

An Interview with Ted Kaczynski

by Blackfoot Valley Dispatch

Ted Kaczynski

2001

In 1999 I requested an interview with Theodore J. Kaczynski for the Blackfoot Valley Dispatch which he kindly granted. The interview took place that same year at the United States Penitentiary, Administrative Maximum, Florence, Colorado.

BVD: Well...

TJK: Well.

BVD: Well, why did you leave your job at Berkeley and your career in mathematics?

TJK: At the time I accepted the job at Berkeley, I had already decided that I would keep it for at most two years before leaving it to go live in the woods. The fact is that I never at any time felt satisfied with the idea of spending my life as just a mathematician and nothing more. Ever since my early teens I had dreamed of escaping from civilization—as in going to live on an uninhabited island or in some other wild place.

The trouble was that I didn't know how to go about it, and it was extremely difficult to work up the nerve to cut loose from my civilized moorings and take off to the woods. It's very difficult because sometimes we don't know how much the choices we make are governed by the expectations of people around us, and the fact that we go and do something other people would regard as mad—it's very difficult to do. Furthermore, I didn't know where to go really.

But at about the beginning of my last year at the University of Michigan I went through a kind of crisis. You could say that the psychological chains with which society binds us sort of broke for me. After that I was sure that I had the courage to break away from the system, to take off and just go into some wild place and try to live there. When I went to Berkeley, I never went there with the intention of continuing there indefinitely. I took the job at Berkeley only to earn some money to get started with, to buy a piece of land.

BVD: You said that when you were in your early teens you had dreams of going to live in an uninhabited place. Do you recall anything that led you to have those dreams? Something you saw or experienced?

TJK: Certainly things I read led me in that direction. Robinson Crusoe, for one thing. And then when I was maybe 11 or 12, somewhere in around there, I read some anthropology books about Neanderthal man and speculations about the way they lived and so forth. I became very interested in reading about that stuff and at some point asked myself why I wanted to read more

about this material. At some point it dawned on me that what I really wanted was not to read more about these things but to actually live that way.

BVD: It's interesting that these things impacted you so strongly that you actually acted on them. What do you think it was about the lives or lifestyles of Crusoe and Neanderthal man that appealed to you?

TJK: At the time I don't think I knew why I was attracted to those ways of life. I now think it had a great deal to do with freedom and personal autonomy.

BVD: Those things must appeal to many people. So, why not everyone who...?

TJK: I think a lot of people are attracted to these things, but they aren't especially determined to actually break away from their ties and actually go and do something like that. Robinson Crusoe is supposed to be one of the most widely read books that's ever been written. So it's obviously attractive to many people. [An investigator for my case] said that she herself was very interested in the way of life I adopted in Montana and that many other people to whom she talked about my case were also very interested in it.

And many people that her investigators talked to thought that they envied me. As a matter of fact, one of the FBI agents who arrested me said "I really envy your way of life up here." So, there are a lot of people who react that way, but they just sort of drift with the tide and don't come to a point where they break away.

BVD: When you broke away, you went to Lincoln, Montana. Why Lincoln?

TJK: Well, first of all I applied for a lease on a piece of crown land in British Columbia. After, I think, over a year, they turned it down. I spent the next winter, the winter of 1970-1971, at my parents' home in Lombard, Illinois. Meanwhile my brother had gone to live in Great Falls, Montana, where he eventually got a job at the Anaconda Company smelter. At some point during that winter he mentioned in a letter to my mother that if I wanted to buy a piece of land in his part of the country, he would be interested in going 50-50 with me on it. So during the spring I drove out to Great Falls, showed up at his apartment, and took him up on his offer. With characteristic passivity, he left it up to me to find a piece of land.

Not knowing what else to do, I just took off toward the west on Highway 200, which at the time I think was called Highway 20, to see what I could see. As I passed through Lincoln I saw a little cabin, almost just a kiosk by the side of the road, with a sign advertising real estate. I stopped and asked the realtor, an old man named Ray Jensen, whether he could show me a secluded plot of land. He showed me a place up Stemple Pass Road. I liked it. I took my brother to see it and he liked it too, so we bought it. We paid \$2,100 in cash—in twenty dollar bills—to the owner, Cliff Gehring, Senior.

