

Introduction

As I wrote this book, I kept coming up against the same question over and over again: What exactly is a homesteader? The term is inexact and open to interpretation. People from all walks of life rally around this word. There are preppers and survivalists, looked at with skepticism by hippies and wellness mamas, and these groups might be warily judged by small family farmers. Yet all of them, in a pinch, would self-define as homesteaders.

It could be said that the only true homesteaders were those relocating under the 1862 Homestead Act. Signed by Abraham



Credit: Kate St. Cyr

Modern homesteading life.

Lincoln, this act gifted 160 acres of land to anyone willing to relocate to the western territories. That's when the term "homesteader" first started being used in the manner that we use it today, though the "back-to-the-land" movement is much older than that. It seems that over the history of civilization, there have always been people wanting to drop out of the mainstream to live a more agrarian lifestyle.

The most recent periods of rural migration in American history happened during the 1960s and 1970s when "back-to-the-landers" flooded into rural states, such as Maine, following the lead of proponents such as Helen and Scott Nearing. Before that, during the late 1800s, folks were settling out West, while back East transcendentalists such as Henry David Thoreau waxed lyrical about the simple life. But you can find "homesteaders" in the Roman era and throughout world history. For the most part when looking at history, I define a homesteader as someone like the Roman dictator Lucius Quinctius Cincinnatus, who preferred life on his small farm to governing the young Roman Empire. These are people who had a choice and preferred living off the land, rather than taking jobs in the city. Of course, there were many yeoman farmers and laborers throughout history, but to begin to define the term "homesteader," I would offer it is someone who makes a conscious choice to live close to the land.

While dictionary definitions and blog posts on homestead websites extoll what individual homesteaders do, self-reliance is always at the heart of this lifestyle choice. A goal for self-sufficiency is borne from a desire to control your own destiny, or, as Thoreau put it, "to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life." Negative experiences within society can make one feel more comfortable outside of the mainstream, or it can derive from a fear or rejection of a direction that culture seems to be heading, and a will to survive even if society collapses.

So my broad definition of a homesteader would be "someone who chooses to live self-reliantly."

At first, I worried about the content. Should I spend more time explaining the workings of a woodstove, and skim the topic of no-till gardens? On my homestead, all our winter heat comes from a woodstove, and I have yet to tend a no-till garden. In the end, I decided to offer readers my own hard-earned, practical knowledge rather than hearsay where ever possible.

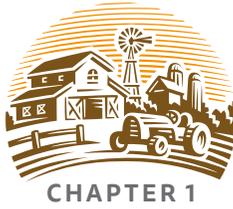
I questioned myself: Am I really a homesteader? The more I thought about it, the more I wondered if anyone was really qualified. I know people who would self-identify as homesteaders who live completely off-grid, with no electricity whatsoever, no running water, but happily drive to the local store to purchase food for their family. I know people who live in comfortable houses with all the amenities, but grow all of the food for their family, make their skin lotions and soaps, even sew their own clothing. And then there is me, in between: no indoor plumbing and fully dependent on wood heat, but using electricity and growing as much of our food as possible, while still making weekly pilgrimages to the grocery store for what we cannot supply ourselves.

With such a broad definition, *someone who chooses to live self-reliantly*, it's clear to me there is no right or wrong way to homestead. It is about doing what is within your abilities in order to create a more self-sufficient lifestyle. For some, it's about making or producing items you would otherwise purchase. For others, it's about withdrawing from modern society and abandoning the scrutiny from unwanted authorities. While these particular homesteaders may not completely share the same mindsets and opinions, both check off "homesteading" as their lifestyle choice.

So maybe your self-reliance starts in the kitchen, or in the garden, or raising livestock for food and fiber, or maybe both. This book is directed at folks considering a shift in their lifestyle from city-based to country living. You might even take the information and apply it to an urban homestead as well. My intention is to offer tips and strategies, as well as personal observations, regarding what to expect when moving to a rural area and to illustrate

the pitfalls and perks that you might not have anticipated. This book also provides a practical guide to managing some of the realities of homestead life, including the dusty and sometimes finicky woodstove.

