

Published June 13th, 2018

From Miramonte to the wilds of Alaska: one woman's story

By Sora O'Doherty



Photos provided

Growing up in Orinda, Laura (Melohn) Emerson never even dreamed about living off the grid in Alaska, but in her 50s that's exactly what she wound up doing. It wasn't an easy transition, but now she loves her life. How has she changed? She says that she is more introverted, she can go for 10 weeks at a time without seeing anyone but her husband Bryan. She's lost her sense of modesty and her manners, living in sweatpants, but she feels more competent, confident and self-sufficient. Most importantly, she has developed a profound sense of appreciation and awe for the simple things in life.

Emerson addressed a fascinated audience in the Orinda library auditorium on June 7, hosted by the library and Orinda Parks and Recreation.

In the winter of 2006 the Emersons were living on the 17th floor of a high rise in Houston, Texas. They weren't retiring; Bryan worked as a small investment banker and Laura as compliance officer for that bank. One day her husband asked her how she would feel if he could purchase five acres of undeveloped land in Alaska. She wasn't really focused, and replied, "Whatever." To her great surprise, he then bought the 5-acre parcel of virgin forest on a lake halfway between Anchorage and Denali National Park, a 20-minute flight to the nearest road.

The following March, Laura and Bryan Emerson flew up to the property by air taxi to visit the only other residents on the lake and rented the couple's guest cabin. The temperature was 30 below. They dined on moose burgers and bear stew and hired their neighbor to build them a home on their property. It took two and a half years to build the little house, and 106 Spruce trees were felled and cut and dried. Their home is 750 square feet, two floors measuring 16 by 32 feet, with a large out-building that houses the bathroom on one side and food storage on the other.

The process wasn't easy. "I felt like I was on a chain gang," Emerson said about working to clear the property of alder trees and undergrowth in the company of a million mosquitos. "I cried," she said. "I was overwhelmed."

But her husband loved everything about it.

"I liked the kayaking," Laura Emerson considered, and told herself, "Get with the program! No whining!" She threw herself into the study of everything she thought might be useful: target shooting, foraging for food, soap and candle making (which is a skill she hasn't used), beekeeping, and, perhaps most importantly, wine and beer making. She acquired certifications in permaculture, master gardening and master naturalist, herbalism, chemistry and botany. The Emersons now enjoy a mandatory 5 p.m. happy hour, when they imbibe in their homemade libations in their kayaks.

With solar panels, a wind turbine and generators, they have electricity that allows them to use the internet to communicate with the world and work remotely. The tower also allows them to access cell service with an antenna that hits a repeater 45 miles away. The Emersons spend two months of the year working in India. During those two autumn months, it would be impossible to travel to and from their home. In summer their property is accessible by float plane. In winter it is accessible by ski plane from Thanksgiving to April, and by dog sled or snow mobile in deep winter. During spring "breakup" of the ice on the lake, it is the most difficult time to travel.

Laura Emerson gardens, growing 65 vegetables and medicinal plants, and they eat bear and rabbit meat and eggs - but she won't eat the chickens she keeps. They can and preserve food, including 14 to 17 gallons of honey each year, and forage for raspberries in July, cranberries in August. They had a 61-foot well dug for water and heat their home with a wood stove, going through a cord of wood a month in the winter.

"I listen to the birds and play with my chickens," she said, "and I feel completely at ease."



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