

Heirloom Seed, Heritage Breed, and Organic Feed:  
The Quest for Simplicity in Portland, Oregon

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**Abstract:**

*This paper aims to situate the urban homesteading movement within the unique geography of Portland, as well as within a historical context of spiritual land-based simplicity movements in the United States. I argue that urban homesteading in Portland is effective at organizing, forming community, and making meaning, and educating through re-skilling, but is ineffective at addressing issues of commodification and like other voluntary simplicity movements, is exclusive to the elite.*

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## Table of Contents

Abstract.....	2
Acknowledgements.....	3
Timeline.....	5
Introduction.....	6
Methodology.....	10
The roots of urban homesteading, spiritual or material?.....	12
Paradise in Portland: History of Utopia in Oregon.....	15
Privilege and elitism in voluntary simplicity movements.....	18
Farmers in Portland.....	19
Commodity fetishism and authenticity.....	24
Conclusion.....	30
Bibliography.....	34

**Timeline:**

1854 Walden published

1856 The Homestead Act signed

1954 Nearings publish The Good Life

1970's: Back to the Land movement in full swing

2000: 20 households have chicken permits in Portland

2003: First tour de coops in Portland

2009: 3 Feed stores open in Portland

2012: 525 households have chicken permits in Portland

## **Introduction**

Nestled in the concrete jungle of southeast Portland among the colorful craftsman homes and pricey condos, one can catch a whiff of something in the air not unlike the countryside. Step inside an unassuming storefront to meet Portland's own urban farm elites, armed with an extensive array of knowledge, garden tools, and the occasional heritage breed chicken. In this urban feed store, customers browse DIY guides to sustainable living, pet the roaming Nigerian dwarf goats, and choose which jar will be perfect for their upcoming weekend project. The several similar urban farming stores in Portland represent the nucleus of the Rose City's expanding urban homesteading movement, which aims to reduce consumptive habits through acquiring skills for production at the individual home and neighborhood level.

The urban homesteading movement is not monolithic in its driving force: it seems each homesteader has their own reason for homesteading and their own way of putting that ideology into practice. Its many constituent parts define urban homesteading. Together, seemingly disparate activities are joined and become one social movement. Activities associated with urban homesteading, like urban chicken keeping, aim to educate participants in food production, distancing themselves from consumerism and the seemingly inescapable global capitalist market. Homesteading is defined differently depending on who you talk to, but most definitions involve a focus on the home economy as a way of dealing with social and environmental concerns. "As a point of intersection for the complex negotiation of personal interactions and institutional demands, the home becomes a hybrid of materials, markets, moralities, and meanings" (Lewis and Potter 2011:205).

Classic homesteading has traditionally aimed for complete self-sufficiency, working from home and producing enough food to get by. Urban homesteading on the other hand can do no such thing, as urbanites rely on city services like trash and recycling services, and their homes are tethered to power lines, gas lines, and plumbing. This paper will make specific distinctions between classic homesteading and urban homesteading, as the urban environment changes the practices of homesteaders entirely.

Homesteading practices are evident in many social movements of the 19<sup>th</sup>-21<sup>st</sup> century. This paper will further explain the new urban version of this dynamic social movement in context with other historical land-based simplicity movements. However, it's not enough to talk about the history of urban homesteading in broad generalizations. In order to further understand the motives and practices of individual homesteaders in today's America, I situate this study in Portland, Oregon. This choice was not random, but instead was the result of observing the growing popularity of urban homesteading in Oregon's most populous city. According to an article in Oregon Business, approximately six Portland urban farm stores have opened up since 2009 to accommodate the growing interest in urban homesteading (Waldroupe 2011). These farm stores provide a rich research site for scholars studying urban homesteading as homesteaders congregate there to take classes, restock their kitchens and gardens, and problem solve with resident experts. The number of Portlanders with permits to keep more than 3 chickens has increased from 20 in 2000 to 525 in 2012 (Van der Voo 2012). There are also many social groups that have formed around urban homesteading, mostly organized online. There is a young farmers club that meets at a popular Portland bar once a month. Portland even has professional chicken sitters, who take care of backyard chickens when their owners go on

vacation (Hauser 2010). There are also farm sanctuaries outside of Portland that take old hens and roosters, as well as unruly goats: casualties of cramped quarters or urban homesteads (Van der Voo 2012). This means that Portlanders may not be considering these more as pets and not livestock animals.

Its growing popularity is also evidenced in Powell's bookstore. Five years ago, Powell's did not have a sustainable living section. As demand increased for urban homesteading books, they designated an entire section for the texts. According to one information desk attendant, Powells now has over 1,000 books on the subject. To the left of the attendant's desk was a feature on urban homesteading which had been up for at least two months. The shelf contained *A Chicken in Every Yard* by Portlanders Hannah and Robert Litt, as well as soap-making and mushroom growing kits. Although Powell's might not be representative of all Portland populations, the relative increasing in urban homesteading books in the past 5 years is telling of its popularity in Portland.

