

The Last Word

By Ted Brown

Several years ago, I received a book from my nephew Jeff.

Entitled *Handy Farm Devices And How to Make Them*, this book was originally published in 1912, when those living in rural Ontario lived a very different lifestyle than today.

There are countless other books of the same nature out there, all with a common purpose— getting the most out of the farm and the property.

Many of the projects in the book were geared to a single person operation, as was often the case in those times.

At first, I thumbed through it as a novelty, smiling at the way the authors explained how to save labour and make these pieces of wooden equipment both safe and efficient.

But as time went on, I found myself reaching for the book more and more, not as a form of entertainment, but as a reference.

We've gone full circle in the rural lifestyle. Quite often, due to the commitments we find ourselves in, there isn't a large group of people available to help with certain chores and odd jobs around home and at the barn.

And the philosophy of the book is to make it possible to do those chores without needing another person around.

It's almost 'everything old is new again,' out here in the wilds of rural living.

An example: How many people burn woodstoves to supplement the heat in their homes today? Thirty years ago, most would simply turn up the thermostat— as well as turn up their noses at cutting fire wood and splitting it to be burned in the woodstove.

Today, with the high prices of fossil fuels, more and more rural homes have a high efficiency wood stove— just like at the turn of the century.

Interestingly, the book features various devices used to cut, carry and stack wood, making it easier to handle.

The book also explains some old methods of handling livestock, planting crops and gardens— hanging a pig to be smoked, making a table for rolling up a sheep's fleece, and all sorts of oddball chores— some that have certainly gone the way of the dodo.

But many of those jobs are still relevant. While building and renovating the stable of the barn at Brown Farm, there have been countless times I've used suggestions in the book, making the barn more efficient, and easier to run.



Let's face it, during the past 100-odd years, animals haven't really changed very much in size or shape, so the book's plans for handling sheep, goats, swine and cattle still apply.

Today's gardens may feature genetically-altered varieties of all sorts of fruits and vegetables, yet the methods of planting them listed in the book haven't changed very much.

As I read excerpts from the book, then look at the barns at home, I'm struck how intuitive the farmers of yesteryear were when it came to designing structures and equipment providing for animal husbandry.

Today, there are barns with highly elaborate ventilation and fan systems, all geared to providing the optimum atmosphere for livestock in the barn, especially during extreme weather, like the hot summer and cold winter months. They are regulated by computerized sensors and keep various livestock in a climate controlled environment.

Every morning, I walk past my oldest barn on the property and admire the foundation that was built in the 1840s.

There are 12 small four-inch square holes set into the stonework with wooden frames— six on the west side, six on the east side.

Many people have asked, 'What were they for?'

They are the passive ventilation system for the barn, allowing the farmer to fine-tune the amount of air traveling

through the building at any given time of the year, any season, and at any temperature.

The holes set into the foundation on the west side of the barn are set in the top of the foundation, above the heads of the livestock inside.

On the east side, the holes are lower, about the height of the heads of the cattle. The concept was the air would come into the stable (on the west side) above the livestock, so they weren't in a cold draft, and then exit through the holes on the east side, drawing the moisture and humidity out at the animal's level.

Years ago there were wooden plugs that could be pushed into the holes to regulate more or less air travel through the building, giving the livestock fresh, dry air all year round. I'm in the process of making new ones out of wood.

The holes, being on opposite sides of the foundation, created a high or low pressure area inside the stable, depending upon which way the wind was blowing. With the wooden plugs, the air travel could be directed whichever way the farmer wanted it to go. It was a classic use of basic physics.

And we think we're so clever today.

I'll be the first to say that old system isn't anywhere near as sophisticated or efficient as the computerized ones of today, but it's certainly a lot more functional than we might think. And it used no electricity— only the laws of physics.

Environmentalists today are building

Everything old is new again

houses using baled straw, thinking they are bold and adventuresome, creating a revolutionary building that is incredibly energy-efficient, economical, and above all else, applying cutting edge technology.

Yet, in the book, there are plans to build a number of different sheep and cattle shelters using— you guessed it— bales of wheat straw, the same material used to build today's 'green' ultra-efficient straw homes.

The livestock shelters weren't lined with drywall on the inside or covered with weather-proof siding on the exterior walls like today's straw homes, but the concept is exactly the same.

In the book, the straw structures claimed to provide warm, economical livestock shelter, lasting at least four or five years, at almost no cost, short of the cost of the roof rafters (usually cedar rails) that were placed on top, then covered with straw, with more rails placed on top to hold down the straw.

The one part of the book that I found intriguing was how to use common tools for various calculations.

A carpenter's square can be used to measure the pitch of a roof, for laying out the angles when building stringers for a set of stairs, or for countless other calculations. One can even cut octagons and other such intricate cuts, all using the common carpenter's steel square.

A plan for a typical farmhouse is provided, showing how to build it with an air space in the walls to make it warmer (like insulation) which is exactly how my home is built.

There is a plan to build a mailbox on a track that can be wheeled out to the road and back with a long cord or rope, as well as a plan for a baby's cradle, made out of an old barrel. (I don't really think there's a need for me to build such a piece of furniture.)

And it goes on and on.

But, by far, the most helpful part of the book for me is suggesting various ways of building pens and feeders for sheep in the barn.

In spite of the plans being just shy of a century old, I can honestly say that many still work in a farming environment.

So, as modern as we all think we are, and as complicated as today's living can be, there is still room to take a look at the 'old ways'.

You just might be pleasantly surprised at how efficient those old designs really were.



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