

True economy consists in always making the income exceed the out-go. Wear the old clothes a little longer if necessary; dispense with the new pair of gloves; mend the old dress: live on plainer food if need be; so that, under all circumstances, unless some unforeseen accident occurs, there will be a margin in favor of the income.

P.T. Barnum

Welcome to Vintage Americana, exploring and restoring rural American Culture. I'm your hostess, Holly, and this is Episode 62 - A Make Do and Mend Mentality. In which we will explore little ways to economize and find more satisfaction, all at the same time.

Before we get into the episode, I'd like to suggest that you drop by the blog at [brambleberry meadow.com](http://brambleberry-meadow.com), and sign up for my e-mail list. I promise not to spam you, but you'll get some updates as well as occasional extra recipes, tidbits, and goodies. Plus you'll be able to download my recipe for "In the Gloaming" Grape-Apple pie. Thanks!

On to today's topic! I'm (just barely) old enough to remember the last time we went through a period of galloping inflation and shortages of things in the marketplace. We're not just heading into that sort of economy again, we're already there. And things are likely to get worse before they get better.

So let's take a stroll through a selection of ways to economize across life. And by "economize," I do not mean just saving money. But also reducing how much is wasted, while, at the same time, improving your quality of life. Yes, we all may need to tighten our belts. But that doesn't mean we have to make it a point to be extra miserable, at the same time.

The first thing we'll talk about is food. Mostly because this is one of the items in the news, almost constantly. And anyone who has gone to a grocery store lately, and has any powers of observation to exercise in the process, has noticed. Skyrocketing fertilizer costs, as well as the cost of using large agricultural equipment means that we're unlikely to see this trend reverse any time soon.

This is not to say that you should be an alarmist. When you see predictions of "food shortages," that doesn't mean that most people in the developed world won't be able to BUY food. Although that's a very real risk in other parts of the world. Here, what you will

see in addition to rising prices, is likely to be rolling unavailability of certain things. Sometimes this might be staples. We saw a little of this at the start of 2020, when yeast and flour were both very hard to find for a few months.

More likely, you'll find that your favorite brand of something might be missing from the shelf. And, the more complicated and processed a product is, the more susceptible it is likely to be to disruption. Frozen pizza requires flour and yeast. But also tomatoes, cheese, and other toppings. Any ONE of those things being in short supply will affect whether or not you can find your frozen pizza.

What this means is - this is probably a really good time to learn to cook. You can either go without that pizza, because tomatoes are unavailable to the manufacturer, and go home and make yourself a sandwich instead. OR - you can make yourself a breakfast pizza, because you know how.

And when I say, "learn to cook," I do NOT mean simply heating food. Or hitting pinterest for "simple 3 ingredient meals," that use processed products combined and heated. Learn to cook from scratch.

If you haven't spent much time in a kitchen before, learn one recipe. But make it a flexible one, so that if you can't BUY one ingredient for it, you aren't in the position of not being able to make the ONE thing you know how to make. And then add to your repertoire as you go.

Increasing practice will allow you to substitute ingredients that you can't find. Or, learn to MAKE that missing ingredient, too. Bottled pasta sauce missing? Learn to make homemade sauce. Can't find egg noodles? Make some.

Yes, sometimes processed foods can be more inexpensive - sometimes. This is because they can be made from the byproducts of other processes - that are sold into the food industry quite inexpensively. But all of these things are likely to get more expensive as commodities go up.

Making things from scratch means you won't necessarily have to sacrifice ALL your indulgences. You might have to lay off the Ben and Jerry's - but you might not miss it if you learn to make pie for dessert, instead. Or apple crisp. Or butterscotch dumplings.

I've talked before about stocking up. That's also a good way to economize - especially in a time of rampant inflation. Buying a quarter or side of beef, or half a pig, means that you're paying today's prices for beef rather than what it costs in 6 months. Many other things are less costly when purchased in larger quantities. Flour, for example, is less expensive lb for lb if you buy it in twenty-five pound bags vs. five pound bags.

Another 70's thing that might be worth reviving is the co-op or buying club. Now, I will grant that there are still some of these organizations around, but they're less common than they were when I was young.

Co-ops or buying clubs (now sometimes also including food churches) are groups of people who come together and buy foods in bulk, and divide them up among the members. They do take a certain degree of organization - someone has to keep track of what everyone has ordered, place the order, break it down for each member of the club's individual purchases, and manage a pick-up.

I'll refer you back to episode 30, "Real Food," for more tips on from scratch cooking.

And from here we'll move into the next area where you can exercise a little frugality. Clothing. Let's face it, clothes can be expensive. And it's tempting to deal with THAT by paying as little for new clothing as possible. This is sometimes a counterproductive strategy. Because cheap clothing doesn't hold up well.

