

Modern Homesteading

Rediscovering the American Dream



A
Wranglerstar
PRODUCTION

About This Book

Over the years, we have received numerous requests to reveal why we decided to move to the country and how we did it. In this book, we share some of our personal story. Each chapter is followed by a “how to” section, called “Wisdom from the Journey.” It covers something we found out or wished we would have known before we embarked on our homesteading journey. The “Wisdom from the Journey” includes both practical tips and tools, as well as how this knowledge or lack of knowledge affected us or someone we know.

This is not intended to be an in-depth reference book, although we hope to save you from the mistakes we made and steer you in the right direction. We envisioned the book to be a companion to our YouTube channel, which can be found at Wranglerstar.com. We cover many of the topics in the book in greater detail on our channel. We do not purport to be experts at homesteading, but we work toward that goal.

“Homestead” is “the land and adjoining land occupied by a family” (Merriam-Webster.com). It further means “to acquire or occupy as a homestead.” Historically, homesteading meant building and living on government land for a certain number of years in order to receive the property free of charge. Today, homesteading means something different; huge plots of land are no longer given away for free, electric or solar power is generally available, print material and media teach us skills we previously would have learned from our elders, and our survival is not incumbent on being able to grow, hunt, harvest, and preserve all of our own food. Modern homesteading is a process, not an event or place, different for each family. Most families will never achieve total self-sufficiency. For us, modern homesteading means making choices to improve the quality of the life of our family, while respecting the community and environment around us — not forsaking modern amenities, but learning old-fashioned skills and methodology and attempting self-sufficiency when conceivable (and, admittedly, convenient). To share our family’s lifestyle, we use modern media, and the time it takes to produce videos eats up the time we might have spent doing something the slower, old-fashioned way. Modern homesteading balances use of contemporary technology to augment our homesteading lifestyle.

Introduction:

Why We Chose Modern Homesteading

While my wife wrote most of this book, you will find my views and suggestions throughout it. And because the question is so often asked, I want to first share why we chose to homestead.

For us, it was important for our family to separate itself from the chaos and distractions of an urban life. I'm not suggesting that homesteading should be used as an excuse to escape reality. The choice to homestead, whether it be 500 acres or five acres, should be about creating a sanctuary in a busy, overstimulated world. Our homesteading reality may look very different than yours; neither better nor worse.

The one thing we should all have in common is a desire to create and nurture a home environment that allows us, free from distraction, to build or cultivate a connection, a friendship with those we love, and for those of us that are Christians, a relationship with Christ. Whether you are Christian or not, the benefits transcend Christianity.

In our previous chaotic life, how could we tell people about Christ, the Prince of Peace, when we were still unsettled? Homesteading put us in a calming environment where we are less influenced by the attention-grabbing noise of our previous life. Even here, it can be a constant battle to protect peace and calmness. That being said, we feel like our shoulders are square, and our feet are firmly upon the right path.

The greatest benefit we, as a family, have received from making the decision to homestead is the ability to spend time together. I can only speak from my personal experience, but an additional benefit I received from making this decision can best be told by a personal revelation the second summer we were here. My wife and I were working in the garden. She was tending to some plants. I was on my hands and knees pulling weeds from the fence line. It dawned on me for the first time in my life that I was actually aware of my surroundings. I felt in tune with the changing of the seasons, the environment around me.

Up to this point, my entire life's focus and ambition had been to make money, build businesses, and acquire things. I had, in effect, limited myself to a type of tunnel vision — even though these things had been taking place around me, I had been completely unaware of them. In essence, I was coveting the things that were unimportant at the cost of those that were.

Although I have many hopes with this book, I do not know who you are, what your background is, or where you are coming from as you read this book. For me, it's not so important to have someone tell me how to do something — the important thing is to see them doing it. Talk is cheap, and actions speak louder than words. What I have done in life and portrayed in my videos are ideas and methods that are in no way unique to me. I am simply building on the accomplishments and courage of others who went before me.

This book and our YouTube channel work in concert to showcase many practical skills and ideas. What I hope they accomplish is to (1) provide you with hope and encouragement that you can change circumstances in your life, (2) teach you a skill that is tangible and of practical use, and (3) if nothing else, be entertaining to you, whether you are young or old.