It is meant neither to encourage nor discourage, but to be realistic and informative. Homesteading in the country has many harsh truths, and it requires a strong work ethic above all other qualifications. It also has brought more joy and satisfaction to my existence than any other lifestyle I have known, and I hope that if you embark on such a journey it will offer you the same delights.



Preparing for Rural Life

In April 2016, my partner and I packed up our little hobby farm and moved to the country. We had kept half a dozen geese and a small garden in a little enclave of mid-coast Maine. The closest neighbors were one hundred feet away, and their front windows looked directly into our back windows. We had built a small coop and run for our birds and spent a summer erecting a stone wall around the garden for some semblance of privacy from the busy route that ran directly in front of our home.

Our sign that we needed to escape suburbia? After our geese escaped their run for the umpteenth time and spent an afternoon sunning themselves along the side of the road, we had a knock on the door from animal control. We were told that we'd be responsible for damages if someone hit one of the geese.

We had already been looking for a place that offered more space and privacy, and now we began to search in earnest.

It took us years to find the right place. We looked at vacant acres with thoughts to build, and seriously considered a house at the end of a dead-end road three



Proud new owners of an old homestead.

hours from anywhere. Our budget was tight, and while our priority was land, we knew it would be some time before we had any extra funds for building, so we wanted a place with some structures for ourselves and our animals. And while we longed for privacy, we also wanted to be within driving distance of our families.

We finally found the place, and knew on the first drive-by that it was the home for us. Nestled on 93 acres an hour inland from our old location, our new home was a farmhouse that had been kept in the same family since it was built in the 1860s. The home had been abandoned for more than thirty years and had no electricity or running water, and the fields were covered in low brush and surrounded by encroaching forests. But the property did feature a structurally sound, massive Yankee-style barn, which was full to the brim with decades of farming refuse.

Located on a road memorably titled Hostile Valley, our farm would never be known to the locals as anything other than “the



“The old Whitaker place” six months after we started clearing the fields.

old Whitaker place." Once a thriving family farm, it had slowly lost its residents until it became a summer place and then a memory. The bones of both buildings were strong, and if you squinted, you could imagine the long, rolling fields as open acres once again. It was time to pick up our lives and make the move to a real rural lifestyle.

Having lived most of my life in a less populated state, Maine, and enjoyed the ideas of privacy and solitude, I thought I was prepared for this transition. In many ways, I was. After all, it was the fulfillment of a lifelong dream. But there were also many unexpected challenges. There were aspects I thought would be easy that grew tiresome quickly, and obstacles I had never even considered. During the first few months, I wondered if we'd made a huge mistake.

From the first neighbors to drop by unannounced, to the worrisome realization that anything forgotten during my weekly grocery store forays would be half an hour away or more until the next time, country life required some changes in perspective that I had never expected.

Moving back to the land often carries romantic notions of cheerfully harvesting food straight from the abundant earth and caring for all manner of strong, healthy livestock. While that is the beauty of rural life, so are the months spent turning soil, planting seeds, plucking weeds, and battling off all manner of pesky and harmful insects. Plenty of dramatic hardships can occur on a farm. There is never a shortage of good stories that bring a sigh of relief in retrospect. But perhaps the biggest surprise of rural living is how totally routine it can be. And if you keep livestock, every day features the same monotony of morning feeding and putting them out to pasture, checking water buckets, breaking ice in winter, changing wet and dirty bedding, and lugging bales of hay. Animals do not like their routine altered, and they'll be feisty and unruly if you're a few minutes late.

This routine does not take a day off. One of the great lessons I learned as a child growing up with horses and chickens was that

no matter how you felt, the animals still needed to be fed. Creatures that you keep as pets or livestock cannot take care of themselves; because of you, they are trapped in enclosures unable to feed themselves or keep their areas sanitary. So they depend on you, and they expect you at a certain time of day. With any kind of livestock, you do not get days off, you do not get sick days or vacation time unless you can find someone you trust to take care of them. This unglamorous routine goes on 365 days a year.

Even for the homesteader without livestock, the reality of rural life is a grueling workout. No one I know who has succeeded at homesteading spends any time not planning ahead. You may think you're out in a rural area where you can take long walks enjoying the sights and exploring the land. But if you want to survive,

everything revolves around what you are doing to promote that survival: growing food, raising food, building shelter, or keeping warm. In order to thrive and provide you with food, a garden needs nourishment. In order to stay warm and survive the winter (and not risk burning your shelter down), wood needs to be constantly collected, cut, and stacked. A property needs continuous work, even with a fairly new construction, and there is always something to fix and improve on the land.