So what makes more sense?

Buy good quality clothing. That doesn't necessarily mean expensive clothing. Although good clothing will cost more than cheap department store fashion items. Become fussy about checking the details of how a garment is made.

Well-made items have a certain amount of heft to the fabric. Pass by the nearly-sheer knit T-shirts. They're good for a few washings, at which point they often shrink, become misshapen, or even develop holes.

Check the firmness of the seams - and make sure that those seams are finished on the inside of the garment. Check the hems, and make sure they look like they're unlikely to come undone easily.

Natural fibers are usually longer lasting than synthetics. They're also more comfortable to wear. Silk, wool, cotton, linen.

Are buttons firmly attached? Are the buttonholes densely sewn? If there is a zipper, does it feel substantial enough to keep the fabric closed?

Clothing in classic styles will serve you better than high fashion items. This is easy to say, and harder to do. Menswear has more "classic pieces" than women's wear. And, even at that, regular changes to things like collar styles, lapel widths, colors, fabrics, or other details mean that things DO go out of style. Still, avoiding wildly trendy things that are only "in" for a season in wise.

It's difficult to give much in the way of brand recommendations, just because tastes are so different. However, I can offer a few suggestions at least for the sorts of things that are useful to wear on the farmstead.

The first is Duluth Trading Company. Nearly everything they make is a good quality item. I'm particularly fond of their firehouse fabric. I haven't managed to snag it, even in the bramble-infested walnut plantation on our property. I'll take them over Carhardt's any day. I will say that their women's jeans are a bit more questionable. The fabric is too lightweight, tends to snag, and the pockets are too shallow. They're great for wearing around town, but they're not work-wear. Their men's jeans are much better. The men's flannels come in multiple weights. It's another instance in which I would recommend visiting a physical store at least once so that you understand the difference.

I used to be a big fan of Lands' End. Now I would say, "recommended with reservations." If you have a store nearby, it's best to check items in person. They still make excellent polo shirts. And their sport knit pants are very good for lounging around the house. SOME of their T-shirts are nice, heavy pieces. And some of them are just too thin for the price you'll pay. Use caution. I have SOME flannels that have done very well. And others that are just too thin and soft to be anything but "fashion" pieces - not meant to last more than a season or two.

L.L. Bean is another favorite vendor of mine. Again, their clothing seems to be well-made across the board. The flannel shirts are made of very nice fabric and hold their shape and color well. I haven't tried their jeans in years, so I can't comment on that.

Where jeans are concerned, I'd actually suggest seeking out the nearest Western wear or equestrian-oriented store. Wrangler still makes really excellent jeans. Often times they're not available in the trendiest cuts - but for a good stout pair of dungarees with enough room in the pocket for a small knife and whatever else you might need around the farmstead - Wranglers are usually a good bet.

Kids clothes. This is always a toughie. Lands' End does have some good stuff, but again you have to be choosy. Some of it can also be thin and poorly made. Carters, once the by-word in high quality children's wear is another brand (now owned by OshKosh) that I think you need to assess item by item. I do have a few of their fleece nightgowns for my girls that did very well - being worn for 2 years by my oldest, and then another 2-3 by the younger.

For kids' barnwear, check Duluth. And this is one instance in which Carhardt might be an option as well.

My favorite source for playwear and sleepwear for the kids when they were young was Hanna Andersson. I don't think we ever wore out any of the Hannas. And more than one outfit went through both my girls and then got passed on to a friend, still looking very good. What's more, Hanna outlets often ARE a good place to score a deal. Especially their sale racks.

I've mentioned visiting physical stores when you can. There are reasons for this, other than checking the quality of items. And, I'm a "shop in my jammies for all the things online" kind of girl. BUT - if you learn to play your cards right, you can often get better deals at physical stores on items being clearanced out. Those same pieces are usually "sold out" online. It's always worth checking. I've gotten some wicked deals on things at Duluth, just as they're changing things from one season to the next.

Don't make the assumption that "outlet" stores necessarily mean you're getting a deal. Some outlet stores are genuine outlet stores. Others are just another retail location for the company.

Thrift stores. I find this to be a very hit-or-miss sort of project. CAN you - hypothetically - find high quality items for low prices at thrift stores? Sure. But it's a bit of a "needle-in-a-haystack" hunt. I think it's actually gotten worse with the blossoming of SO MANY thrift shops. It's become an overwhelming sea of places to look. And, you're in

competition with the whole horde of people who make extra money buying up "the good stuff" at thrift stores and reselling online. So, if you have more time than money, this might make sense. I don't commit more than an occasional perusal, because it's just a larger effort than I'm currently willing to expend for a relatively small reward.

