A PLAIN HOUSEHOLD ALMANAC

The Old Ways Still Work

What the old farms knew about keeping a home on very little.



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WATER · HEAT · LIGHT · ROOT CELLAR · SOAP · REPAIR

First Edition · MMXXVI

Nobody wrote it down. Now it's yours.

The Old Ways Still Work

Thirteen things your grandparents knew about keeping a home on very little

by Amos Beiler



Amos Beiler is a narrated character. The methods in this book are drawn from traditional household practice, old agricultural-extension bulletins and current public-health guidance, and are written down plain so they can be followed.

Prices are typical United States retail prices in 2026 and will differ where you live. Where a number decides whether something is safe — water treatment, canning times, curing, smoke, fuel — this book gives the current published guidance and says where it came from. Check it against the newest edition before you rely on it.

This is not medical advice. See “A note on what this book is not.”

First edition · MMXXVI

The Promise

One page, no more.

Your grandfather could keep a house alive all winter on forty dollars a month. Not because he was tough. Because he knew the order of things.

He knew the water came before the stove, and the stove came before the shelf. He knew that one warm room beats six cold ones, that a candle outlasts a battery, and that a jar of beans put up in August is worth more in February than a twenty-dollar bill. He didn't keep any of that in a book. He kept it in his hands, and he learned it standing beside somebody who knew.

Most folks who get caught short in a hard week don't get caught for lack of things. They have the flashlight, they have the canned goods, they even have the generator. They get caught because they did the right things in the wrong order — ran the heat before they drew the water, opened the freezer to check on it, burned the good fuel the first night and had none the third.

So here is what this book promises you. Not that you will never be cold or hungry or in the dark. That when it comes, you will know what to do first, and what to do next, and what can wait. And that when the good weeks come back, you'll know how to keep a house on very little — the way it used to be kept, before anybody called it prepping.

None of it is new. That's the point. It already worked once.

— *Amos*

How to Read This Book

Straight through as a season, or off the shelf when something breaks.

There are two ways in, and both are right.

STRAIGHT THROUGH

The book runs the way a hard season runs. Part I is the first night — what you do in the first hour, the first day, before you know how long this is going to last. Part II is water, because without it nothing else matters by the third day. Part III is heat and light, which decide whether you stay in the house. Part IV is food, and it is the longest part, because putting food by was the longest part of the year. Part V is the household that makes things for itself — soap, clean floors, seed, eggs — which is where the money is actually saved. And Part VI is the system that turns all of it into a habit, so you are not starting over every time.

Read it in that order through one winter and you will have done everything once.

OFF THE SHELF

Or keep it by the back door and open it when something goes wrong. Every chapter starts with its claim — one sentence that tells you what the chapter believes — and every section is numbered, so "4.7" is always chlorine and iodine, and "15.1" is always the haybox. You don't need to have read chapter three to use chapter thirteen.

THE FOUR KINDS OF PAGE

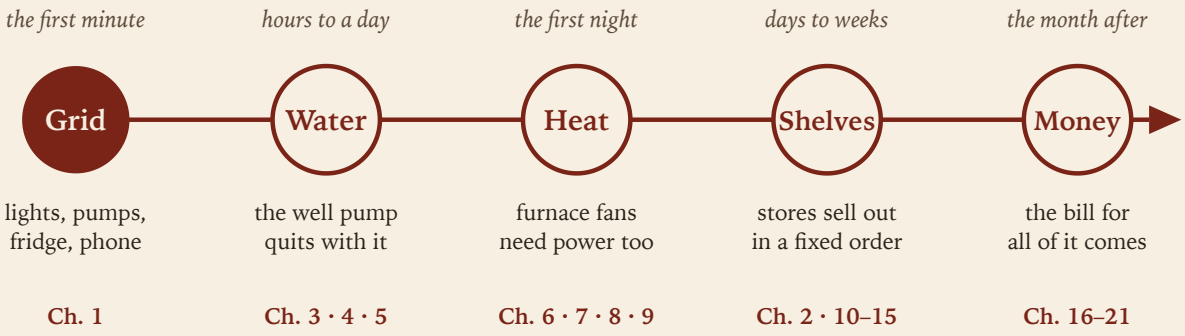
You'll find four kinds of section, and they read differently:

- *Methods* — how a thing is done. What you need, how it's done, the by-eye way to know it's right, and what to do when it goes wrong.
- *Numbers* — what a thing costs, weighs, holds or burns, worked out on paper so you can work it out again for your own house.
- *Stories* — a household, a season, a person. These are the reason the methods exist.
- *Cards* — one page at the end of every chapter, the whole chapter boiled down to what you check off. Cut them out. Tack them up. All twenty-one are gathered again in Appendix B.

