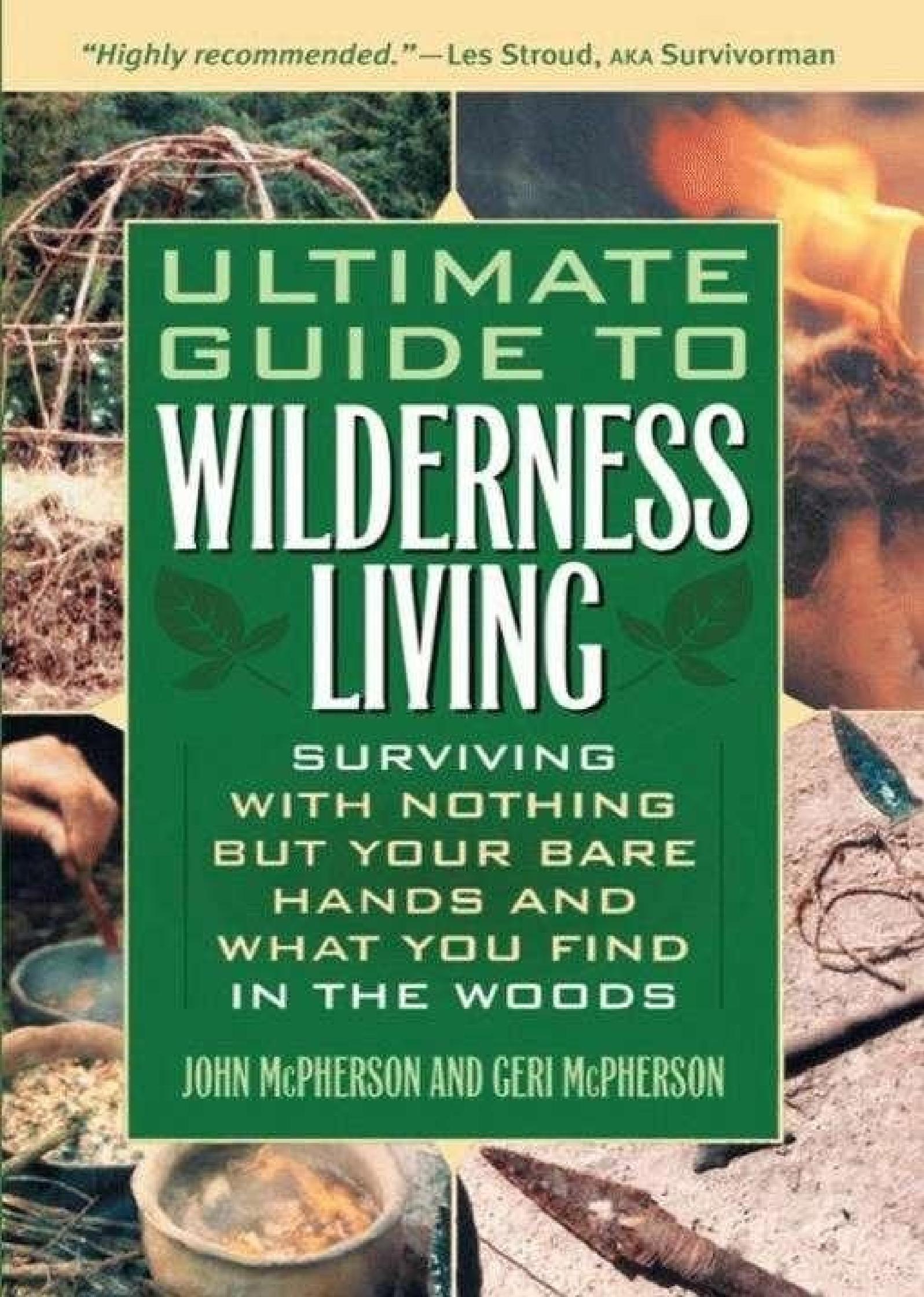


"Highly recommended."—Les Stroud, AKA Survivorman



ULTIMATE GUIDE TO WILDERNESS LIVING

SURVIVING
WITH NOTHING
BUT YOUR BARE
HANDS AND
WHAT YOU FIND
IN THE WOODS

JOHN McPHERSON AND GERI McPHERSON

Table of Contents

[Title Page](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Foreword](#)