What about making your own clothes? There is, sometimes, an assumption that this is somehow a less expensive option across the board. Usually, this is an assumption made by people who cannot sew and what YOU to recreate a garment that they don't want to spend the money to own. But IS it an economy to make your own clothes?

Sometimes. It depends a bit on what you're making, and what you're making it out of. But - patterns are expensive. Fabric is expensive. Buttons, thread, elastic, notions of all kind are expensive. If you add up all the materials, you may find it would have been less expensive to buy the garment you're making.

And it's just occurred to me that the topic of making clothing without it costing the Earth is large enough for it's own whole episode - so maybe we'll do that NEXT week. Stay tuned!

Now that you have your clothes, remember that proper care will extend their life. Turn printed things inside-out to wash them. The design will last longer that way. On the other hand, very dirty jeans will clean up better when washed right-side out. Preferably only with other similarly hearty items. Use a good quality detergent. I sometimes use washing soda as a booster when stuff is really grimy. Bleach, only as a last resort. Bleach breaks down fabrics, causing them to wear out more quickly.

Dry your items on cooler settings. Or, better yet, hang them on the line. Yes, they tend to get a bit stiff. Just bring them back in, and toss them in the dryer with some dryer balls for 5 minutes and they'll soften back up nicely. Even towels.

Learn to mend. It doesn't take that much time or effort to sew a button back on, tack a hem back up, or repair a split seam. And we live in an era in which visible mending is considered fashionable. Don't be afraid to apply a decorative patch, or darn a hole.

What about around the house?

I might be a little bit of an addict where household linens are concerned. I'm way too

excited by the prospect of new sheets, towels, dishcloths, or other goodies to be entirely normal. But I never buy them full price. And I'm generally fussy about quality.

Why? Good quality linens just last longer. Especially when you're talking about sheets. Poor quality sheets almost immediately start to pill, and develop thin spots or even holes. In general, I avoid poly-cotton blends. Why? Usually, the sharper, firmer polyester fibers actually cut the cotton fibers as the sheet wears - and those cut cotton fibers are the pills. I also avoid super high thread count sheets. They don't wear nearly as well, since the threads are SO fine, they can't handle much abrasion.

I have two favorite sources. The Company Store - which is strictly a catalog company. And The Pottery Barn. I strongly recommend The Company Store's Company Cotton sheets. But, either way, I usually watch for colors and styles that are being cleared out or avail myself of annual sales. The Company Store usually has a White Sale with a blanket 25% off. While the Pottery Barn regularly rotates out prints. Honestly, with the Pottery Barn, I usually hit their outlet store and pursue the clearance section. I've gotten quite a few twin sheet sets for the girls over the years, and I find them to wear really well. They also have nice, deep pockets and quality elastic on the fitted sheets.

Blankets. You'll get the most wear out of good cotton blankets. They're light enough for use year-round, and take washing without trouble. You CAN also haunt vintage and thrift shops for genuine wool blankets (or even invest in them). They're best reserved for colder weather. They CAN be washed - carefully. And ought to be stored in a cedar chest or other moth-resistant location when not in use. Avoid acrylic blankets, as they typically don't last and are less comfortable to sleep with.

For bed spreads, while duvets are fashionable (and you can just change out the cover when you want a new look) I find I have to remove it from the bed to sleep. And that seems like a bit of a waste. I prefer quilts, cotton coverlets, or other then spreads. If you get a solid color, you can add a patchwork quilt at the foot for interest and an extra layer.

For bath towels, I prefer to visit Home Goods and just see what they have at any given time. I look for nice thick pile, well-sewn hems, and heavy selvages (that's the woven edges on the sides).

My kitchen linen collection mostly consists of seasonally printed towels or colored

dishcloths that I picked up out of season. I don't go in for embroidered towels, just because I'm way too rough on my towels. I DO have a lot of flour sack towels. I like these better for baking, and they just last longer than the pile towels.

Furniture. I admit, my house is about 50% hand-me-down, and 50% intentional purchase, even yet. But I do have a few tips. Furniture should be something of an investment. Not that you are going to sell it alter at a profit - not that kind of investment. But avoid the Furniture Mega Mart matched set stuff. It's so poorly built it will break down in under 5 years.

One of the frustrating things about furniture shopping is that very little of it these days is made of real wood. But if you want pieces that will last, avoid particle board like the plague. Ditto the awful paper printed "veneers."

Good quality furniture can be found in the weirdest places. I got my favorite bookcase when I was in college at the local big box grocery and more store. It's heavy 1" plywood, with solid wood shelves. All maple. I had to stain and poly the thing myself, but it's a beast, and the shelves don't sag even when piled with textbooks. When we move, I'll probably sand it, paint it, and put it in my daughter's room.

