

# Melyce

by Carol Van Strum

In the rainforests of coastal Oregon, berry vines and alder trees spring up almost overnight on untended clearings. Dense jungle quickly swallows abandoned homesteads and orchards, where only daffodils and an occasional apple tree remain amid the ferns and saplings, blooming tributes to years of human toil. Vast thickets of brush carpet the scarred earth of clearcuts and old logging roads. By the 1970s, the dioxin-tainted herbicides 2,4,5-T and 2,4-D had become indispensable tools for replacing such "unwanted vegetation" with plantations of Douglas fir seedlings.

The US Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) 1979 emergency ban of herbicide 2,4,5-T sent shock waves through the timber and chemical industries, which predicted the loss of 20,000 timber jobs and blamed marijuana growers for the ban. In heavily sprayed coastal Lincoln County, which had comprised most of the Alsea Study area, a county commissioner vehemently denounced the 2,4,5-T ban, suggesting on local radio programs that the ban was prompted by marijuana growers to protect their illegal crops. Echoing earlier Dow Chemical Company statements, the commissioner proclaimed that any health problems attributed to herbicides were actually caused by smoking marijuana.

Driving along the coast with her two small children, Melyce Connelly heard the commissioner's radio broadcast. His words rankled during the forty-mile drive inland to a home and sanctuary that no longer promised safety.

A single mother at age 22, Melyce clung doggedly to the log house she and her ex-husband had built themselves, determined to wrest a living from her few cleared acres along the river. With help from neighbors, she plowed the land, drove truckloads of manure, and coaxed a small paradise out of forest soil. Her garlic field paid the mortgage, and beds of herbs—sweet basil, lemon thyme, rosemary, dill, sage, parsley, shallots, sold fresh to coastal restaurants—supplemented her winter income from teaching exercise classes. For herself, she grew flowers, and from March to November the log house basked in a sea of holly-hocks, roses, lilies, cosmos, daisies, narcissus, columbine, dahlias, tulips, and daffodils. Her business card was a photo of herself, laughing

under a cascade of flowers on her porch, with a giant hibiscus blossom in her hair.

Shortly before the commissioner's radio broadcast, Melyce had learned for the first time that the EPA had found dioxin in a neighbor's water supply directly upstream from her home. The neighbor had lost two babies through miscarriages, and had another child with multiple birth defects. As Melyce said, "You can't help but wonder if there's a connection."

After the 2,4,5-T ban, the Forest Service announced it would substitute 2,4-D in its spray plans for that year, which included the headwaters of Ryan Creek, the watershed for Melyce's farm. She and other neighbors met with the district ranger, who had them mark their water sources on his spray map and promised those areas would not be sprayed. Three days later, however, Melyce woke to the sound of a helicopter spraying Ryan Creek. Within the next few days, all her young chicks and ducklings died,

and her six-month-old son developed persistent, bloody diarrhea. In the surrounding valley over the next month, every pregnant woman in her first trimester miscarried, and several children were hospitalized with near-fatal cases of spinal meningitis. Melyce carefully preserved the chicks and ducklings that had died, putting them in her freezer in hope that she could get them analyzed some day.

Alarmed by these events, the Lincoln County Health Department initiated a study of health problems following the spraying in the valley. The EPA had taken over the county's effort under the auspices of its Alsea Study. Publicity about the study had prompted the commissioner's remarks about marijuana growers.



Melyce Connelly. Photo by Scott M. Blackman

Still fuming, Melyce took from her freezer some of the frozen bodies of her chicks and ducklings, and drove over 50 miles to the county offices in Newport. Carrying her infant son and the bag of frozen poultry, she marched unannounced into the commissioner's office and thumped the bag on his desk.

"Open it," she commanded. As the startled commissioner peeled tin foil from the small, frozen bodies, Melyce placed her son on his desk as well and took off his diaper.