I also wanted to gage how popular this movement was in Portland compared to the rest of the country, and even the rest of the world. A preliminary search on Google trends revealed exactly what I had hypothesized: that for a small city like Portland, urban homesteading was wildly popular. Search terms like "urban farming", "chicken keeping" had Portland at the top, out of all cities in the world. Clearly, there are limitations to this search, that it only searches English and not other languages, and that it is only considering Internet searches and popularity. That means people who are interested in homesteading, but don't have the Internet or speak English, are not being taken into account. However, these searches show at a most basic level, that Portland just may well be the nucleus of the



urban homesteading movement. At the same time, another way to tell that an activity is becoming a widespread social movement is to look to mainstream commodity markets. Nation-wide stores like Williams Sonoma and Whole Foods have started selling items typically found in local feed stores. The tension between what is authentic and inauthentic to the urban homesteading movement is palpable. This paper will explore issues of commodity fetishism and authenticity.

This paper aims to situate the urban homesteading movement within the unique geography of Portland, as well as within a historical context of spiritual land-based simplicity movements in the United States. I argue that urban homesteading in Portland is effective at organizing, forming community, and making meaning, and educating through re-skilling, but is ineffective at addressing issues of commodification and like other voluntary simplicity movements, is exclusive to the elite.

First, I will discuss my methodology in finding answers to basic questions like, who are urban homesteaders in Portland, and what are their motives for participating in related activities? Next, the urban homesteading movement will be historically contextualized within pseudo-religious land-based social movements. This section will move chronologically, beginning with The Homestead Act of 1862 and pioneer lifestyles in the United States, followed by an overview of voluntary simplicity, and a discussion of the back-to-the-land movement of the 1970's. After the roots of urban homesteading are explored in full, I address why Portland lends itself so well to urban homesteading, by discussing visions of utopia in Oregon specifically from the books "Eden within Eden" (Kopp 2009) and "Cascadia: The Elusive Utopia" (Todd 2008). Then I will move into a

specific discussion of urban homesteading in Portland, as observed through interviews and observations in stores and in online homesteading communities. Finally, my paper will conclude in a discussion of the role of spirituality and materialism in the urban homesteading movement, as well as make suggestions for further study.

## **Methodology**

In order to further understand the motives of urban homesteaders, I undertook bibliographic research, casual interviews both online and in person, as well as online media research of homesteading blogs (web-logs), social groups, and forums. I took a particular interest in simplicity movements because of the tension between spirituality and materiality, so relevant to the movement in Portland. Huneke found that much of the voluntary simplicity community is web-based. Since I am exploring urban homesteading as a movement rooted in voluntary simplicity, I felt that ignoring resources on cyberspace would be a limiting factor. Gould writes, "Homesteaders produce more texts than they do vegetables". This seems to still hold true to urban homesteaders, but instead of written texts, urban homesteaders have gravitated to the blogosphere. Including websites, blogs, and forums in my research helped me access a larger community of urban homesteaders, as well as peer into parts of their lives they might not otherwise share with me in an interview. Nicholas Hookway explores this in his *Qualitative Research* article, "Entering the blogosphere: some strategies for using blogs in social research". Hookway writes,

Blogs offer substantial benefits for social scientific research providing similar, but far more extensive opportunities than their 'offline' parallel of qualitative diary research. First, they provide a publicly available, low-cost and instantaneous

technique for collecting substantial amounts of data. Further, blogs are naturalistic data in textual form, allowing for the creation of immediate text without the resource intensiveness of tape recorders and transcription. The anonymity of the online content also means that bloggers may be relatively unselfconscious about what they write since they remain hidden from view (Hookway 2008:92).

Because urban homesteading is relatively new, scholarly work on the subject has yet to come to light. Furthermore, after a few preliminary interviews, it was clear that my interviews were not capturing the aspects of urban homesteading that I wanted to be critical of. It was difficult to ask direct questions about spirituality and materiality, for example “Do you consider yourself religious?” or “How do you feel about your store’s commodification of goods?” Furthermore, the interviews were all conducted in urban homesteading stores in Portland, meaning that I was only seeing the work side of my informants. Reading their blogs, I entered into their homes. Pictures of their families, of their gardens and of course, their favorite backyard farm animals were publically available. Because of this, I was able to see the more ideological and spiritual side of their lives, rather than only experiencing the practical work side. Entering their social networking sites also allowed me to see how homesteaders in Portland interact, how they schedule their time, and what subjects they talk about at their meetings. The social networking sites also became a place for them to post information about politics or urban homesteading in other cities, connecting them to the rest of the world. One aspect that Hookway doesn’t mention is that the blogs allow for a conversation between homesteaders in the comments section. This is especially true for forums, where people pose questions, and others answer.

That being said, the interviews I conducted were instrumental in experiencing homesteading first-hand. Meeting the faces behind Portland’s homesteading stores helped

me relate to them and understand their background and motives. Because they were in person, I was not analyzing the narratives of online diaries, but was engaging in meaningful conversations with them. Interviews were conducted as casual conversations, with some leading questions about my specific research. Tape recorders were eschewed so as not to pressure informants. Instead, interviews were transcribed during and immediately after. The exception to in person interviews was Chris Brockway, who leads the Portland Homesteaders Guild. Interviews with Chris took place over e-mail, since this was his primary communication with other homesteaders. All informants expressed enthusiasm in this project, and all of them agreed to me using their names.