The Order of Failure

Every chapter in this book is placed against this one line.

When a house loses its power, things don't fail all at once. They fail in a line, and the line is nearly always the same. Learn the line and you will know what to do first.



Fix them in this order. Never skip ahead to the shelf while the water is still undone.

The order of failure. Each chapter is placed where it belongs on the line.

The grid goes first, and in the country it takes more with it than people expect. If your water comes from a well, your water went with the lights; the pump is electric. If your heat comes from a furnace, it went too, even if it burns oil or gas — the blower and the igniter need power.

Water is second because the body runs out of it fastest, and because a house without it can't cook, clean, or flush.

Heat is third. In winter it decides by nightfall whether you stay in the house or leave it.

Shelves are fourth. Food lasts longer than people fear — but the store doesn't, and what it runs out of first is not what you'd guess.

Money is last, and it's the one that lingers longest. Spoiled food, burst pipes, a motel, a generator bought at the worst price of the year. The household that produces its own soap, eggs and repairs is the one whose month after is cheap.

Water before warmth. Warmth before food. Food before the rest.

A Note on What This Book Is Not

Said early, so it never becomes a problem later.

It is not medical advice. Chapter 18 is about what a household kept on its shelf and how it kept it dry and labeled. It does not tell you what to treat with any of it. When somebody is hurt or sick, you call for help, the same as my grandmother did when it was past what she could manage — and she knew exactly where that line was. Her story about it is in section 18.5.

It is not a gear catalogue. There are prices in here, because a method you can't afford isn't a method. But nothing in this book needs a brand name, and nobody paid to be in it. Where a tool is worth buying, it says what kind, not whose.

It is not a bug-out plan. This book is about staying — in your house, on your land, in your town — and keeping it running when the usual things stop. It assumes you'll still be there in the spring.

It does not pretend the old ways were always right. They weren't. Old households were poisoned by their own stoves and their own wells, and lost food and children to things we now know how to stop. Where the old way got it wrong — carbon monoxide, radon, low-acid canning, raw-meat drying — this book says so plainly, and gives you the modern safeguard right beside the old method. Keep both. That is the whole of it.

PART I

The First Night

The reader survives tonight before they plan a winter.



CHAPTER 1

The First Hour

Almost every prepping failure is an ordering failure, not a supply failure.



When the lights go, folks reach for whatever is nearest — the flashlight, the phone, the freezer door to see if it's still cold. That reach is where most of the trouble starts. This chapter is the first hour taken slow: what to do in the first fifteen minutes, the next forty-five, the afternoon and the first night. Do it in this order and you will wake up tomorrow with your water drawn, your cold still in the freezer, your fuel mostly unburned and everybody in one warm room.

ON THE CHANNEL · *What Grandma Kept at Home for a 3-Day Power Outage*

1.1 The candle and the dead solar generator

An ice storm, the second week of January.

The ice came on a Tuesday night, and by morning every line on our road was down under it. Our neighbors across the creek were good people, new to the country, and they were

ready — or they thought they were. They had a solar generator in a hard case, the kind with the screen that tells you how many hours are left. It had cost them more than our cow.

By ten in the morning they had the coffee maker going off it. By noon they had a space heater going in the front room, and the screen said six hours. By four it said two. The panels were on the porch under a sky the color of a wash pan, putting in nearly nothing. At a quarter past seven the screen went dark, the heater stopped ticking, and their house was as cold as ours had been all day — colder, because they had kept every door open to "let the heat get around."

The father walked over with a flashlight to ask if we had anything. My mother had been up since five. She had drawn every pot full of water before the pressure tank gave out. She had closed off every room but the kitchen and hung the quilts across the doorway. She had the stove going since seven, the bread rising behind it, and one candle on the table — one — because one candle in a small room with white walls is enough to eat by.