You CAN score good quality wood furniture at thrift stores or - Habitat Restores, if you have one locally. They may not be terribly stylish, but this is where the fact that painted furniture fits into a layered decorating perspective is helpful. Need inspiration? Hit Pinterest for painted furniture photos and go nuts. You might end up holding onto that piece for decades - occasionally repainting it to fit in with a new room or scheme.

Vintage and antique stores, or flea markets are other great places to look. You'll find everything from worn-to-the-woof but still solid items that you can rehab to restored versions that will instantly look at home.

Learn to make simple repairs on wood furniture, too. Youtube is your friend, here. It is not difficult to fix hinges, handles, cracks, or other minor problems. Often all it takes is wood glue, some wood scraps, a few small tools and a little patience. This is WHY you want real wood furniture, though. It can BE repaired. Whereas a piece made of particle board probably cannot.

If you're in the market for upholstered furniture - couches and comfy chairs - look for something with a solid hardwood frame and well made cushions. Some of the better

brands even guarantee the cushions for a specified number of years. Remember that firmer cushions will keep their shape longer than super soft, floppy ones.

And many companies now offer the option of slip covers for the whole piece, rather than fully attached upholstery. You could even get TWO sets of slip covers. Which allows you to have a back up - and to change the look seasonally. Getting more milage out of what you DO spend money on counts as economizing.

Moving outside, into the farmstead, think about what things can do double-duty. If you need a hedge somewhere, can you use juneberry bushes or nanking cherries - something you can also eat?

If you have a resource - like our 3-1/2 acres of walnuts - what can you do to make better use of it? We'd like to put some pigs out there to eat the walnuts. But, of course, that's a seasonal food source. So we'll have to also feed the pigs. And we can use them as a way to get extra use out of food scraps from the house.

Planning your farmstead should involve thinking about closing the loop, wherever possible. In a talk given by Beth Dougherty about getting your first milk cow, she comments, "within 36 hours of owning a cow in milk, you'll either lose your mind - or get a pig!" Because that cow may be producing more milk that you and your family can reasonably drink - or make into cheese, butter, etc. It will either go to waste - or it can go into the pigs, reducing your feed costs.

No farmstead should be without SOME way to make use of whatever food scraps come out of the kitchen. A compost pile, chickens, pigs. Not ALL food scraps will be suitable for livestock, but a lot of them will.

You can even make use of other people's food scraps. I've known people who have made deals with local grocery stores or bakeries to pick up unsold produce or food that must be discarded to feed to their pigs. Usually at very low or no cost.

Make it a point not to overcrowd your stock. Trying to raise livestock "intensively" means you must purchase much more of your feed. The price of feed AND hay is likely to also go up exponentially. If you have the room, think about whether you could, instead, implement a managed, intensive grazing plan. Maybe even stockpile some grass for later. Think about how to minimize purchased inputs.

This is what I mean by "closing the loop." If you have a couple of cattle that you are moving from paddock to paddock every week or so to graze - follow along behind them with chickens in a tractor. Maybe two - one with laying hens and one with meat birds. They'll both get a lot of nutrition from being on your nice, green, buggy pasture AND scratch the cow manure into the ground while adding their own. You won't have to fertilize.

I know a few people who are switching from meat chickens to meat rabbits this year. Why? Less purchased feed. Rabbits can fatten on grass.

Any time you do something on the farmstead, think about whether the resulting refuse can be used. My husband loves apple prunings for smoking things. I'm probably going to need to plant some willows to help in some wetter areas - and I can use willow whips for hedging or even baskets. Wood chips from clearing one area can be used to mulch another.

Get good at repairing your equipment. In fact, lots of people prefer older tractors or other machines, because they can BE repaired by the owner. I'll even put a link to the Tiller's International class on small tractor repair in the show notes.

Learn to sharpen a mower blade, clean out a carburetor, and perform other basic maintenance.

Keep outdoor wood structures painted. This might even be a good time to rediscover old fashioned products like milk paint. Or whitewash. Both are inexpensive, and help prevent wood from rotting. Build things to shed water - even fences. Those cute little decorative tops on the fenceposts are not just decorative - they don't rot as quickly as a flat top that allows water to pool.

Inside your home and out, look for ways to reduce waste and just make things last as long as you can.

Or - Use it up, wear it out, make it do or do without. As the saying from the second world war goes.

I hope I've given you some ideas on how to make your dollar go a little further. And I invite you to go check the podcast archives for some more specific information on

things like real food, historical sewing inspiration, and mending.

If you enjoyed this episode, I invite you again to drop by the website at [brambleberry meadow.com](http://brambleberry-meadow.com). And also to sign up for the newsletter for tips, recipes, and other vintage-themed goodies.

Just now, I'm going to go troll through the local thrift stores for a basket to use to keep my mending in. Are you coming?