

What's behind the latest drift back to the land?

ESSAY: HOME SWEET HOMESTEAD

Words
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Scroll through the posts in a homesteading Facebook group on any given day and you are certain to learn a thing or two: the best ways to preserve watermelon; recipes for batch-cooking Spam; how to tell if a cow's leg is broken or just sprained; the difference between toad and snake droppings.

Homesteading—a way of life characterized by subsistence agriculture, preserving food, making clothes and, in some cases, living as if the past 50-plus years never happened—is in a post-pandemic boom. Those who'd been nursing their dreams of living off the land while stuck within their four walls emerged from the pandemic with a cache of knowledge from their vicarious online wanderings.

“We saw hundreds of thousands of new homesteaders come into this lifestyle during 2020 and the beginning of 2021,” says Homesteaders of America (HoA) co-founder Amy Fewell, who's

generation of homesteaders apart is the striking contrast between the unplugged, solitary lifestyle they have been drawn in by and the very online communities that facilitate it.

Homesteading Facebook groups boast hundreds of thousands of followers, the homesteading subreddit has 2.4 million members and there are 1.9 million posts tagged to it on Instagram.¹ Where those living off the land were once reliant on neighbors in small rural towns for advice, answers about everything from canning fruits and vegetables to butchering livestock to repairing fences to creating medicine for common ailments are now just a click or post away. “I do think that social media has made it a viable option,” says Fewell. “People are starting to understand that this is attainable no matter who you are and what you know.”

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currently juggling the organization of this year's HoA conference with a popular podcast, an Instagram account, a YouTube channel and a blog, along with parenting three children and managing her Virginia homestead with her husband. During the pandemic, she launched a “How to Grow Your Own Food” YouTube series which brought in over 10,000 subscribers to the HoA channel in less than 24 hours. Right now, she says, the interest in homesteading is “growing even more because of the food shortages and gas prices.” This year's annual conference is sold out, with 5,000 attendees expected.

This is not the first time the US has experienced a homesteading boom. Back-to-the-land movements tend to coincide with moments of scarcity or adversity: the Great Depression, the postwar era, and during the civil rights movement and the Vietnam War. What sets the new

Homesteading influencers have also found thousands of followers, showcasing their lives through beautifully curated photography and educational videos. Their accounts become a fascinating window into the deeply varying ideological views of those who homestead—from off-the-grid survivalists focused on sustainable living who follow *An American Homestead* to ex-corporate types escaping the rat race who enjoy *Living Traditions Homestead* to those who view it as a way of life that hearkens back to old-fashioned family values and keep up with *The Elliott Homestead* and *Balserina Farm*.²

(1) The private Facebook group Homesteading has over 120,000 members and posts hourly about recipes, land purchases, homeschooling and animal husbandry. A rule of the group: “Anyone can homestead regardless of their political affiliation. This is not a political group please help keep it that way.” Shaye Elliott of *The Elliott Homestead* was described by *The Atlantic* as “the Gwyneth Paltrow of America's growing homesteading movement” in an article that summarized the varying output of homesteaders as somewhere between “*Goop*, *Little House on the Prairie*, and *Mad Max*.”

(2)

Those who embrace the way of life as a return to the simpler times of frontier living may be recapturing the traditional family dynamic of the movement's pioneers, but if you till the soils of homesteading history, you'll unearth some rotten roots that few homesteaders acknowledge. The word itself is derived from the Homestead Act of 1862—an initiative to settle American land west of the Mississippi—that offered enterprising farmers parcels of up to 160 acres of government-claimed land for a \$10 application fee. But the act left many behind; racism and lack of start-up capital barred most formerly enslaved people from homesteading opportunities. It also displaced Native Americans who'd occupied the land for generations.³ All told, over the 123 years the act was in place, almost 10% of the United States—270 million acres—was stolen from Native Americans and given to four million homesteaders.⁴

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Though the American West of the past is oft romanticized, *Little House on the Prairie* doesn't tell the whole story. Sixty percent of homesteaders who filed for land failed to develop their plots within the five-year time frame they were given; many had little farming experience or money to invest in materials and tools. Punishing prairie conditions and growing difficulties took their toll. Since those early days of homesteading, modern conveniences and technology have aided in selective adoption of the lifestyle. Tools can be purchased inexpensively at a local store or online,

(3) Renewed interest in homesteading as a way of life has spurred support behind a Native-led Land Back movement to return ancestral lands to Indigenous people; since 2020, there has been an increasing succession of land reclamations.

