

At Home in Utopia

CHERI AND JIM CAMPBELL SURROUND THEMSELVES WITH THE UNIQUE HISTORY OF THE BISHOP HILL COLONY, WONDERFUL OLD PAINTED FURNITURE, AND THE SMELL OF FRESH-BAKED BREAD IN THIS PEACEFUL ILLINOIS VILLAGE.

Written By Gregory LeFever

It's been 165 years since members of a small, Swedish religious sect settled in western Illinois, determined to establish their "Utopia on the Prairie." While the Bishop Hill Colony didn't last, several of its buildings did. Today, the quiet village is home to just over 100 people, several living in the stately and sturdy buildings the Swedes constructed and enjoying a lifestyle many Americans would call utopian indeed.

"This may be the only town we could live in because it's like being out in the country – the atmosphere is just so lovely," says Cheri Campbell. She and her husband Jim occupy one of the original colony dwellings. They also operate an antique shop from their home and own the popular village bakery a couple of blocks away.

Much of their married life has been dedicated to creating homes for their family in the same spirit as the hardy folks who settled the Midwestern prairie. For three decades they've labored to rescue a tumbledown farmhouse or two, build a log cabin from scratch, rebuild a couple of barns, and now they maintain a valued historic dwelling for themselves and posterity. Plus, their home is filled with



Photographed by Jill Peterson

furnishings that reflect the spirit of the prairie – rare and rugged farmer-built pieces whose once-vivid paint has weathered to pleasingly muted hues.

“We have people say to us – and some don’t necessarily mean it as a compliment – that it’s like we live in a museum” Cheri explains. “But no, we really live with these things, we use them. If I have a firkin sitting on the counter, you can be sure that there’s something in it. We don’t just set things around and say you can look but don’t touch.”

That hands-on attitude explains a lot about the Campbells’ own journey to Bishop Hill. Or perhaps an even deeper destiny has been at work. “I had no idea,” Jim confides, “but after we moved here we learned that, on my mother’s side, I’m a direct colony descendant.”

Building Bishop Hill

The Swedish immigrants who arrived on the western Illinois prairie in 1846 were disenchanted Lutherans following a charismatic leader named Erik Jansson. Some of Jansson’s original followers died of disease as they trudged the 150 miles from Chicago on foot, and the survivors spent a brutal first winter, cold and hungry in makeshift cabins.

They named their new home Bishop Hill after Jansson’s birthplace, Biskopskulla, in Sweden.



Left: A flock of chickens live in this quaint chicken house on the Campbell property. It was originally located on neighboring land, but Jim hauled it across the street and established it in its new location.

Below: Jim added the lean-to portion onto the barn, using lumber from a former livery stable, to accommodate his woodworking and blacksmithing equipment. The smaller outbuilding to the right is the original six-hole privy for the trustees’ house, and the only privy remaining from the original colony. The Campbells have converted it for use as an extension of the Sweet Annie Primitives antiques shop

Previous Page: Home to the Campbells since 2004, this 1855 structure once provided sleeping rooms for the Bishop Hill Colony’s trustees, who governed the colony. The building has thick bricks walls with a stucco coat. The Campbells operate an antique shop in a portion of the first floor.







Previous Page: This picturesque second-floor sitting room is located at the end of one of the house's eight-foot-wide hallways. While there are no actual fireplaces in the house, the Campbells have created a faux fireplace with an early mantel, crane and other fireplace utensils. In the foreground is a farmer-made chair-table flanked by early ladderback chairs. Behind it is a desk with old red paint, with an early Illinois cupboard hanging above it.

