

BACK TO BASICS

**A Complete Guide to Traditional Skills,
Fourth Edition**



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Part One

Land: Buying It—Building on It

A house, we like to believe, can be a noble consort to man and the trees. The house should have repose and such texture as will quiet the whole and make it graciously one with external nature.

—Frank Lloyd Wright, *The Natural House*

The homes of the settlers conformed naturally to the great architect's precepts. People built slowly in those days, over generations, and they understood their land as only those who spend their lives on it can. Their building materials were the very stuff of the earth around them—trees from their woods, rocks from their fields, adobe mud beneath their feet—so it was small wonder that their homes blended well with the surrounding countryside. Above all, they built their homes themselves, and so each mitered beam, each length of floorboard, each hand-riven shingle took on a special meaning of its own. In *Land: Buying It—Building on It* the process of creating a home the traditional way is described, from the acquisition of a site to the construction of the house to the installation of walls and outbuildings. Some of these jobs are difficult; others are within the capabilities of the average person. All help impart a personal touch to a house. In the final analysis that is the ingredient that makes a house a home.





Buying Country Property

Realizing the Dream Of Owning a Place In the Country

With careful planning and a modest investment almost anyone can turn the dream of owning a small farm or a few acres of country land into a reality. And with some effort this land may provide a significant portion of life's amenities: wood for the fireplace, fresh produce for the table, a pond for fishing or swimming—even waterpower to generate electricity. But as with any other major purchase, care and caution are required.

The first step is to have, in general terms, a strong notion of what it is you want. Those desiring year-round warmth will obviously have different priorities than those who wish to see the seasons change. Prospective part-time farmers will look for one kind of land, whereas weekend sojourners will look for another. Whether you enjoy isolation or prefer neighbors nearby is another consideration to ponder. And, of course, there is the matter of money: how much you can afford to put down, how much you can pay each month for a mortgage and taxes. Once you have made these decisions, pick an area or two to inves-

tigate. Get the catalogs of the Strout and United Farm real estate agencies, and look for ads in the Sunday paper real estate section. Also subscribe to local papers from the regions of your interest; these may provide lower priced listings plus information on land auctions.

When a property appeals to you, investigate—first by phone and then in person. When looking, do not neglect small matters, such as television reception, the contours of the land, and the style of the farmhouse; but never lose sight of your ultimate goals or basic priorities, and gauge the property in that light.

To Buy or Not to Buy: Resist That Impulse

Once you have found a piece of property that appears to meet your needs, resist the temptation to come to terms. This is the time for an in-depth investigation rather than a purchase. After leaving the parcel, think about it, talk about it, try to remember its contours, and list all the things you do not like as well as the things you do. If after a week or so the land still is appealing, arrange to spend an entire day tramping about it.

Walk slowly about the property in the company of your family. Among the subjects of discussion should be these: Is the ratio of meadow to woodlot about what you have in mind? Does the woodlot consist of hard or soft woods? (The former are generally more valuable as timber and fuel.) Is the meadow overlain with ground cover, indicating some fertility? Is it swampy? Is there a usable residence on the property? If not, can you afford to build? Is there a road that cuts across the property into a neighbor's driveway? If so, there is likely to be an easement on the parcel, conferring on the neighbor the right to cross at will. If there is no electricity, gas, or telephone service, ask yourself honestly how well you can get along without these conveniences. And if

Abandoned farms, like the one at right, often offer the greatest value. Not only has the land already been cleared—though it may have become overgrown—but there are outbuildings and a residence in place, though these may require considerable renovation. In addition, the owners of the property are likely to be particularly interested in selling, since they have already moved away.