(4) The act didn't just give the US its largely white rural middle class; if you were to gaze down at the gridlike configurations of farmland from an airplane, you would see its echoes literally etched into the landscape.

seeds can be ordered through catalogs and farm equipment can plow, plant, harvest and process in a fraction of the time it once took.

In September 2020, Kate Brown became the program associate in commercial agriculture with Rutgers Cooperative Extension of Burlington County in New Jersey. “Over my first year I noticed I was getting a lot of calls from new landowners and beginning farmers wondering what to do with their land and whether they wanted to have crops or livestock,” she says. In response, she co-founded the Rutgers Homesteading Academy in 2021—a once-monthly series of free webinars where experts instruct on a range of topics, from raising backyard poultry to beekeeping. “It's such a wholesome pursuit to want to be able to provide for yourself from your own land,” says Brown, who herself aspires to one day own a small farm. “I think the pandemic just expedited a lot of people's interest in wanting to seek self-sufficiency and happiness on their own terms and do as much as they can to provide for themselves and their family.”

As with any movement fueled by online tutorials and images, not every source is reputable. At its most extreme, influencers who engage with homesteading as a sort of extended country vacation from real life are criticized for the commodification of the practice and the erasure of the experiences of those who once turned to homesteading out of necessity. When influencers with supplemental incomes model \$20,000 AGA ovens and \$500 prairie-inspired dresses, it paints an unrealistic and unsustainable picture of the lifestyle, romanticizing it in similar ways to the pioneer days of the Homestead Act. A simpler time, it turns out, never quite was—and the fallout of its illusion is that it turns away earnest would-be homesteaders.

“You have people that put out this false way of living that might discourage people from living that way because they think it has to be all rainbows and butterflies all the time,” Fewell says. “Farming isn't pretty. There's mud and there's poop and there's stuff everywhere. You've got 10 million five-gallon buckets laying around the property and it's just real life, but we live in an Instagram world now. . . . The beauty of homesteading is that you can do it differently, but I think that people who are interested in homesteading should go into it believing that it's going to be less beautiful aesthetically than most people show it online.”

There are many who've proven the lifestyle doesn't require piles of cash or acres of land.⁵ Popular homesteaders like Shanna and Francois of *Black Suburban Homestead* began their journey at a local community garden; Kati and Kyle Cearley of *The Urban Ladybug* run a microfarm on just one acre of land; Jordan and Silvan of *Homegrown Hand Gathered* regularly show how they supplement the yield of their suburban homestead with fishing, foraging and plots at community gardens.⁶

The shared belief among all manner of homesteaders appears to be that, in a world filled with chaos and change, we can only count on ourselves. “I do think the one uniting factor would certainly be the food and health care system just not being reliable,” says Fewell. “That's what I love about homesteading: It doesn't matter what you believe or what you think or where you come from, whether you're rich or poor or somewhere in between. People are realizing that homesteading is an acceptable way of living. . . . And it gives them more confidence in their ability to take care of themselves and their family and their community.”

(5) Some US states still offer free land to those willing to develop it, although the types of land available have changed. Small towns with dwindling populations use offers of free land to encourage the rebuilding of local communities. Kansas and Nebraska are two states that currently have active programs.

(6) In 2007, controversy erupted after an organization called the Dervaes Institute successfully registered “urban homesteading” and “urban homestead” as trademarks and began insisting that bloggers not use the terms. It took six years of legal action for the decision to be overturned.