BVD: So it could have been almost anywhere, actually.

TJK: Yeah.

BVD: What was Lincoln like when you first moved there?

TJK: The town itself to me doesn't seem that much different. I don't notice that much change. But there has been some, like the new school, the library, and a few new businesses. Maybe I would notice the changes in the town more if I were interested in it, but since I'm not, I don't notice much of those changes.

I am interested in the surrounding countryside, and that has changed a lot because aside from logging and road building, an awful lot of people have moved in there. For example, Stemple Pass Road. There were far fewer places along Stemple Pass Road, and most of them were just log cabins. Not modern log cabins, but ones that must have been built decades and decades ago, and

the few year-round residents were real old-timers, another culture, not modern people. Stemple Pass Road at that time looked like a bit left over from the old frontier days.

If you go down Stemple Pass Road today, you'll see these fancy, pretentious, modern things that really look out of place in the woods. But the very few cabins that existed before were not pretentious. They weren't modern. In fact, once when my parents came to visit me in the early 1970s, we drove along Stemple Pass Road and my mother, who is bourgeois to the core in spite of her background, asked in a sneering tone "Who are these people who live in these places? Are they just drifters or what?" They weren't drifters, but stable old-timers, retirees. But they weren't concerned about status and the appearance of their homes. They were old-fashioned enough so that they didn't care whether their houses had an appearance of middle-class respectability. So, by my mother's standard their homes looked shabby.

You can see how Stemple Pass Road has changed and similar changes, I think, characterize a lot of the country around Lincoln, because a lot of places where there are cabins now, there were no cabins when I got there.

BVD: Your cabin looked right at home—harmonious—with its surroundings in the woods. Did you use plans to help you with the building of it or did you plan the building yourself?

TJK: I just planned it myself.

BVD: And you built the cabin yourself?

TJK: I had a little help from my brother, but very little. The amount of help he gave me was insignificant. Mostly I did it by myself.

BVD: How long did it take you to build it?

TJK: It took me from the beginning of July 1971 until I think late November. But the work was interrupted by some trips I made to Great Falls for various purposes. Much more important, it was interrupted when I scalded my foot. On August 1st, 1971, I was so clumsy as to knock over a pot of boiling soup. It poured right down into my sneaker and scalded my foot so badly that, on doctor's orders, I remained inactive for about 5 or 5 1/2 weeks.

BVD: I'm curious. Did you have enough light in your cabin? Was it light enough in there?

TJK: In the winter?

BVD: Anytime.

TJK: Yeah. It was light enough. Except for when it got dark outside, of course.

BVD: Who were the people you first met when you came to Lincoln, and who were your neighbors?

TJK: Well, obviously, the realtor. But, the first people whom I knew socially when I moved onto my property were Glen and Dolores Williams, who still own the cabin next to mine. They never lived there permanently. It was only a vacation home for them. I was always on friendly terms with them, but I never became at all close to them. And, Irene Preston and Kenny Lee. They were, what we call, colorful characters. He used to have some interesting stories...

BVD: And when did you meet the Lundbergs?

TJK: I think I first met Dick Lundberg around 1975, because until that time I had a car, later an old pickup truck. But after about 1975 I had no functioning motor vehicle, and that was when I started riding to Helena occasionally with Dick. I think I met Ellen in the late 1970s or early '80s.

BVD: So, these people you met were the people living in close proximity to you.

TJK: Yeah. Glen and his wife, as you know, were living just below me, and I also met Bill Hull and some members of his family. Aside from clerks in stores and so forth, those were the only people I got to know until, oh, probably into the '80s. When Sherri (Wood) took over the library,

I started to get to know her. Eventually I got to know Theresa and the Garlands. I got to know them by going into their store. So, I didn't really get to know people there to any significant extent for the first 10 years I was there, or more.

