

ELECTRICITY FREE LIVING

by Stephen D. Carpenteri

Raised in urban Connecticut back in the 1950s, I was more than acclimated to the electric world when, after a bit of wartime experience, I disappeared into the Maine woods for about 12 years of homesteading.

Spoiled as anyone could be at the time, I quickly learned (through stubbornness and thrift) that living without commercial electric power is (a) not impossible and (b) actually pleasant if you are prepared for and understand the alternatives. Overall, I would count those years as some of the most enjoyable of my life. During that period I worked a full-time job, raised a family, built a 10-room log cabin (from stump to rooftop using chain saws and hand tools) and never once felt the urge or need to hook up to the local power grid.



Living without electricity promotes peace, quiet and tranquility on the homestead.

The Basics

There are manual alternatives to just about every electric gadget that's become common to everyday life these days. The basics include gas refrigerators (Servel is a common brand and many are still available at antique stores), gas stoves, gas lights and gas heaters. Of course, the cost of operating these appliances can be

prohibitive. In my homesteading days I used wood heat (burning everything from cedar to rock maple), kerosene lights, a Coleman lamp, an Aladdin lamp and heater as well as candles (some made from rendered bear fat) and battery-powered lights.

Water came from a hand pump on my well, which the neighbors often laughed at except when ice storms or other disasters shut the power down for days on end. Suddenly there would be a procession of neighbors coming in to use my hand pump, and not a one of them was laughing!

Tools

For every electric tool there is on the market today there are an equal number of hand-operated tools that will do the same job. For example, I used a hand auger for drilling, hand saws for cutting, bucksaws for wood chopping, hack saws and coping saws for steel and wood projects, hand chisels, shingle splitters, scythes (for cutting the grass), snow scoops (for clearing snow) and any number of nippers, clippers, shears and trimmers for various jobs around the house. There are planes, files and hammers for every use, wood and metal shaping tools, hand mixers and churns...whatever was done by the settlers of the 1800s was done by hand using non-electric hand tools, and many of those tools can be found (new or used) today through catalog sales or at antique stores.

Lighting

To be honest, I found kerosene wick lamps to be little more than "feel your way" lighting. Though they give off a soft glow and are relatively cheap to operate (you must buy fuel, of course, and wicks), the quality of light they produce is barely enough to allow you to walk through the house without bumping into the furniture. You can, like Lincoln, read by lamplight, but you will strain your eyes if you do it for long periods. Specialty lamps like the Aladdin models work better and brighter but require

constant attention to keep the mantles from carbon buildup. Simply lower the fuel output and the mantle will burn itself clean, but of course this means reduced light output during the cleaning period.

Propane gas lights are far superior to kerosene lamps. They burn brighter with less “flicker” than lamps, but they do create some noise and produce a lot



Cooking outdoors whenever possible saves electricity and keeps the house cooler during summer.

of heat - great in winter but not so great in summer. I installed one gas light per room throughout my house so that I could have light wherever I needed it. I even installed two separate gas lines (one for each half of the house) so that there were shorter runs of tubing between lights and therefore less gas sitting in the lines.

Truth be told, Coleman-type camp lanterns are great for camping but not so good for household use. They are loud, expensive to run (about a tank of gas per 8 hours of use), require generator replacement every month or so and are literally so bright you can't see! No matter where you put them there will be huge areas of black shadow (primarily under the lantern and to the sides) and blinding bright light above. In addition, the fumes created by the light will quickly fill a room, so be sure you have adequate ventilation for these and other types of alternative lighting.

Battery-powered lamps and lights are great to a point - the point where you have to buy more batteries! Rechargeables sound great, but when you are relying on these lights for all your illumination needs, they can become quite pricey. There is always a need for hand-held flashlights or lanterns, but I would opt for the LCD-type penlights that use AAAA batteries. These lights generally last 12 hours or more per set of batter-

ies, and if you use them sparingly and only as necessary, you can get several weeks or months out of a battery set.

Hot Water

Without electricity, you have to come up with an alternative water heating regimen. For me, the obvious solution was the wood stove. I would keep a 5-gallon canning kettle on the stove year-round, replenishing the water as needed so that I always had at least one kettle of hot water available for dishes, laundry or bathing.

Winter heating of water was a snap because the wood stove would run all day. I'd just keep a full kettle of water going at all times. In summer, I'd start a fire at bedtime, put the water on and, by morning, I'd have a good supply of hot water, enough for a morning bath or to do dishes and other cleanup chores.

