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Back to 1900 is not the way back to the land

By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—Every once in a while you read a memoir of folks doing something so colossally pointless that you root for them to succeed. Like a one-legged man of 102 hopping up Mount Everest backward and blindfolded in a flip-flop, holding his breath to avoid breathing oxygen-thin air.

I picked up Logan Ward's *See You in a Hundred Years: Four Seasons in Forgotten America* last Friday. It turned out to be one of those entertaining clueless-urban-writer-moves-to-farm-and-writes-heartfelt-account-of-finally-mastering-the-rural-skill-of-spitting-into-a-cup.

Ward and his willing wife, Heather, along with their young son, followed that well-written path, but took it one giant step into the vapors. They chose to live poor, as they imagined it was in 1900. No electricity, indoor plumbing, gas engines, computers or phones, with exceptions for emergencies and well-drilling in a drought. They spent a year trying to live "the life of dirt farmers from the era of our great-grandparents."

Why would anyone do this? Ward's answer: He felt stressed by modern urban life, burned out with keeping up and disconnected from the Milky Way.

The Wards hoped to free themselves, as Thoreau tried, from lives of "quiet desperation" and "self-imposed bondage." Nothing wrong with that. They shared Thoreau's interest in "individual simplicity," and, like Thoreau, Ward "posed for himself" to study himself as both artist and model, in E. B. White's words.

So they bumbled around for a couple of weeks until they found an old brick house with a root cellar on 40 acres in Swoope (rhymes with hope), a rural community of come-heres and been-heres near Staunton, Virginia, about an hour's drive from my place. They had no farm experience, no knowledge of what they were doing and no one to help them learn the ropes. They brought the presumptuousness of their ignorance, a silent brashness they didn't know they had but certainly needed.

Similarly equipped, the first English at Jamestown 400 years ago mainly starved. The natives saved them, and later the clueless Pilgrims who followed on Cape Cod. The Swoopians, too, befriended the time-colonists who had landed amongst them, offering acceptance, advice, food and cold beer.

The Wards ate what they could coax out of two goats, a handful of chickens and a garden that mainly fed several dozen other species. They bought some staples, like coffee and flours, and left their lifestyle hibernacula only by foot, bicycle or one-horse wagon.

Like Thoreau, the Wards spent their year thinking about themselves, feeding themselves and heating themselves. They realize early on that piling up enough food to survive a year was as stressful as hunting and gathering assignments from Manhattan editorial offices.

Did Ward find what he sought? He writes: "It's the same story all over again. Just like in New York, here I am nervous, preoccupied, unable to focus my energy. ...I fret over the weather and insects, feeling frustrated, angry, and inadequate." Issues like his generally travel well, even backwards.

Millions of farm families survived 1900 because they had the intellectual tools, field-tested know-how, infrastructure and equipment to make a go of it. What seems so impenetrably challenging to the Wards would have been a routine chore to a 13-year-old farm kid 100 years ago.

Milking a goat would not have led to carpal tunnel syndrome. Killing a barn rat would not have occasioned a treatise on the right to life. Every Tom, Dick and Harriet would have known how to pick a hoof, open a flue damper and hatchet a chicken so that it did not run around with its head cut off.

After reading one Ward flub-a-dub after another, I felt myself wincing in anticipation of the next page. I was watching "America's Funniest Home Videos" from 1900.

Thousands of young people "dropped out" and went "back to the land" in the 60s and 70s. Some chucked modernity as the Wards did until poverty, disease, boredom or survival instinct brought them back. The excursion left many roughed up.

Having watched some contemporaries reject indoor plumbing once, I didn't find Ward's second sitting any more ennobling or enlightening.

Others back then blended modern technology with boots and banjos. The axis around which this group spun was The Whole Earth Catalog (WEC), which Apple's Steven Jobs described as "Google in paperback." It was an oversized encyclopedia of tools, from hand-made hoes to the sharpest of technology's cutting edges, packaged with ideas for being and doing in an environmentally responsible way.

The WEC was a vehicle for helping back-to-the-land metros become competent and share their knowledge.

A Hundred Years is not that kind of book. It's not intended to be useful, and it's not--though it is funny in spots and earnest everywhere else.

Chucking modern life -- with all of its stress and excess -- is the prescription of Islamic ideologues who want to drag everybody back 1,000 years and seal up the tomb. Going back isn't an option, even if had been nicer back then, which it wasn't. And neither is staying put.

When it comes to modernity, I guess I'm a half-chuck guy. Simplifying makes sense as does living light; rejection doesn't.

Memoirs, of course, are always about the memoirist. I found the Wards' struggles and befuddlements a nice weekend read. But the premise of their year is essentially silly. I didn't take much away from Ward's triumph over garden bugs by popping each one between his gut-stained fingers or his losing tussles with a 2000-pound, mind-of-her-own, Percheron mare.

I, too, have a mare, though considerably smaller. And though I've whispered in her ears hundreds of times, she continues to bare her perfect teeth at my most sensible instructions with the warning: "Stay out of my beeswax, Jack." I fear she, too, is not trainable.

The Wards made it to the end, which I did not believe likely when they started their survival garden in June. They began with the idea that, maybe, they'd continue their little goat-cheese business. But after serving their sentence, he decided that he hated goats, and she decided that she hated making goat-milk cheese.

What I most liked about this book is that Ward knew he was a doofus and does not flinch from showing us the evidence. That's more than self-deprecating humor, that's being an honest writer.

Ward can be reached at <http://www.loganward.com/>. A paperback version with a new Afterword appeared in December.

Both the hardback and paperback were printed with computer technology and were not distributed by farm wagons pulled by Percherons.

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