[Introduction](#)

[Chapter 1 - Primitive Fire and Cordage](#)

[Bow Drill and Hand Drill](#)

[Hand Drill](#)

[Cordage](#)

[A Coupla Fire-Making Tips](#)

[Chapter 2 - Primitive Tools—Making and Using Them](#)

[Basic Flintknapping](#)

[Sandstone](#)

[Heavy Blunt Instruments](#)

[Bone and Antler](#)

[Digging Stick](#)

[Wooden Awl](#)

[Celt](#)

[Hafting](#)

[Adze](#)

[Vise](#)

[Working with the Tools](#)

[Finis](#)

[Wooden Bowl](#)

[Mano and Metate](#)

[Mortar and Pestle](#)

[Chapter 3 - Primitive, Semipermanent Shelters](#)

[What a Shelter Keeps Out \(and In\)](#)

[Shelter Basics](#)

[House Materials](#)

[The Wickiup](#)

[The Lean-To](#)

[Thatched Wickiup](#)

[Generic Shelter](#)

[Wrap-Up](#)

[Chapter 4 - Makin' Meat - 1](#)

[The Primitive Bow and Arrow](#)

[Anatomy of a Bow](#)

[String](#)
[Arrow](#)

[Chapter 5 - Makin' Meat - 2](#)

[Obtaining Sustenance in Nature](#)
[The Trap Line](#)
[Gathering](#)
[Atlatl](#)
[Insects](#)
[Meat Preservation](#)

[Chapter 6 - Deer from Field to Freezer](#)

[Field Dressing](#)
[Skinning](#)
[Removing Head](#)
[Cutting Off Legs](#)
[Sinew Removal](#)
[Removing Loin and Tenderloin](#)
[Meat Cutting](#)

[Chapter 7 - Primitive Wilderness Cooking Methods](#)

[In the Coals](#)
[Broiling](#)
[Baking](#)
[Boiling](#)

[Chapter 8 - Primitive Wilderness Containers](#)

[Baskets](#)
[Coiled Basket](#)
[Bark Container](#)
[Cordage](#)
[Stone Container](#)
[Animal Parts Used as Containers](#)
[Wood Container](#)

[Chapter 9 - Primitive Pottery](#)

[Quick Run-Through](#)
[Clay](#)
[Temper](#)
[Construction](#)
[Firing](#)
[Last Words](#)

[Chapter 10 - Brain-Tan Buckskin](#)

[Brief, All-Important Summary](#)
[Materials](#)

[Skins](#)
[Framing and Fleshing](#)
[Surface Preparation](#)
[Braining](#)
[Sewing of Holes](#)
[Finishing](#)
[Smoking](#)
[Sewing with Sinew](#)

[Index](#)

[Resources](#)

