

WELCOME TO THE PAST

Fires in the area this past summer meant the fireplaces didn't get used. In fact, fire trucks were parked in the drive for a while, but happily the property was spared, at least in part because the Fosters were wise enough to install an in-ground sprinkler system.



BY JOYCE STANDRIDGE

Photos Courtesy of Rocky Mountain Log Homes

This Montana retreat may be brand new, but its beauty is firmly rooted in the 19th century.



ABOVE: Ellen's kitchen is just the opposite of most in that the natural wood finish is on the walls while the custom-made cabinetry has been painted a soft color for contrast. The backsplash was inspired by a piece of fabric Ellen was considering using in the house.

OPPOSITE: Ellen was relaxing at her interior designer's office and mulling over furniture selection when it occurred to her that the chair she was sitting in was perfect for the dining room.

Readers who remember the hit television show *Bonanza* and fell in love with the handsome log home where the Cartwrights hung their holsters will feel more than a little envy for Tim and Ellen Foster's Montana vacation retreat. While Hop Sing would find the kitchen far too advanced—right down to the trash compactor—even that room evokes memories of a slower, easier age. And that was the point. “We developed a theme from the very beginning,” explains Ellen. “We wanted to create a look like the home and the other buildings had been there for a long time.”

Ironically, it was supposed to take a long time to create, too. The Fosters, who reside in the Philadelphia area, determined that a few acres in one of Montana's remote and breathtaking valleys would be an ideal location for their retirement home. Since they're years away from that time, they decided to build a guest home on the property that they could use for occasional vacations in the interim. “With three spring-fed creeks on the property, it was too appealing to my fly-fishing husband to just let it sit,” laughs Ellen.

The Fosters began collecting magazine articles and ideas of what their vision for the guest house would be. Soon they contacted Rocky Mountain Log Homes and their handcrafted division Pioneer Log Homes to start discussions about their plans. Used to helping long-distance customers, the firm also put them in touch with Jeffrey Crouch of Kibo Group Architecture, who spends a significant portion of his time assisting clients looking for that 1900s appeal, and Howard Mills of Yellowstone Custom Country Homes. Mills, under the direction of German and Finnish immigrant mastercraftsmen, began working on mostly custom residential log and timber-framed homes back in 1970.

It was a marriage that even Dr. Phil couldn't fault. These were clients who had a vision, but were flexible and capable of making decisions quickly, teamed with talented professionals who had the kind of backgrounds that could make it all happen with minimal issues. In fact, all rave about what a fabulous project it was to work on.

“We begin a project by sending the client a questionnaire and by going through their ‘Client's Dream File,’ which is the clippings and ideas they've gathered,” says Crouch. “We also walked the property with them to see if what they wanted would work.”

“Our only glitch in the entire process was that initial inspection of the land,” Mills says, picking up the story. “They showed me where they wanted to put the buildings, but I disagreed. I took them up to the knoll and said that they shouldn't pass up this fantastic view. Tim is a very decisive person and it took him all of about 10 minutes to look it over, pace it off, and decide that I was right. I was a little worried that I might have offended them, but it turned out that both Tim and Ellen appreciated a forthright opinion and often accepted our advice. That made the whole project move forward with few delays and a lot of enthusiasm.”

The Fosters proved not only open to suggestions, but they also came up with some terrific ideas of their own, and it wasn't unusual for Ellen to go hunting on her own for objects, fabrics, and furnishings. “I found this wonderful firm, Kibbler & Kirch in Red Lodge, that was instrumental in helping select the fabrics and offering suggestions on styling,” she says. “They advised us that we wanted a real comfort level to our furniture, and I realized that they were correct in looking for relaxing items.”

Ellen continues, “I also used Richard Crawford (of Philadelphia), an interior designer who has worked with me on our primary residence. He was especially helpful in selecting soothing colors that blended well with the extensive use of wood in the house.”

And they used lots of wood, but not just any wood.





ABOVE: Blending well with its surroundings, Tim and Ellen Foster's vacation log home evokes thoughts of an earlier century in Montana's history. **OPPOSITE:** Indigenous materials from floor to ceiling, including the fireplace stone, coupled with carefully selected, comfortable furnishings make this vacation home a popular destination for all the Fosters.

"The logs were crafted by Pioneer Log Homes and are primarily lodgepole pine 8-by-14-inch and 8-inch-by-12-inch," says Mills. "You see a lot of round logs used out West, but in fact the dovetail that Tim and Ellen used is historically accurate. If you look at the old cabins you'll see that the eastern influence was brought out here by the earliest settlers."

