose parents live across a thick woods from her grandfather, can swing on a rope from a 300-year-old oak tree into a secluded swimming hole that undoubtedly attracted her great-great-great grandfather's eye when he first rode his horse into Kane County, looking for a site with timber and water nearby.

That is the romance Sizer hopes to capture even as the area's rural tradition disappears. Rather than sell off farmland, Sizer, with Elgin architect Charles Burnidge, has planned a 68-home development on 63 acres of timberland to be called Strafford Woods. Lots of a half-acre or more will be priced in the \$60,000 range, and homes will begin at \$200,000.

It is not the money that he is interested in, Sizer insisted, but the quality of the development. He is well-to-do already, having sold his Industrial Gear Manufacturing Co. on the West Side of Chicago in 1963. Nine years later, he and his wife moved from their Oak Park home to the family farm. They moved into one of two houses built on the farm for hired hands and rented out the graceful family home that overlooks Bliss Road.

The roof sheeting of their house is made of walnut cut from the timber that it looks upon. Sizer has remodeled the old dairy barn behind it as a guest house.

It is a tranquil place, and Sizer has no inclination to leave it or see it spoiled, he said. But there is little doubt that development will come.

Sizer need look no farther than across Bliss Road to see the sprawling Prestbury development that in the last 15 years has transformed the 700-acre Cooper family farm into a bedroom community with hundreds of single-family homes and townhouses, its own golf course, recreational facilities, utilities and access to what becomes the East-West Tollway.

"It's the city kids on that side now and the country kids on this side," Sizer said.

He and the architect first obtained aerial maps to determine how to build around most of the aged hardwoods, then began a 17-step process of guiding their plan through the protective network of Kane County's bureaucracy.

"I didn't know anything about how to do this when we started, but I hired an architect and planner who has a good rapport with the county because he is careful not to screw up the land," Sizer said.

Sizer submitted his proposal at a time when government and public bodies were on edge about disappearing farmland and environmental damage from overdevelopment, he said. Their guard was up for fast talkers, so he spoke slowly.

"It helped that I was the owner, developer and presenter at most of these meetings, and that was unusual," he said. "When I ran into a roadblock, I was usually able to answer the questions to their satisfaction." County road officials knew what Sizer wanted, and they wanted something in return. The intersection of Merrill and Bliss Roads comes at the crest of a hill and is extremely dangerous, they noted. If the area was developed, they wanted that intersection moved to a safer spot. He agreed.

The environmentalists had their plan as well. At one edge of the Bliss Woods sits a delicate 30-acre marsh that gives life to several endangered species of plants, including witch hazel and the only golden field--a forest floor plant--known in Kane County, according to Richard Young, county environmental director.

"His desire to preserve and capture the heritage of the area is unique for a developer," Young said.

In addition, there were public meetings and written exchanges with regional planners, development and zoning committees, neighboring land owners, soil and water conservationists, Sugar Grove officials, utilities, school, parks and forest preserve officials.

During the long process, the bottom dropped out of the development market in 1980, forcing Sizer to shelve his plans for a year or two. He was not alone. During that period, more than 6,000 home sites approved by the county sat undeveloped.

"I was lucky not to have overextended myself by going in right away and clearing land and building roads and sewer and water lines," he said. "The process of development has been hopelessly slow, but I`ve come to believe that might be a good thing."

These days, John Sizer sits in his yard, blueprints at his side, waiting for the suburbs to cross the road. He has a lot of time and more than \$30,000 invested in his plan to take on the growth on his own terms.

"I don`t know what Peleg would say about all this," he said. "When you think about men riding in on horseback and clearing the land with mule teams

--I don`t even push a lawnmower, I ride it--you have to be impressed that they were able to find a site, without maps, that 150 years later is still considered a prime piece of property."

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