There's a comfort and a familiarity to performing the same tasks every day, and then the delight in the occasional out-of-the-ordinary experience: when the first doe delivers newborn kids, or a batch of fluffy goslings



Credit: Kate St. Cyr

Goats and other livestock need daily attention.

arrive. We humans are, after all, animals too, and it makes sense that we would want that kind of daily pattern. However, after two years on the homestead following the same drill every morning and every evening, monotony began to take its toll on me. I was feeling restless and missing the excitement that I once had from my daily tasks, and realized I was in need of a little bit of rest and recuperation.

I realized a break is necessary once in a while. And that is just one reason to build a support network around your homestead. Friends and neighbors, and folks living on other farms, can be very valuable if you need to step away from the farm in an emergency or for a break. These people are especially helpful in sharing advice and can commiserate with you over setbacks. Having at least one or two people that you can trust to take care of your farm when you're away, and turn to for advice if something goes wrong, is very important to surviving homestead life.

And there will be setbacks. There will be all of the problems that you've thought might happen, and more that are unexpected.

Everyone homesteads a little bit differently. Your manner of homesteading depends on your reasons for making this lifestyle choice. Some choose to live truly off of the grid, with no electricity or running water. Others, while living in a traditional home with heat and running water, focus on raising as much of their own food as possible and making everything that they consume. Plenty of people live somewhere in between, which is where we found ourselves upon moving to the country.

When we bought our farm, it had no electricity, no running water, and very little else. After weighing our options and priorities, we put connected electricity and water to the barn. We were fortunate to discover an old pipe linking the barn to a spring up the mountain, and simply reconnected it and added a hot water heater to provide an outdoor shower and functioning sink. In the house, we closed off two rooms for living, where we set up a bed and woodstove and kept a bucket for excrement, emptying and burying the contents twice a week. Our lifestyle was rough and

unbelievable to many of my friends, yet it was the lap of luxury compared to many homesteaders I knew.

Even with our limited modern amenities, we still encountered unforeseen challenges. The first year, we put off winterizing the outdoor shower until it was too late and found ourselves bathing in the kitchen with a small tub of water and a wet towel for the next four months. Our first full summer, we relied on the natural spring for all of the farm's water needs. That dried up in August and did not give us another drop until November. No matter what you plan for, there are always going to be unexpected setbacks.

The Maine winters provided us with some particular challenges. We knew what to expect in terms of temperatures and snowfall, but planning to survive those elements is a lot trickier in a remote area. It is certainly true that the entirety of summer in a highly seasonal area is spent simply preparing for the upcoming season. Gardens are planted and harvested not for immediate vine-to-table consumption, necessarily, but for storage to use in the cold winter months when fresh vegetables are hard to come by. Heating with wood will have to start by cutting and splitting at least six months earlier in order to have it dry in time for use. Even if you're purchasing dried firewood, you'll be spending a good chunk of time in the summer stacking it. While the old adage says firewood warms you twice—once when you cut it and once when you burn it—I would propose it's actually thrice, since stacking is such a labor-intensive process. Depending on your location, winter may or may not be a major annual experience. If it is, events as basic as snowfalls can develop into logistical nightmares if you are not prepared.

There will also be drama on the farm. Sometimes things go wrong that can break your heart. If you farm with animals, you will have to address their mortality at some point. Many homesteaders raise animals for meat, and the reality of butchering your own livestock can be a harsh one. Even if you keep animals only for milk or eggs, accidents and illnesses can occur, and despite all your best efforts, at some point you'll lose an animal that was a great friend. Farming of any kind is never for the faint of heart,

and since the rest of your livestock will be clamoring for attention, there is very little time to mourn on a farm.

The demands of homesteading can be divided into the physical and the emotional. Physically, you require a basic level of strength in order to be successful. While not every homesteader must be young and fit, you will be hauling bundles of firewood, heaving bales of hay, or bending over in the garden for days at a time. If you plan to keep livestock, you need to be able to physically handle your animals.

