

Linda Jamison Letter 1992

June 5 , 1992

Dear Dave,

Dick attended a "Knap-In " in Glass Buttes, OR in March and had a wonderful, educational experience. But alas, he questioned how much pride one can have in a primitive arrow that is notched with a coping saw? His arrowhead constructed with a deer antler was labeled "crude" and he was ashamed to display it alongside those chipped with metal tools, which seemed necessary to make " show" points. (It appears, sadly, that many *abos* are relying on Black and Decker to make primitive tools and weapons.)

Nevertheless, Richard marveled at the lithics expertise he saw there, which gave me cause to think about the last *Rabbit Stick* we attended .. in 1990.

We were thrilled at that time to meet craftsmen and women with such marvelous skills. It was also very intimidating. In planning to attend in 1991 I wondered what skills I could teach that someone else could not address far better than I. Larry Olsen made the same comment, that he was overwhelmed and intimidated by the craftsmanship he saw.

Certainly things have changed since the first *Rabbit Stick Rendezvous*, when the basics weren't basic. Don't get me wrong, we are delighted, albeit a little saddened that the movement appears to be passing us by. I'll admit I'm a little jealous, and it may sound petty, but I feel like one of the "elders " in the book *Clan of the Cavebear* ... put out to pasture.

Richard brought home a copy of the Spring 1991 *Bulletin of Primitive Technology* [Issue #1] with an application form to join. Congratulations, we know it isn't easy to publish a 40 ± page magazine and it looks great.

Quite frankly, we received a short version of the bulletin sometime last year and contemplated becoming a member but decided against it. The main reason is that we had discussed the issue of forming a "society" to amass "*abo*" followers back in the early 70s and again in 1977 when we began publishing *Woodsmoke Journal*. But we (Larry Olsen, Richard and myself) determined not to set ourselves up as an "expert governing body." We have always been against forming an organization because someone has to head it up, and who really has the authority to appoint him or herself as the authority?

In the beginning I suppose it might have been Larry Olsen. And, with another 25 years under his belt, I suppose it still would be Larry, or Jim Riggs, or yourself. But there is the question of whether Larry is as "expert" as someone who has "perfected" one or more of the primitive skills that he once taught on the trail?

I worry that when we break off into "groups" someone will be left out. Like the world being divided into countries, countries into provinces, etc. and some will inevitably try to control. We are no longer a world family because of these factions. Maybe it is inevitable, as history has proven, that those with the most technology or the most advanced technology, leave the others behind. Are we better off, or are we missing something valuable that could be learned from those less sophisticated countries-like the Australian aborigines?

The real question is ... can the new "experts" actually live the primitive lifestyle?

As you know, there are only a scant few "experts" who have ever actually been on the trail (Jim, Peg Mathewson, Larry and Zeke and their instructors, Richard and I, you and your instructors, and I'm sure others I'm not familiar with. On the trail you learn how to do a lot of different things that are necessary for basic survival. One seldom has the time to advance any specific skill to perfection; you must balance all of the life skills in such a way as to secure shelter and enough food and water to sustain life until the next day. And, as an instructor, you must also concern yourself with the needs of your students. As you know, this goes on week after week for several months throughout the expedition season. Then the lifestyle eventually gives way to creature comforts, like a roof over your head and trying to pay the bills until the next series of trips begins.

There is nothing particularly glamorous about it, and it isn't easy, you get mentally burned out and physically exhausted. Richard suffered from scorpion bites, a number of intestinal problems, was poisoned by insects, ended up in the hospital with kidney stones, and eventually had a nervous breakdown. But trail life develops a philosophy about the earth and life in general in a way that some "experts" only read about, and you keep going back because it empowers (and overpowers) you.

As a result of your perseverance, you get a feel for the primitive people that once inhabited the canyons where you make your temporary home, and feel their presence as you imitate their lifeways; you learn to appreciate the resources that sustain your very life and take more care to preserve them; and you learn the value of cooperation and human caring as you form gathering/hunting groups and determine who will lead and who will follow. You literally "touch time."

You learn to improvise ... a universally valuable skill that can be a benefit in any walk of life. You learn these things by personally experiencing them, and you can learn by sitting at the knee of someone else who has experienced them.

Sadly, I think, the "new" *abos* are also missing another factor that was an integral part of primitive life, one that is grossly absent from modern life ... respect for the older, wiser members of the clan. Just because some of the veterans are "technologically" behind the times, doesn't mean that they don't have knowledge and wisdom that is beneficial. If you don't believe it, try sitting at the knee of people like Ernie and Margaret Wilkinson who have spent their entire lives with animals in the outdoors and have a wealth of knowledge to share. Or Zeke Sanchez who has experienced the joy of watching troubled youngsters turn from caterpillars to butterflies as a result of the metamorphosis that takes place through the grueling hardships of hiking 100 miles through the desert, or Jim Riggs who is one of the few "real" *abos* I know ...

Richard and I did it ourselves for twelve years, until Richard had a nervous breakdown and we had to get realistic about putting kids through school and paying the bills. During those years we sold our business and moved to Montana to start the "*Woodsmoke Journal*" and run the "*New Homestead*" program along with Larry Olsen.

That was a lesson in reality. We learned how difficult it is to make a living in the "primitive" business (a lesson I know you struggled with for many, many years) - - and the magazine NEVER made enough money to support itself.

You might be interested in how *Woodsmoke* actually began, few people know the story ... frankly, few people remember the journal at all!

While sitting on a rock in the desert one hot afternoon Larry said to Richard, "look at all the people who have my book, and your films. There are more people out there than we know, and we need to reach them." They didn't know how they were going to do that, but they determined that it was a worthwhile goal, so in 1976 we set up workshop for Larry in Colorado Springs to raise money for the first issue. We arranged for lectures, radio spots, and ran a 2-day workshop.

