

# “I’m happy to say you are a true American”: An Analysis of Cody’sLab



*Thumbnail from the first episode of Chicken Hole Base, showing Cody next to the eponymous chicken hole, in his handmade copper chainmail suit*

## Introduction

Cody Don Reeder, whose channel is known as Cody’sLab, is a Youtuber who makes videos on a number of topics, including science, experiments, building things, gardening, and many others. Cody is also very popular, at over 2 million subscribers to date. I was initially interested to write about him after reading Roderick Nash’s claim in *Wilderness and the American Mind* that the pioneers were almost universally hostile to wilderness, and thinking of Cody as a

counterexample: a man who moves out into the wilderness and is highly protective of it. My interest was furthered by this comment, on one of Cody's videos (typos are original):

I'm happy to say you are a true American, innovative, resourceful, cleaver, and makes cool stuff with what you have. People like you are unfortunelty gone with the ages :( <sup>1</sup>

My overall question is this: how does Cody reflect and resonate with conceptions of Americanness, particularly regarding the back to the land movement, self-sufficiency, resourcefulness, and environmentalism?

## Basic Ideas of the Back to the Land Movement

The back to the land movement is, fundamentally, a movement aimed at returning from the cities to the countryside and becoming farmers. Though commonly associated with the 1970s, it began at the end of the 19th century and grew in the early 20th.<sup>2</sup> It was originally articulated by Bolton Hall, in his 1907 book *Three Acres and Liberty*: people in cities were like a horse with its feet tied together at night, that still hobbles during the day even with the ties off, until it sees another horse walking freely. The message was that city-dwellers thought they were bound to a regimented life, but that they could escape it, if they realized this was possible.<sup>3</sup>

The key purpose of this return was self-sufficiency, especially in food: "With one voice, moreover, back-to-the-land writers endorsed household self-sufficiency. While many of them encouraged readers to develop a cash crop from their new farm or garden, nearly all insisted that market production should be subordinated to the greater goal of an independent

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<sup>1</sup> Cody'sLab, "Oversized Pressure Gauge"

<sup>2</sup> Brown, *Back to the Land*, 3-4.

<sup>3</sup> Brown, 22.

subsistence.”<sup>4</sup> This was intended as a way of protecting oneself from the danger of an unstable economy: “Back-to-the-land authors of this generation repeated in unison that the chief reason for returning to the land was that it would enable one to defend oneself against depressions, panics, joblessness, high prices, and low wages.”<sup>5</sup>

## Chicken Hole Base as a back to the land project

The connection between the back to the land movement and Cody'sLab is in his project known as Chicken Hole Base (hereafter abbreviated as CHB). CHB is a project to settle Cody out in the Nevada countryside. There are two videos announcing the project and explaining its purpose. The first video is public, entitled “Missing Mars.” This video explains the conceit of the project: Cody tried to go to Mars and build a settlement there (shown in the space flight simulator Kerbal Space Program), but something went wrong and he landed back on Earth instead, so he will build a simulation of a Mars base here; the area is “rather Mars-like” after all.<sup>6</sup> The other video is unlisted, but available in the CHB playlist, entitled “I’m Moving to Nevada! (eventually)”. In this video, Cody purchases the property and explores it with his dad, giving a plainer version of his goals: set the area up so he can live there<sup>7</sup>.

Self-sufficiency, a central tenet of the back to the landers, is a key element of CHB. The base is intended to be completely self-sufficient in food, water, and even air.<sup>8</sup> The reasons differ somewhat from the back to the landers, however. As described earlier, the back to the landers wanted self-sufficiency to protect people from economic hardship. The first reason for Cody seeking self-sufficiency is to model conditions on Mars: on Mars all food and water would have to come from inside the base, (and of course the atmosphere on Mars is unbreathable) as

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<sup>4</sup> Brown, 29.

<sup>5</sup> Brown, 27

<sup>6</sup> Cody'sLab, “Chicken Hole Base Episode 1”

<sup>7</sup> Cody'sLab, “I’m Moving to Nevada.”

