

Realities of Going Primitive

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So, you have been considering a change of pace? Want to leave the rat race behind? Possibly even bypassing the cabin on the hill with sheep, chickens, and an organic garden, and diving head long into that wild lake of your dreams called Primitive Lifestyle? Great! I welcome the company. You see, I took the plunge two years ago, and I am still swimming with my head above water, though just barely at times.

I am now living in Northern Michigan, together with a few others who have also heard the call of the wild and have answered it. I was asked by Steve Hulsey, Editor of Wilderness Way, to write of my journey of the past several years, and how I see and experience the realities of living a primitive lifestyle.

I want to be as encouraging as I can be to those of you seeking this way of life. However, I am also going to tell it straight up, just like it is.

Having been through what I have in the past several years, I have developed some sense of what is going down in the world. I believe there are many wonderful human beings that are depressed, devastated, and overwhelmed by the crazed society that surrounds them. Their true desire is to live as close to the land as possible. Perhaps no one else knows that they feel this way and they tell no one for fear of rejection and ridicule. So their secret consumes their thoughts and dreams and they continue going through the motions of crazed society, living the way they really want to only in their heads. I know what this is like and maybe some of you reading this also know. Also, I hope readers can learn from mistakes I have made. I refuse to write a flowery, buttered-up story of living native, but I will say that the joys, rewards and freedom I have experienced are well worth any hardships encountered. So, this is not a blueprint for going primitive, just the human side of my attempt thus far.

What is it like to live primitive, the difficulties, the compromises, the progressions and rewards? I will finish by relating what I feel to be the two most important aspects of living primitive. They are not found in any wilderness skills book, but can determine one's success at living in the wild.

Sometimes I think I was predestined for a primitive life way. As a youngster I was fascinated with all things "Indian." I spent long hours exploring the tall grass pastures of our farm, shooting arrows and throwing spears. Perhaps I was also influenced by books I read, like *Island of the Blue Dolphins*. In some ways, I have come full circle back to my early days.

Not unlike many of you, I was raised in a rural farming community, Indiana to be exact. As a young boy I was responsible for looking after the pigs, cows and occasionally the horses. I enjoyed

being around the animals and thought I would probably farm for a living. When graduation came, the right thing to do was to get that college education, because, after all, farming was becoming more complicated every year. Living in the city at the university was nerve wracking. I was used to roaming pastures and corn fields. I worked part time to pay for tuition and books, and, oh yeah, the occasional beer party... Majoring in agribusiness and animal science and belonging to a large fraternity, I was, after two years, disgusted with myself and the college scene. I moved back home and commuted to class, determined to finish what I had started.

Since my weekends were no longer filled with parties and women chasing, I had more time to think about what I was doing with my life. Even then, I had begun to doubt my interests in a career, especially in the agribusiness. On a whim, I enrolled in an elective, Forestry 240 – Wildlife in America, with Fred Montague. Little did I know at the time that this was a pivotal decision in the path I would later take. Dr. Montague is one of those unique professors that goes far beyond the prescribed course text, in fact, pretty much throwing the text out the window. Not only did we have discussions on wildlife, but we were challenged with every factor that affected wildlife: pollution, habitat destruction, mindless capitalism, the very civilization itself.

By the time college graduation rolled around, I had done a 180. Wanting nothing to do with agribusiness, I had thoughts of starting a small farm or going to California in search of the music business (at the time I was lead guitarist for a small time rock-n-roll band). I was depressed, with no job. It is funny how, when you think you've hit rock bottom, things can change in a flash. Something had clicked. I liked animals and liked observing them. I had loads of experience with farm animals. I would become a farm animal behaviorist!? Was there such a thing? A phone call and a few days later, I found myself in the office of a premiere farm animal behaviorist who actually had a graduate student studying the effects of music on farm animals. The professor put me on the payroll. I didn't blink an eye. My duty was to assist his student in her research. Soon I was enrolled in a graduate program of my own with my own research projects.

My co-graduate student, well, she and I saw things eye to eye and liked one another. We were a great team. Before I knew it, we were engaged to be married. By this time I was heavy into the environmentalism scene. I became vegetarian, except for occasional pork raised back home on the small farm. I began putting more and more pressure on myself to make a difference within the system.

In time my marriage began to fail – and I didn't even see it coming. After passing my thesis defense, I headed to a large university in the south to study behavior and consciousness in animals. Things fell through, and my wife and I got into jobs with the U.S.D.A. studying animal welfare.