### **The roots of urban homesteading: Spiritual or material?**

Homesteading is a lifestyle encouraging self-sufficiency, introspection, and the simple life through crafting, cooking and preserving, and backyard farming. Throughout 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century America, these practices have been limited to rural areas. The very notion of homesteading in itself is American, representing westward expansion, the frontier, and free land in exchange for hard work. The Homestead Act of 1862, signed by President Lincoln, promised 160 acres in return for 5 years of living and working the land. The act provided an opportunity for families down on their luck, as well as oppressed people like former slaves and women, to leave the cities and start a new life in the frontier. Those who accepted the challenge were met with hardship. To survive, they had to build their own shelters and grow the food they needed. Although Turner declared the American frontier closed by 1890's, the Homestead Act remained in effect until 1976, and 1986 in Alaska. Homesteaders settled about 10 percent of the area of the United States. Thus, the act was

successful at spreading Americans from sea to shining sea. Gould writes that the Homestead Act was “primarily an expression of the dominant American ethos: railroad-produced expansionism, early industrialism, and manifest destiny” (Gould 2005:2), hardly the homesteading at the center of this study. However, as discussed later in this paper, many voluntary simplicity movements aimed for the same pioneer lifestyle led by rural homesteaders.

Coined by Richard Gregg in 1936, voluntary simplicity is a lifestyle that focuses on reducing material possessions to improve the quality of one’s life (Elgin 2010). People who subscribe to this way of living cite philosophical and ideological reasons to reduce their possessions and simplify their daily lives, often interpreted as a response to overconsumption and consumerism. The decision to downsize the amount of clutter and downshift the pace of one’s life possessions is not an easy one to make, and likely not one made on exclusively practical grounds. Duane Elgin is a scholar on the subject, writing *Voluntary Simplicity* in 1981. According to Elgin, the voluntary simplicity has roots in Puritanical visions of self-denial and self-sufficiency as well as transcendentalist qualities in “plain living and high thinking”, all of which stems from the teachings of spiritual leaders like Gandhi and Jesus (Elgin 2010:3). Not only is it practical for people to rid the needless clutter from their homes, but the act of purging and starting anew is decidedly religious. The Homestead Act was not characterized by voluntary simplicity; as for the most part people were driven by necessity to move westward.

Eight years prior to the signing of The Homestead Act, Thoreau published *Walden*, his transcendental foray into an intentional “rural” life. However, Thoreau did not go west.

He did not go out into remote wilderness. He stayed within the limits of his hometown, enjoying frequent visits to his parents' house, and inviting friends over often to enjoy the peacefulness of nature. Much like today's homesteaders, Thoreau documented his experience, attempting to find deeper meaning in his daily observations. However, it seemed that Thoreau was trying to free himself from some of the confines of urban living, while urban homesteaders innovate solutions to those restrictions, and benefit from city services.

One hundred years after *Walden*, Helen and Scott Nearing published their rural homesteading experience in *The Good Life*. Unlike Thoreau, the Nearings were mostly self-reliant, erecting their own houses and maintaining a working farm. There is no doubt that *The Good Life* had religious significance, expounding the virtues of hard work and a simple, rural life. Rebecca Neale Gould moved into the Nearing's rural homestead after Helen passed away, researching *la vie quotidien* of the Nearings as well as the spiritual components of the rural homesteading they so encouraged. She writes, "While the Nearings publicly recommended leisure, their homesteading vision was inscribed with a strict Protestant work ethic that outclassed any ideal types Max Weber might have imagined" (Gould 2005:39).

The back to the land movement of the twentieth century closely resembles collective imagination of rural homesteading. The back-to-the-land movement refers mostly to the trend of counter-culture city dwellers in the 1970's to leave the city and settle in rural areas, trying to live off of the land. A series of pressures resulted in this urban to rural migration of "hippies", including the oil crisis, growing awareness of environmental

problems, and its expanding popularity in mass media (Edington 2008). By the end of the 1970's, it's estimated that 1 million Americans were going back to the land, mostly on small plots of land as opposed to communes or large farms (Agnew 2004). Back-to-the-landers were neo-pioneers, returning to the "frontier" and romanticizing pioneer ways of living.

The back to the land movement was characterized by intense homesteading that aimed for complete self-sufficiency, which included eschewing modern technology like plumbing and electricity. Locations for this style of homestead were generally far from large cities. Spirituality played a large part in this movement, as back-to-the-landers attempted to find deeper meaning and identity in their new country life. According to Agnew, a former back-to-the-lander herself, "Historically, in a nation abundant with freedom, wealth, and often, bad choices, our country's original Puritanical attitudes calling for restraint on a wide range of vices never entirely disappeared from our social heritage" (Agnew 2004:28). Although some tend to view the back to the land movement primarily as a countercultural response to political issues, we mustn't ignore the spiritual dimensions inherent in finding meaning in nature.

### **Paradise in Portland: History of Utopia in Oregon**

Now that the context of homesteading has been established within other American environmental movements, it's necessary to also place homesteading in a bioregional context. Oregon has a rich history of back-to-the-land experiments and those wishing to participate in voluntary simplicity. It's not surprising that Oregon, the territory at the end of the Oregon Trail, would be an appropriate place for urban homesteading to occur. It's impossible to discount the affect of the local geologic landscape on the lifestyles of its

residents. The cascade mountain range characterized by snowy white volcanoes, bursting out of the horizon, paints a picture of wilderness as a backdrop. The confluence of the great Columbia River and the winding Willamette River mean a rich indigenous legacy, a long history of natural resource extraction and trade, and the seemingly endless supply of water so common to metropolises of the Pacific Northwest.