He stood in the doorway and looked at that candle a long while. Then he said, "We had more than you."

He was right. They had more of everything. What they didn't have was the order. They had spent their stored heat on the first afternoon, their light on a coffee maker, and their cold on opening the freezer every hour to see if it was still cold.

Mam gave him a pot of water and four candles and told him which room to close himself into. They slept in their kitchen that night, all five of them, and the next morning the father was over at first light asking how she knew to fill the pots.

"You do the water first," she said. "Everybody knows that."

Everybody used to. This chapter is so everybody does again.

1.2 The three questions a farm wife asked before she touched anything

My grandmother didn't reach for a light when the power went. She stood still, in the dark, for about as long as it takes to say a short grace, and she asked herself three things.

THE THREE QUESTIONS

1. *Is everybody here, and is anybody hurt?* People first, before anything is touched. Who is in the house, who is out on the road, who is in the barn. A child on the stairs in the dark is a worse problem than a thawing freezer.

2. *What gets ruined if I do nothing for an hour?* Not what is inconvenient — what is ruined. The water left in the pipes and the pressure tank. The cold in the freezer. Animals that need water before dark. Pipes in a north wall on a zero-degree night.
3. *What do I have that I can't get back if I waste it?* Fuel. Batteries. Matches. Stored water. The last of the daylight. Every one of these gets spent in the first hour by folks who never asked.

WHY THE ORDER MATTERS

The first question keeps you from making things worse. The second tells you what to do first. The third tells you what not to do at all. Notice that none of the three is "what do I need to buy?" In the first hour there is nothing to buy. There is only what is already in the house and the order you use it in.

THE BY-EYE WAY

If you find yourself holding the freezer door open, or plugging something into the power bank, or walking out to the truck to "go see what's happening," stop. You skipped the questions. Go back and ask them, out loud if it helps. The house will wait the half minute.

TROUBLES FIXED

- *Everybody talking at once:* one person asks the three questions and gives the jobs. In my grandmother's house that was her. It doesn't matter who, so long as it's one.
- *Somebody is out on the road:* they come first, but you don't go looking in the dark unless you know where to look. Leave a light in the window they'll see and get on with the water.

1.3 What actually fails first, and in what order

A house doesn't lose everything at the same moment. It loses things on a schedule, and once you know the schedule you can stay ahead of it.

When	What goes	What it means for you
The first second	Lights, outlets, electric stove, garage door, internet	Inconvenient, not urgent. Leave these for last.
The first second	The well pump	No new water comes in. What's left in the pressure tank — often only five to fifteen gallons — is all you get. This is the urgent one.
The first second	The furnace, even oil or gas	The blower, the igniter and the controls are electric. The house starts losing heat now.
The first hours	Sump pump	In a wet spell, the basement starts filling.
About 4 hours	The refrigerator, door kept shut	After that, perishable food above 40°F begins to be unsafe.
Hours to a day or more	Cell service	Towers run on backup batteries and generators that vary widely. Don't count on the phone past the first day.
About 24–48 hours	The freezer, door kept shut	A full freezer holds about 48 hours, a half-full one about 24.
The first cold night	Pipes in outside walls	Once the house falls well below freezing, the pipes are at risk.

Refrigerator and freezer times are the U.S. Department of Agriculture's food-safety figures for doors kept closed.

How to use the schedule

Read it backward from the thing you can least afford to lose. For most country houses that is water, and the water clock starts at zero. For a house on city water, the pressure usually holds longer, but you fill containers just the same — city pumping stations lose power too. Next is the house heat, which you can slow down (Chapter 6) but not stop. The refrigerator and freezer you protect by doing nothing at all, which is the hardest job in the house.

The by-eye way

Turn on a cold tap and listen. If it runs strong, you still have pressure-tank water — use it now. If it spits and coughs, the tank is near empty. Put your hand flat on the inside of an outside wall where the pipes run; when it starts to feel like a window pane, it's time to think about the pipes.

TROUBLES FIXED

- *You're on city water and the taps run fine:* fill containers anyway. Pressure can drop without warning, and the water may come with a boil notice later.
- *You don't know if your furnace needs power:* it does. Nearly every modern furnace and boiler does.