My marriage was all but over, although I still couldn't realize it. It was a dark time for me. I took a week off from work and went on a humanitarian mission to the slums of Juarez, Mexico – a border town. If one could major in primitive living, I think I would make as a pre-requisite that one visit a "third world" country. One's ideas on materialism and what one can do without quickly become solidified.

I felt very positive about my decision to leave the material/civilized way of existence behind. I just wasn't sure where I would be going to leave it behind. A friend loaned me a packet of info on outdoor survival schools. In the packet I came across one that gave me goosebumps. I wrote a short note saying I wanted to attend the gathering. They responded by saying "glad to have you, and by the way we have a few staff positions open." My intuition said "This is your chance, dude!" My heart said, "Hey look, you're still married, even if unhappily, and you'd better stay put

if you want to make this marriage work.” I felt caught to say the least. My wife must have known because, to my surprise, she enthusiastically stated that we should call about the openings!

Within a month, my wife and I found ourselves in the Northwoods of Wisconsin at the outdoor school. I felt that this was the beginning of making a go at living the earth ways. However, if you want to canoe wild rivers, there are bound to be rapids and waterfalls. Two weeks after arriving at the school, my wife made it clear she no longer wanted to stay in the marriage. This devastated me. Only those who have gone thru divorce can understand the darkness, pain and anxiety of such an experience. I had gone over the waterfall and felt I was drowning. Indeed, for a time, I felt I would be better off to die rather than endure the suffering and heartache I was going through.

I was alone now, but in the few short months I resided at the outdoor school, I had gained some close friendships, and had begun to learn some basic primitive living skills. I had also learned to canoe, and had lived in a primitive shelter. It was my first taste of what living primitive might be like, and I was still hungry.

Being restless, I moved around the Northwoods of Wisconsin. I built a camp of my own consisting of a birchbark covered wikiup (see picture), by a small bass filled lake. Having no cash and wanting to make my own deer skin clothes, I bartered my services. I did ceiling dry-wall work, a tough job, for a local butcher, remodeling and received a decent pile of deer skins in exchange. At this time, I did not know enough about hunting and trapping to procure a food supply, and so it was quickly looking like either food stamps or a job. I took a temporary, low paying farm labour job for a month. Again it was either divine intervention or dumb luck; it happened to be a diverse farm, and I was able to take home with me several bags of great apples, and all the squash and pumpkin I wanted, as well. These were a boon to my diet.

Not long after, I retrieved a road kill deer in fine shape that gave me meat through the winter. I was coming to believe that prayer did work after all!

At this point, I had left a decent paying research position, payed off my debts and with a few hundred dollars left, had wandered through the Northwoods of Wisconsin, gradually gaining confidence in my abilities to survive. I was an opportunist-doing whatever I had to to survive, without going back to civilization. I was, in effect, making a break from civilization at the mental and emotional levels. I was trusting more in myself and discovering my true heritage. Knowing that 99.95% of my ancestors had lived a hunter-gatherer way of life made my heart grow stronger. My dreams began changing from being chased by gunmen in city streets, to scenes of ancient landscapes with ancient people.

The deep snows off of Lake Superior made the woods even more quiet. I had heaps of time alone to reflect on my past, the present, and the unknown future. This quiet time helped me to heal from past emotional wounds. The days and nights spent out by my wikiup camp were incredibly awesome for me. The first night in the wikiup was late in the hunter’s moon (October-late). Frost was in the air – my favorite season. I came clear up out of my balsam fir bed when a Banded owl landed in a nearby tree and gave a blood curdling yowl! If you’ve heard this at close range, you know what I am talking about. The very next evening, a few coyotes came down to the lake and were letting everyone know with sharp, cackling vocals, and howls. Now this was the wildlife! I thought. A few weeks later and I heard my first wild wolf howl. There was a pack of wolves in the vicinity, though few people have heard or seen them.

Yes, I have lost my way in the woods several times, and boy does it give the heart a workout! I left the beaten path and just when I was ready to head back, I stepped in a hole and fell. I was a bit disoriented when I stood and the clouds had moved in. Nothing looked familiar. The adage

“things look a whole lot different on the way out than they do going in” is very true. I paused and tried to look for my tracks, which isn’t the easiest feat when no sun is shining into a cedar swamp. By the time I had checked for tracks, I seemed to see them in every direction. It was beginning to get late in the day. My now steady breathing got just a tad heavier. If you’ve ever been down in a brush swamp of cedar and tag alder and are not positive which direction will take you out, you start to get worried. I took off in the direction I thought I had come in, not realizing it was exactly opposite of the way I wanted to go, and fought wave after wave of tag alder heaven. My face and arms were scratched up, I was dripping wet with sweat, I was sinking up to my knees in bog every step, and was now plumb confused. It was then that I must have lost track of both time and space, but finally came out on a logging road.