—Cody, aka Wranglerstar
September 2015



(web link)

As you read our story, watch for these unique links. Videos have been created by Cody to enhance the content of each chapter of this book.

www.wranglerstar.com

Life Turned Upside Down

My husband, son, and I were in our van headed home after three days on the western slope of Glacier National Park. Unbeknownst to us then, those few days would radically change our lives. Twelve months earlier, I had read a book discussing the need to simplify life. “To simplify life,” now a cliché to help you to clear the clutter from your closet, and, yet, at the time it represented something novel. The book suggested streamlining all aspects of your life in order to spend more time with your family. The author and his wife had quit their jobs, sold their home, and moved thousands of miles from their extended family — a drastic measure taken to keep their failing marriage and family together. The book further challenged readers to escape their chaotic lives to which our culture has grown accustomed. It presented practical concepts, not only lofty, theoretical goals. We heard the author speak at a lecture and spoke with him and his wife afterward. They extended an off-hand invitation to attend an event they were hosting at their remote, off-grid mountain home. We took them up on it and it was from that event that we were now driving away.

Twelve hours and three states away from home, we had a long drive to consider the people and lifestyle we had just experienced. Most of the attendees were conservative Christians beyond anything to which I had been exposed. All of the women wore long skirts — even when exercising



Traveling in our “adventure” van. We took out the seats and put in a bed, fridge, counter, and swivel seats.

or doing yard work. Dietary restrictions were strict and schedules firmly adhered to. Mainstream cultural experiences were extremely regulated. All toys were taken from the sandbox on the day of worship and it, as well as the swings, was off-limits to children. The children were homeschooled. The women definitely did not work outside of the home. These were not, and are not, our ways. I sensed my appearance pained them with my showy jewelry, painted toenails, shorts, and tank tops. Our son Jack wore printed tee shirts and shorts instead of plain, collared shirts and long pants. Very few times had I ever felt more out of place. However, they were kind, generous, and, astonishingly non-judgmental. We were not unwelcome, only decidedly different.

We appreciated our time with them and learned a great deal about dedication to family, having joy and laughter in life, and putting God first. They were not sticks in the mud. There was music, volleyball, camping, whitewater inner tubing, and playing tag — adults too. It was unadulterated fun. We desired many parts of it.

As my husband Cody and I discussed our trip at length, I was surprised to learn that the group setting and the roles people took appealed to him. It was reminiscent of positive experiences he had known in his childhood. While much differed, it felt normal to him, and comforting in its familiarity. While I watched and adapted to the odd social norms, he spent time learning about what it took to live off-grid and so remotely. He made hundreds of mental notes on solar panels, snow loads, gardening, pantry layout, logging, and adventure. Seeing the book's concepts in practice instead of just reading about them was more influential than we had imagined. During our drive home, we agreed we desired a life where we spent more time together, purposefully, as a family. Despite my quitting my job recently to stay home with Jack, Cody still worked a tremendous number of hours. Our marriage and family life felt the strain. We resolved to change many things, giving up our urban lifestyle.

We returned home motivated. We held no wish to be reclusive or harken back to bygone ways — however, we deemed change necessary. Our desire included moving farther out of the city to a truly remote location. Likewise, we were convinced I should educate Jack. We received some initial resistance from family and friends concerning our aspirations to relocate and to homeschool. Despite their uncertainty, they backed our struggle to achieve these goals. Although it is an ongoing evolution, we would now consider ourselves modern homesteaders.

The Power of YouTube

Approximately nine years ago, Cody began putting videos up on YouTube. He sold vehicle parts online and frequently explained, over the phone, how to install the same part repeatedly. Multiply this confusing task by the 1,500 parts he sold, the distinct ways people understand the same instructions, and varying mechanical skill levels, and Cody became an expert at giving step-by-step instructions in a clear manner. He quickly realized he could save countless hours if he performed the task once while filming, put the video up online, and directed purchasers to the website instead of answering numerous phone calls. With this revelation, our YouTube channel was born. What began as a car parts how-to site morphed into a do-it-yourself channel of another flavor. Our channel name, Wranglerstar, reveals our history — “Wrangler” from Jeep parts and “Star” from a location meaning a great deal to us.