1.4 Minutes 0–15: shut off, shut in, count people

The first quarter hour is three short jobs, and none of them needs a light you can't find with your hands.

WHAT YOU NEED

- One light kept in one place everybody knows — a candle and matches on a saucer by the kitchen door, or a flashlight that lives there and nowhere else
- Your three questions (1.2)

HOW IT'S DONE

1. *Shut off.* Switch off or unplug the things that would be hurt by a surge when the power comes back — the computer, the television, the freezer if it's on a shaky line. Leave one lamp switched on so you'll know when the power returns. If you have an electric water heater and you think you'll be drawing water out of it later, switch its breaker off now; a heater that comes back on with an empty tank burns out its elements.
2. *Shut in.* Close the refrigerator and freezer and tell everybody they stay closed. Close every door to every room you won't use tonight. Draw the curtains on the north and west. Close the damper on any fireplace you are not burning in — an open chimney pulls warm air out of the house all night.
3. *Count people.* Who is home. Who is out and how they'll get back. Which neighbor lives alone, is old, or has a baby. The animals, and whether their water will freeze before morning.
4. Look out the window. If the whole road is dark, it's the line, not your house. Report it to the power company once, and then stop calling.

THE BY-EYE WAY

At the end of fifteen minutes the house should be quieter than it was — fewer open doors, fewer lights, nobody wandering. If there's still a flashlight going in every room and somebody's on the porch, you haven't shut in yet.

TROUBLES FIXED

- *Can't find the light in the dark:* that is the lesson, and you learn it once. Tomorrow the light gets a home.
- *Children frightened:* give each one a job — closing doors, counting candles, fetching blankets. A child with a job isn't scared for long.

1.5 Minutes 15–60: water, light, the one room

Now the real work, in the order of the failure line. Water first, because it has the shortest clock.

WHAT YOU NEED

- Every clean pot, pitcher, jug and bucket in the house
- The bathtub, plugged and wiped
- Candles and holders, an oil lamp, matches

HOW IT'S DONE

1. *Water.* Draw what's left in the pressure tank into clean pots and jugs for drinking and cooking. Do the drinking water first, then fill the tub for washing and flushing. Don't flush the toilet with tap water now — the tank water already in each toilet is one more flush, and after that you flush with a bucket of tub water poured fast into the bowl.
2. Remember the water heater. A 40-gallon tank holds nearly forty gallons of clean water you can draw from the drain valve at the bottom, once the power or gas to it is off and the water has cooled a while. Open a hot tap upstairs first to let air in.
3. *Light.* Set out tonight's light while there is still daylight to see by: candles in steady holders on plates, the lamp filled and its wick trimmed, matches in one dish. Don't light anything yet. Daylight is free.
4. *The one room.* Pick the room you will live in tonight — small, on the south side if you can, with the stove if you have one, near the kitchen and the water (6.2). Carry blankets, the drinking water and the light kit into it.

THE BY-EYE WAY

By the end of the hour you should be able to point to tonight's drinking water, tonight's light, and tonight's room without walking anywhere. If you have to go looking for any of the three, the hour isn't done.

TROUBLES FIXED

- *The tank ran dry before you got to it:* start on the water heater, the toilet tanks (fine for washing, not for drinking) and Chapter 3.
- *Not enough containers:* clean trash bags inside a bucket or a laundry basket hold washing and flushing water for a day or two. They aren't food-grade, so drinking water goes only in pots, jugs and food-grade containers.

> **Mind this.** Water from the water heater can carry sediment from the tank bottom; let it settle and pour off the clear water. Toilet-tank water is for washing and flushing only — never drinking, and never if you use tank cleaners.

1.6 Hours 2–6: heat and the first meal

Now you can think about being warm, and about supper. Not before.

