



The Bunkhouse Chronicle

Craig Rullman

One meal at a time

Sometimes we can measure success in tiny milestones. We had one the other night, on our little rancho in the pines. We made a meal entirely out of our own food. That is, we hunted the elk, we raised the vegetables, and we canned the fruit.

I wouldn't call it home-steading, what we are trying to do, not in the truest sense of the notion; but I would call it a deliberate exercise in reducing dependency and increasing our ability to supply our own needs. It's an honest effort, and it comes with frustrating failures and a steady supply of lessons in what not to do.

We've had waves of golden mantles and rabbits — that motley combination of vicious critters that can destroy a garden overnight;

we've had mid-summer hailstorms that crush an entire crop of promising tomatoes, and an unsuccessful hunt or two. But even in these failures we learn something hard and valuable and timeless, and we are reminded just how difficult a thing true independence is. You have to work for it, every day, and you can lose it quickly.

But the payoff, when it all comes together, even if it's only one night out of many, is a nourishing meal and a sense of self-sufficiency that exceedingly eludes us in many aspects of life. Maybe you've felt that, too.

This isn't driven by paranoia — we aren't buying surplus gas masks and hiding out in a bunker, shivering at the sound of helicopters and waiting for the jackboots to knock on the door and haul us away. It's merely a considered experiment in reducing, maybe some day eliminating, our dependency on an exceedingly complex, and increasingly fragile system.

Our grandparents, and most certainly our great-grandparents, might even think what we are trying to do is nutty, given that much of what we consider a major accomplishment is simply how they lived.

And there is an element of illusion to all of it. There is no real threat of starvation, and we still buy most of our food at Ray's or Melvin's. But we are moving closer to goal, and we're raising a steer, to fill the freezer even if this year's elk hunt fails.

When I was a kid, we had a milk cow, mom churned our butter, we had an acre or so of garden, and we raised our own beef and lamb. Those were halcyon days because it's harder to do that now. The larger world seems to discourage even the attempt, or considers the notion of self-sufficiency, and those people seeking it, as either ideological nut-jobs or curious and amusing anachronisms.

Somehow we got away from that fulfilling life over the years, little by little, until one day we woke up and realized that we weren't producing anything at all. Nothing in the pantry was ours. We were entirely, utterly, dependent — it happened while we weren't paying attention — and that sort of realization is an ice-cold bucket of water.

So we started back in slowly. With tomatoes. We were lucky to live in a place then where throwing some seeds around yields perfect



PHOTO BY CRAIG RULLMAN

Gardening in Central Oregon is hard — but the rewards are sweet.

gardens every year, and we gave away as much as we used. We made salsa. We made spaghetti sauce. We made just about anything it is possible to make with a tomato.

It's harder in Central Oregon. Trust me on that one. There is an entirely new set of skills to learn, or remember, and maybe the biggest of them is patience. But we've been at it here for a few years now, and we are getting better, or maybe just luckier, and the other night it all fell together like the last few pieces of a giant puzzle.

We aren't all the way there, not even close. But for now we have started to assemble complete meals that we hunted, or raised, or worked for, outside of the grocery store. And that's proof that we are farther down the trail. And we think it actually matters. We know where it came from, how we fed it, how we raised it, how we stored it, and how we cooked it. And we know it's better for us — it just tastes better.

At the end of the day, it just feels right, and that is its own reward.



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