[About the Authors](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

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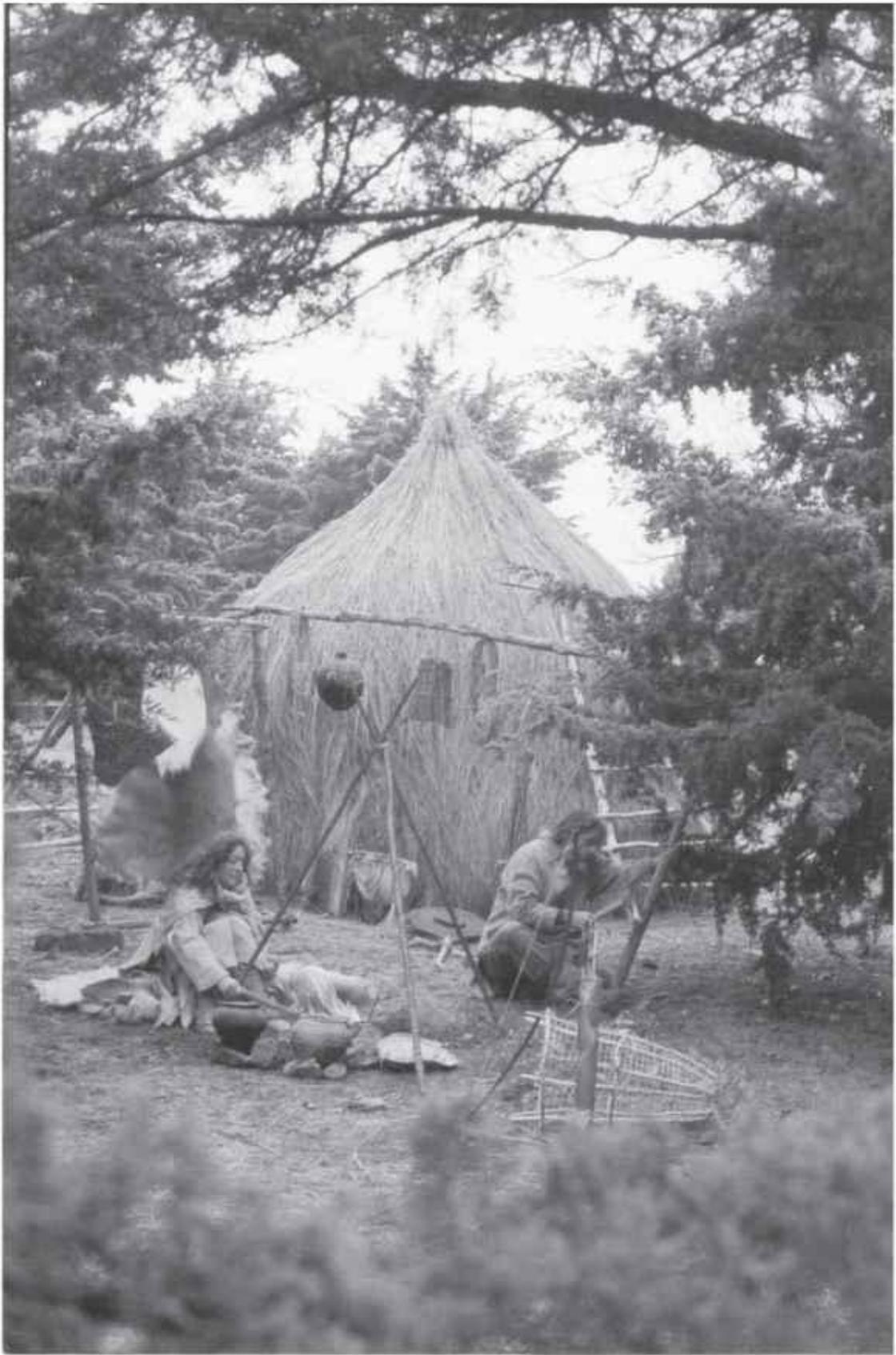
by John and Geri McPherson

Foreword by Cody Lundin



Ulysses Press

Dedicated to those who give of their time and all too often their health and lives to ensure that we, and those like us, are able to pursue our dreams in freedom—the men and women of the U.S. Military. More specifically we single out the men that I, John, served with in the 173rd Airborne Brigade (Sep) in the Republic of South Vietnam (A Company, 1/503rd Airborne Infantry) and the men of the Special Operations Community who accomplish so much for so little.



Foreword

It was 1989 and I was a punk kid attending a major primitive living skills conference. Toting a smelly deer hide, I walked up to him and asked his opinion about softening the skin based upon advice I'd just been given by another instructor. It was my first brain-tanned deer hide and I wanted it to be perfect. After listening to me ramble on, he looked at me quizzically, cocked his head, and said, "Son, we don't really care how it 'looks'—we want it to *work*."

This was my first encounter with John McPherson, and his words of simplicity and practicality have rung through my head ever since.

Years later, the world's interest in relearning indigenous living and survival skills has grown by leaps and bounds. Whether it's a new magazine article, book, or TV show, more and more people are exploring the art of primitive living skills and self-reliance. Yet, as in any other "craze," many who have dubious credibility in what they preach are eager to feed upon the body of this growing interest. Legions of media producers and editors who have zero experience in survival skills give their two cents' worth about what it means to "survive in the bush." Many of these productions not only are ridiculous in their format, but are filled with errors that, if taken literally by a starry-eyed and naïve public, may very well cause their demise.

Little by little, the simple, commonsense survival skills that kept every race alive upon the planet were being sensationalized in order to sell one more book or gain one more viewer. Commonsense reality had turned 180 degrees into a shameless bureaucracy of company-sponsored deception that honored how a survival skill "looked" rather than whether it "worked."