<sup>8</sup> \_\_\_\_\_, “Chicken Hole Base, Episode 1: 5:07

shipping anything through space is extremely expensive. This is, to an extent, reflected in the economics of CHB: bringing stuff all the way out to the property is cumbersome, and so the more he can make at the base the easier it is. (This is especially true of water, which he recently released a video on capturing it on-site<sup>9</sup>). Cody is also not unfamiliar with economic insecurity- his youtube ad revenue has been shut off for going on three years now for unclear reasons,<sup>10</sup> (along with many of his videos being removed from Youtube)<sup>11</sup> and he depends on his Patrons for income, so he also has economic reasons to try to be as self-sufficient as he can.

Associated with this self-sufficiency is a desire to be independent from outside control and the generally oppressive nature of city life (as the back to the landers viewed it). One back to the lander wrote: "What I want is to own a piece of land and nobody to lord it over me or tell me what to do with it."<sup>12</sup> This sentiment resonated a century later with one woman who "looked wistfully back to a time "years ago" when people were "more self-reliant and were more able to take hold of the reins and do things themselves."<sup>13</sup> Cody expresses some similar sentiments- in "I'm moving to Nevada" he says that some benefits of moving out to CHB include lower taxes, fewer regulations on radioactive materials (which Cody sometimes handles), and not having to film on his parents' property (which they didn't like). He also mentions the rock being easier to break, which would allow him to dig without needing the permitting for explosives, which had been an obstacle in a previous series of his.<sup>14</sup> An interesting occurrence a few months earlier also hints at this line of thinking- the city of Logan, where he lived, sent him a notice telling him to mow the patch of sugar beets he was growing, calling them weeds (despite them being obviously cultivated). The video's description says, "Apparently the state vegetable is now

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<sup>9</sup> \_\_\_\_\_, "Chicken Hole Base, Episode 21"

<sup>10</sup> Reeder, Twitter post

<sup>11</sup> Cody'sLab, "What's Been Going On"

<sup>12</sup> Brown, 92.

<sup>13</sup> Brown, 229.

<sup>14</sup> Cody'sLab, "Cody's Mine: The End"

considered a noxious weed. Time to move I guess.” One comment says “THIS is why I live in the country.”<sup>15</sup>

One factor in this desire to regain independence is that, in the original back to the land movement, many people in the cities had recently come from the countryside: looking at the Censuses from 1890 and 1910, Dona Brown says that “These statistics make it clear that for millions of first-generation city dwellers, going back to the land would not be a very long journey.”<sup>16</sup> Unlike most of the back to the landers described in Brown’s Epilogue, who were native city people, Cody is from a farm- he says in “Missing Mars” that “I really need to get away from these car noises. I was only supposed to be here [in the city] for one, maybe two years- not five.”<sup>17</sup>

Another important parallel between CHB and the back to the land projects, especially of the early 20th century, is that they were not being done only for the individual going out to the land- they were also being produced as content for an audience. The back to the land writers wrote stories of people going out to the land for an audience that was hungry for them- so much so that some authors invented stories, including one of the most famous, the story of the so-called David Grayson, a fictional pseudonym for the author and journalist Ray Stannad Baker. Other authors, however, were telling their own stories.<sup>18</sup> Cody, of course, is telling his own story, and could hardly make it up, as he is filming it. There are, however, ways in which Cody presents CHB that shape it as a story, on top of simply being what he is doing (though I hasten to add that these divergences are not hidden or anything). The first is the overall conceit, that Cody missed Mars and is now practicing for another run. Another is the interesting conceit of

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<sup>15</sup> \_\_\_\_\_, “City Wants me to Mow”

<sup>16</sup> Brown, 24

<sup>17</sup> Cody’sLab, “Chicken Hole Base, Episode 1”

<sup>18</sup> Brown, 52-60.

“Robo-Cody.” Robo-Cody is, in concept, a robotic version of Cody who does a lot of the manual labor (CHB Ep 6 is the first mention I can find of him) (and doesn’t need to wear Cody’s chainmail suit to simulate a spacesuit)<sup>19</sup>. In one episode, Cody describes some “upgrades” he gave to make Robo-Cody more efficient.<sup>20</sup> Robo-Cody is actually just Cody, edited in to be in the video twice at the same time, but it shows how Cody creates a story around his project, similar to the back to the land writers.