During this period that I think of as the very beginning of my attempting a go at primitive lifeways, I had what I call “the Shaman complex.” The Shaman, or medicine person, is what is glorified and emphasized about native cultures by our media. Therefore, I, along with many others I know, are especially drawn to this aspect when first learning about primitive lifeways. In other words, learning about all the plants and the medicine uses seemed paramount to me (and others I’ve run into) and topped my list. This isn’t a bad thing, if one progresses beyond it, for it drew me into the woods, meadows and river areas and allowed me to familiarize myself with wildness. My first summer I learned maybe one hundred plants and their uses as medicines (one need only learn a half dozen or so to take care of most medical needs from bee strings to cuts/bleeding to colds!). I don’t mean to belittle the medicine person, and in fact, I still am drawn to aid in healing.

Midway through my first winter in the Northwoods, I met a woman who was ailing from Lyme’s disease — a most debilitating and awful disease, spread by deer ticks. I grew fond of her and wanted to help in any way I could. Because many of her days were spent in bed, she asked if I would move in and care for her. I said I would. It was very difficult for me to see this person in misery despite everything I tried. The mythic aura surrounding “the Shaman” had been burst, and I had learned a good deal about myself and the fragility of human life. Being a medicine person has little to do with drums or rattles or chants, or even how many herbs you know. In fact, this woman was helped not so much by the herb I gave her as by my simply being there, lending an ear and a hand and letting her know I cared. I no longer have the “Shaman complex.” I realized that we all have unique potentials to help and to heal by our presence and caring.

Having been away from “civilized” ways of living for about one year now, I was longing to be with others who also wanted to live a primitive lifeway. I had been keeping in touch with a few of my friends from the outdoor school I had met the previous summer. We had been kicking around the idea of starting a community based on living primitively. After working out details of where we could set up a primitive camp and agreeing on some basic premises, a tribe was born. When it comes to a tribe or community, the adage “the whole is greater than the sum of its parts” is very true. We had been able to make the break from civilization at the emotional and mental levels, but now we were attempting to do it at the physical level by living the old ways.

So, what is it like to live a primitive lifeway, sleeping in a conical birchbark lodge, wearing deer skin clothing, making and using tools, traps and weapons to supply meat, and all of the other multifarious aspects of wilderness living? In the following pages, I will detail my experience of living close to earth. Again, it will not be a flowery account, but rather one that is full of compromises and hardships, but also of rewards and joys.

I do not claim to know everything about primitive living or survival, and I have not lived in this way long enough to be 100% proficient and self-sufficient. However, I have learned much and

want to share what I have learned. Primarily, I want to discuss the many unexpected mysteries one has to figure out and learn before progressing further. I have called my quest the journey from civilized chaos to primitive paradise.

Moving up to northern Michigan was my fifth move in one year. As you might guess, my material possessions were at a basic minimum. When it comes to bringing it, less is more. Less baggage – more freedom. The items needed to live primitive are few.

Those few friends joined me and I was thrilled to be part of this new tribe/community. To my way of thinking, this is the real starting point of primitive living; a family of some sort. It was myself, another bachelor, and a married couple. Though one could get a good start on primitive living on one's own, humans are meant to live together, and having companionship and support is a definite plus.

I have heard it said, that in survival situations, there is a hierarchy of needs as follows: heat, shelter (including clothing), water, food. This hierarchy could also be applied to getting a primitive encampment started, though shelter, water and food all kind of co-evolve. We knew where we were going to get water – a fresh water spring 3/4 mile away and we had been working on brain-tanning deer skins to make clothing. Other than wild greens, we would have to wait until fall to be legal hunters of meat. This fact, together with the fact of sleeping in tents (polyurethane nightmare) meant I put constructing semi-permanent primitive shelters at the top of our list. This was no easy task as you will see, for it held some basic realities and “compromises” we have had to accept for the time being. One of these realities is that most land in this country is privately owned, and what is considered public land often has strict limitations. For instance, the state forest out our back door (actually, front door as we've no back door) is highly regulated. Theoretically, if caught taking even so much as a twig could result in a fine and loss of privileges (i.e. hunting/trapping). Thus one is fairly limited to where camp can be set up. Preferably we wanted next to water; since we didn't have necessary funds to purchase land, we were settling for staying on a community members' parent's land. This in itself is a compromise, as we agreed to work part time remodeling a house in exchange for staying on the land. This turns out o.k. as we do get paid for working.