In similar fashion, on the educational front line, well-intentioned professors lectured students about how indigenous peoples lived, even though the vast majority of these professors had never even camped in the wilderness—let alone created fire with sticks, a canteen from a gourd, or a sleeping mat made from cattail.

Over time, the repetition of survival assumptions, half-truths, or outright lies became an all-too-trusting public's "truth" about outdoor survival and primitive living skills. The majority of the public didn't care (and still don't). A plethora of survival books, as well, have been written by authors who are not survival instructors; and, judging by their works, they haven't bothered to try out the supposed lifesaving skills they regurgitate upon the page. Even more common are survival skills practitioners

who, while proficient in many physical skills, don't psychologically live what they teach. This "walk-the-talk" concept goes much deeper than simply doing a hand drill every other morning while living in the city. It is an all-encompassing life attitude that affects every decision one makes in their quest to do more with less. All indigenous living skills revolved around people becoming more self-reliant within their environment. The quest for the all-important calorie ruled the day, and there was no time or consciousness for complicated, flashy skills that didn't put meat in the pot. In essence, truly living a self-reliant life (whether the lifestyle incorporates literal "stone-age" skills or not) demands a lifestyle commitment on all levels that few can stomach.

I can count on one hand the number of survival instructors I know whose passion for survival skills includes living a self-reliant lifestyle. On this hand are John and Geri McPherson. They practice what they preach—psychologically and physically—and have done so for a very long time. The *Ultimate Guide to Wilderness Living* is a pioneer in the field of no-bullshit primitive living skills and is loaded with practical, time-tested tips, tricks, and photos that manifest only from many years of "doing it." True to John's advice given to me nearly two decades ago, this book is written in a style and spirit that embodies primitive living skills that really *work*.

Cody Lundin

Cody Lundin is founder and director of the Aboriginal Living Skills School and author of the best-selling books *98.6 Degrees: The Art of Keeping Your Ass Alive!* and *When All Hell Breaks Loose: Stuff You Need to Survive When Disaster Strikes*.

Introduction

This is not written as a survival book—it’s a compilation of most of the basic skills that original peoples around the world used in their daily pursuit of life, known as “primitive living skills.” Knowledge of such skills will allow you to live in the wilderness with nothing except for whatever nature at hand has to offer. In essence, the skills presented here are the ultimate in self-sufficiency. Being capable of heading into the wilderness with absolutely nothing and making a life there, not simply surviving, is the very definition of survival knowledge. So, I guess this is in some manner a survival book.

Today, everything around us—all goods manufactured by humans, whether it’s the concrete we drive on, the vehicles we’re driving, many foods that we’re eating and the utensils that we eat them with, the computer I’m writing this on, even the paper that you’re reading it on and the ink it’s printed with—*everything* comes from the Earth! In our case we (“we” being mankind today) have modified parts of the Earth to create other things, manmade things. Precious few of the components of everyday “things” around us (Ford pickups, space shuttles, bread wrappers, clothing, and so on) contain elements from the Earth that are unmodified. Everything that we’re familiar with has come from the Earth but has been modified and tinkered with by so many hands that it’s impossible for us to see any semblance with the Earth itself. Ask most anyone to gather materials from the Earth and make the simplest of necessities, then watch ’em squirm. Primitive man, by contrast, took *everything* that he used in his daily living directly from the materials that nature provided.

Not only will this book show you how primitive peoples accomplished this, but here you’ll learn, step by step, how you too can accomplish that. The purpose of this book is not to entertain; there’s more than enough media out there to do that. Rather, it was written to teach you, the reader, how to actually do the skills addressed.

Several things set this book apart from other in-depth ones on the market:

- ✿ We, Geri and I, have done the skills we write about. We’ve done them a lot. So we write only what we’ve personally experienced. And it does work! If you want to know how to do it, read about it here—and you will know.

- ✿ Each chapter was first written as a complete book of its own. It was written on one or two particular subjects or skills for the purpose of teaching another person—you—how to do it. Often a publisher will dictate a list of subjects for an author to write on (whether or not the author is familiar with it), and you the reader end up with a lot of theories and wild ideas instead of facts. Here we decided what you need to know.

- ✿ These skills don’t follow any one culture or peoples. The idea is for you to

be able to understand what makes a skill work, which will enable you to travel anyplace on the planet where resources are available and for you to use that skill effectively. The rules that we developed for ourselves are to be able to take from nature only, using nothing modified by mankind.