Another aspect of the back to the land stories that shows up in CHB is the story being kicked off by unease or ill health. Brown says that “Often, the stories began with a personal crisis,” and cites an example of one writer who claimed to be different because they *didn’t* have a crisis to start with.<sup>21</sup> Published and private accounts describe “work in the city either as too fast paced and competitive or monotonous and unsatisfying- enough to make a person sick, indeed.”<sup>22</sup> In “Missing Mars,” Cody says that “my Youtube channel hasn’t had a lot of things going on lately, and I really need another big project.”<sup>23</sup> In “I’m Moving to Nevada,” he gives a reason for this: “the creator burnout thing is hitting me pretty hard, especially since over a hundred of my videos I’ve either had to make private or Youtube’s removed... seeing that work... taken away, it gets to you after a while.”<sup>24</sup> For Cody and the back to the land writers, going back to the land is a way to revitalize yourself with independence and a new goal.

Another parallel is the emphasis on the practical. In back to the land stories, “it was not so much their romanticism as this relentless focus on concrete agricultural advice that put back-to-the-landers at odds with country life reformers. The hallmark of the back-to-the-land

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<sup>19</sup> Cody’sLab, “Chicken Hole Base, Episode 5”

<sup>20</sup> Cody’sLab, “Chicken Hole Base, Episode 14”

<sup>21</sup> Brown, 59.

<sup>22</sup> Brown, 82.

<sup>23</sup> Cody’sLab, “Chicken Hole Base, Episode 1”

<sup>24</sup> Cody’sLab, “I’m Moving to Nebraska”

book was the detailed information displayed in charts of vegetable planting dates, sketches of garden plans, and tables of expenditures.”<sup>25</sup> Because they were writing for people that wanted to go out to the land themselves, or thought of themselves as such, it made sense to focus on what a prospective farmer would do. Cody has a similar focus- his videos are primarily dedicated to the tasks of building and running CHB- setting up the tanks, preparing the greenhouses, tending to the plants, etc (and almost all the videos are named this way)- and he rarely waxes poetic about the landscape or the simple life. This focus is a feature of his work- one comment (though not on a CHB video) reads “Cody, giving us the yard work content we subscribed for.”<sup>26</sup> This focus on practical tasks also extends to a shared focus on what the back to the landers called “intensive agriculture,” or “techniques that allowed European peasants to get large yields from small places.”<sup>27</sup> For these writers, this allowed those without a lot of capital to be able to sustain themselves. For Cody, the use of greenhouses is a necessity because of the arid environment and the Mars modeling- the soil on Mars is toxic, so he has to make his own out of compost.<sup>28</sup> For both, it is a way of getting around constraints and making the most of what they have.

Cody’s CHB is, in all these ways, a back to the land project, with many parallels to the original back to the land projects of the early 20th century. There are, however, important differences, especially because of Cody’s presence on Youtube and the role of Mars. All of this, as we shall see, is bound up in conceptions of the frontier.

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<sup>25</sup> Brown, 29.

<sup>26</sup> Cody’sLab, “Reforestation the Ranch”

<sup>27</sup> Brown, 36

<sup>28</sup> Cody’s Lab, “Chicken Hole Base, Episode 13”

# Role of the Frontier

Along with being a back to the land project, CHB is also a frontier project, and the connection with Mars is conceived as a frontier mission as well. Because of this, the perception of Cody is also related to the frontier.