We also donated all the proceeds from sales of Larry's book *Outdoor Survival Skills*, which we took to the Denver boat show and sold by the pallet (BYU press said we sold more books than any other single outlet). We set up a trip and put in all the proceeds from that venture. We sold one ad to Blue Star Tipi and printed 12,000 magazines on the first run.

We didn't have the slightest idea how to publish a magazine. We tried to attract a combination of young people who were interested in the "homestead" lifestyle as well as modern day *abos*. We didn't have enough material to fill up all the pages, thus a six-page article on "Food Production, People and the Future," in 12 point type, no less, in addition to those by Larry, Richard and myself. Cringe!

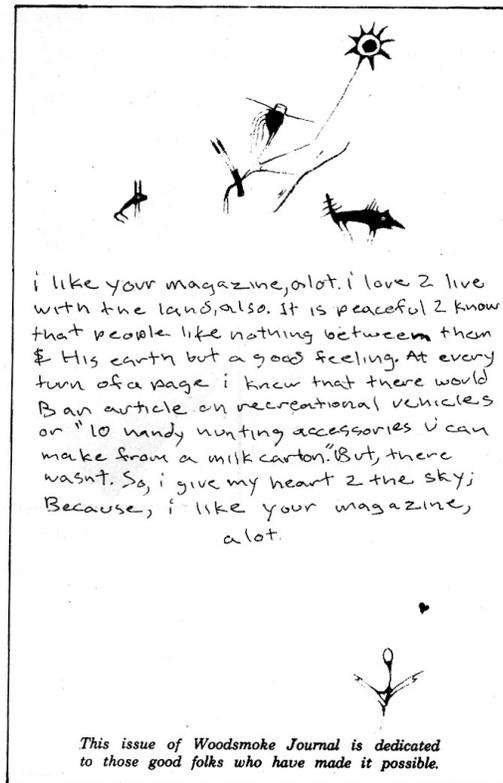
Our excitement in getting the first issue off the press was surpassed only by the excitement of our move from Colorado Springs to Stevensville, MT where we intended to spend the rest of our days happily publishing "*Woodsmoke*" and conducting primitive skills workshops and expeditions. We sold everything, including our home and business and rented a home "down the lane" from Larry's farm.

We "hired" Rich Johnson (for free), who left a paying job as editor of "*Four Wheel Drive Magazine*" in California to live with his wife and two children in a cabin on Larry's property with no running water or electricity for a year while he helped get the project off the ground.

The first problem came when we began marketing the magazine ... we gave several thousand copies to the Yellowstone Park company who put them in their stores free gratis. Lots of people picked them up. Many of these people lived in foreign countries, particularly Canada. Thus, what at first appeared to be a blessing, was a curse. Suddenly we were spread out over the entire US and Europe, Canada and Puerto Rico. Subsequently, we had collected a limited number of subscriptions from a wide based readership. When we approached advertisers, they weren't interested in placing ads in a magazine where the subscribers could not buy their products, nor were national advertisers interested in reaching such a limited number of subscribers, nationwide. Yet, we had committed to a year of issues and spent the subscription price on the second issue, which was admittedly better than the first--except for an article on homemade granola recipes written by the wife of our editor to fill space. *Ad infinitum* ...

We did all the layout ourselves. Two issues were "printed" on a copy machine, collated, stapled and folded on our kitchen table by our family. One attempt was no more than a crude newsletter. **There were 13 in all. Over a period of 6 years, that's an average of only 2 per year.** Our subscribers were VERY patient.

I guess you might say, it was the ultimate "labor of love" and it succeeded until 1986 only as a result of the loyal support of people like Jim Riggs and others who generously donated their knowledge in the form of articles. Once, when we thought we had mailed our last issue, someone anonymously sent \$500. I was so overwhelmed I cried for an hour, and issue #10 was mailed--with the message from the anonymous benefactor on page 1.



It was the ultimate sacrifice. In the end, three families literally lost their homes, jobs and life savings as a result of the "Woodsmoke" project. Friendships were strained, some beyond repair, others repaired themselves in time. And, when we were personally unable to continue to finance the magazine, it became an anthology and continues to be a popular source of "basic" primitive knowledge. It's not perfect, but continues to be a good source of basic knowledge.

I got out some back issues of the old "Woodsmoke Journal" tonight. I still like to read the articles and I remember typing every one, but it made me wonder, is "Woodsmoke" becoming an artifact? I hope not, because a lot of genuine blood, sweat and tears and considerable sacrifice were involved in the project.

"Woodsmoke" is still alive in print, however. As you know, in 1990 we set out to compile a third anthology in the "Woodsmoke" series and approached Outdoor Life Book Club to publish the book since they have sold over 50,000 copies of the previous releases over time. Due to cutbacks, buy-outs and changes in management, we have been "on hold" for two years. Last month we made the decision to self-publish and OLBC has agreed, enthusiastically, to offer the resulting book as a featured book to its members as soon as it is off the press. We will pursue this endeavor as soon as we can afford to pay the printer.

And, six "*Woodsmoke*" programs are now being distributed in video form through OLBC to their members beginning this month. Thus, *Woodsmoke* is alive and well today, and the beat goes on. And if we succeed in our endeavor, all practitioners of abo[riginal] skills will benefit. This is as it should be, and as we intended. I doubt that anyone will make money at it, but this time we knew it in advance.

Well, I have rambled long enough and here is our \$20 to join the Society. We are glad to see the "*Bulletin of Primitive Technology*" carrying on the tradition. We certainly support your efforts and wish you the best.

Please feel free to call on us, we would love to be involved and contribute in any way we can.

Best Regards , Linda Jamison

cc: Steve Watts

Jim Rig