Because the YouTube community was so small back then, little concern was given to privacy issues, such as where we lived, or the name of our son. Once you share some things, you simply cannot take them back. As viewers became familiar with us, they requested we increase the number of videos of more mundane activities, such as rescuing Morris the cat from a tree, setting off water bottle rockets with an air compressor, or

The screenshot shows the YouTube channel page for 'wranglerstar'. At the top, there is a search bar, an 'Upload' button, and a 'Sign In' button. The channel banner features a logo with a star and crossed axes, and the text 'Wranglerstar MODERN HOMESTEADING'. Below the banner, the channel name 'wranglerstar' is displayed with a 'Subscribe' button showing 247,785 subscribers. The navigation menu includes 'Home', 'Videos', 'Playlists', 'Channels', 'Discussion', and 'About'. The main content area shows a video titled 'Wranglerstar Channel Trailer' with 690,621 views, posted 1 year ago. The video description includes social media links for Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Tumblr. To the right of the video, there is a 'Support this channel' section with a 'Support' button and a 'Wranglerstar Favorites' section with a 'Subscribe' button for 'FRESH PRINCESS'.

Jack giggling madly while riding his little electric quad, pulling Cody in wild fashion through the shop on a dolly (a small platform on wheels used for moving heavy objects). Never did we anticipate our daily lives would be of interest to anyone but ourselves.

Early on, Cody added some gear review videos and political commentary, and has always conducted Bible studies. He received positive feedback and his number of subscribers began to accumulate. A wildly popular YouTuber featured one of Cody's videos, back in the days when you could show someone else's video on your own channel. We were at a barbecue when Cody starting getting email notifications his subscriber base was rapidly multiplying. Without that exposure, our channel may never have grown to the size it is today.

The mixture of instructional how-to videos, online Bible study, and everyday-life videos taught Cody how to highlight the necessary information with enjoyable moments. He was forced to answer questions, discuss difficult topics, and highlight the beauty of commonplace occurrences. Feedback taught him what topics viewers appreciated or disdained. In the beginning, he had no idea how to edit—shooting all videos in one take, which often meant 10 to 15 takes to get it perfect, or “close enough.” He believed producing videos would be so much easier if he could only splice two video segments together. Back then, consumer-level video editing software was not readily available like it is today. As the subscriber base increased, it put demands on Cody to up his game to make higher quality, better content videos. He started to pay closer attention to movies and videos, becoming a student of transitions and jump cuts. He taught himself to edit using a free downloaded version of Corel®.

As he sought to educate others, he too has been educated. When our bulldozer would stop running, we appreciated how bulldozer experts emerged with useful tips and explanations of complex mechanical fixes. We saved a tremendous amount of time, effort, and money because of these knowledgeable and experienced viewers. To those viewers — keep those comments coming! We love learning. Of course, there were “experts” who had never picked up a tool, much less touched a bulldozer. Those types of self-proclaimed “experts,” while not the norm, were, and continue to be, frustrating. They criticize our decisions and us more than anyone else does. On the other hand, those with genuine wisdom tend to be exceedingly gracious, and valued.

With our move to the off-grid location, the number of videos Cody produced increased dramatically. Developing an off-grid site was unusual and interesting. Subscribers poured in. The quality of the videos from that period was low, in part because of the lack of time to devote to

This is reality. We lack the polish and staged drama of television actors... We openly show our successes and failures.



editing and a horrific Internet connection. We had other jobs at hand. Investment in a quality camera and editing software also were not paramount for us. Cody purchased a flip camera for \$100 and continued to use Corel®'s basic editing software, which sold for under \$50. Many of those videos are no longer available, as YouTube changed music copyright policies, forcing us to delete them. Since the era of the off-grid property, our video and editing equipment has been upgraded. Cody purchased a used Apple laptop, and still uses consumer-level editing software. He bought a refurbished Canon video camera and an iPhone®. He invests little in cameras because he exposes them to terrible weather from constant outdoor filming — they careen out of trees, and tripods fall over. Because of subscriber demands, he now attempts to upload a video daily. His hours remain much longer than Jack and I prefer, but he works from home, so we can, and do, interrupt him frequently. Responding to viewer comments and emails requires more hours than occupy a day. Please forgive him if he does not answer yours. Cody makes a valiant attempt, but falls short. However, the comments and emails compel us to continue to videotape our everyday occurrences.