"My grandmother was from West Virginia," Ellen adds, "and the Appalachian look was so appealing to me that I really wanted to re-create that in our house."

"The use of reclaimed materials fit the feel and character for this project, too," says Crouch.

The wood in the ceiling, floors, and siding came from old graineries, lumber yards, and mills. Even old snow fences from Wyoming were used. With Mills's and Crouch's connections, tracking down and finding the wood was relatively easy, but the preparation process took more time, starting with replanning the wood and stripping it of tar and other adherents. Then, "to give the wood a more uniform but aged look we utilized a three-step [finishing] process," Mills explains. "The first application [of finish] tones the wood to a certain degree. The second is a semitransparent stain, and the final is an accent stain. How long it all takes varies depending on species, moisture, and condition, but we've done this long enough that we can pretty

much anticipate what we'll need to do. Still, it's a time-consuming process."

The masonry is indigenous as well, and the stone in the fireplaces was stacked in a style reminiscent of the early settlers. "Our objective is to create a vacation home that meets the needs of the modern family while creating a building that at first glance—and hopefully, second glance, too—could have been there a hundred years ago. In that regard, the masonry was especially effective," Crouch reflects. "I don't think it could have turned out better."

The interior of the vacation home features many mixes of modern and historical. "Most people want open floorplans these days," Crouch continues, "but you know the original log homes had a lot of tiny block rooms, especially because they were usually added as the family could afford to or as it expanded in numbers. In this instance, we went for the open plan, but by utilizing the materials we did we could still retain the historic feel."

Use of plaster over drywall on some of the interior walls was another way that they got the feeling they were looking for. Utilizing sand and sawdust in the chinking also gave it an aged look.

One of the more effective elements was the metal roof. Coreten rusts about one-quarter of the way through the metal and then a chemical agent stops the process, giving it an appealing coppery patina while ensuring a long-lived (approximately 50 years) roof. "It's so good," Mills





ABOVE: Ellen's interior decorator doesn't usually work with the late 1800s country look, but in this case he and Ellen came up with elements that are nothing short of perfect.

explains, "that it's similar to one used for the New York City reservoir guard rail system. It doesn't require any maintenance and doesn't require painting either."

Other suggestions also were appreciated. "Howard is noted for giving 'gifts' to his clients, and the barn was one of his gifts to us," says Ellen.

"I come from a farming background and love the look of old barns," Mills says. "To create the Fosters' I found an existing old one and took measurements."

The "barn" is actually a garage that houses Tim and Ellen's ATVs. But Mills's gift didn't stop there. "He also

insisted that we create a loft above the garage area with windows and rough-ins for plumbing and wiring," Ellen continues. "That way we could expand. 'People will want to see this view,' Howard said, "and he was absolutely right. Then he also roughed-in plumbing and wiring in our daylight basement so we can expand there, too."

"Having several buildings on the property was important to re-creating the 1800s look," Mills adds. "As we have it, they can expand within the existing structures, but they can also add more, including that retirement home they started out wanting."

Started out wanting—but may not build. "The guest house is only about 1,900 square feet, and with 13 sib-

lings between us, everybody wants to come out and spend some time, so we need more room. But we have fallen in love with this house. And we're revising our plans now to make this vacation home at some point our primary residence and to expand in the basement and the barn. We may end up adding more buildings, but we never had any idea of how much we would want to stay in this home. Our retirement home got accelerated considerably, I think!"

Even their two teenage children, whom Ellen jokes are "a couple of Eastern city dwellers," would rather be at the vacation house—where they spend most of the summer as well as Christmas. "We expected to enjoy it

in the summer, especially the fishing, but we've been surprised at how much we enjoy the winter. There can be five-foot drifts of snow, but the air is so crisp, the sky so blue, and our home is so beautiful when it's framed by the snow."

A project that's gone from good to great to wonderful didn't have any major issues. "The electrician put some plugs in the wrong location," Ellen notes, "so we had to cover them up with shelves. Guess what? Even that has become one of our favorite elements in the house!"

She concludes, "This area is a treasure. Life is simpler and even though I'm 40 miles from town, more people stop by to chat and look at the house than I have ever had in Philadelphia. This vacation log home ended up exceeding our dreams." 🌲

BELOW: They didn't plan to have custom-built doors and windows in the house, but as it turned out that was the only way to achieve their goals. Comfortable overstuffed furniture in subdued colors and durable fabrics also harken back to an earlier age.

LOG HOME PRODUCER: Pioneer Log Homes, Victor, Montana.; **ARCHITECT:** Kibo Group Architecture, P.C., Missoula, Montana.; **BUILDER:** Yellowstone Custom Country Log Homes, Alder, Montana.

