

Home on the Territory

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They live way out there, Molly and Cody, more than 100 kilometres from Smithers. Deep in one of the Gidimt'en (Bear/Wolf) lands of the Witsuwit'en, in a territory called Lhudis Bin (in English, "The Lake Way Out There") the cabin sits on a south-facing rise. And it's more than a cabin. It's a whole complex: the log cabin surrounded by outbuildings—woodshed, outdoor kitchen, bathhouse (this is a work in progress: no running water yet) and a smokehouse. Step out the front door and there are lovely views of peaks in the distance, all snowy on a sunny March day when the temperature hovers near zero, the air smells sweet and you can poke around outside with just a sweater on. In the big piles of snow pushed up by the plow, there are snow forts and a snow cave, a sign that children live here.

It's just a one-room cabin with the kitchen at one end and the beds at the other. A staircase descends along one wall from a loft above: it is small for four people. At the table I meet Lily and Liam, who are five and eight. The family homeschools them, so on the rafters I see an alphabet chart and a number line, and books are scattered everywhere. One is a volume sent by Robert Munsch, in response to a letter from Molly suggesting he do a book on boys with long hair. Liam does have long hair, which Molly brushes out and braids while we talk.

It took a year and a half to build this place, Molly tells me, from the time they began bringing in logs until the building had a door and a wood stove. The Gidimt'en were keen to have someone living out here on the territory, so lots of people came out to help build this place and make it work. It was tough in the beginning ("we basically abandoned anything we had that needed to be plugged in," Cody says) and even now, with satellite internet, plus a generator and solar panels that charge a battery bank, it's still tough at times. "But I can work from here now!" grins Molly, indicating her laptop, which allows her to work at the Office of the Wet'suwet'en.

Necessarily this family has its feet in both worlds. Home is here, but at the moment they also keep a small apartment in Smithers to be their temporary base when they visit or have to travel in for work. "Traditionally, out here you would have all your family and your loved ones nearby," says Molly. "Nobody ever did live on the territory alone. The reality now is that the kids miss Grandma, so we go in for visits."

But raising these bright, active and interested kids out here is a central part of the project. Cody, who is originally from Haida Gwaii, explains that getting back to living on the land may be a two step process. "To go back to traditional subsistence living you need to go back to a homeschooling lifestyle first—and then to traditional subsistence. I think it's a generational work, and the next step right now is to get more people out here to create the community. Going all the way at once to a traditional lifestyle is too big of a jump for one generation."

Molly observes how it works. “Even when Liam was young we’d go goat hunting and build a fire and pick berries—and he’d call being out there his ‘other home.’ He’s already talked about where he’s going to build his cabin. His vision of what the future looks like is different. I grew up in town, and I can’t imagine what that’s like. Our kids’ worldview will be different from ours.”

While Liam made a transition from living in town to living out here, Lily has always lived here. “For Lily, this is home,” says Molly. “When we’re in town, she says, ‘I want to go home.’”

Of course living in the cabin is also tied in with defence of the traditional lands of the Wet’suwet’en. You commonly hear about the Wet’suwet’en traditional territory, that this event or that ceremony takes place on the unceded territory of the Wet’suwet’en antion, or that things are happening on the territory that are not approved by the hereditary chiefs. And you might wonder: is anyone really living out there?

Yes, here they are.

But the territory has been under siege from logging and mining for decades: in fact we drove here on logging roads, dodging loaded trucks headed down to the mills. From the cabin you can see a nearby cutblock that was replanted and is growing back in an unnatural monoculture of pine. Logging results in roads, and both the roads and the cutting changes the landscape. Molly tells us about her favourite huckleberry patch: but now, a logging road has been put in just below it, and logging is proceeding uphill towards where the berries are. Cody mentions that in 2015, after an increase in vehicle traffic, many of the moose left the area. “It’s not really possible at the moment for the territory, in the damaged state it’s in, to support us and our extended families,” Molly explains. A family needs to harvest food for its own meals, and it also needs to contribute foods to the feast hall.