✿ This book covers primitive wilderness living skills only. You'll find nothing that is superfluous. Information on edible and medicinal plants, camouflage, tracking, spirituality, and art must be found elsewhere.

There's no big secret to mastering any of this. It's all just basic physics. Once it's learned, you'll say, "Well, hell yes—why didn't *I* think of that!" Some of it (no, much of it) is time-consuming, especially in this day of instant everything. But I'm finding that many, many people are pretty sick and tired of all the hustle. This consumer-oriented industrialized society that we belong to has made most of its inhabitants dependent on others for even the simplest of needs. These skills, once learned, because of their simplicity, will be with you from now on till forever—and that's a mighty long time, folks. They need not be applied or practiced every day to stay fresh in your mind. And the comfort that comes from just knowing them will give you the freedom to know that you'll be self-sufficient to the extreme.

You gotta walk before you run, though. Understand where you're headed, and be aware that that path can—and likely will—change as you proceed. Pick one or two of the skills in this book that interest you the most, then try to gain an understanding of how and why they work. The learning and practice of most primitive skills can be done in your backyard, garage, basement, or even living room (depending on the tolerance of your wife or husband or partner). You can become proficient in them without ever venturing beyond these bounds. And if you should find yourself in a primitive situation, either by choice or by chance, though you'll find that the application isn't as easy as when done in your own backyard, you'll also find that through repeated practice you've developed the understanding and "feel" of the basic functions, the muscle memory as well as the confidence that you "know" how to apply the various methods. You'll own that special feeling of freedom that comes from knowing that you need depend on no other man, woman, or beast.

Learn the wilderness under controlled conditions. Use a tent, modern sleeping gear, backpacks, and fire making. Hike and camp in familiar surroundings where getting lost or in trouble isn't a part of the equation. Get out there in all the elements—not just when the sun shines. Learn what it's like to protect yourself in the rain and snow, especially when you're wet and cold. Add primitive things a bit at a time. Remember, though, that it would be rare to impossible for you to be placed in the outdoors with absolutely nothing, unless you do it voluntarily. Certain of the skills we detail in this book are necessary for survival: fire, cordage, traps, tools, shelter, and containers. These six skills are the basis for any living or survival situation. Everything else will grow from these.

We've read, within the past couple years, of a group that spent some time in the wilds of northwest Montana. They had "primitive" down to a T. All their clothing, bedclothes, and gear were primitive, whether brain tan or otherwise. Primitive bows. Primitive pots. Plenty of primitive containers. Primitive fire-making sets. They had primitive under control. But, when they placed themselves "out there" in the wilderness, it appears to me that they found they lacked much of a grasp of the wilderness part. Although they commented that mice or other rodents were around and in their campsite, they never did catch any for food. In 18 days, the only food harvested by the group was reported to be one fingerling fish. When it rained they moved from their shelter to the protection of boughs of trees in their attempt to stay dry and comfortable. Oops? Maybe, but the experience will have enlightened them to this fact—a part of the learning curve. I'd bet that, next time, they encounter fewer problems.

As you read this book, you'll notice some references in the form of a thank-you scattered here and there, but no list of references. This is because, for the most part, we have learned the skills we present through a lot of fieldwork and trial and error. We, meaning all of us human beings, are the result of everything that we've encountered before. For sure, Geri and I have read or heard somewhere that to make fire by friction we need, for example, two pieces of wood to rub together. Yet it was through our own personal efforts and labor that we've learned the little steps involved to make that effort result in a fire on a somewhat regular basis. No one to credit here except us.

We learned early on that, in our day (the 1950s through the 1970s), there was no easy way for us to master skills like this. Most books on the subject only glossed over the information that we were looking for—there was absolutely nothing available that we could find to teach us "How To." True, there were a couple books that tried to cover many of the skills described here, but we soon discovered that their authors had a lot of talk but little walk behind them. Some depended on the knowledge of others (the perpetuation of myths) and since they, the authors and editors, knew nothing about this, they had no idea that what they were passing along was for the most part garbage. It might make for good reading but failed miserably as field manuals. The reason that I early on depended on the use of a great many photographs to illustrate techniques was to reinforce to you, my readers, that we've actually done these skills, in the manner that we're presenting them to you. They do work! (Other authors can draw anything.)

