

The First Time Homesteader

By Ken Davison

In the 30 years that we have been homesteaders, we have probably made every mistake in the book, at least once. This was partly because there was no "book". Our parents were not homesteaders and by the time we had questions, our grand parents were gone. With nobody to teach us, we had to learn the hard way. The old timers called it "paying fool tax". We write this for "first time" or "would-be" homesteaders, in the hopes that you won't have to pay as much "fool tax" as we did. The best place for anyone wanting to become a homesteader is to start is right where they are now. Even while living in the city, working a 9 to 5 job, many of the necessary homesteading skills can be learned, and once learned, put into practice. Your situation will place limits on what and how much you can actually do. While raising goats may be out of the question, raising a few tomato plants and herbs in pots on a window sill is a definite start.

By learning how to live more frugally, you will be better able to save towards someday getting your own piece of land. Perhaps you choose to buy produce when it is at it's cheapest, in mid summer, and home can or dry some for your food storage? Go to produce sellers and ask if they have any produce that is too bad to sell. Often produce is damaged in shipping and cannot be sold, but is still perfectly usable. Vegetables with a small spot of spoilage can often have this section removed and the rest be just fine. Often the produce seller will give you these vegetables for free, or at very low prices. The food can then be reclaimed, dried, frozen, home canned or eaten fresh. The bad parts can be fed to any chickens that your space might allow, or if nothing else, could be used as compost for your plants. For "city compost", run all the bad plant parts through your blender with just a little water, and then pour the "slurry" around your plants.

Start now to buy things used, but in as good a condition as possible. Visit yard sales and flea markets. If you have the space, start gathering the tools that you will need once you move onto your homestead. Begin to simplify your life now and start selling off things you no longer use, making more room for the things that you will want for homesteading. The best place to buy many homesteading tools is actually in the city, where they are not as often used. Read as much as you can about homesteading skills. In short, make your preparations while you are still "stuck" in the city. If nothing else, it will help to make the time go by faster, and the time spent working on your homestead plans can become a small island of sanity where you can renew your spirit. Eventually the day will come when you can start to really live your homestead dreams. Where you look for land may be determined by many things; family, friends, employment, climate and land prices. Unless you have your heart set on one particular area, check land prices all across the country. You may be pleasantly surprised at how cheap land is in some parts. Recently, in Florida, (not known for cheap land), we saw one 20 acre piece sell for only \$400.00 per acre.

What should you look for in a piece of land? One of the most important things to think about and look for in a piece of land is water. Having a good water source can make or break a homestead. You may not only want to check out annual rainfall in a area, but also how deep the water table is. Most well drillers can give you a pretty good idea how deep the water table is in a given area. While it is sometimes possible to gather enough water to run a frugal household with rain water catchment (such as a cistern), having water for livestock and irrigation is more difficult. Natural springs and year round streams are a big plus when looking at land. Before you buy the land is a good time to try to find out about any problems that may be present with the water. Do some of the local wells dry up in summer? Are there unwanted minerals in the local water? How does the water taste? What about pollution in the ground water?

The deeper the water table, the harder it is to pump the water to the surface. The "pitcher pump" will draw water only about 20 feet. Deep well pumps are available in manual and electric power. People who are new to homesteading, and are coming off of "public water" systems, need to reeducate themselves to the realities of where water comes from. A low capacity water system, already in place, doesn't necessarily mean rejecting a piece of property; but people should acknowledge that solving water problems on the homestead cannot simply be taken care of with a call to the local utility company. The property that you may be looking at may not have adequate water for your needs, and it is up to you, not the seller, to determine this. We simply cannot stress enough how valuable an adequate water supply is on a homestead.

The next area for concern is access. Access simply means a way of getting to your land. There are at least two possible problems with access. One is: does the land have legal access? In many areas legal access is established, such as when a road or trail has been in use for a long time, but this is not always the case. Just because the seller was able to drive you to the land does not always mean that there is legal access. Almost all states have laws that make it unlawful to "land lock" anyone off their land, but the new land owner may have to buy "right of way" access at current market value. A slightly higher priced piece of land, with legal access guaranteed, may be less expensive in the long run than a lower priced piece would be without the access. With legal access, the electric company can bring power lines beside the right of way. Otherwise, you may have to go to your neighbors and ask them to grant the power company right of way. While most states have laws protecting people from being land locked, few require that power access be granted.

The second and equally important access problem is terrain. Swampy areas, steep

hills, creeks that may swell during rains, areas of the land that are prone to flooding, or anything that may make getting to the land difficult or impossible, should be considered before buying. Unless you have priced building materials recently, you may be in for "price tag shock" the next time that you do. Any buildings or other improvements that are already on the land will increase its value. Maybe the old house is too rough for you to live in, but it might make a work shop or barn. Consider all improvements when looking at land, including how far power lines would have to be run in order to get electricity. If you plan on heating with wood, the size and quality of the wood lot should be looked at. Soil quality and places for gardens or pastures should be considered. The growing season should also be thought about before buying.

Even with hard work, climate does effect what and how much can be grown. The severity of winters and how hot the summers are might be considered. Other considerations are what the State and local laws might be that restrict the use of the land. You need to find out about these before you buy the land, not after. How fast is the area growing? Many more neighbors might effect local restrictions on land use, or more people putting in wells might, in time, lower the water table. If you are choosing the land as a permanent homestead, you might want an area that is not showing rapid growth. Any natural building material that is on the land might be taken into consideration.

Distance from schools, hospitals, shopping centers and the possibility for work may also need to be considered. Finally the price must be taken into account. Two very similar pieces of land can often vary greatly in price in the same area. By talking to the people already living in an area, it is sometimes possible to find land that is much below the price of what the Real Estate dealers are showing. Real Estate brokers work for a commission when selling the land. If you buy directly from the seller, you can often save this commission. If you already have some land that does not stand up to these ideas too well,

then there are ways to work around many problems; but homesteading would be much easier without this extra effort. Stay tuned next time for Shelter and Animals...