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J.D. Warren and his
Lawnbot400



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A Cabin from Scratch

In the spring of 1983, I was finishing up my second year at Virginia Tech. I still hadn't found a major that was right for me; I felt lost and frustrated.

While I was deciding what to do, I met a local guy named Eddie who must have sensed I was ready for a challenge because he asked if I wanted to build a cabin on his property. His offer caught me off guard since I had zero experience building. I thought about it for one night and decided this was exactly what I needed.

Eddie agreed to guide me in the building process. I started clearing the land about a month before exams started. After classes ended, I set up camp next to the building site and began to work from sunup to sundown. I moved in just three days before the fall semester. I lived in the cabin from summer 1983 to fall 1985. No rent. No utilities.

I built the cabin for \$1,100 and the investment paid off in more ways than I could ever have imagined. The last time I visited the cabin was in 2000, and it was in good shape. I have no idea if it's still standing.

Some lessons I learned, in no particular order:

1. It's not critical to have electricity, running water, and a phone to be comfortable.
2. With no phone, it was hard for friends to contact me at the spur of the moment. With no phone, I learned how to plan better.
3. I learned how to conserve water. I learned the value of a clean and abundant water supply.
4. I learned to use a chainsaw without hurting myself.
5. I learned how to be quiet and enjoy it.
6. I learned that building a home is relatively easy — it's not rocket science. This knowledge has provided me with a great sense of security over the years.
7. I wished I had built a cabin with half the footprint and a second story. Building the foundation took an enormous amount of time compared to the rest of the building process.
8. As soon as I was done building the cabin, I found out about yurts. Had I known about yurts, I would have built one of those instead.
9. I learned how to become more self-sufficient.
10. I learned how to ask for help after I injured my back and needed help stacking firewood.
11. I learned how valuable electricity is.
12. I learned how to navigate a dirt road under all types of conditions (deep mud, ice, snow) and learned when to park and walk.
13. I learned how to stay warm in the winter. I learned how to cut wood and prepare kindling. I learned how to quickly start a fire in a woodstove and keep it going. I learned the value of a well-built woodstove.
14. I learned how to be super safe with fire. If my cabin had ever caught on fire, the whole thing would have burned down in minutes.
15. I learned how to play the banjo. My solitude and lack of distractions (like TV) afforded me lots of free time to explore and create. Even now, when I play the banjo, I'm reminded of all the hours I spent playing in the cabin.



Tom Heck is a daddy, banjoist, team builder, and maker. See photos of his cabin build at tomheck.com.