WHAT YOU NEED

- A heat source that is safe indoors — a woodstove, a fireplace insert, or a heater sold for indoor use, with a working carbon monoxide alarm
- Blankets, wool, hats
- The refrigerator food, in the order below

HOW IT'S DONE

1. *Heat the one room only.* Light the stove and close the room off. Hang a blanket over any doorway that doesn't have a door (6.3). If you have no stove, the room is still warmer than the house with the doors shut, the curtains drawn, and four people in it.
2. Dress before you're cold. A wool layer and a hat put on at three in the afternoon are worth more than two blankets at ten at night.
3. *The first meal.* Eat out of the refrigerator first, the freezer second, and the pantry last. Open the refrigerator once, take out everything for the meal, and close it. Milk, leftovers, eggs and meat go first; hard cheese, butter and fruit can wait.
4. Make it hot if you can. One pot, one flame — a soup or a stew from what's in the refrigerator. A hot supper on the first night is worth more to a household than anything else you can do.

THE BY-EYE WAY

The room is warm enough when nobody is shivering sitting still and the water in a glass on the floor isn't skinned with ice by morning. It doesn't need to be seventy. Fifty-five in a room

full of people dressed for it is comfortable.

TROUBLES FIXED

- *Stove smokes when you light it:* the chimney is cold and the air in it is pushing down. Hold a lit twist of newspaper up into the flue for half a minute before you light the fire, to start it drawing the right way.
- *No stove at all:* see Chapter 7 for which heaters are safe indoors and which are not, and Chapter 15 for cooking a meal on one small flame.

> **MIND THIS.** Never use a grill, a charcoal fire, a camp stove meant for outdoors, or a generator inside the house, the garage or on a closed porch — not for heat, not for cooking, not for a few minutes. They make carbon monoxide, which has no smell and kills people in their sleep every winter. A generator runs outside, at least twenty feet from the house, with its exhaust pointed away from doors and windows. Put a battery carbon monoxide alarm in the one room. Chapter 6 says more.

1.7 Night one: sleep warm, wake early

More people get cold in their sleep than awake, because they go to bed damp, on the floor, alone.

WHAT YOU NEED

- Bedding laid off the floor — on a mattress, a cot, or a thick pad of folded blankets
- Dry clothes to sleep in, a wool hat, wool socks
- A hot-water bottle or a warm brick wrapped in a towel (7.8)

HOW IT'S DONE

1. Everybody sleeps in the one room. Beds close together, heads away from the outside wall and the window.
2. Change into dry clothes before bed. The clothes you wore all day are damp from the day's work even if they don't feel it, and damp cloth pulls heat out of you all night.
3. Put as much underneath you as on top. The floor is the coldest thing in the room.
4. Fill the hot-water bottle with hot water, not boiling, and tuck it at your feet or your middle. Children and old folks first.
5. Bank the stove for the night (7.3). Blow out every candle. Check the carbon monoxide alarm.

6. *Wake early.* The coldest hour is the one before dawn. Get up then, build the fire, and walk the house: look at the pipes, the animals' water, and whether anything has frozen.

THE BY-EYE WAY

If you wake up in the night with cold feet and a warm head, there isn't enough under you. If you wake with a stuffy head and a headache, open the room to fresh air at once and check the alarm — that is not the cold.

TROUBLES FIXED

- *The house will go below freezing and you have no pressure:* dripping a faucet does nothing without pressure. If the outage will last and the house will freeze, shut the main valve and open the lowest tap and every faucet to drain the pipes. A drained pipe can't burst.
- *Can't sleep for the cold:* eat something with fat in it before bed and drink something warm. The body makes heat from supper all night.

1.8 What a night actually costs — fuel, candles, food

People think a blackout night is expensive because the gear for it is. The night itself is cheap — if you spend it in the right order.

THE NUMBERS

A family of four, one room, one winter night of about fourteen hours, at typical 2026 prices.

Item	How much a night	About
Light — two household candles	Two 6-inch tapers, burned one at a time, 5–7 hours each	$1.50
Light — or one kerosene lamp	About half an ounce to an ounce an hour, a pint or less a night	$1–2
Heat — woodstove, one room	About a fiftieth of a cord for a cold day and night, at $300 a cord (the night alone is nearer $4 — see 7.11)	$6
Heat — or indoor-rated propane heater	Two to three 1-lb cylinders on low	$10–15
Food — supper and breakfast for four	From the refrigerator first, then rice, beans, oats from the pantry	$6–8
A night, woodstove and candles		**about $14**

HOW TO FIGURE IT

Candles: hours of dark you'll be awake (5) ÷ hours per candle (5–7) ≈ 1 candle. Buy two.
Wood: cords a winter (a one-room winter is about 3–4 cords over 180 days) ÷ 180 ≈ 0.02 cord a day.
0.02 × $300 = $6.

