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Self-sufficiency is a full-time job

By Curtis Seltzer

The idea of economic independence in the form of a farm that produces almost all of what its owners consume and need is an old one in practice with relatively recent philosophical re-justifications. American antecedents are found from wilderness homesteads to ante-bellum plantations.

After WW II, a literature developed that extolled the economic and lifestyle virtues of small-farm independence. I first read Ed and Carolyn Robinson's, *The Have-More Plan: How To Make a Small Cash Income into the Best and Happiest Living Any Family Could Want* (1946) about 40 years ago. I followed with the Helen and Scott Nearing's books, then many others. Homesteading, self-reliance, back to the land, off the grid, survivalist, preppers—all are working the same ground.

John Seymour, who died in 2004, set up the The John Seymour School for Self-Sufficiency in Ireland (! [HYPERLINK "http://www.self-sufficiency.net/"](http://www.self-sufficiency.net/) ¶ www.self-sufficiency.net^L) and published several books of how-to advice, beginning in the mid-1970s. The most recent is *The Self-Sufficient Life and How To Live It: The Complete Back-To-Basics Guide*, with Will Sutherland (DK Publishing, 2009).

The book is a wonderfully illustrated and comprehensive trove of how-to information on managing a small plot of land for the purpose of living on what it can produce. It is particularly strong on gardening and handling livestock for home consumption. It is weak on energy self-sufficiency and much modern technology.

Seymour prefers hand- and animal-powered technology, though grudging acknowledgement is made that electricity and oil-powered engines exist.

Most books of this type (including those of Joel Saladin) gloss over their actual, spreadsheet-type, 1040-type numbers that would reveal whether small-scale farms can actually support life in a modern society. Seymour, for example, says that a boar and six sows are "astonishingly profitable...indeed, in good years and bad, they paid all our bills for us." Applying his formula to an American context raises my doubts, but I suppose proof lies in what their bills amounted to and how much profit was made on say 120 weaned pigs a year. Seymour's book does not present such numbers and calculations. I'm betting that 120 pigs would not cover my bills were I totally committed to self-sufficiency.

Self-sufficient farming withdraws from the cash economy to the degree that each practitioner can manage. Cash for many self-sufficient farm efforts seems to come mostly from pre-existing family resources, non-agricultural sources (including off-farm employment and lifestyle-educational work, such as books, farm visits and speaking) or pre-farm buy downs of costs (as in, parental money buys the farm and provides infusions when needed). Self-sufficient farms, like Seymour's, are not designed to generate much cash, though I see more and more examples of small farms earning some money through local sales to high-end restaurants and consumers.

Seymour's book is about how to make a living from a small farm. It's not about how to make enough cash from such a farm to live on. If you have to pay for health insurance, property taxes, income taxes, property and vehicle insurance and even a tiny mortgage, I don't see how the Seymour plan works. But as a guide to a simpler, more labor-intensive and more satisfying lifestyle where earned cash is not the point, it's a great resource.

Seymour's core ideas are worth practicing on land whether or not you spend full-time being self-sufficient. He, for example, believes that a balance between animals and plants produces an environmentally healthy farm that takes cares of everyone's needs. He follows the Natural Cycle: the soil feeds the plants; plants feed the animals; animals manure the land; manure feeds the soil; and soil feeds the plants. To which he adds, the Law of Return—all residues should be returned to the soil. He practices rotational grazing for large livestock and poultry, and he is particularly fond of pigs, which makes him smart in my grading book.

Seymour's perspective is that primarily of British "smallholders." American readers will be able to figure out most of the terms he uses, though I don't think there's a large demand for thatching know-how among the former colonials.

Even if you don't intend to buy into the Seymour plan as a fully immersed convert, Self-Sufficient Life will make the time you live in the country deeper, better, more fully understood and more efficient.

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