An Experiment in Country Living

Contributed by Peter Goodchild
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One thing my wife and I learned from seven years in rural Ontario is that country living doesn't always mean freedom from money issues, and of all our expenses the greatest and most persistent was the car. People who live in the country nowadays are actually more hooked on automobiles than those who live in the city, since there are long miles of highway between one's home and other destinations such as shops or a job.

In fact, one of the biggest problems of the truly poor in the countryside is that they may have no means of getting to a job even if it is offered to them. For everyone, the obvious alternative to the automobile would be horses, but how can horses survive at the present time, with the roads dominated by high-speed cars and trucks?

Besides the car, our big costs were property taxes and house renovations. It was a good thing we had paid cash for the house and land, because if we had been paying off a mortgage we would really have had trouble making ends meet. I should add that at first we were not as frugal as we might have been: we had a fair amount of money because we had sold our house in Toronto, but because we had so much money we spent it too freely.

We did not expect money making to be the principal issue in country living, but such was the case. Although we ran a one-acre market garden as efficiently as possible, a profit always seemed to elude us. As time went by, we began to realize that there were not many people in the area who had financial security. Most of the people we met were living either on pensions or on welfare, or something similar. The pensioners were sometimes elderly poor people living on nothing but payments from the government. There were only a few people living on company pensions, which provided a higher standard of living. One group of people who had a reasonable income were the few trades people that the area could support - carpenters, plumbers, mechanics, and so on. The other large segment of the population was the cottagers, the Torontonians, who were likely to show up only in the summer, but these people didn't have to deal with the problem of earning a local income.

Most people under retirement age, however, were barely surviving, partly because the entire area pretty well closed down during the winter. The main industry was "tourism," which is sometimes little more than a euphemism for "poverty."

My suggestions that people rediscover their rural origins didn't get very far. The young disliked country living and were rather ashamed of it. The middle-aged took the attitude, not that "anything worth doing is worth doing well," but that it is worth doing only with heavy machinery. I remember seeing two large brand-new trucks going down the road one day with a grand total of four people, merely to eat at a local restaurant not a big crime, just a vignette. The most knowledgeable people were in their eighties, but the following generations wanted to be part of what they considered the modern world: they were willing slaves to the urban economy that was slowly killing them.

After we bought the property, we seemed to find more and more work that needed to be done to make the place livable, and most of it had to be done before the approach of the first winter. We knew very little ourselves about renovations, and at the same time we had very few names to work with, so we ended up hiring people without

getting multiple estimates for the work to be done. As a result, we were sometimes charged too much money, but we were unable to realize that fact until much later.

I would even say that some of those "renovations" should have been left undone. For example, we spent a good deal of money for eaves troughs to be installed around the metal roof of our mobile home, not realizing that a slippery metal roof would result in avalanches of melting snow in the spring, and that those avalanches would simply tear the eaves troughs away.

On the positive side, we finally learned many things about house repair and renovation. In particular we learned how to do a number of carpentry tasks. I even did a bit of plumbing, at least to the extent of replacing old faucets. Electricity, however, remained for me a rather esoteric subject, probably because I found it both dangerous and expensive. Electricity was also unreliable, and violent summer storms would often mean looking for candles and matches.

We learned a great deal about heating with wood. We not only managed to operate a wood stove properly, but we gradually went through the entire process of cutting down trees, sawing them into lengths, splitting the pieces, stacking and storing them, and so on. I became quite adept at using a chain saw, although I found that using such a machine on a long-term basis requires a good knowledge of maintenance, including sharpening the chain, cleaning the entire machine, and recognizing common problems.

As a long-term "survival skill," operating a chain saw is rather dubious, of course. How will people operate such things as the world's petroleum runs out? Oil production in 2030 will be less than half that of the year 2000. In any case, according to at least one expert on the subject, if you calculate the money required to operate a chain saw, and the time involved in maintaining the equipment, you may find that you're better off using a simple bow saw.

I think using a bow saw to put together a winter's supply of firewood might require many long weeks of labor, but there may be some sense to the theory. Certainly modern bow saws are quite good. The blades are of hardened steel, which means they cannot be re-sharpened and must be discarded eventually, but they last a long time, and buying a lifetime's supply of such blades would be easy enough.