BVD: What about Chris Waits?

TJK: The first I met him would probably be somewhere around the mid '80s. I don't remember. He used to sometimes pass me on the road. I may have taken a ride from him once or twice—I'm not sure if I ever did at all. But I know he used to pass me on the road and say hello, and that's the only acquaintance I ever had with him, except once I was at his yard sale at Leora Hall's, and I talked briefly to him there. See, I pretty much spent my time in the woods and kept to myself, and so, really, had no occasion to meet anyone except the people living in the immediate area.

BVD: I see. He didn't really live in the immediate area. About Leora Hall's yard sale, where you briefly talked to him: in his book, Waits claims that you bought silver or silver-plated flatware there. But Leora Hall has said that you positively did not buy any silver or silver-plated flatware, because she didn't have any for sale. She does, however, remember seeing you there and even remembers the specific items bought. Any comment?

TJK: I've never bought any silver-plated flatware from Leora Hall or anyone else.

BVD: Well, let's move on then. Did you follow routines in your life?

TJK: I didn't really have routines, but certain activities—such as cooking meals or fetching sticks for kindling—tended to fall into routine patterns.

BVD: What was an average day like for you in Lincoln?

TJK: That's a very difficult question to answer because I don't know that there was an average day. My activities varied so much according to the season and according to the tasks I had before me on a given day. But I will describe a representative day...

TJK: ...Well, let's take a day in January, and let's suppose I wake up about 3:00 a.m. to find that snow is falling. I start a fire in my stove and put a pot of water on. When the water comes to a boil I dump a certain quantity of rolled oats into it and stir them for a few minutes until they are cooked. Then I take the pot off the stove, add a couple of spoonfuls of sugar and some milk—made from powdered milk. While the oats are cooling I eat a piece of cold boiled rabbit meat. Afterward I eat the oats. I sit for a few minutes before the open door of the stove watching the fire burn down, then I take my clothes off again, get back into bed, and go to sleep. When I wake up, the sky is just starting to get light. I get out of bed and dress myself quickly because it's cold in the cabin. By the time I'm dressed there's a little more light and I can see that it's no longer snowing and the sky is clear. Because of the fresh snow it should be a good day for rabbit hunting. So I take my old, beat-up, single-shot 22 down from the hooks on the wall. I put my little wooden cartridge-box, containing 16 cartridges, in my pocket, with a couple of books of matches wrapped in plastic bags and a sheath knife on my belt in case I have to build a fire in an emergency. Then I put on my snowshoes and take off. First there's a hard climb to get up on top of the ridge, and then a level walk of a mile or so to get to the open forest of lodgepole pines where I want to hunt. A little way into the pines I find the tracks of a snowshoe hare. I follow the trail around and around through its tangled meanderings for about an hour. Then suddenly I see the black eye and the black-tipped ears of an otherwise white snowshoe hare. It's usually the eye and the black-tipped ears you notice first. The bunny is watching me from behind the tangled branches and green needles of a recently-fallen pine tree. The rabbit is about 40 feet away, but it's alert and watching me, so I won't try to get closer. However, I have to maneuver for an angle to shoot from, so that I can have a clear shot through the tangle of branches—even a slender twig