Somehow, our struggles and successes at our off-grid property became a bit of a poor man's reality TV show. People tuned in regularly. When the set changed from off-grid to our present-day homestead, the viewers came along. We lack the polish and staged drama of television actors, but people tell us they prefer that. When we work outdoors, our clothes show dirt and stains, our hair remains uncombed, our faces reveal no make-up, and dialogue comes naturally. We lack the expensive tools and equipment

of the professionals. People relate to us. We claim no more strength, wealth, or intelligence than the average viewer does. As one subscriber told us, “I like that you aren’t Martha Stewarts, where everything is perfect, placed somewhere for a reason, and expensive. Watching her can make you struggle with feelings of inadequacy.” We openly show our successes and failures. Jack summed it up nicely one time: “This is reality.” I imagine that is why people watch. It is strange to share our life so publicly. It was not our intent.

Somehow, a ministry has emerged from ax handles, composting, and hard work. Our viewers remind us daily that we are blessed to have this family, home, and adventure. I used to believe people watched us because we also readily admit to believing in God. In reality, that is the most controversial topic on our channel. Viewers tend to either love or hate the mention of our beliefs. Interestingly, this division cannot be drawn between Christians and non-Christians. Some atheists are our strongest supporters. Some Christians are our biggest critics.

Honestly, I approach our YouTube channel with hesitation, because of the weight of responsibility it brings. I toiled diligently at its creation, endured much to ensure its success, and have been of support to Cody in his efforts. I enjoy the fruits of this labor, but like many good things, I sometimes wonder if I am up to the task. I do not shirk hard work or difficult situations, but we all bear different types of responsibility better than other types. Perhaps I consider the channel too seriously, but the messages we receive tell us we are involved in a ministry, whether we intended it or not. That makes me nervous. I know God uses the least, but I feel a little bit too least even for Him sometimes. I often want to ask Him if He is sure about His choice. I do not mean to sound too casual or disrespectful, but I know He wants to hear my fears and struggles. When I pray, God tells me He will use both Cody and me if we let Him. I find when I follow His lead, something better than I might imagine generally emerges.



Tree planting party
with subscribers and
friends



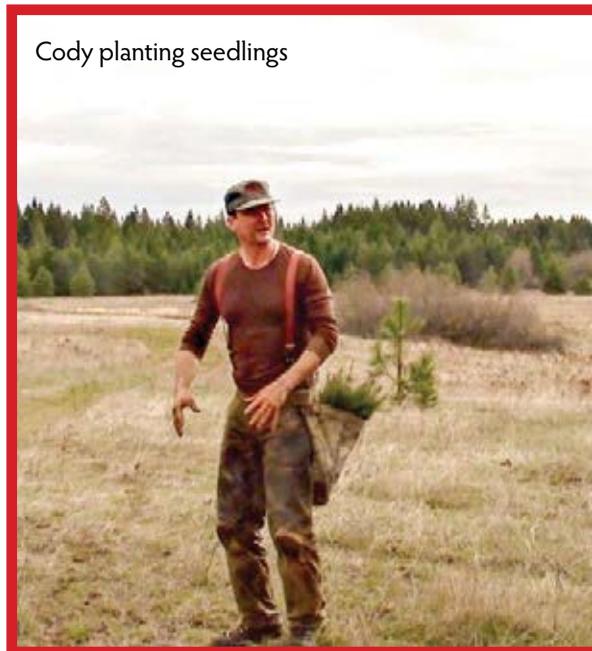
An example involves our open houses at the homestead. A number of times each year, we invite subscribers to play, labor, and fellowship on our property. Once a year we invite them to camp from three to five days. I always ask people why they come. Why do people drive long distances to camp on hard ground and work all day with strangers? One couple from California replied, “We wanted to see what you and Cody were really like. What are people like who trust enough to open their home and property to one hundred complete strangers?” Put that way, I understood how crazy we might seem. I answered that, despite my reluctance, God had asked us to invite viewers, so we did. Despite my insecurities, I choose to share what I treasure. By the time the couple left, they understood why we continue to host, without any need for further explanation. Despite all of our differences in background, skill level, and ideology, a harmony emerges as people work and socialize together.

Cody recently posted a video in which he said we would be planting trees. He did not request any help and yet I received over half a dozen emails from previous open house attendees asking if they may come and plant. Clearly, they do not desire to come because planting one thousand conifers on their day off excites them. They come because of the camaraderie and satisfaction from simple work. People yearn for these types of real experiences, challenging their bodies, their strength, and accomplishing teamwork. This is not our doing. We simply open our gate to allow it to happen here.