Of course, we wanted to build our shelters from materials we would harvest from the forests. Materials that would make a shelter worthy of northern Michigan weather – from below zero to above 100 degrees – and all the snow and rain anyone would want. We have sandy soils here and not much grass or clay. We thought, as have most of North America's subarctic tribes, that birch bark was ideal. It takes approximately 40–50 good sheets of bark (depends on size of shoot) to cover a 12 ft. wigwam or conical lodge. We applied for a permit with the forest service to harvest birch bark from several stands scheduled to be clear cut. We needed to borrow a pick-up for transporting the bark. It took three trips (3 full days) to harvest the bark and get it to where we could use it. Some of these bark sheets were sewn end to end with spruce root to make panels. Others were placed individually on the lodge frames. (See picture of placing panels sewn together on wigwam on next page)

Generally (and I emphasize) one cannot improve upon what has worked for thousands of years for indigenous people. We would prove this out time and again, often the hard way. Shelter has been a prime example. We exerted more energy than I care to think of in attempting to build the “perfect primitive” shelter, only to return to the basics in the end.

As I write this, I am reminded of how we often forget what the primitive person had to work with for tools; namely wood, bone and stone implements. It is amazing how quickly one can

destroy and travel down the wrong path with the white man's axe, shovel and saw. Prior to actually getting birch bark, we had decided to try to build earth lodges, basically underground shelters. As incredulous as it now sounds to me, we dug a four feet deep by sixteen feet diameter pit through sand and gravel, using steel shovels. We were modeling our structures after the Mandan Earth Lodges (which were not dug but a foot down). We had axed down huge hop-horn beam supports and were figuring out the best way of placing the ceiling beams on. It was becoming more and more apparent that the sheer amount of materials needed to construct the lodge would be prohibitive. In addition, we began questioning what structural integrity we would end up with, knowing that tons of earth would be pushing from all directions. We were trying to live primitively by using the white man (read civilized) mentality.

With some thought, we decided to go with what was originally used in this geographic region – conical lodges and wigwams. We thought we would build one of each and see the advantages/disadvantages of each. The wigwam was straight forward, however, the earth lodge idea wasn't totally dead and we decided to make a 10 ft. diameter conical lodge, (which ended up 9 ft. diameter) within the huge crater we had dug and then bank dirt up 4 feet around it.

We liked the idea of trying to harvest all materials for our shelters nearby and had permission from neighbors to harvest several basswood and ash trees, so we thought we could peel the bark and use it rather than birch bark, which wasn't nearby. Because we only had a few trees we could take, we wanted to fell them so as to use as much of the bark as possible. Felling large diameter, 60 ft. tall trees is no simple thing, and we nearly killed ourselves in the process, all with the help of buck saw and axe. I believe the trees were trying to tell us something, for from the get go, the first 5 trees all became "hung-up" on neighboring trees. Several of the trees "barber-chaired", (a very dangerous situation when felling trees). After seven trees the message started becoming clearer – the natives rarely felled any trees larger than wrist size primarily because of risk of life and limb, and secondarily because of energy expenditure to do so. A revelation occurred and for a time we had dubbed our tribe "The Little Trees" for we vowed not to cut anything but saplings and wrist sized trees from there on out.

We had peeled a good share of basswood and ash bark, more-or-less. Hard lesson number 179 – basswood bark cracks and splits and curls horrendously upon drying. It is very marginal for shelter coverings. Ash also cracks and curls, but much less so. Soon it was back to square one – what the natives used: Birch bark. Birch bark is tough, rot resistant, water proof and beautiful. Thus, we finally succumbed and got our permit to harvest birch bark. If done properly it doesn't kill the tree, as long as direct sunlight doesn't shine upon the inner bark of the tree.

The wigwam was straight forward, with only a bit of coaxing to cinch bark down around the curved ceiling. Placing bark on the conical lodge was even quicker. However, we needed forty strong poles for a frame to hold the weight of the dirt we piled on it. As you might guess, this left almost nothing of a smoke hole. The smoke had a tough time going out and we had a tough time breathing. Furthermore, all of those poles sticking out caught considerable rain which would drip onto us and our bedding. We soon discovered that if we didn't want rain water gushing into our lodge we would have to dig out an entrance way that sloped down away from the door. A huge headache to construct, I might add.