The primitive lifestyle isn't for everyone—in fact, it's for very few. But the knowledge of the skills needed to live this lifestyle is within reach of anyone.

Enjoy your experience, wherever your path may lead.

John and Geri McPherson

Randolph, Kansas

January 2008

Chapter 1

Primitive Fire and Cordage

The learning of the necessary “skills” to live directly with nature, eliminating the need of intermediaries, isn’t really all that difficult. You learn a little about this aspect...a bit about that one...and then another. Pretty soon you find that most of them overlap and the further you get along in your natural education, the easier it is to learn.

Many years ago when I first got serious about putting all this together (my first step was to get rid of the TV, and then electricity), I felt that if I were to learn a few of the basic primitive “survival” skills, I’d really become quite the woodsman. I soon found that the more that I learned, *the more I still had to learn*. I read (and I urge anyone interested in learning to also read) everything that I could lay my hands on that deals with living *with* nature. There’s a lot written on all aspects of it—some poor, some superb, but most lying somewhere in the middle.

Before you can decide what’s workable, you’ll have to get out and work with it. Reading only goes so far. When you actually begin to put into practice what you’re reading, then it becomes obvious just who knows what he or she is writing about.

No special talent is needed here—only the ability to follow a bunch of natural rules (physics). Any of the primitive skills, today as well as yesterday, can be carried to the extreme and become an art. I’m far from being expert in woodsmanship. I have, though, taught myself what I need to know to go “naked into the wilderness” and not only survive but before long be living fairly comfortably (unless, of course, I froze to death first). I refer to my teachings as primitive “living” skills, not “survival” skills, though they can be used in that concept. I have taught myself to be proficient in these skills—not to be an artist.

Since 1987 I’ve made thousands of fires with the bow and drill and with the hand-drill methods. So I’m proficient enough in this to teach it to others. The same holds true with the making of cordage. The more you learn, the more you realize what there is to learn—but the easier it becomes to learn it.

Bow Drill and Hand Drill

The basic principle of making fire with either a bow or a hand drill is really very simple. The amount of practice needed to develop that special touch which enables you to regularly succeed in this is another thing entirely.

To say “make fire” with the bow or hand drill is really a misnomer. Actually, what’s accomplished is that the wooden drill spinning on another piece of wood creates friction, which creates dust, and eventually things get hot enough that a spark is created. The compressed pile of dust that has been formed becomes like the hot tip of a cigarette that’s placed into a pile of tinder and coaxed into a flame.

Simple? Yeh, really it is. I’ve had students “make fire” within minutes of being exposed to this procedure, *and* understand just what they were doing.

I’ll first show you how to make fire (bow drill first, and hand drill a little later). I’ll quickly describe the necessary components and the steps to follow. Then we’ll get down to brass tacks and go through it again, dwelling a bit more on how to assemble the parts and to put it all together. When you finish with this, you’ll be able to make fire.

We have five components: (1) the bow, a limber stick about 30” long; (2) the drill and (3) the fireboard, both of which are softwoods; (4) a cup, called a “bearing block,” in which the upper end of the drill is placed to keep it from drilling through the palm of your hand; and finally (5) the bowstring, which will be covered in greater detail later in this book.

Simplified Directions for Making a Bow Drill

We take a knife and cut a notch and a slight depression into the fireboard, twist the drill into the string of the bow, place one end of the drill into the depression of the fireboard, place the bearing block on top of the drill, and spin the drill by pushing the bow back and forth till a spark is formed. We finish by dropping the spark into a prepared “bird’s nest” of tinder and gently blowing it into flame. Easy?...sure. And you might be able to make it work with no more information than this. Some 13 years ago, three of us spent the better part of a day wearing ourselves out with no more information than what you’ve just read—and eventually made fire.