can deflect a .22 bullet enough to cause a miss. To get that clear shot I have to lie down in the snow in an odd position and use my knee as a rest for the rifle barrel. I line up the sights on the rabbit's head, at a point just behind the eye...hold steady...ping! The rabbit is clipped through the head. Such a shot ordinarily kills the rabbit instantly, but the animal's hind legs usually kick violently for a few seconds so that it bounces around in the snow. When the rabbit stops kicking I walk up to it and see that it's quite dead. I say aloud "Thank you, Grandfather Rabbit"—Grandfather Rabbit is a kind of demigod I've invented who is the tutelary spirit of all the snowshoe rabbits. I stand for a few minutes looking around at the pure-white snow and the sunlight filtering through the pine trees. I take in the silence and the solitude. It's good to be here. Occasionally I've found snowmobile tracks along the crest of the main ridge, but in these woods where I am now, once the big-game hunting season is over, in all my years in this country I've never seen a human footprint other than my own. I take one of the noosed cords out of my pocket. For convenience in carrying I put the noose around the rabbit's neck and wrap the other end of the cord around my mittened hand. Then I go looking for the trail of another rabbit. When I have three rabbits I head home. On arriving there I've been out some six or seven hours. My first task is to peel off the skins of the rabbits and remove their guts. Their livers, hearts, kidneys, brains, and some assorted scraps I put in a tin can. I hang the carcasses up under the shelter, then run down to my root cellar to fetch some potatoes and a couple of parsnips. When these have been washed and other chores performed—splitting some wood maybe, or collecting snow to melt for drinking water—I put the pot on the boil, and at the appropriate time add some dried wild greens, the parsnips, the potatoes, and the livers and other internal organs of the rabbits. By the time it's all cooked, the sky is getting dark. I eat my stew by the light of my kerosene lamp. Or, if I want to economize, maybe I open the door of the stove and eat by the light of the fire. I finish off with a half a handful of raisins. I'm tired but at peace. I sit for a while in front of the open door of the stove gazing at the fire. I may read a little. More likely I'll just lie on my bed for a time watching the firelight flicker on the walls. When I get sleepy I take off my clothes, get under the blankets, and go to sleep.

BVD: I envy you, too ... While work, that does sound wonderful. Freedom and autonomy. No time clock to punch, whether literal or figurative. But let me shift topic. You just mentioned sleep. Was your bed, or bunk, comfortable?

TJK: Well, it was comfortable enough for me.

BVD: I respect and appreciate your thanking Grandfather Rabbit. I'm reminded of the real origins of the ritual or custom of saying grace before a meal: A solemn awareness of sacrifice, that all life gives itself so that other life may live...Do you believe in fate?

TJK: No.

BVD: Do you believe in God?

TJK: No. Do you?

BVD: Fate or God?

TJK: Both.

BVD: Maybe... I remember reading that your parents were atheists, that you were raised in an atheistic home.

TJK: True.

BVD: Do you remember your parents ever talking about God? Did they ever say anything like "This is what some people believe..."?

TJK: Oh, they did a little bit. For example, if my mother were reading a book to me and something about God were in there, she would explain “Well, some people believe so-and-so, but we don’t believe it.” That sort of thing.

BVD: I see... Well, back on your representative day—you mentioned some of what you might eat. What was our diet like in general? What would you eat on a typical day?

TJK: This varied so much with the season.... Between 1975 and 1983 I would buy flour, rice, rolled oats, sugar, cornmeal, cooking oil, and powdered milk, and a modest amount of canned fruit and/or tomatoes for the winter. I would eat maybe one can every other day through the cold season. I would eat a small amount of canned fish and dried fruit. Other than that almost everything I ate was wild or grown in my garden. I ate deer, elk, snowshoe hare, pine squirrel, three kinds of grouse, and porcupines, and occasionally ducks, rockchucks, muskrats, packrats, weasels, coyotes, an owl killed by accident—I would never kill an owl intentionally—deer mice, and grasshoppers, huckleberries, soapberries, red twinberries, black twinberries, gooseberries, two kinds of black currants, raspberries, strawberries, Oregon grapes, choke cherries, and rose hips. Starchy roots I ate were camas, yampa, bitterroot and Lomatium, also sprint beauty... I also ate a few minor kinds of roots and a couple of dozen kinds of wild greens. During May and June, before each meal I would eat a salad, often quite a large salad, by just strolling around my property, picking a bit of this and that, and popping it into my mouth. In a few cases I ground up edible seeds and used them for bread. But grinding them was excessively time consuming. I had no hand-mill, and ground them on a rock. In my garden I grew potatoes, parsnips, beets, onions, two kinds of carrots, spinach, radishes, broccoli, and on occasion orach, Jerusalem artichoke, and turnips.