Cody's connection with Mars extends beyond CHB. Cody was one of the top 100 finalists for the Mars One mission, a private mission to set up a colony on Mars, intended to be funded by a reality show of the colonists. This was noted in a local paper<sup>29</sup> and Cody made a video interviewing himself talking about his selection. In it, Cody explicitly invoked the American frontier as an example for him: "This is a colonization mission... it's just like the Virginia company back in, what was that, 1500 [sic- an annotation gives the correct date], there was a private company, based in Europe, and they got some ships, sent them on a six-month voyage across the ocean to the new world, to set up a colony, and here we are, 500 years later, one of the most powerful countries in the world. I can see very similar things happen to Mars."<sup>30</sup> Though Mars One ended up folding, declaring bankruptcy in 2019,<sup>31</sup> the project at CHB can be seen as a continuation of Cody's efforts to extend the frontier to Mars. There is one moment in CHB where Cody brings up the pioneers explicitly: he gets the idea to cook with cow chips ("to save on wood", another example of practical self-sufficiency), and then says: "I think the pioneers did this, didn't they?"<sup>32</sup>

Cody is also connected to the frontier through his perception. In his essay on the frontier, Turner notes that "the frontier is productive of individualism" and that "to the frontier the American intellect owes its striking characteristics. That coarseness and strength combined with

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<sup>29</sup> Knox, "Utah student makes 'Mars 100' cut."

<sup>30</sup> Cody'sLab, "Cody Reeder, Top 100"

<sup>31</sup> Cooper, "Mars One is Dead"

<sup>32</sup> Cody'sLab, "Chicken Hole Base, Episode 13"

acuteness and inquisitiveness; that practical, inventive turn of mind, quick to find expedients; that masterful grasp of material things, lacking in the artistic but powerful to effect great ends; that restless, nervous energy; that dominant individualism, working for good and for evil, and withal that buoyancy and exuberance which comes with freedom”<sup>33</sup> Cody displays these traits to a great extent, as we have seen: practicality and inventiveness (Cody actually mentions these traits in his Mars One application video)<sup>34</sup> , restlessness (in wanting to go out to the frontier), and individualism (CHB is a fundamentally individual and solitary project).

All of these traits are associated with the frontier, which Turner then says is now closed: “the frontier has gone, and with its going has closed the first period of American history.”<sup>35</sup> It is because of this association with the frontier, and Cody’s attempt at reopening it, that the comment which opened this essay said that “people like you are unfortunately [sic] gone with the ages.”<sup>36</sup> They had been gone with the frontier, but now Cody, a new pioneer, is bringing them back.

## Resourcefulness

The conception of resourcefulness in a hostile environment as a particularly American trait goes back to De Crevecoeur, and this resonates with Cody as well. This is central to De Crevecoeur’s description of Nantucket: “Yet I have a spot in my view... though it is barren in its soil, insignificant in its extent, inconvenient in its situation... Here I can point out to you the exertions of the most successful industry;” and “their freedom, their skill, their probity, and perseverance, have accomplished everything.”<sup>37</sup> He goes on to describe the island’s barrenness, as well as its inhabitants’ industriousness. In letter V, he talks about their employment: they started out with

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<sup>33</sup> Turner, “The Significance of the Frontier”

<sup>34</sup> Cody’sLab, “Cody Reeder Mars Applicant”

<sup>35</sup> Turner, “The Significance of the Frontier”

<sup>36</sup> Cody’sLab, “Oversized Pressure Gauge”

<sup>37</sup> De Crevecoeur, “Letters From an American Farmer” Letter IV

only one boat for whaling, and slowly became more and more skilled until they gained a near monopoly on it.<sup>38</sup> The key point here is that they have done this by their own effort and problem solving, without external help or good land to work.

Cody has numerous examples of this kind of resourcefulness and creative thinking. The initial comment noting Cody's "true American[ness]" was responding to Cody taking a pressure gauge and scaling it up to show how it worked; not a thing most people would probably think to do.<sup>39</sup> The most recent adaptation in CHB is Cody's efforts to get water, using a dehumidifier to get water out of the ground; it uses the same principle as a design that's used by other people, but he modified it to be significantly more efficient to fit the situation at CHB, where water is difficult to get.<sup>40</sup>

## Environmentalism

In his living out in the wilderness, Cody's environmentalism (what originally interested me in writing about him) follows in the tradition of moving out to the wilderness to save and protect it. In his book on the conception of the wilderness, Nash cites a 19th century depiction of a pioneer who protects nature: "Pioneers who wastefully slash the forest and its creatures... occupied the lowest positions in Cooper's elaborate social scale. Leatherstocking, on the other hand, was the ideal pioneer because he honored the wilderness and used it respectfully."<sup>41</sup> Cody is, similarly, very protective of the area he has moved into. One example happens after someone drove through the grass at CHB while it was wet, meaning that "the grass is going to be damaged like this, potentially for years. I am not happy about it."<sup>42</sup> A much more dramatic example of protectiveness occurred on Cody's parents' ranch. A fire broke out in the area, and Cody went