My “bath formula” worked out well for me: One kettle of boiling water to one kettle of cold water. This results in a nice, warm bath for one person using about 10 gallons of water. I had an old-fashioned clawfoot cast iron bathtub that kept the water warm long enough for a bath if I first put the hot water in and let the cast iron warm up a little before I added the cold water.

In summer, I collected rain water in black-painted metal barrels that warmed the water simply by leaving them in the sun. I'd also take “eave showers” whenever it rained, or I would hook up a special “gutter shower” (a spout about 6 feet up the gutter drain) that would serve as an impromptu shower head. Here's a tip: The first rainwater off a hot roof during a thunderstorm is the hottest. Once the storm is underway the water quickly cools - and showers become breathtakingly cold!

Gray Water and Waste Water

Waste water presents a challenge in the non-electric home. The best long-term solution is to dig a cistern or install a septic tank so that waste water from the tub or sink can be disposed of properly.

For years I had an indoor toilet that was essentially a wooden box with a standard toilet seat that had a 5gallon bucket inside as a toilet. I used commercial RV toilet chemicals (the blue stuff), about one cupful per bucket, and then dumped the bucket in an outhouse located 100 feet from the house and down-slope.

In a family of four, the bucket may need to be dumped twice a week. Monitor the bucket level and dump it before it gets too full!

There are many other alternatives to waste water

and other septic treatment, from composting to (gas) incineration. It is possible to hook up a standard septic tank and leach field and deal with waste products using gravity feed (pouring water into the sink, tub or toilet and flushing the waste water away in an almost "normal" manner). It's up to the homesteader to consider his options and pick the most workable alternative.

Running Water (Literally!)

During my 12 years as an electric-company dropout, I tried any number of water supply techniques.

It always came down to my four plastic 5-gallon jerry cans, heavy-duty military surplus types that lasted through 12 years of hard, daily use. At first, I got my water out of a natural spring that had been upgraded by placing an old potato barrel into the spring hole. A 5-gallon jerry can would just fit into the barrel and it would take about two minutes to fill each can. The spring was three miles from home, but I used it for three

years because it was such a pleasure to drive along the woods road to it. I might see deer, bear, moose or other native wildlife on any trip. One winter however, I nearly drove off a makeshift bridge into a raging stream while hauling water during a major storm, and had to come up with a safer alternative.

I made a couple of trips to the local coin laundry after that, but the water quality was poor - too much chlorine for my taste! - and so I began hauling water from a neighbor's traditional covered well. One day my wife decided to help me out by going to get the water as I worked late one cold winter's night, but when I got home she met me at the door in tears. She was soaking wet, the cans were empty and the flashlight was gone!

I went back to the well and found that she had slipped and dropped the flashlight into the well, and there it was, shining brightly, lying on the bottom in about 15 feet of frigid water! It was winter, a cold wind was blowing and I could not leave the flashlight down there for fear of contaminating the water, so I did the right and only thing I could: I stripped naked, climbed down into the well and retrieved the flashlight. Friends, if you've never been immersed in 33-degree water in

the middle of winter with a cold gale blowing, you haven't lived. There is no describing the aching cold I felt, and let's just say I was suddenly able to sing all the high notes for quite some time!

Of course, we never used that well again, which moved me to have a well drilled on my own land and have a hand pump installed. Best move I ever made! We always had plenty of fresh, cold water just steps away from our door, and never had to rely on electric power to get it. We even trimmed our jerry can inventory

down to two cans, and it became a simple routine to refill them every two or three days.

The Secret to Successful Homesteading

"Roughing it" is not a fair assessment of the homesteader's life. In fact, in many ways living without commercial utilities is healthier, less stressful, easier, quieter and more satisfying than having all the comforts of home but having to contend with all the bills

that are associated with them.

The key is to know what needs to be done, make time to do it and do it well every time. For example, when I saw the water cans getting low, I would empty them into the canning kettle or tub, place them by the door and plan to fill them the next time I went outdoors to work, feed the animals or do something else. When I had spare time I would restock all the cans, kettles and toilets (eventually I had two bathrooms!) and started out with everything full and ready to go.

The same goes for the wood pile, food supply and other restockables. See what needs to be done and take care of it. Putting the chores off even one day can set you back for hours. It's much easier to keep up with the chores than to try to catch up!

Don't let the thought of homesteading scare you. It's a pleasant, peaceful way of life that more folks should try at least once!

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Candles and battery-operated lights are good for emergencies, but better lighting is provided by gasoline lanterns (like this Coleman camping lantern) or built-in propane gas lights.

