

*The following essay is an adaptation of an article I wrote for our local newspaper several years ago.*

The dictionary has betrayed me. It describes the words "easy" and "simple" as synonyms. That might sometimes be true, but regarding them that way could get a person into a lot of trouble.

I'm thinking now of that phenomenon of the 1970s called the "Back to the Land" movement. It is not dead even today, but there is a mere trickle of people attempting this lifestyle change now when compared to the flood of that decade. The name itself was a misnomer. "Back to the Land" implies that whoever is going to the country has been there before. Many of the young, affluent urbanites and suburbanites who made up the bulk of this movement had had little previous contact with the realities of rural living. So, "To the Land" would have been a less misleading slogan for these people. I think, though, that the Swedes, faced with a similar rush to the outlying districts, gave the movement a much more descriptive and appropriate title. They called it "The Green Wave."

But, let's go back to that problem with "simple" and "easy." Most of the "Back to the Landers" were enticed by the simplicity of rural life. They were tired of the hurried pace, the emphasis on material values, and the supposed sterility of urban living. They wanted to get their hands dirty, milk a cow or a goat, bake bread, raise a garden, be self-sufficient. There's not a thing wrong with any of this. It is pretty much the way a lot of us have always lived. To be sure, those of us who grew up in the country had learned our lessons early: we were equipped with the knowledge and persistence needed to succeed in this kind of living. It is a wonder that a small percentage of those who came actually did learn what they needed to know, and what was even more important, adjusted their attitudes to fit the realities of this way of life. Those people are with us yet. There aren't many of them, but they deserve our respect.

What happened to the rest, and why? They were perhaps deceived by two little words, "simple," and "easy." They were looking for a simple life, and they did not realize that this pared-down, uncluttered lifestyle

was, and is, very hard to achieve. It requires a certain amount of sacrifice to live this way. It takes a lot of hard work, commitment to a life with little money, and the ability to tie oneself down--day after day, month after month, year after year. Cows want to be milked on Christmas and Thanksgiving Days too, and sheep want their feed on Sundays as much as on weekdays. When the green beans are ready to can or the tomatoes ripe enough to make into sauce, one must stay home and do the job then, not tomorrow or next week.

Some of the former homesteaders of that era are back in their old lives, living the same way they did before they gave it all up for the "simple" life in the country. They have returned to the consuming lifestyle that is so prevalent in American society. Others realized that they couldn't handle the rigors and realities of the simple life, but they did not abandon their idealism. They remain active in issues of ecology and social responsibility, they perhaps grow a garden for part of their food supply, and they are conscious of the importance of monitoring their own "carbon footprint."

Some of the "Back to the Land" people have stayed here in the country, but have abandoned the way of life they came to pursue. Instead, they have found that they can be as determined in the pursuit of money and things here as in the urban areas.

People often comment on the simple lives we live. They admire the peace and quiet of our area and the focused ideals of our lifestyle. I believe some of them actually think these things just happen. I wonder if any of these people realize that this life is not easy. It's worth the work, the lack of monetary resources, and the commitment of one's whole self. But, like so many in the "Back to the Land" movement soon discovered, "simple" and "easy" don't always have similar meanings at all.