By mid September, we were having frosts. I began noticing that in the mornings, it was much warmer outside than it was in our lodge! I decided we had built nothing more than an elaborate cold air sink, that was also damp, smokey, and cramped for two people. Believe it or not, we endured this for over three months, despite having rain about every other day.

Finally, we said “enough”, and chose to dismantle the failed experiment and build a regular good ’ol down to earth (not in it) conical lodge. We made it 12 ft. in diameter rather than the 9 ft. we were living in. We needed only 13 wrist sized poles for a frame. Amazingly we dismantled the old lodge, moved materials to a location of red pine for winter wind protection, and built the new lodge in a day’s time. The new lodge has almost twice the floor space, the smoke goes straight out the smoke hole, and it is so well lit, you can read fine print. It is dry, warm and beautiful. I guess the natives already knew that...

Another aspect of primitive life I have been thinking a lot about is food. Nutrition, diet, methods of obtaining meat, and water have all been hot topics of discussion within our community. Of course, clear drinking water is essential for good health, as well as for bathing, cooking, cleaning cooking and eating ware and clothing — also soaking deer hides. Because we don’t live next to water, we have to hike a 1 1/2 mile trip to carry water, and the river is a 3 mile round trip. Living this way instills a sense that water is valuable, and not to be wasted. It does become a hardship to walk to the river to bathe when it is 100 degree F, and muggy, and the walk back defeats the trip to begin with. I quickly realized why aboriginal people chose, whenever possible, to set up camp next to a lake or river. Without a water source, cleaning self and clothes, and obtaining drinking water becomes a hardship.

Another reality check is the difficulty in obtaining enough food from the wild to live here in the 20th century. There are three primary factors that limit the hunter-gatherer diet right off: (1) the amount of privately owned land, (2) strict hunting and trapping seasons and (3) strict limitations on hunting and trapping methods and bag limits. What about plants? Well, getting fresh wild greens in summer is easy, and does enrich the diet. I used to be vegetarian, but that is next to impossible in a hunter-gatherer existence. The best item for living in the north is meat and as much fat as one can get. I have learned that it is possible to live quite well on spruce tea and meat, as long as one eats the entire animal. Eating organs and eyes, gives trace amounts of important minerals and vitamins A & C, not found in muscle. The spruce tea provides vitamins A and C, which are hard to get in the winter.

Because of the limitations I mentioned earlier, I have had to purchase about 50% of my food. I am learning ways of making wild meat stretch in the diet, one of which is making a brothy stew and adding some tubers or squash and rice occasionally. Adding a beaver tail now and then adds great amounts of much needed fat and is very tasty!

I have tried going on civilized food like rice and beans, peanut butter, oatmeal and the like, but my energy level was very low. Wild meat is what I have to have to remain healthy and strong and keep my body temperature regulated in the cold winter months. This has meant that I am a “reformed vegetarian” eating only a little plant material.

Because of my change from vegetarian to meat eater, one thing I had to come to terms with was the fact I would have to kill to get meat. I certainly don’t like the idea of someone else doing the dirty work and buying meat. Most domestic meat is practically poison anyway. I had to come to terms psychologically with killing another living being. This would not be difficult had I been without other rations. However, I was eating well during the summer and therefore, it made it difficult to think about killing. It seemed that any other creature is out there doing its best and that I didn’t have a right to pluck it from this world? The closer I got to nature, the more I understood it hasn’t anything to do with rights and everything to do with the circle of life itself. Life feeds on death whether you are vegetarian or meat eater. It is the way a sense of respect has formed

for the animals I began hunting and trapping for food. A sense that it would be disrespectful if I didn't use the entire animal.

I remember the occurrence that put me over the edge. I had just dried a sizeable amount of wild apples, and had tried to keep them varmint proof. After coming back from a two day trip, they had all been nabbed by chipmunks. It was the last straw! I set up two deadfalls and became a killer. It's not as heartless or gruesome as it might sound. Properly set deadfalls and snares kill an animal quickly and humanely, and without the animal associating being caught by humans. Perhaps they think they are caught in a bush in the case of a snare, and in the case of deadfalls, they never know what hit them, because it's over in a second. Snares and deadfalls are illegal to use in Michigan and most other states, but I am practicing with them on small game (meal chipmunks) to become proficient whenever I might need to use them on a wider scale. Deadfalls work on a mouse or a bear and snares for rabbit to moose.