Just as the geography has seduced settlers, it has also shaped the spirituality of its residents who look to nature instead of religious institutions. James Kopp writes about the more spiritual history of Oregon in his book, *Eden Within Eden: Oregon's Utopian Heritage* through careful study of utopian communities that occurred around the state. All of these communities had both ecological and deeply spiritual reasons for existing, and Kopp notes that this character is a common thread within Oregon, writing:

Upon this backdrop of Oregon as Eden in various connotations, it is not surprising that the state also became an attractive place for individuals or groups seeking their own forms of an ideal life or perfection in some manner. The same features of the land and the environment that drew early pioneers and homesteaders also were factors for those seeking to create their own Eden within the broader Eden of the natural beauty and regeneration quality that Oregon provided. (Kopp 2009:5)

Kopp notes that homesteaders were drawn to Oregon because of its unique geography. Practically, it's easy to live in Oregon. The winters and summers are mild. However, Kopp seems to be referring to a deeper spiritual sense, that homesteaders were drawn to Oregon because of its awe-inspiring nature. Oregonians find themselves in a cathedral built of forest, mountains, and rivers. Furthermore, Oregon has often been seen as the end of the traditional frontier, meaning that there is a



notion of Oregon as empty wilderness or space to be filled by settlers. This idea is articulated in *Cascadia: The Elusive Utopia*. The editor, Douglas Todd, brings together a variety of authors to get at the ideological and spiritual heart of Cascadians, i.e. Pacific Northwesterners. He argues that the “spiritual, but not religious” tendencies of Cascadians signify that the region is not void of religion and spirituality, but is actually rich in what he calls “spirituality of place”. He writes:

Northwestern migrants, from homesteaders in the mid-nineteenth century to back-to-the-land utopians in the late twentieth century, have always imagined the frontier to be culturally empty, a place of limitless possibility, with their task being to pour meaning in the vacuum. In this way, Cascadians are hopeful and forward looking; they stand ready to invent new and better traditions (Todd 2008:46).

Trying to fill a cultural void is no easy task. Movements such as homesteading certainly help to make meaning for residents. Todd also writes about how four out of five Northwesterners live in a city, and that the urban/rural divide is stark (Todd 2008).

According to him, the urban parts are the areas that embrace a spirituality seeped in a love of nature more readily than the rural parts, despite the former being farther from what we consider nature (Todd 251). Religious none-ness, like perceived cultural none-ness, does not actually exist, but justifies filling the “void” with something entirely new. The apparent void of religion is actually fake perception as eco-spirituality rampant in urban areas of Cascadia.

## **Privilege and elitism in voluntary simplicity movements**

The previous pages have illuminated how seemingly practical countercultural movements are also spiritual in nature. It's impossible to extract the Puritan work ethic from the American who wishes to trade his or her life for something more fulfilling. Activities related to homesteading become ritualized. The action of digging in the soil, turning over clods of dirt, and watching something grow, observing the cycle of the seasons, all of these can be deeply religious experiences, even if not necessarily monotheistic. They are all tied together by a similar quest to fill some void, whether religious or cultural, and make a new identity of meaning. However, there is another aspect that is evident throughout the history of voluntary simplicity movements, including today's urban homesteading movements: the ability to participate in these movements decided by socio-economic status. In other words, only those who have a certain privilege are able to participate. Princen, author of *Confronting Consumption* writes:

Without perhaps realizing it, mainstream environmentalism ends up locating voluntary simplicity to the affluent margins of society who consider themselves 'environmental' but not actively political- if you are a white, economically comfortable, eco-touring suburbanite with a big lawn, e-mail, a cell phone, and the flexibility to search for a 'nice neighborhood' and you want to save the world in 12 easy steps, simple living may be for you (Princen, 221-212).

Here, Princen is arguing that voluntary simplicity does not address issues of social justice, focusing entirely on market-driven solutions to global and political issues. He feels that individual lifestyle changes will most likely not result in large-scale environmental change, especially change that addresses inequalities. Huneke echoes this sentiment, writing, "Voluntary simplicity is thus a choice a successful corporate lawyer, not a homeless person,

faces (Huneke 2004:533). The choice to reduce one's possessions in order to lead a more sustainable and more fulfilling life to some extent idealizes poverty, or, it can be argued that it ignores poverty. This thread is evident throughout voluntary simplicity movements like the back to the land movement. Agnew, a former back-to-the-lander herself, was able to be critical of her peers for not preparing for rural hardships. She calls this genteel poverty, romanticizing being poor. She reminisces, "Many of us had clearly romanticized the idea of low-income living because of our lack of exposure to it" (Agnew, 2004:117). Similarly, Thoreau's middle-class upbringing gave him the privilege of forgoing material needs in exchange for immersion in nature. He was able to focus his attention to spiritual ends, the goal of the transcendentalists, instead of feeding himself. This is ultimately why the back to the land movement failed and most likely why Thoreau emerged from his forest cabin to scurry back into town. Living a life of intentional rural poverty was easier said than done.