WHAT THE NUMBER LEAVES OUT

The expensive night is the one where something goes wrong in the wrong order: a freezer of meat lost because the door was opened every hour (several hundred dollars), a burst pipe in an outside wall (more), a motel because the house was let go cold. The cheap night and the dear night have the same candles in them. The difference is the order.

Prices are U.S. averages and vary by region and season. Work your own with the line above.

1.9 The gear that fails and the old substitute for each

Most of what fails in the first night fails because it needs a battery, a charge or a plug. Each one had an older thing that didn't.

What fails	Why	The old substitute
Flashlight	Batteries die, and weaken fast in the cold	A candle in a glass jar; a kerosene lamp (Ch. 8)
Phone as a light, clock and address book	One battery doing four jobs	A wind-up clock; phone numbers written on paper inside a cupboard door; a battery or crank radio for news
Power station or power bank	Holds hours, not days, and heat drains it fastest	Keep it for the phone and the radio only. Never for heat.
Electric stove	No power	Woodstove; an outdoor camp stove used outdoors; the haybox to finish what you start (Ch. 15)
Well pump	No power	Stored water; the hand pump and bucket (Ch. 3)
Refrigerator	No power	Eat it first; a cooler packed with snow or ice kept in the shade on a cold porch (Ch. 10)
Electric can opener	No power	A hand opener kept in the drawer, and a second one in the pantry
Electric blanket	No power	Wool, a hot-water bottle, a warm brick (7.8)
Garage door	No power	The red manual-release cord — find it in daylight, before you need it
Sump pump	No power	A bucket and a strong back, every few hours in a wet spell

The by-eye way

Walk the house once with the breakers off on a mild Saturday afternoon. Everything you reach for that doesn't work goes on a list. That list is your shopping list, and it's usually short and cheap.

Troubles fixed

- *You bought the expensive version of everything:* keep it. Just put the old substitute beside it. The old one is what you use when the new one runs out.

CUT OUT AND KEEP BY THE KITCHEN DOOR

1.10 The first-hour card

BEFORE ANYTHING — THE THREE QUESTIONS

- ☐ Is everybody here? Is anybody hurt?
- ☐ What gets ruined if I do nothing for an hour?
- ☐ What can't I get back if I waste it?

MINUTES 0–15

- ☐ Unplug what a surge would hurt. Leave one lamp switched on.
- ☐ Electric water heater breaker off.
- ☐ Fridge and freezer shut — and they stay shut.
- ☐ Close every room you won't use. Close the fireplace damper.
- ☐ Count people, neighbors, animals.

MINUTES 15–60

- ☐ Drinking water drawn from what's left in the tank.
- ☐ Bathtub filled for washing and flushing.
- ☐ Light set out — candles, lamp, matches in one dish. Not lit yet.
- ☐ One room chosen. Blankets, water and light carried in.

HOURS 2–6

- ☐ Heat the one room only. Doorways hung with blankets.
- ☐ Wool and hats on before anyone is cold.
- ☐ Supper from the fridge first. Open it once.
- ☐ No grill, camp stove or generator indoors. CO alarm on.

NIGHT ONE

- ☐ Everybody in one room, off the floor, in dry clothes.
- ☐ Hot-water bottles for the youngest and oldest.
- ☐ Stove banked. Candles out. Alarm checked.
- ☐ Up before dawn: fire, pipes, animals' water.

Water before warmth. Warmth before food. — The Old Ways Still Work · Amos Beiler

There’s More Where This Came From

This was the first hour. The book is the whole winter.

This chapter came out of *The Old Ways Still Work* — twenty-one chapters, from finding water without power to heating one room on four cords of wood, putting up a winter of food, making soap from ash and fat, and the repair bench that keeps it all running. Every method measured out plain, every number worked on paper, and a card at the end of every chapter to tack up by the door.

Get the whole book → oldways.example

Nobody wrote it down. Now it’s yours. — Amos