I am often asked if I ever miss soda pop or candy bars or pizza. Currently, I don't, but when I was first starting out, I did have cravings. Honestly, I cannot drink a soda now, because of how sugary sweet it tastes. Wild apples, blueberries, raspberries, and strawberries, are native sweets and they more than satisfy me. I also eventually didn't miss salt. Most of the stews I made are void of salt and spices and they still taste good.

I want to say something on food variety. This past summer, I got sick of peanut butter and cheese sandwiches and could barely choke down black beans and rice by fall. After trapping season started, and we had beaver to eat, I never noticed I was eating beaver stew three times a day! It is good.

Food variety is fairly limited in the primitive diet. That does not mean it isn't a good diet. Studies of pre-contact primitive peoples the world over have found that these "limited" diets meet every body requirement. In the book, *Nutrition and Physical Degeneration*, by Weston Price, it was concluded that these primitives had unbelievable endurance, erect postures and cheerful personalities. They were found to have excellent bone structure and well developed jaw and teeth free from decay. In case after case, Price found no incidence of cancer, ulcers, tuberculosis, heart or kidney disease, high blood pressure, muscular dystrophy or sclerosis or cerebral palsy.

Price also spoke of these primitive societies having no psychiatrists, no crime, no prisons, no mental illness, alcoholism or drug addiction. Every baby was nursed by its mother, and there were no neglected children. In other words, physical health went hand in hand with mental and emotional health.

The Hunzas, who were living in the Himalayas, were studied by an English physician named Robert McCarrison. The results mirrored those found by Price. It was said a Hunza messenger could carry a message to a village 35 miles away and return the same day with no signs of fatigue!

Other groups of aboriginal people studied by doctors in pre-contact periods also agree with Price's findings.

Of course we all know too well that the modern diet and lifestyle results in exactly the opposite effects as found in the primitive peoples.

Another question I am asked, especially by girls and women, is "where do you go to the bathroom?" I think they are politely asking what does one use in place of t.p. Well, hygiene in the wild is pretty important in order to stay healthy and, like all things, mother nature provides for every necessary need. Moist leaves on the forest floor do quite well, and sphagnum moss (which has anti-septic qualities) is even better. Snow works during the white season. After taking daily

trips to the woods when “nature calls” I can say that most any bathroom or outhouse seems smelly and unsanitary to me. Besides, when I “go” to the woods, I am closing the circle, giving something back if you will. It can really become something of a ritual.

When you’re back in the woods, hygiene is an important factor of all-around health. Keeping camp clean and picked up and keeping yourself clean is a priority. Having a river or lake to take occasional swims during warm seasons is refreshing and also allows easy cleaning of cooking and eating bowls. We have a sweat lodge where periodic sweats are taken. This is tremendous at removing dirt and grease from the body and hair and also helps clean any toxins from the skin. I have never felt cleaner or more refreshed than after taking a sweat!

Since I have broken the “civilized” habit of daily showers using synthetic soaps and shampoos my hair and skin feel much better. No more itchy, dry skin. In fact, taking daily baths washes oils from the skin that are necessary for vitamin D production in the body. At any rate, body oils and odor seem to stabilize after a few months in the woods. Waiting for greasy hair to “stabilize” was trying, but once it did my hair has been very healthy.

There are a number of myths about our primitive ancestors perpetuated by modern civilized people. These are often directed toward me when the topic of “what do you do these days?” comes up. Then, “Don’t you know those people died before they turned 40?!” Me: “I seriously doubt that the human species would still be around if all people died that early and even if they did, I would rather live a free and full life in the wild and die at 40 than live a desperate, seared and isolated existence of 80 years. Then, “Your teeth will fall out and you’ll get cataracts!” Me: “My teeth have never been healthier, especially since I am not eating junk anymore, and my eyes — ...I’ll drink some willow tea, it’s supposed to prevent cataracts.” Them: “It must be miserable living in a tipi in the winter and so cold!” Me: “Yes, it does get cold, but I feel great and invigorated staying in my tipi. Fresh air always at my nose, a nice warm fire with meat cooking, looking up at the stars as I go to sleep — no I wouldn’t trade tipi life for any house.”