Homesteading can be a great daily fitness routine. It calls for reserves of endurance, and same workout is usually without much variety for months at a time, changing only with seasonal requirements. That workout is demanding, and some of the most mundane daily tasks can be physically exhausting. For instance, when checking the garden for pests, I'm not carrying anything, but the act of bending over to check each plant puts a burn in your back, after working the entire quarter of an acre—and if you really want to be self-sufficient, a garden at least that size is recommended.

Firewood and water carrying are great muscle-builders for a farmer. Even on the grid with running water, you'll have to carry buckets for animals or gardens at some point. And there is no getting around firewood and the labors involved in its creation and use. If all goes well, the worst your body will suffer will be some blisters and sore muscles. You also need an emergency response plan should you be badly injured—which is very easy to do, especially if you keep large livestock—including someone to call on



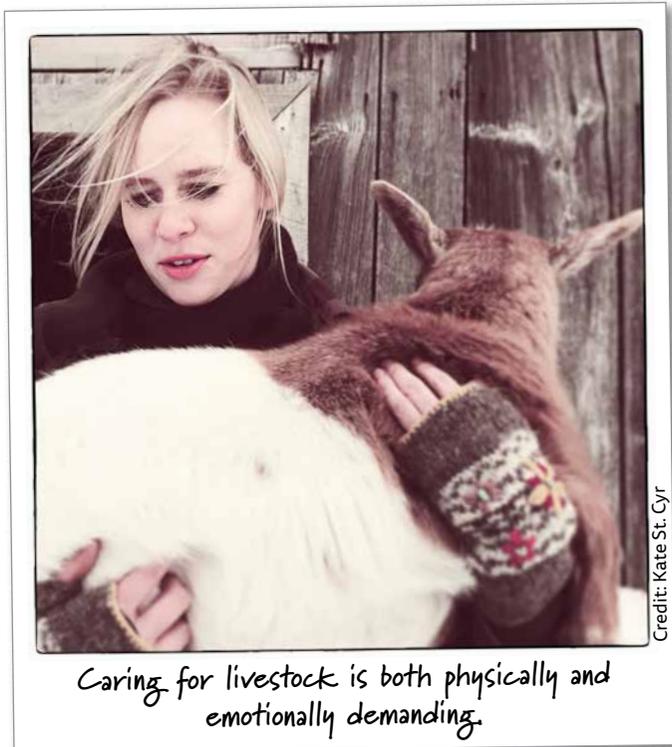
Credit: Kate St. Cyr

The bonds we form with our livestock can be deep.

for help while you are laid up. Once again, neighbors or nearby farmers can be a tremendous help if you have built connections with them. If you are able to keep working with an injury, well, that is a hardship in itself.

The physical aspect of farming is especially important to consider if you are planning on this being your long-term lifestyle choice. Back in the day, farmers had large families to help keep up with the demands of their farm. Today it is less common to have so many children, and plenty of couples choose not to have children at all. Besides, having children on a homestead brings its own challenges. If you envision relaxing on your homestead in your golden years, it is possible. But you have to scale your life to conditions and activities that can be carried out when you are not as young and robust as before.

The emotional hardships on the homestead can be the most exhausting. One tragedy can bring you down in an instant, but



more often a series of small hardships might work your system over until you feel like throwing in the towel at the end of a long season.

Even without mishaps, the mental wear of early mornings and late nights without a break can be taxing. Projects to prepare for the next season require time, which is taken away from any leisure or just added on as extra hours that you'll be awake and working. You cannot delay preparations on a homestead. Winter will come, and you need to be ready. If you keep animals or have a family, you owe it to them to be ready for every season.

The most effective way to maintain mental health and physical endurance on the homestead is to schedule your leisure time. In their book, *Living the Good Life*, Helen and Scott Nearing discuss the importance of evening meals with music and friends. Other homesteaders I know make it a point to get off the farm at least once a year. You can escape the monotonous daily tasks for a little bit, or even include leisure in your routine, but you will have to plan for it proactively.

Having to be mentally on, constantly thinking of solutions, can be as stressful as hard physical labor. Even on the smoothest running farm that you've been operating for years, there are fresh ideas to implement and new crops to try. On a new homestead, it is all about figuring out what works and what doesn't and making changes to ensure that you and your family are comfortable, safe, and achieving your goals. So while the homestead might let you rest physically occasionally, you'll find yourself unable to rest totally as you do the math for next year's breeding plans or crop rotations in your head over and over again, or try to figure out a better way to transport water or turn the soil without a rototiller.