I would dry wild greens and garden vegetables, and sometimes berries, for use in the winter. But for my starchy foods I relied mainly on potatoes and on store-bought staples such as flour, rice, et cetera. Wild starchy roots are scanty up in the high country. Bitterroot and camas are abundant in places in the lower, flat areas, but these are mostly private land and presumably the ranchers wouldn’t want me digging up their meadows to get these foods. In the winters I used to use a tea made from the needles of Douglas fir as a source of vitamin C.

My last winter in Montana, 1995-1996, I was hard up. But when you have to dispense with the things that the system provides, it’s surprising how well you can do by improvising on your own. I had no commercial fruits or vegetables, whether fresh, dried, or canned, but I had plenty of my own dried vegetables. I had some dried black currants and rhubarb, and I had squirrels and rabbits for meat. The commercial stuff I had was just flour—whole wheat and white—cooking oil, sugar, and I think I had a scanty supply of rice. I don’t recall whether I had any oats or cornmeal. I do know that the little powdered milk that I had soon run out and I was using plaster of Paris—dental—as a source of calcium. When that ran out I was planning to use either burnt, pulverized rabbit bones, or pulverized limestone. But I did alright, I enjoyed my meals, and it was a good winter.

BVD: What was your favorite wild food?

TJK: Probably the tastiest wild food in the Lincoln area is partridge berries, a tiny species of *Vaccinium*—the blueberry genus—that grows at high altitudes. The berries are so tiny that it may take an hour to pick a cupful, but the flavor is superb. Apart from those, my favorite foods are huckleberries, yampa, and the livers of deer, snowshoe rabbit, and porcupines.

BVD: Did you have any favorite meals that you prepared?

TJK: I didn't have any standard meals, since I just ate what was available at a given time. Generally speaking, my best meals were the stews that contained meat, vegetables, and some starchy food such as potatoes, rice, noodles, or roots such as yampa.

BVD: Would you eat your meals outdoors?

TJK: I seldom did that. I usually ate indoors, at my table in the cabin... When I was done eating, I would sometimes sit back in my chair with my feet up on the table and just gaze out the window for a while...

BVD: Could you see out the window?

TJK: Pardon me?

BVD: Could you see out the window?

TJK: Yes. That's what windows are for...

BVD: How did you learn which plants were edible, and their preparation, if any was needed?

TJK: For years before I left Berkeley I'd been interested in the outdoors, and I had been learning skills such as how to recognize edible wild plants and so forth. I learned how to recognize them from books on the subject, such as *Edible Wild Plants of Eastern North America*, by Fernald and Kinsey, and *Wild Edible Plants of the Western United States*, by Donald Kirk. The books give some information about preparation of these plants, but mostly I learned to prepare them by trial and error. I learned some edible plants by experiment. It would be dangerous to experiment with certain families of plants, such as the carrot family and the lily family, because they contain some species that are deadly poisonous. But it's safe to experiment with the mustard family; and the composite family and the beet family, as far as I know, contain no deadly species, though they do contain some that are more or less poisonous. There were a couple of members of the mustard family that I used as greens without ever learning the names of the plants. There was a member of the composite family that I ate for years before I learned that it was a species of false dandelion. And there was a member of the beet family that I often ate but never did identify.

BVD: Were you self-sufficient?

TJK: By no means wholly self-sufficient. I needed store-bought staples such as flour, rice, rolled oats, and cooking oil. I bought most of my clothing, though I also made some. Originally, complete self-sufficiency was a goal that I wanted to attain eventually, but with the shrinking of the wild country and the crowding-in of people around me, I got to feeling that there wasn't any point in it anymore, and my interests turned in other directions.

BVD: How did the way you chose to live fulfill your dreams, desires, or original motivations? That is, your dreams as a youth, and your plan and decision to leave Berkeley. And what was the most satisfying thing about your life in Lincoln?