I could go on with the years of myths that crowd our minds concerning the natural life. I have to meet my own doubts and myths head-on. I believe that most aboriginal people lived long, healthy and joyous lives. Sure, there were hardships and heartaches. If there wasn’t some adversities and struggle it wouldn’t be much of a life, and how would one learn about the right ways and wrong ways to do things?

Modern society and its disdain for the primitive do something that always seems to be just over the ridge. It is impossible to hide from its ever searching eye and I am often humming Greg Brown’s song “Ain’t there no place away...” I can’t put my finger on it exactly, but fear and misinformation has bred a gargantuan monster of regulations, laws and codes that can be aggravating to the would-be primitive. I’ve already spoken of hunting/trapping limitations with DNR officials who are armed to the teeth. I may be a bit paranoid, but after we had built our lodges, it seemed that air traffic directly over our shelters picked up immensely. Maybe just intrigued pilots or maybe some surveillance by government officials? Several times we’ve had groups of F-16 fighter jets storm the tree tops above our lodges.

It is not only being watched and the hunting regulations that aggravate me, but there is also the issue of housing codes and zoning nightmares. Social Services once threatened friends of mine who were residing in a wigwam with their children that the children would be taken away unless they were in a house that met zoning codes. This meant they had to have tar paper on the roof, a wooden floor, no open fire, and a thing called a “rat wall.”

There is an immense need for education on this issue of primitive living. U.S. History classes are now incorporating study of lifestyles previous to European contact. I have started going to elementary schools to talk with children about what it is like to live aboriginally and to demonstrate making fire and cordage; the items I use in daily life. The children really take to this, and have many questions they want answered. Adults too are interested, many I thought unlikely to be intrigued about the lifestyle I am living. Just yesterday, my mother told me she had gone to the dentist, same dentist I went to as a kid, and he asked what I was doing. Mom said he was thrilled when she told him, and he excitedly said he had always wanted to do something like that (i.e., wilderness living). With adults, the response is usually either “you’re going to freeze to death” or “how wonderful, I think I will have to make a visit to check this out.”

The presence of modern society is a reality that I deal with, not just in passing, but also when it comes to making ends meet. At this time neither I, nor anyone else I know of, can live primitively 100%. I do think it will be possible in the future. For now, there are land taxes (the community recently purchased land – with a river on it!) automobile costs, and car insurance (very costly), and extra food costs. I have been doing some construction and masonry work part time to enable me to meet these expenses, yet also continue pursuing the primitive lifestyle almost full time. I have started giving demonstrations on aboriginal living at schools for a fee, and this is another way I can get income, while educating others.

I would much rather share how to do something (i.e. make a bark basket, tan a skin, etc.) than to make it myself and then sell it to someone who will hang it on their wall of their half a million dollar house.

When I first embarked on living primitive, I wanted to be able to live it full time without needing a car or extra food. For now, the reality is that I need income, just a little, to make ends meet.

The reality of land is also important. We as a community didn’t (don’t) like the idea of “owning” land. What it boils down to is either be willing to be nomadic in national forests or buy land or have a generous relative. Although being nomadic on public land has its advantages, for now having a home base and not have to worry about harassment from DNR and Forest Service officials is the best choice. After looking a while, we found a great little piece of land for sale in the wildest area of the entire midwest, surrounded by national forest. It has a creek and river on it as well. To me it is paradise, and I am looking forward to moving there soon (June ’96). Of course, the flip side is that I am in debt due to the land purchase. That means more outside work is in order. This currently is ranging from part time masonry and house remodeling work to giving talks and demonstrations on aboriginal life at elementary schools. We hope to be giving workshops on aboriginal living soon.

Some people become disappointed when I tell them I drive a car occasionally, or that I don’t get all of my food from the wild. They have an idealistic sense of what living with nature is. This seems to stem from what they think a real “Indian” is or should be. Before I actually went primitive, I also had an unrealistic view of what it would be like to live primitive.

At present there is no cut and dried dividing line between modern living and primitive living. It is a grand illusion to think you can totally step from one world to the other right away. Because of the number of skills and amount of knowledge needed to live in the wild, I am having to be patient and take the time to learn. I do not always wear buckskins. I am using cast iron to cook in until adequate clay pots are made. I own and drive a car to and from certain hunting areas, to schools, to visit relatives, etc. At some point, I hope to canoe or walk (most) everywhere. I use

wool blankets and a sleeping bag until enough fur pelts are tanned for a sleeping robe. In other words, the transition from modern society to a primitive lifestyle is just that, a transition. I have had to rely on certain non-wilderness products to survive. I am reiterating all of this because I want to emphasize that this transition takes lots of time, time to learn skills, time to heal from living in modern society, time to deal with insecurities, time to adjust to a major lifestyle change.