### **Farmers in Portland:**

What would my interactions with homesteaders in Portland tell me about spirituality and materiality? Originally, I hypothesized that my interviews would uncover a similar thread I found throughout rural homesteading as well as urban homesteading handbooks; that the ultimate goal was to be completely independent from corporations and strive for self-sufficiency. Of course, I figured I would find an interesting tension between living in the middle of a city, and striving for self-reliance. I saw this as a contradiction instead of an advantage. However, an interview with Kristl Bridges, co-owner of Portland Homestead

Supply Co, was useful in showing how urban homesteading differs from its rural predecessors. I asked Kristl what her goals for her store were, to which she replied:

Our first goal is education through classes. We want to teach people the possibilities of what can be done in urban environments. Secondly, we emphasize the importance of community. Honestly, I believe that self-sufficiency is unrealistic. It's better to build communities in which people trade, help each other out, and share tools. This is more convenient for everybody.

Her perception of self-sufficiency as unrealistic was surprising yet comforting. Perhaps homesteaders would achieve more, or at least set their sights somewhere other than complete self-sufficiency once they admit to themselves that cutting themselves off from city services, and from the community around them would be detrimental to their own success. This time around, homesteaders want the simple life *and* a tight knit community with the conveniences of urban life. Although it can be argued that this was the intention of Thoreau, his writings indicate that he was striving to separate himself from inner city life. Rural homesteaders came back to urban areas because the burden of doing everything on their own was too much to bear. It must be refreshing and encouraging for an urbanite interested in homesteading to hear that they don't have to do it all themselves. Their efforts are instead both practical and symbolic. They are trying to move towards an independence from "the system" while relying on city life for their daily bread.

Kristl's sentiments about community are reflected in her carefully organized store. The store does not just sell tools for homesteading, but also sells classes to teach urbanites heirloom skills. There is a very clear goal of working together to achieve their goals, rather than depending on everyone's separate and far-removed homesteads for success. One of

Kristl's blog posts demonstrates her goal of creating community over individualism. The post is titled, "It takes a village to make an omelet", as it follows her steps in making a Sunday breakfast in Portland: Duck eggs from Chris, goat cheese from Newberg, wild foraged mushrooms from random pedestrians, shallots from Connor, cow's milk from Colleen, and some fresh parsley from a neighbor's garden. Kristl concludes,

The point is that we sometimes tend to equate homesteading with self-sufficiency- the idea that we have to do everything ourselves. But you know, I don't raise duck eggs, or make amazing goat cheese, or know where to find beautiful chanterelles, or even grow shallots. But I don't have to do all of those things because I'm part of a community that shares such abundance. We each have different abilities and resources to bring to the table. The most important part of homesteading is to actually come to the table, be a part of the community and share what we have to offer (Bridges, 2011).

The problem inherent in this blog post is that not everyone has a lifestyle that allows them to have access to these resources. Their neighborhood may not have as great of a social cohesion or community-feel, which makes it easier to share tools and food.

I also hypothesized that most of the people I would encounter in Portland would be urbanites that didn't know what they were getting themselves into, just like the back-to-the-landers of the 1970s. Although I have read newspaper articles claiming that amateur homesteaders get goats and then don't know how to take care of them, they are the few casualties of the wider trend. Most of the Portlanders I talked to actually grew up in a rural homestead or farm environment, or had years of experience farming. Each had their own reasons for why they now lived in Portland, most of which were coincidental or temporary.

Perhaps this indicates that many homesteaders are actually farmers in disguise, and are biding time until they can move back to the land.

Shawn Kidd, an employee of Kristl, has worked at Portland Homestead Supply Co. since 2009 and is by no means an amateur. Judging from the cracks on his hands and the dirt under his fingernails, I could tell he had farming experience. He began his story with his time working in a vineyard in Maryland that relied on conventional chemicals. He described to me a pivotal moment in his life, “I remember one week it was over 100 degrees every day. I would work all day and touch the vines and the grapes, then wipe the sweat from my forehead. I ended up with a rash all over my face and that’s when I realized that conventional farming wasn’t for me, and that there had to be a better way.” The story that followed was basically his quest for the better way. He worked on a pasture-raised, grass-fed beef farm, and even started his own farm where he focused on biodynamic practices. “I read up on Rudolph Steiner and biodynamic practices. I didn’t get into making the preps myself, although I did order them.” However, farming was grueling work and he never had a lot of money. I asked him why he eventually found himself in Portland of all places, to which he replied, “Honestly, debt lead me to the city and Portland seemed like a pretty good one. I had to get a job for a while.” Although Shawn seemed content with his job here in Portland, I also got the sense that he planned on going back to the land someday to farm. This sentiment was also reflected by Shawn’s friend and patron of Portland Homestead Supply Co, Noah. Noah and Shawn talked for a while about how his hens had stopped laying, trying to diagnose the root of the problem. Was it the feed? Long winter nights and short days?

While Shawn ran off to answer phone calls and talk to other customers, Noah told me about his own experience as a homesteader. He is an 8<sup>th</sup> generation Maryland farmer, which is saying a lot for a country as “young” as the United States. Why was he in Portland then, if his family was so rooted in Maryland? He answered with a thick accent, “I am currently employed as a mechanic. We make those machines you see at grocery stores for bottle returns. When I am not at work, I am in my yard. I now have 5 hens. Having a job supports this lifestyle. I do plan on returning to Maryland eventually to farm.” For Noah, urban homesteading was a way to continue farming without actually being a farmer, or perhaps to get enough money to support his ideal farming lifestyle. For many people it seemed urban homesteading was a liminal space between their city identity and their farming identity. There was a clear tension for them between wanting to go back to the land but being financially unable, and staying in the city with amenities abound.