"Now, sir," she said, "you tell me those ducklings died from smoking too much marijuana. You tell me those chicks died from smoking too much marijuana." Fighting back tears, her voice shaking, she thrust a bloody, soiled diaper at him. "You tell me this child has bloody shits day after day from smoking too much marijuana. Tell me to my face, Mr. Commissioner!"

The next day, the commissioner went on the air again with a public apology. Information had been brought to his attention, he said, that convinced him of grave health risks from herbicide exposure. For the rest of his time in office, Commissioner Andy Zedwick led a tireless campaign against the aerial spraying of herbicides in Lincoln County, joining the county medical society in sponsoring ballot measures to restrict such uses.

When the EPA took over the county's health study of her valley, Melyce accompanied researchers on their sample collection efforts, and gave them the bodies of her chicks and ducklings for dioxin and herbicide analyses. Promised results of the study within 90 days, Melyce hounded the agency for four years, only to be told finally that many of the samples—including her birds—had never been analyzed, and that results of others were inexplicably "mixed up"

with Dow Chemical samples from Midland, Michigan.

In 1984, EPA researchers returned to the valley to resample a single site, the water supply of Melyce's neighbor, where dioxin had been found in 1979. In the five years since 2,4,5-T was banned, dioxin levels had increased four-fold in sediments upstream from Melyce's home. Despite the increase, to the highest dioxin levels in stream sediments ever reported in the Pacific Northwest, the EPA made no effort to collect further samples in the valley, and announced that the levels found presented no "immediate" health risk.

On July 4, 1989, ten years after Ryan Creek was sprayed with 2,4-D, Melyce Connelly died at age 32 of brain, lung, and breast cancer. Friends and neighbors gathered in Melyce's gardens for the last time to spread her ashes among the flowers and trees she loved. Shortly thereafter, the new owners of the property bull-dozed the gardens and garlic fields, and the house she had built burned to ground a few weeks later in an accidental fire. Berry vines and alder saplings now thrive in the clearing where her house and gardens once stood, the old pathways emerging ghost-like every spring in rows of bobbing daffodils.

Not until 1993, thirteen years after requiring manufacturers to test 2,4-D products for dioxin, did EPA admit that 2,4-D—which had been sprayed over Ryan Creek after the 2,4,5-T ban—was also contaminated with the most toxic form of dioxin, 2,3,7,8-TCDD. Yet according to Dr. Anthony Colluci, a former EPA official, the EPA had known of TCDD in 2,4-D by the early 1970s.

The use of 2,4-D in forestry and on residential lawns, roadsides, golf courses, and school grounds continues to this day, with EPA approval.

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## Picking Strawberries in Lincolnwood

by Nan Hendricks, Bridge Alliance

I came to live in my husband's Lincolnwood house when we married in 1955. It was a fine neighborhood with a small park in back, a utility corridor and one train track, the Northwestern commuter to Skokie. In those days our neighbors took the train downtown to the Chicago Loop every day.

We all noticed when the railroad sprayed the new weedkiller along the tracks. Rabbits and pheasants disappeared. Scrub brush died. Nothing grew along the tracks except strawberries. Beautiful strawberries.

I was home now awaiting the birth of my first child. I went to pick the strawberries and made jam from them.

The second year I picked strawberries I took a small neighbor with me. In the evening the child's mother came to say that the father was very upset that we had picked and eaten the strawberries. He was a food additive researcher for Kraft Cheese Company. He said the weedkiller was in the strawberries. I should throw them away and never even walk along the track. Thirty eight years ago I could hardly relate to such information. I came very slowly to believe.

I kept bleeding throughout the first and second pregnancies. And after my second son was born I did not stop bleeding for three years despite repeated hospital stays with drug therapy. I spent much of the second pregnancy in bed trying to get to term. I had a serious kidney infection. In 1965 our third child was born after a similar pregnancy.

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### To be two years old and weigh 14 pounds and not walk. That is wasting.

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We only learned gradually of the hyperactivity and learning disability of our first son and the inguinal hernia and learning disability of the second. With the third child, a daughter, I became aware that something was very wrong while still in the delivery room area. She required immediate surgery for imperforate anus.