There is simply no cultural circle in place to help those of us pursuing the “wilderness way.” We have few, if any, elders to learn from. We have been schooled and prepped from birth for the helter-skelter business world, not the aboriginal world of gatherer-hunter. I have had to refrain from being so critical of myself to avoid becoming discouraged and be accepting and as patient as possible.

I hope this lets the reader know that there isn't a ready-made primitive way of life waiting once jobs are left and houses are sold, etc.,. What has been encouraging for me, is the knowledge that every one's ancestor's (99%+) were hunter-gatherers. This is our true heritage. As I have moved closer toward a 100% primitive lifestyle, things seem to get easier. Ideas form quicker. A certain grasp of the whole circle of what living primitive means is being made. I just have had (and continue) to have the perseverance to believe it is possible and that I can do it.

I suppose there are levels of freedom these days. In my opinion, going primitive offers the most freedom possible. At times it exhilarates me and definitely enhances my life. My life is my own. If I want to go explore a new wilderness area, I go do it. If I want to go scout for beaver or deer or whatever, I go do it. If I want to simply sit half of the day in the sun by the river, I can do that too. I am very flexible with what I can do and when I do it. This is a part of being free, I believe.

Another aspect I have noticed is my change in sense of time. I am relaxed and not hurrying around to beat the clock. As I have slowed down, it appears that there is more time! A wonderful paradox, isn't it? I think less of the future and live more in the present moment. Time seems to have opened up and blossomed — expanded if you will. I feel more into the natural flow of life. This too is a part of freedom, I believe. Living in the present moment isn't something I have consciously tried to accomplish, but is gradually and naturally occurring the longer I am in the woods.

I said I would finish by talking about two aspects of primitive living that are not found in any skills book, yet, that I believe are essential to success in long term wilderness living. They are (1) Community (i.e.family, tribe, friends) and (2) Attitude.

Community, in my eyes, comes before all else. A group of people with common goals and shared interests is a powerful thing. You become like brothers and sisters, and care about each other. When someone is hurt or sick, the others pitch in. If someone is down or depressed, we talk and play music. If a lodge is to be built, we all help. If someone kills a deer, or traps a beaver, all share in the meat.

Being in a community is also like a mirror to yourself. Realizing each of us has come from a messed up society, we each have our own personal hang-ups that we each work on. We don't always agree on everything in our community, and that is good because we have to think twice about things and hash them out.

I am thankful for the community we have, though it may be only five people now. I hope others will be able to form in the near future.

Attitude. It can make or break ya. It is important to know skills like fire making inside and out, but if you're caught in a rain storm or blizzard or whatever, and you let the weather get to you psychologically — it could mean hypothermia. I am learning that I need a sense of confidence

and courage to live the way I have in the past two years. Many doubts have entered my mind about what I am doing. I have had to suck it up and get past the fears and let myself know I can do it. If I fail, I try again. I can't give up on anything and continue to live primitive. Many things need to be learned. Some wise elder said, "When you get up in the morning, encourage yourself. No one else will, so you have to do it for yourself."

A sense of humor is a big part of the right attitude. Mine can get very sarcastic at times. I deal with the set backs and compromises with humor-poking fun and being sarcastic. Being able to laugh at myself (I do it often) helps a great deal. When things don't go just the way I've planned, I can either get down on myself, blame someone else, or laugh at myself or the situation. Having been through what I have, I can say that laughter is indeed the best medicine. When I began to live a free lifestyle, my personality also became more free.

Actually I hope I have not been too heavy on the compromises and difficulties of going primitive. It is difficult to describe the magnitude of feelings of freedom and awesome sights, sounds, smells that enliven my senses in the woods. The joys and rewards of this life are not things which can be understood from talking or reading about them, but are meant to be experienced first hand. So get out there. Experience it and live it!

I have enjoyed sharing some of my experiences of the past few years in my journey toward a full primitive lifeway. I hope it has encouraged many of you to make the break from modern existence. Maybe we will meet someday.

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Brent Ladd
Realities of Going Primitive

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Brent Ladd laddb@ecn.purdue.edu is writing a full length account of his 3 years living in the wilderness and is looking for publishers.

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