Years ago, we benefitted when people opened their homes to us and wrote books on homesteading. We likely would not have traded in our

urban lifestyle for a simpler, rural way of life had it not been for them. Because of this, we feel an obligation to share our homesteading journey too. We do not aspire for others to live a life similar to ours, but to forge ahead with their own dreams and implement the changes they want in their lives. The medium to share our story simply happens to be videos. Through YouTube we can dialogue with others; ask, answer, suggest, and learn. This channel has provided a useful way to interact between creators and subscribers.

Questions abound about how we support ourselves on the homestead. YouTube began in 2005, and in 2007, launched its revenue-sharing Partner Program. After a year of uploading videos, YouTube invited us to join its Partner Program. We were thrilled with the \$30 paychecks we received each month. Today we receive income from both the advertisements playing prior to our videos and for sales made through our online streams. After eight years of making videos, the checks only recently amounted to enough for us to make videos fulltime. At first, I felt guilty for receiving a paycheck for making videos. I then realized that, combined, we spend well over 90 hours a week on videoing, editing, production, commenting, emailing, and bookkeeping. I could find no reason not to receive compensation for the work we do. Cody also contracts on wildland fires to supplement our income. We are not rich; we still cannot afford to remodel our house, buy a tractor, or visit my brother and his family who live overseas, and whom we miss terribly. We budget strictly, purchase most of our clothes at thrift stores, and buy used when possible. I am not complaining, only answering a frequent question. Together, we prioritized this lifestyle over other choices. I am glad we did, and yes, we have started to save for part of the remodel and a trip. The tractor will have to wait.



Cody planting seedlings

In the beginning, I wanted absolutely no part of the YouTube channel. Indeed, it brought up concerns about time consumed and private information revealed. Perhaps because I am a woman, but sharing personal information with a stranger was the antithesis of all the safety messages



Cody filming one of his many videos for the Wranglerstar channel

I had heard over the years. So please refer to our mountain as Mt. Fuji, which it is not. Let people know we live in Colorado, which we do not. We understand with over one thousand videos, people gain an intimate knowledge of our family. After so much exposure, we cannot fake who we are. On the flip side, we lack any information about the majority of people we meet. It is strange, really. We are blessed to meet so many wonderful people whom we suspect could be close friends if the situation were normal. But it is not. They know us, but we do not know them. There can be very strong expectations, which can be tricky to manage. Often we can only enjoy a few minutes or hours with someone. People stop by uninvited, creating awkward moments both for them and for us. When I am home alone, and a strange man comes through our gate, I am not elated, as you can understand. We love invited guests though! Plus, our house gets messy, our schedules are full, and that is why we hold the open houses.

I am a gifted listener, but a reluctant storyteller. I avoid public speaking. With no hesitation, I stand up to provide information I know or my opinion in front of a small crowd, but do not ask me to prepare and deliver a speech to ten of my closest friends. This disdain for speaking allowed me to escape appearing in Cody's videos for the first five years or so. Thus, I kept my anonymity. Cody laughed when I suggested penning this book as Mrs. Cody. While he was pleased I am proud to be his wife,

he considers me a bit ridiculous. Nonetheless, to keep the mystery alive, please do not reveal my first or maiden name; I prefer to be called Mrs. Wranglerstar.

Despite my reluctance, the pressure to participate in videos was real. Although initially successful in shying away from the spotlight, Cody convinced me the success of the channel relied upon contributions from the entire family, and not just off-screen. When I saw how much Cody despised working with Jeep parts, and how difficult it was for his body, it proved impossible to say no. Honestly, he had no interest in Jeeps or parts sales, but diligently ran the business for over a decade because it provided a means for me to stay home with Jack. The hours were long, the work dirty and taxing, and all of his shops were regularly bitterly cold or miserably hot. The wrenching of parts, at awkward positions, caused his back and limbs to suffer ongoing pain. Every morning he struggled out of bed. Many mornings I had to help him out of bed. Visits to the chiropractor were frequent. I would do anything to alleviate his suffering, even appearing in videos.

In early 2015, we were able to shut down our online Jeep parts store. Skills and livelihood were gathered there, a blessing for certain, but what a relief. As Cody worked more on videos and less on part sales, his pain subsided. I daresay a complete recovery occurred. And this is why we run a YouTube channel called Wranglerstar.

<https://goo.gl/FVOv8n>



Our Wranglerstar family