TJK: In my life in the woods I found certain satisfactions that I had expected, such as personal freedom, independence, a certain element of adventure, a low-stress way of life.

I also achieved certain satisfactions that I hadn't fully understood or anticipated, or that even came as complete surprises to me.

The more intimate you become with nature, the more you appreciate its beauty. It's a beauty that consists not only in sights and sounds but in an appreciation of...the whole thing. I don't know how to express it. What is significant is that when you live in the woods, rather than just visiting them, the beauty becomes a part of your life rather than something you just look at from the outside.

Related to this, part of the intimacy with nature that you acquire, is the sharpening of your senses. Not that your hearing or eyesight become more acute, but you notice things more. In city

life you tend to be turned inward, in a way. Your environment is crowded with irrelevant sights and sounds, and you get conditioned to block most of them out of your consciousness. In the woods you get so that your awareness is turned outward, toward your environment, hence you are much more conscious of what goes on around you. For example, you'll notice inconspicuous things on the ground, such as edible plants or animal tracks. If a human being has passed through and has left even just a small part of a footprint, you'll probably notice it. You know what the sounds are that come to your ears: This is a birdcall, that is the buzzing of a horsefly, this is a startled deer running off, this is the thump of a pine cone that has been cut down by a squirrel and has landed on a log. If you hear a sound that you can't identify, it immediately catches your attention, even if it's so faint that it's barely audible. To me this alertness, or openness of one's senses, is one of the greatest luxuries of living close to nature. You can't understand this unless you've experienced it yourself.

Another thing I learned was the importance of having purposeful work to do. I mean really purposeful work—life-and-death stuff. I didn't truly realize what life in the woods was all about until my economic situation was such that I had to hunt, gather plants, and cultivate a garden in order to eat. During part of my time in Lincoln, especially 1975 through 1978, if I didn't have success in hunting, then I didn't get any meat to eat. I didn't get any vegetables unless I gathered or grew them myself. There is nothing more satisfying than the fulfillment and self-confidence that this kind of self-reliance brings. In connection with this, one loses most of one's fear of death.

In living close to nature, one discovers that happiness does not consist in maximizing pleasure. It consists in tranquility. Once you have enjoyed tranquility long enough, you acquire actually an aversion to the thought of any very strong pleasure—excessive pleasure would disrupt your tranquility.

Finally, one learns that boredom is a disease of civilization. It seems to me that what boredom mostly is is that people have to keep themselves entertained or occupied, because if they aren't, then certain anxieties, frustrations, discontents, and so forth, start coming to the surface, and it makes them uncomfortable. Boredom is almost nonexistent once you've become adapted to life in the woods. If you don't have any work that needs to be done, you can sit for hours at a time just doing nothing, just listening to the birds or the wind or the silence, watching the shadows move as the sun travels, or simply looking at familiar objects. And you don't get bored. You're just at peace.

BVD: What was the hardest part or thing about your life in Lincoln?

TJK: The worst thing about my life in the woods was the inexorable closing-in of modern civilization. There were always more houses along Stemple Pass Road and elsewhere. More roads put through the woods, more areas logged off, more aircraft flying over. Radio collars on the elk, spraying herbicides, et cetera, et cetera.

BVD: What are some of your fondest memories of your life in the woods?

TJK:...Early in the springtime, when the winter's snow was melted off enough to make it possible, I would take long rambles over the hills, enjoying the new physical freedom made possible by the fact that I no longer had to wear snowshoes, and coming home with a load of fresh, young wild vegetables such as wild onions, dandelions, bitterroot, and Lomatium, with a grouse or two—killed illegally, I'll admit. Working on my garden early in the morning. Hunting snowshoe rabbits in the winter. Times spent at my hidden shack during the winter. Certain places where I camped out during spring, summer, or autumn. Autumn stews of deer meat with potatoes and other vegetables from my garden. Any number of occasions when I just sat or lay still doing nothing, not

even thinking much, just soaking in the peace.

BVD: Thank you, very much...

TJK: You're welcome.

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