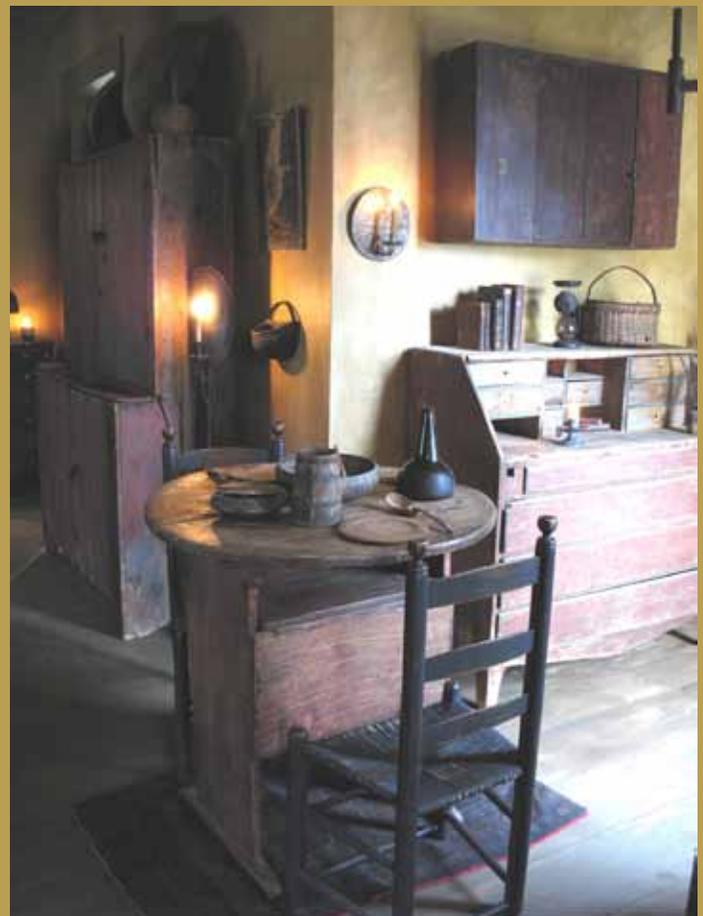
Above: This view of the second-floor sitting area features primitive shelving from Kentucky that holds some of Cheri's candle-mold collection, the large wooden bowl and document boxes. The flame-painted box and red one above are part of a set of three that were provided to all families in the colony, though the blue box is not part of the original set. Next to the shelves are a hanging cupboard and a small dry sink with original blue paint. The stairs in the background lead to the attic.

Right: An elderly couple sold the Campbells the beautifully worn farmer-built chair-table, which they had been using for years as a kitchen table. The desk is missing its drop-down front but has retained much of its original red paint. Above the desk is an early Illinois hanging cupboard, while the large step-back cupboard in the background, with traces of its original blue paint, is likely from Pennsylvania or Ohio.

Colony members held beliefs similar to the Shakers – communal living, no ownership of personal property, equality of men and women, the spiritual value of work – and frequently interacted with the Pleasant Hill Shaker community, near Harrodsburg, Kentucky, about 500 miles away.

For the next 15 years, the colony attracted up to 1,200 people who grew crops and orchards on 12,000 acres of virgin farmland. Though a dissident former member shot Jansson to death in 1850, the colony rallied to build still more brick dwellings, mills, civic buildings and a furniture factory. Eventually the Bishop Hill colony crumbled under the weight of the nation's 1857 economic crisis plus the colony's own indebtedness and years of financial mismanagement. It officially disbanded in 1861.

Viewing the 17 surviving colony structures, it's clear the Bishop Hill believers built their village to stay. "It's pretty amazing," Jim explains. "They came here in 1846 and within 10 years they'd hand-fired over a million bricks for all the brick structures in town, including, at that time, the largest brick building in the country west of Chicago" – a four-story structure called Big Brick with sleeping rooms for 96 believers and a first-floor dining room that sat 1,000. It burned to the ground in 1928.



The house the Campbells now occupy was built in 1855 as a dormitory for colony trustees – Bishop Hill’s governing body after Jansson’s death – that originally contained 15 sleeping rooms. The house displays the sturdiness typical of colony housing, with five-course-thick brick exterior walls and brick interior walls throughout. Its exterior is sheathed in stucco to create a more refined appearance.

While the village was most populated during the heyday of the colony in the 1850s with more than a thousand resident believers, today the population is closer to 100. Still surrounded by prairie and farmlands – the closest city is Galesburg, about 30 miles southwest – Bishop Hill is a National Landmark Village, an Illinois State Historic Site, and the surviving buildings appear on the National Register of Historic Places.

A Love of Homesteads

It takes a certain type of person to cope with the demands historic homes make on their owners, and the Campbells qualify as true veterans of restoring and maintaining these treasures. “We’ve always lived in old houses,” Cheri explains. “We bought an old farmhouse and redid that, bought another farmhouse and took it down and added it onto the first one. We’ve always loved the old and we love to save things like old barns or whatever we think may go by the wayside.”

Both Cheri and Jim are children of Iowa’s rolling farmlands. She was raised on the outskirts of Marion in a house her father built in 1955. Jim was from the Swedish-immigrant community of Stratford, went to high school in Des Moines and met Cheri when they both were students at the University of Northern Iowa in Cedar Falls.

“Cheri’s always had a lot of strong interests in these things, and I’ve adapted to them,” says Jim, a former schoolteacher and financial advisor. “I didn’t know a lot about carpentry, electrical, plumbing or whatever, but I’ve learned a lot over the years because we’ve done these projects together.” He’s not only mastered matters of infrastructure, but also studied traditional crafts such as blacksmithing and coopering.

Their housing adventures really began about



Above: The hanging cupboard with shelves and four drawers originally hung in a blacksmith’s shop and now occupies a wall in the Campbells’ kitchen. Below it, a rare countertop dry sink sits on a drop-leaf table.