For most homesteaders, the other emotionally exhausting aspect of the lifestyle is finances. While a few back-to-the-landers do back up their plans with money, the lifestyle generally attracts people working on a budget. And even with a financial cushion, you'll be amazed how quickly these lifestyle choices eat into any reserves.

As in any situation, it is important to keep an open conversation going about finances. For those trying to escape the “real world” on a homestead in the woods, you’ll find it is impossible to begin without making initial smart investments. You won’t be spending money on frivolities anymore: you’ll be placing your dollars where you hope to recoup them on the farm or investing in tools or materials that will outlast you on the land. Maintain a budget whenever possible and research the financial realities of any animal or new equipment before adding it to the farm; try to make gains, not losses. All this sounds very practical and common sense, but to maintain focus and stick to a budget can be mentally draining—especially if you thought that was what you were escaping.

Money choices should be made wisely, but expenditures are well worth it if they help your lifestyle to be enjoyable and successful. Eating out, vacations, new clothes, all fall away if you’re focused on your homestead. Instead, when you’ve got a bit of extra cash, it is invested in the farm, whether it be new equipment or new animals.

The best step to take to avoid emotional burnout or undo physical stress is to be prepared. Preparation takes its own mental toll and is hard work, but it is a lot less stressful than fixing a situation that has already gotten out of hand. While there will be plenty of unforeseen issues, consider what you already know. Every year you know winter is right around the bend, and every spring you should be ready for planting and new animals. There is no reason to make your life on a homestead any more difficult than necessary when you are fully aware of the cycle of the seasons.

My observation has been that many different kinds of people choose to homestead. Interestingly, while generally following the same lifestyle, they often couldn’t be more different in their outlooks.

A “homesteader” is someone wanting to live in closer harmony with the land and be involved in the production of their own food. Homesteaders do not have to detach themselves completely from

the modern world. They are excited about self-sufficiency and having control over their life systems and energy resources, but they are not restricted to an existence entirely separate from modern civilization. In other words, there are no “rules” for homesteading, nor an archetype homesteader.

I do not believe that a homesteader needs to make their life more difficult than necessary. Homesteading is about self-reliance, creating your own food and goods, and controlling your own life. It doesn't have to be detached unless you want it to be, and it doesn't have to overlook conveniences.

For example, do yourself the favor of getting the best quality tools. If you are going to be heating and cooking with wood, buy the best woodstove that you can afford. If you want to keep an extensive garden, find a good rototiller that you can operate comfortably. Some make the choice to till by hand, which works fine if you are prepared for that amount of effort. Do your due diligence in research before bringing home any animals, and continue to learn about their needs while they live on your farm. Invest in a good farm truck, or another vehicle, that can transport bales of hay and animals easily. With tools and animals, take the best care possible of what you have. Have a plan for all weather, although those plans always change. Within your own personal parameters, depending on your reasons for homesteading and how connected you wish to stay, get yourself the best gear whenever you can.

Homesteading is hard work. There is no break from the efforts. You deal with physical hardships, emotional heartbreaks, and you'll face the unexpected at every turn. Your ultimate goal, be it total self-sufficiency or simply some independence from the grocery store, will be the entire focus of your life.



Further Reading

- ▶ *The Contrary Farmer* by Gene Lodgson
- ▶ *Living the Good Life* by Helen and Scott Nearing

Questions Before You Leap

- ▶ How much land does the property have?
- ▶ What is the condition of the house and/or outbuildings?
- ▶ Does the property include any open fields or ponds?
- ▶ What is the condition of the land generally?
- ▶ How does that land's condition translate into your homesteading plans: for example, can you grow the crops you're planning on or pasture the animals you hope to raise?
- ▶ What level of off-grid living are you hoping to achieve, both initially and long term?
- ▶ Do you have a plan for obtaining a mortgage?
- ▶ Will you be maintaining a job off the homestead, and if so, what will your commute look like?
- ▶ Do you know and trust folks who can take care of the homestead if you need a vacation? If not, are you prepared to be on the homestead every day?