The territory of Lhudis Bin belongs to the Cas Yex or Grizzly house. Molly, even though she’s only about thirty, has herself just this last week, in the feast hall, been given a chief’s name. She is now Sleydo’, a name that has been dormant for about seventy years.

Even though they are young and capable, Sleydo’ says that when they decided to live out here, “our families thought we were crazy! They said things like, ‘You would freeze to death in your sleep!’ But now they come out and they see that it’s doable and it’s sustainable.” Like any young family, they are caught up in a web of multiple ties to various generations. Having internet and driving to Smithers once a week is just a necessary adaptation to make it work for everybody.

They place a large pot of snow on the wood stove to melt for dishwashing water. It is rustic simplicity: there’s no running water here, no electricity, no cell service. “But unfortunately the cell service is getting closer,” Cody says, indicating a nearby hill where he’s noticed he can get a signal.

One of the functions of the homestead, which also goes under the name of the Gidimt’en Wellness Village, is to host indigenous visitors who want to learn traditional skills. “The only way to encourage people to care is if they have connection with the land,” says Sleydo’. Cody explains that they teach workshops on hide tanning, trapping, hunting, food preservation and more. “We’ve hosted women’s camps and family

camps. People know what they're missing. So there's lots of interest." What was once a cabin has now grown into an educational centre whose many buildings can accommodate more students.

They are also connected to other homeschooling families living out on the land through the Indigenous Life School, which uses seasonal themes to organize learning in traditional ways.

A beautiful lynx fur hanging on the wall bears witness to Cody's traditional skills, but he has a special interest in moose. "We do all aspects of tanning moose hide," he says, "and we have different hides that are at different points in the process so we can teach the entire thing in one weekend. Someone paying attention can walk away and tan a hide. To be able to clothe yourself is fundamental."

And Sleydo' speaks of the challenge of perpetuating all of this knowledge. "In this day and age there's not enough time to learn all the crafts everybody used to do," she says. "It's part of the Life School project to share forgotten skills between nations. Birch bark baskets, for example: we've learned how to make them from the Secwepemc, near Kamloops. This is one of the things they're proficient at."

Cody adds that, "We've decided to pick a new skill each year to learn."

There are several other families in British Columbia living on traditional territories and participating in the Life School. "And then locally, lots of families come out and are like, 'How do we do this?'" says Sleydo'. She indicates that there may be another Witsuwit'en family from the Tsayu (Beaver clan) family working on setting up something similar.

But Cody points out that often the older generations are not so interested in trying this experience. "They don't want to live out here because they already did it, or had the experience with their grandparents."

For sure, it's pretty crowded in the cabin, but it's clear their hearts are happily settled in living here. "It is so much less stressful than life in town!" Sleydo' points out. "People sleep a lot when they first come out here."

There's a generator to run, to charge the battery bank about once a week. Everything in the cabin operates on twelve volts, but besides the occasional light, the electricity is mainly used for the internet, phones and laptops. Presently they have a 140 Watt solar panel, but they are hoping to exchange it for a 300 Watt one, which will almost eliminate the need for the generator.

"The first year it was just kerosene lamps," says Cody. "It was a different lifestyle. In the winter you'd fall asleep at 5:00!"

Is life out here easy? "It was pretty interesting to potty train out here in the winter with no running water!" Sleydo' exclaims. Cody relates trying to walk a short distance outside at the height of bug season. "Yeah, I had to turn around," he says. "And when I got back my neck was a half inch thicker!"

It's a long term project that has positive implications for the perpetuation of traditional ways, and improves the monitoring of the health of the territory. "Unless you're out in the bush," Cody says, "you don't know the extent to which things are changing. We keep track, and we know, and we notice when there's change." As more Witsuwit'en families move out in the territory, as they make homes, they will continue to turn there into here and provide not only eyes and ears but a presence.

As we leave, they lend us a radio to make our drive out on the logging roads a bit safer. The intensity of resource use out here—not even counting the massive and ill-considered Coastal Gas Link pipeline project—is shocking. It is clearly predicated on the idea that no one lives out here, and that no one needs this land for anything other than growing trees. Which is simply not true.