Sean Weinstein is currently a full time student at Lewis & Clark College, but has managed to find time to keep chickens and garden. It’s easy to assume that a young student would be homesteading because of a fad, but Sean grew up on a farm in Colorado. He finds himself in the city because of school, not because he came here to join in the homesteading movement. Keeping chickens helps him continue what he is used to. Sean told me, “We got chickens to have eggs, and because having animals around is comforting.” Not only is the act of chicken keeping supplementing his college diet, its also a means of stress relief and a source of happiness.

Finally, Chris Brockway is an environmental engineer and professor in Portland. In his spare time, he is known as the leader of the Portland Homesteaders Guild. Like the rest

of the urban homesteaders discussed so far, Chris grew up in a rural farming environment, in this case the foothills of the Catskill Mountains. His father tried his hand at farming, but was not the best at his job. “We jokingly called him a rock farmer,” recalls Chris. However, they did harvest all of their firewood, and his father built their house and barn. This focus on self-reliance stayed with Chris through his years. He now gardens, preserves the harvest, and collects rainwater.

They all found themselves in Portland for whatever reason: debt, college, career and decided to keep farming in their lives, despite the constraints of living in an urban area. In a sense, all of them were trying something new, by bringing more sustainable lifestyles to the city. Of course people would need help, and want to buy books on urban homesteading if they had only farmed on a larger scale, or have never farmed without the help of their family. My interviews made me confused: wasn't I supposed to be critical of these individuals? Instead I felt a bond with them. I think this was because the things I was critical about weren't necessarily apparent in interviews, and wasn't necessarily a problem with individual homesteaders, but with the movement as a whole.

### **Commodity fetishism and authenticity**

Portland Homestead Supply Co. is cute; in fact it's downright adorable. The design is flawless, making visitors feel like they are in an old country home. On one table, there are old-school tools like grain grinders for DIY bread flour, hand-crank sausage makers and charcuterie tools, and cider presses. Not one bit of plastic. The wall of mason jars, the corner full of soap making supplies, and of course the goats and chickens roaming in the back of the store. In the center of the store, there is a large table where they host classes



ranging from cheese making to chicken keeping. It's very charming indeed. But why was this environment so intoxicating to be in? Urban homesteading, like traditional rural homesteading, looks back upon pioneer times with nostalgia. The products sold in this store, and many of Portland's other homestead supply stores, are not exempt from this nostalgia. The store's construction of a pioneer-meets-modern Portland identity can be explained in terms of a quest for authenticity. In traditional environmentalism, which seeks to conserve and preserve nature, there is a point in history which they point to a time in history as say, "That is the year we want to preserve". Of course, the idea that we can go back to any given time is culturally constructed and requires extensive restoration work. Furthermore, how is the decision made to say which year is more true or authentic to its original nature than any other year? Edington notes that the back to the land movement had its fair share of authenticity issues, writing, "The countercultural back to the land movement turned to a markedly American practice of pastoral mythmaking that held rural life and labor as counter to the urban-industrial condition" (Edington 2008). This constant quest for authenticity via "pastoral mythmaking" is evident in Portland homesteading, which I argue is one result of a push for simpler times. In its quest for authenticity, urban homesteading becomes commodified and fetishized.

Marx wrote plenty about how commodity fetishism is the erasure of the commodity form. Today, scholars of environmental studies note that greenwashing is one example of commodity fetishism. Consumers are told that the product in question is "green", or good for the environment, which allows the producers to stop short at identifying the commodity's true origins. According to Susan Willis, author of "Unwrapping Use Value", "The concept of making and struggling over meanings is not primarily based on an

understanding of the commodity form. It assumes the commodity as an unavoidable fact of mass culture, but it does not question the consequences of fetishism of the meanings made” (Willis, 1991:13). This holds true for voluntary simplicity movements, including urban homesteading in Portland, as questions of commodity fetishism are only raised for large corporations and not in the local feed stores around Portland.

Perhaps the problem with urban homesteading is that participants are encouraged to reduce their possessions in favor of truly quality possessions that will last a lifetime. Elgin, scholar of voluntary simplicity echoes this characteristic, writing, “Living simply need not be equated with living cheaply. The hand crafted, durable, aesthetically enduring products that appeal to frugal consumers are oftentimes purchased at a considerable premium over mass produced items” (Elgin 2010:5). All of this handcrafted, artisanal *stuff* comprises their identity in the city, especially when homesteaders visit each other’s homes often and share tools. Ironically, the urban homesteading movement warns against consumerism, but it also can create a market for homesteading products. There are aspects of ethical consumption in urban homesteading in Portland, as consumers are encouraged to buy local. However, in my observations in homesteading stores, not every commodity is advertised by its origins. Its not that the store owners are withholding information about where the products come from, its more about greenwashing, that the image the commodity presents will make up for any questions about origin.