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<sup>38</sup> De Crevecoeur, "Letters From an American Farmer" Letter V

<sup>39</sup> Cody'sLab, "Oversized Pressure Gauge"

<sup>40</sup> Cody'sLab, "Chicken Hole Base, Episode 21"

<sup>41</sup> Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 77

<sup>42</sup> Cody'sLab, "Chicken Hole Base, Episode 4"

out with a shovel to save the trees by stomping the fire out, as well as clearing grass away from the trees; he saved dozens of trees by doing this, along with his beehive. This was done at considerable risk to himself, as he acknowledges in the video.<sup>43</sup>

Nash comes up in another way as well; for Nash, the pioneers who lived in the wilderness were hostile to it because of the dangers they encountered- it was their enemy.<sup>44</sup> Cody, by contrast, protects the wilderness despite the danger he encounters from it. When he spends his first night at the base, he accidentally locks himself out of his car, and has to try to open the door with a piece of wire. Eventually, however, he hears and sees coyotes in the distance, and frantically breaks the window and opens the door that way. Despite this, he does not show anger at the coyotes; talking after getting inside the car, he says “It’s just coyotes; probably just curious. You know a single coyote, they’re not that big; they’re mostly fluff. The issue is, you get a big pack of ‘em... I’ve seen what they do to deer, it ain’t pretty.”<sup>45</sup> While he knows the dangers the wilderness can pose, it does not lead him to disdain for it.

Another environmental thinker with relevance to Cody is William Cronon. In his essay, *The Trouble with Wilderness*, he argues that the way we imagine wilderness as a place untouched by humans is unhelpful, and that we should look for the wild in everything and figure out how we integrate ourselves into it.<sup>46</sup> Cody is on both sides of Cronon’s argument. On the one hand, he picked the spot he did partly because it was far away from other people and untouched by pollution: when walking through the area, he exclaims “This is some clean snow; and it tastes good actually! There’s no industrial smokestacks for a hundred miles.”<sup>47</sup> On the other hand,

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<sup>43</sup> Cody’sLab, “The Ranch was on Fire”

<sup>44</sup> Nash, 43

<sup>45</sup> Cody’s Lab, “Chicken Hole Base, Episode 3”

<sup>46</sup> Cronon, 19-20.

<sup>47</sup> Cody’s Lab, “I’m Moving to Nevada”

Cody integrates himself into the area and has no qualms about bringing things to it. He brings his bees<sup>48</sup> and chickens<sup>49</sup> to the property. The area is now his responsibility.

This sense of responsibility for it comes out most clearly in his video on the trees at CHB. In this video, he looks at the trees, many of which are infested with scale-bugs (though the scale bugs are impossible to see on the video)- he eventually concludes that all the trees are area are dying, and asks, with anguish in his voice, “what could be causing this?” and says “I think it’s us humans”, ultimately attributing it to climate change. He tries to figure out ways to save them, though with the problem being climate change and a region-wide drought there isn’t much he can do. Cody’s environmentalism and protectiveness of nature come out of a strong sense of responsibility for it.

## Conclusion

Cody’s Lab (and his popularity) reflects our conception of Americanness as individualistic and resourceful. This conception came out of our ideas of the frontier. When the frontier closed and the country industrialized, people who wanted independence went back to the land and embraced these qualities again. Now, with the environment being the current moment’s defining crisis (in the form of climate change), people like Cody want to be the ones to go out and fix it, and they look to the frontier as an example. Cody is a true American because these traits are how we define ourselves- the country was built by the pioneers, and Cody is a new pioneer, bringing those traits back into our current world.

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<sup>48</sup> Cody’s Lab, “Chicken Hole Base, Episode 8”

<sup>49</sup> Cody’s Lab, “Chicken Hole Base, Episode 4”

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