I even bought some antique timber saws, those gigantic devices, often several feet long, that our ancestors used for dealing with logs. I learned how to set the teeth (bend them to certain angles), using tools that I had made myself, and how to sharpen them properly. I soon concluded that I didn't have the ancestral muscles for such saws. Part of the problem, however, may have been that even after I had done my best to polish the steel surfaces they were not really smooth, since rust had caused pitting. Much later I heard that such timber saws can be bought brand new, and that a new timber saw will cut firewood much more quickly than a bow saw.

We learned that there are many other ways of dealing with firewood and heating problems. A smaller house needs less firewood, and so does one with fewer and smaller windows. Good insulation is an enormous help. Another trick from the old days is to use less firewood by sealing off unnecessary rooms in winter. For similar reasons, the stove must be located in the room that will be used the most in the

daytime.

We learned many things about vegetable gardening that we didn't know before, although the locals were not of much help, since they lived mainly on supermarket food. We discovered the importance of starting with good soil (which we didn't have), and the importance of keeping an eye on dates and on weather. We learned to identify and defeat many species of harmful insects. We also tried a great many crops and developed a good idea of what crops work in that area and which ones don't.

We gained a good knowledge of grains. Corn is by far the best grain to grow, since the yield per unit of land is quite high, and it requires very little in terms of equipment for growing, for harvesting, or for processing. By "corn," however, I mean the older varieties once grown by the native people, not modern corn, which is susceptible to insects and diseases. The other grain that did well was rye, mainly because of the sandy soil.

Our brief experience with raising chickens was quite educational in two senses. The first is that I learned something about the construction of buildings with frames made of 2x4s, and as part of that learning experience I did everything with non-electric tools except for the somewhat tedious task of cutting chipboard.

I built the first chicken coop with a poured concrete-slab foundation and a "shed" roof (i.e. one slope rather than two), and the outside was made of board-and-batten (vertical boards, with the intervening gaps covered by thin strips). The roof was covered with roll roofing.

For the second coop, I deliberately used entirely different methods, partly so that I could gain further experience. The foundation was of concrete piers rather than a solid slab, the roof had two slopes (and hence two gables), and the outside of the walls was covered with chipboard, which in turn was covered with vinyl siding, all of it admittedly not very "traditional" but perhaps "transitional." The roof was covered with the same material as the first coop, but in the form of shingles rather than rolls.

For the most part, I preferred what I did on the second coop, although I now think concrete piers are very difficult to build and position neatly without preformed molds and pre-mixed concrete.

The second and rather odd thing that we learned, or seem to have learned, about chickens is that our long hours of acquiring an education in modern poultry-raising may have taken us somewhat in the wrong direction. Just as we were closing down our entire chicken operation, I began reading a few articles which seemed to indicate that from a survivalist perspective it would be better to get away from modern methods. These methods are designed to maximize production of either eggs or meat.

But our chickens eventually totaling fifty were living mainly on purchased feed, which was expensive to buy and transport, and out of that feed they ate only the types of grain they liked, and simply left the rest to rot. They were also living in

highly fortified buildings with well-fenced yards, all of which protected them from foxes, raccoons, and weasels, but their isolated existence meant they were not roaming the fields in search of vegetation and insects which could have provided free food.

It may well be the case that a better approach to poultry may be a less-modern one. The chickens raised in more-primitive cultures, in other words, may be relatively unproductive but might have greater resistance to diseases and predators, and the actual varieties of chickens worth considering may be smaller and hardier birds that are closer to the ancestral types.

Perhaps above all, we learned that it is possible to live with some independence from modern civilization. On the four acres that were ours by law, but in reality belonged more to Nature, the seasons followed one another, even if we were sometimes too busy to notice. In spring the river roared and bellowed and foamed along its banks, and in winter that same river was a tranquil study in black and white. None of that will ever change. But there are other things will certainly change one day: the cars will be gone, and so will the money economy.

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The Century of Famine

Post-Peak Economics

Food and Population

Depletion of Key Resources: Facts at Your Fingertips

When the Lights Go Out

Crime in the Post-Peak World

How Much Land Do We Need?

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