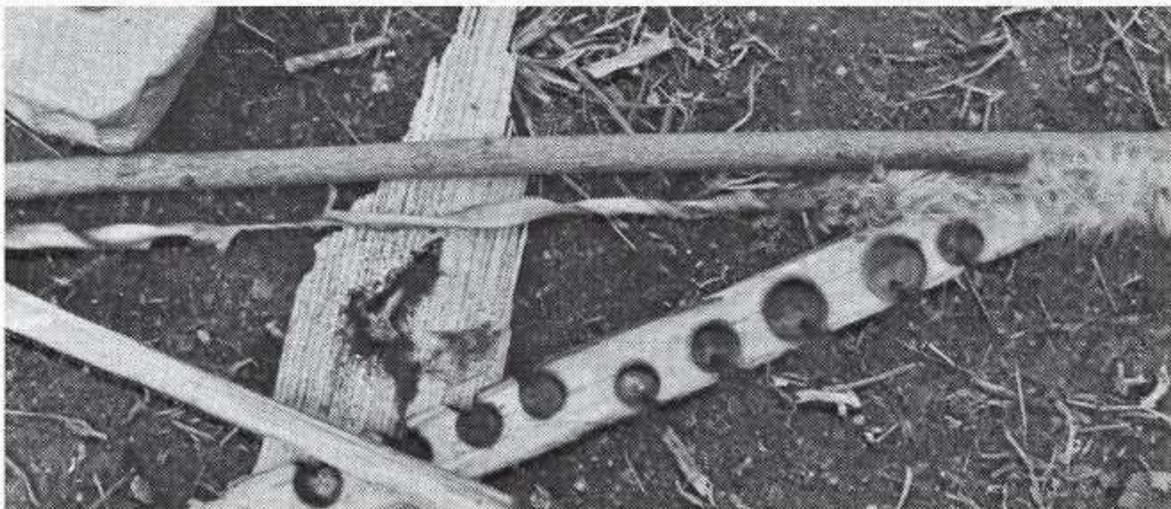


The day most of these photos were shot, the Fahrenheit temperature was in the 40s and it was misting. I threw up the crude shelter using only what one would normally have: two light jackets and a shirt, using also rocks and grass. The purpose of the shelter was just to block the wind and rain from preventing my making of fire.

Parts of a Bow Drill

Now I'll go into more detail about all the parts—the whats and the whys, how to gather the parts, and how to fashion them under primitive conditions. The special touch you'll have to develop yourself through practice (it *does* come pretty easily).

BOW—This is the easiest part to obtain. A reasonably limber stick (limb or piece of brush), 1/2" to 3/4" thick, approximately 30" long. It needs to be limber enough to create just the right amount of tension on the string when the drill's inserted. Too limber and you'll have trouble with the string slipping on the drill. Too stiff and too much stress will be placed on the string and the drill, resulting in the drill's continually flying out on you, and most often the string's breaking. (Believe me, the stress created on the string and the drill is nothing compared to the stress that'll be building in you at this point!) The length of about 30" is also important, though a bow of only a few inches, or even one of several feet, would work, just not as well. At that length the bow isn't too cumbersome and will allow *for a good, full sweep of the entire length*. This is critically important, as every time the bow stops to change directions, everything cools off a tiny bit, thus impeding your efforts.



Raw squirrel skin cord “made fire” the first time. The hair rubbed off while in use; spark was found beneath pile of hair. Note thinness where skin's about to break. Fortunately, I got the spark first (note coal) and also had plenty of extra length to reuse the skin after drying.

DRILL—We now need to be a bit more particular. A *softwood* is necessary. Also,

dead and dry (I'll mention damp wood later). Literally dozens of woods will work for a drill. Cottonwood, aspen, and yucca are my favorites, not only because they work well but also because they're abundant in the parts of the country where I live and travel. Willow is a favorite among many firemakers. I've heard that sage works well too, as do box elder and hackberry. The smaller limbs and sapwood of cedar, locust, and ash would be fine (though the heartwoods of these are too hard). The list goes on. I've been told and have read to avoid resinous woods, such as pine. Cedar works, at least in some parts of the country. Experiment with what's available to you. Members of the cottonwood family (including birch, aspen, and poplar) can be found in most parts of the country; all of them work superbly. Search out dead limbs, preferably off the ground (to eliminate absorption of ground moisture) and with bark weathered away. Check the condition of the wood by pressing it with your thumbnail. If it makes a slight indentation easily without crumbling, it should be about right. Also, if it breaks easily and cleanly with a snap, it has no greenness or moisture left in it. The drill needs to be about as small around as your little finger up to as big as your thumb. No real exactness here, though I wouldn't go much for larger or smaller (since a smaller drill spins more with each pass of the bow, thereby creating friction faster but also drilling through the fireboard faster, sometimes before the spark has formed).