One example of this is the city chicken. There are some cases in which chickens are sourced locally, and local hatcheries do work hard to ensure the preservation of heritage breeds. However, there are large national distributors of chicks that ship the animals so

that they arrive immediately after they hatch. One homesteader I talked to, Bri, noted how strange it was so go pick up 40 Buff Orpington chicks at the postal center. As she walked through the warehouse, the loud chirping of chicks came from dozens of cardboard boxes. She postal worker noted that sometimes people forget to pick up their shipments and the chicks start to cause a problem. The single laying hen, strutting around stores in Portland, will appear to shoppers as the ultimate accessory to their neo-pioneer lifestyle. However, the commodity form is erased. It is a chicken that was flown in with thousands of anonymous other eggs from the Midwest. The laborers that work in these giant hatcheries are forgotten, as are the postal workers that ensure the chicks stay alive through their trans-continental journey.

A second example of observable commodity fetishism in Portland is the Mason jar. The jar is a symbol of the movement, representing self-sufficiency through preserving food. Mason jars can be found at any feed store in Portland because they are useful for many projects. However, the Mason jar takes new meaning when restaurants start using them to serve drinks in. Nedd Ludd, a restaurant in Portland named after the founder of the Luddites, serves water and alcohol in Mason jars, as do many other restaurants in Portland. Drinking out of jars as opposed to glasses signifies that the restaurant is trying to give off a rustic, down-on-the-farm charm. Essentially they are trying to reconnect consumers to a simpler country lifestyle, as Lewis and Potter write, "A reconnection of consumers to commodity origins- framed variously in terms of tracing, discovering, provenance- thus becomes a leitmotiv of ethical consumption" (Lewis and Potter 2011:89). The Mason jar, empty on the store shelves in Portland, is actually full of meaning created by consumers.

In his study of consumption in environmentalism, Princen discusses one way that social movements can be stifled by the mainstream, writing, “Countercultural movements in the United States are not so much beaten back as co-opted, commodified, and sold back to would-be protesters for a tidy profit” (Princen 2002:229). The commodification of homesteading goods on a small scale like Portland’s homesteading stores doesn’t threaten the movement, it propels it. When people stroll by the stores, they are drawn in through curiosity. They learn about urban homesteading and want to take a class or two to get involved. Those who have been homesteading for some time take great relief that they can get everything they need at one place, rather than ordering everything online (as most homesteaders still do who don’t have urban farm stores in their cities). Furthermore, the commodity fetishism in Portland is mostly harmless; the imagery of the Mason jar or the silhouette of a laying hen is a symbol that homesteaders can rally behind. The image helps them identify as a cohesive movement. What Princen is instead referring to, is the co-opting of symbols and images by larger, corporate bodies. When I started my research, I felt this co-opting was just around the corner, a cobra ready to strike. Unfortunately, I was correct.

This year, only a few weeks before I completed my research, I got word that Williams Sonoma, the famous home goods retailer, had come out with a new line of products titled “Agrarian”. Their website proclaims in rustic looking fonts on images of gloves in rich, black soil “Introducing Agrarian: take charge of your life from the ground up. Cultivate a healthy awareness of where your food comes from”. The slide show continues to display the most beautiful shovel I have ever seen, fresh goat cheese and herbs on a farm table, and assorted vintage seed packets. All of their products look carefully handcrafted,

ensuring the highest quality for urban agrarians. Naturally, the urban homesteading blogging world exploded with shock and disgust. A Huffington Post article reads, “Among the 257 offerings, intended to help customers coax food from seed to table, there are a few that read like a parody or a sketch from ‘Portlandia’” (Tepper 2012) referring to the comedy show about Portland, Oregon. Bloggers wrote, “I’d almost think it a spoof. Who are they marketing to? The gullible healthy hipster population?” (Stewart blog, 2012). Representing a defense of this blatant commodification of urban homesteading, another blogger wrote, “That a major upscale retailer is selling chicken coops and canning supplies goes to show how much things have changes in the past ten years. I take this as a good sign...Thank you great recession!” (Wall Street Journal, 4/4/2012).

Is the “acceptance” of urban homesteading in the products of Williams Sonoma, and other companies, a good or bad thing? While I am glad that a wider audience is becoming more interested in urban homesteading, I worry that the movement will become even less accessible to the non-elite. Furthermore, the narrative of imperfection that Williams Sonoma tries to sell is ironic, as their products are mass-produced. They can sell that story, and convince buyers that they are investing in something truly “heritage” or “vintage”. Chris of the Portland Homesteaders Guild wrote to me expressing his worry for this exact thing to happen:

It remains to be seen what happens if homesteading catches on and becomes "trendy." I fear that, because people doing it for their images may tend to water down the biggest effect we are looking for: namely, sustainability. I'm an Environmental Engineer. I've seen the spread of greenwashing through our culture. Heck, I've been part of it. I don't wish it for homesteading. (Chris Brockway, 2012).

For some bloggers, the presence of urban homesteading in mainstream stores was an evidence of its success, while for Chris it would mean its failure. The blogger fails to recognize what Chris sees: the fetishization of urban homesteading products. This poses a problem for homesteaders who try to avoid the distancing between producer and consumer, who still stand for the ideals that mean making a coop on your own with the help of a few neighbors.

