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Sustainable Compromises



The Yurt

Our Sustainable Future

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Sustainable Compromises

*A Yurt, a Straw Bale House,
and Ecological Living*

ALAN BOYE

University of Nebraska Press
Lincoln and London

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For Jim Wilson, Jim Exten, and Mollie and Phil Freeman

“The future of all life, including our own, depends
on our mindful steps.”

—THICH NHAT HANH, *Essential Writings*

“To those devoid of imagination, a blank place on a map is
a useless waste; to others, the most valuable part.”

—ALDO LEOPOLD, *Sand County Almanac*

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Sustainable Compromises



Fig. 1. Linda

1

What I Lived For

In the late spring months of 1973 I built a yurt on a high desert plateau thirty-five miles to the southeast of Santa Fe, New Mexico, and began living there alone. I had just finished teaching fifth grade in the small, mostly Hispanic village of Tesuque. I was almost dead-dog broke, skinny as a rail, and barely twenty-three years old.

I didn't have any idea what to do with my life beyond finding a place where I could live as cheaply as possible. Then friends told me about some land they had found that was for sale for next to nothing. Never mind that it was thirty-two acres covered mostly in cacti and sand or that it was a mile away from the nearest road, never mind that I knew nothing about checking deeds for proper ownership, much less anything about building a structure where a person could survive in such a place—I bought it. Besides, it looked like a good place to try out my self-romanticized vision of the starving artist: some half-crazed genius bent over his cabin's only table, working under the light of a single kerosene lantern, while coyotes howled outside below a pale desert moon.

Soon, with the help of a few friends, I built an odd, cupcake-shaped dwelling on the land. I lived alone there for a little over a year before the rattlesnakes, the loneliness, the black widow spi-

ders in the outhouse, and my own restlessness made me a sojourner in civilized life again. But for that year, I lived as simply as a human being could. I lived without running water, electricity, and refrigeration and survived only on the meals I prepared from a three-month stockpile of canned goods, rice, and beans. Granted, without my youthful blindness to the fragility of life, I would never have attempted such an experiment in voluntary poverty. My regret is that that same youthful blindness prevented me from properly learning the lessons of that lonely plateau until years later. Once I left the desert, my life became one of modern comforts and conveniences. I forgot nearly everything I had learned about living simply.

Flash forward thirty-five years. My wife and I had been living in New England for decades. As we approached retirement age, we started talking about selling our beautiful but drafty and inefficient Victorian house. We wanted a smaller place, one better insulated to withstand Vermont's long cold winters, but also something we could afford on the modest fixed income we were anticipating. Wherever we lived, we also wanted it to be as simple and as environmentally sound as possible.

We wore out a couple of real estate brokers trying to find a house that suited us—the houses were either too far from town or poorly insulated, either too expensive to fix up or too large. The idea of building our own home started to grow on us. The more we talked about it, the better it sounded. We decided it was possible to build a small, inexpensive, and environmentally sound house for less money than many of the houses we were looking at.

I had been an English teacher for most of my life; I knew next to nothing about designing a house or about sustainability. I hadn't thought about such things as the proper depth for a foundation or the problems of human waste disposal since I lived in the yurt. It took us three years to build, from our decision to do so until our

first night in the house. The labor was often torturous, brutally hard on both body and spirit. At one point, we were on the brink of financial ruin. At times, our marriage was on very thin ice, and it is a miracle we still have any friends. But—with the help of those friends—we built an off-grid, energy-efficient house, using mostly locally produced materials, and made it a comfortable and affordable dwelling.

Oh, one other thing: the house we built is made of straw.

What I learned from those two attempts at living in better harmony with the world is the subject of this book.

To reach the land where I built the yurt, you drove far into the high, lonely desert south of Santa Fe. The road wound through miles of low, rocky hills the color of straw, speckled with the pale green of piñon and juniper trees. Several desolate miles past the New Mexico State Penitentiary and several desolate miles before you got to my land, you came to a multicolored mailbox with the word “Cornucopia” painted on the side. Three or four couples, an assortment of children under the age of ten, and a handful of dogs, cats, and chickens lived here in a sprawling combination of old adobe buildings, sun-sheltering A-frames, and three or four ramshackle wooden sheds. My friend Bob, who gave me the plans for the yurt, lived at the small commune with his young wife and their infant son. Everyone who lived there shared chores and common space and tried to agree collectively on any issues they faced. Cornucopia survived for only a few years. After a fire destroyed the A-frame, people went their separate ways.

Although I didn’t appreciate it at the time, watching how those people tried to work and live together eventually gave me an understanding of both the difficulty and the importance of harmony in human communities. To live with an awareness of the environment isn’t simply about using the right light bulb and recycling

trash; it also requires that we create communities that can sustain humanity.

One day, shortly after I had moved to the land, I was at Cornucopia. I had volunteered to help replaster one of the commune's adobe buildings. After a mud-speckled day of hard work, all of us were seated in the big common room, eating and drinking from a jug of cheap red wine.

We talked that night about politics, from the local volunteer fire department to the jungles of Vietnam. The world's problems back then were no less disheartening, and we discussed them seriously but with good cheer and friendship.

Someone mentioned how the plaza area of Santa Fe was changing. A multistory hotel was being built and would tower over the old adobe buildings. The place was being transformed from an authentic southwestern town into an "Adobe Disney Land" for tourists.

Bob took a deep hit from the jug. "The problem with the world is that there are too many people," he said. "Plain and simple, that's the gist of it: there are too many people in the world." He handed me the jug. "Of course, living out there at the yurt, you won't see any people at all."

The conversation drifted to talk of my new dwelling. People wanted to know how it was working out. Bob asked whether I was going to install a sod roof, as the plans called for me to do.

He was the one who had seen an item in the *Last Whole Earth Catalog* about a structure that was very inexpensive to build. He sent away for plans for building a yurt, and the plans ended up in my hands. I still have them. In 1973, the year I built the yurt, the average cost of a new home in the United States was \$32,000. I don't remember how much it cost me to build the yurt, but last week I took the plans to my friends at a local lumber store. They told me I could build the structure today for only \$920, a dirt cheap home even by 1973 standards.

One thing is certain: my decision to build a yurt had little to do with sustainability. I had very little money, and so I decided I was going to find a way to live as cheaply as possible so that I wouldn't have to work at a job. I wasn't going to compromise.

I wasn't smart enough or old enough to accept some kind of middle ground.