## **Conclusion**

Although my bibliographic research revealed a great deal of spirituality in rural homesteaders and those partaking in voluntary simplicity movements, my in-person interviews did not reveal the same trend. This can be attributed to the problem discussed in my methodology, that issues of religion and ideology are sometimes difficult to talk about to a stranger. However, I did find snippets of religion scattered throughout the online homesteading community. E-mail correspondence with Chris Brockway, introduced earlier, revealed spiritual links to homesteading. I asked Chris to tell me about his favorite and least favorite parts of urban homesteading, to which he replied:

I am heavily influenced by Zen Buddhism, especially Mindfulness practice, thus anything that contributes to my carefully chosen goals and the greater good, I see and usually experience as "enjoyable," even if it appears to hurt, burn, be cold, be tedious. The part of my mind I pay most credence to enjoys everything about it. But I cannot omit, that it can feel tough preparing for spring in the dead of winter!

This to me, seemed very poetic and tied in nicely with Thoreau, who saw transcendent beauty in the woods. However, not all of my findings were that obvious. What I found is that the spiritual components of urban homesteading were more nuanced, for example, the

longing for a community in the void of religious institutions, the postings that I saw on homesteading forums asking people to pray for their loved ones and the pseudo-proselytizing by fervent homesteading authors on websites, blogs, and books to downshift and enjoy a simple and more virtuous life. This paper does not make evaluative statements about whether or not spirituality is good or bad. Instead, I conclude that the inclusion of spiritual components in urban homesteading can be valuable in keeping the momentum going. It could be the case that building a healthy homesteading community in Portland would be impossible without it. That being said, there is an important intersection between spirituality and materiality in Portland in regards to urban homesteading and its commodities. Can we live an intentionally spiritual life within a narrowly materialist culture?

Although homesteading's preoccupation with nostalgia and tradition can seem to fetishize the commodities, it's possible that that looking backwards to heirloom skills is one way to preserve tradition and re-skill a largely skill-less population. Kaplan and Bloom, co-authors of a popular self-help manual, *Urban Homesteading: Heirloom Skills for Sustainable Living* write, "When we engage in creating, preserving, and fermenting our food in these time honored ways, we participate in growing a place-based culture that connects us to the living world around us, as well as participating in the evolving history of human habits, traditions, and ceremonies that give life meaning" (Kaplan and Bloom 2011:140). Even though the skills are old, the meaning made with them is entirely new, and used towards forming a community. This is echoed in another homesteading manifesto titled *United States of Americana: Backyard Chickens, Burlesque Beauties, and Handmade Bitters: A Field Guide to the New American Roots Movement*, author Reighley writes "In the twenty-first

century we're seeing more young people in cities and suburbs who are improving their quality of life by relearning skills their grandparents took for granted while still retaining their trendy zip codes" (Reighley 2010:13). Skills that were assumed to be necessary 50 years ago have been forgotten.

For those who fear peak-oil, or other technological and energy crises, as well as those who fear some kind of disintegration of culture, re-skilling is a viable way to gain agency and prepare. Todd Chamagne, owner of Happy Girl Kitchen said, "I joke at my workshops that canning is the new knitting. Food security takes on a heightened importance during difficult times" (Muhlke 2009). The struggle for complete authenticity may result in an increased readiness for ecological problems, as well as re-skill young people who otherwise would not have important life skills. One blogger wrote in response to the Williams Sonoma agrarian product line, "When the next batch of hurricanes hits and the oil wells run dry, whom do you want to wake up next to? Someone who can program HTML or someone who can help a cow give birth? Do you want someone with Bluetooth or someone with a tractor? How can someone who makes food out of dirt not impress you?" (wallstreetjournal). Luckily, urban homesteaders may represent both sides of this false dichotomy between farming and technology.

This study explicated where urban homesteading came from, hypothesized as to why its so popular in Portland, and discussed motives and practices of urban homesteading in Portland. There still remains much to be studied in this growing social trend or movement. Urban homesteading would benefit from demographic study, as my research did not look into socioeconomic patterns. Although I expressed worry that urban



homesteading was not concerned with social justice issues, i.e. who has access to urban homesteading, my observations are not enough to make any significant conclusions about the diversity of urban homesteaders in Portland. A demographic study could utilize tools like GIS, mapping out spatial patterns in homesteaders locations, as well as comparing layers with socio-economic data. One indicator of where a homesteader lives would be to find where people have permits to have extra livestock.

Although I have situated my study of urban homesteading within the context of spiritual land-based social movements, others could easily explore the roots of urban homesteading in recent alternative food movements, like the meat renaissance in Portland as well as a push for community garden spaces, which are in high demand in Portland. One could potentially situate our understanding of the emergence of urban homesteading in an economic lens. The back to the land movement emerged at a time when people were tired of materialism, after the 60s and people were tired of protesting. They wanted to change their lives. The oil crisis meant that people were no longer able to live off the land. Now, current concerns of peak oil leads people to reduce their carbon footprint.

Interestingly, many people seemed to think that urban homesteading is only a trend, and will soon lose momentum especially if commodified like the organic movement was. Chris, the same one who was pessimistic about greenwashing, also felt that the movement was not losing momentum, but gaining momentum while workers at Powells had witnessed a saturation of interest in sustainable living books in Portland. Only time will tell. Given its current popularity, the future of the urban homesteading movement is not to be ignored.

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