Below: This mid-1800s pie safe in old blue is a Midwestern piece. Resting on it are a few of Cheri’s firkins and pantry boxes in a variety of original old paint colors.

Following Page: An array of early, painted furniture fills the Campbells’ kitchen. At left is a rare countertop dry sink sitting on a drop-leaf table, beneath a shelf-and-drawer cupboard that originally hung in a blacksmith’s shop. The sawbuck table is surrounded by early side chairs and a child’s primitive high chair. Toward the rear, the tall step-back cupboard not only holds part of Cheri’s firkin and pantry-box collection but also hides the family’s refrigerator.







Above: Plenty of natural light spills into the Campbells' living room where a number of their finest furniture pieces are displayed. In the foreground is a rare double-trestle table from Iowa, with its beautifully worn wide-board top. The red blanket chest may be from Ohio.

30 years ago when they bought a ramshackle 1850s farmhouse in Port Byron, Illinois, where Jim had obtained work as a schoolteacher. The town is on the Illinois shore of the Mississippi River, north of Moline. "We spotted the old farmhouse with its missing windows and we knew it wasn't going to last," Cheri recalls. "Somebody was going to bulldoze it down and it needed us."

With two young children, they rented a nearby house while they made the farmhouse livable. It was seven years of hard restoration work and an outpouring of love for the old house, but they successfully rescued it. Along the way they bought another tumbledown 1840s homestead, dismantled it and hauled the pieces to the farmhouse, where they created an addition using pieces of the dismantled structure.

Next the Campbells bought a 14-acre wooded tract about 40 miles southwest in Illinois City, Illinois, and began clearing the land while still living in the Port Byron house. Two adventures in log dwellings followed: The first was a longstanding dream of Cheri and Jim's to build an authentic log cabin. With the help of their son Tom and a friend, they felled trees, hand-hewed the logs, hoisted them into place, and chinked the structure. In the end they'd built a 15-by-18-foot log cabin in the style of Midwestern pioneers, complete with a loft, stone foundation and little porch. "It took two-and-a-half years to do it, and we loved it," Cheri explains. "When it came time to build our house so that we could actually move to the area, we wanted to build it like we did the little cabin, but we got impatient."

They opted instead for a manufactured log home. While much roomier and faster to erect, it also was more, well, "manufactured" than their handmade cabin. "People would come out to visit and say, 'Oh, it's just like being on vacation in a lodge,'" Cheri recalls, "and I'd think, 'But I don't want

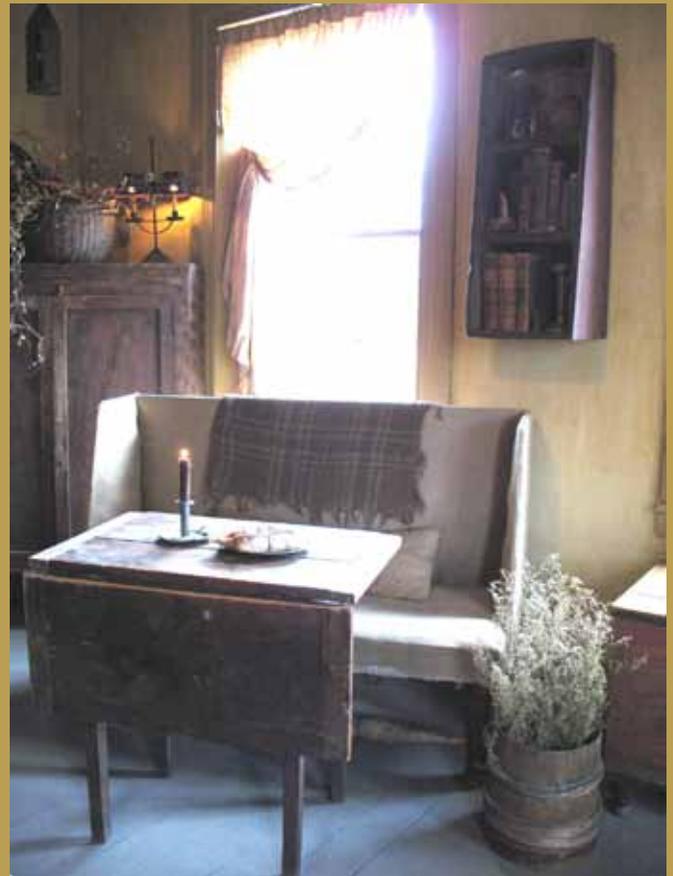
to be living in a lodge.” After the Campbells were away from the Port Byron farmhouse for seven years, it came back on the market, they drove over to look at it and immediately bought it again. “We wished we could’ve taken our little log cabin back to the farmhouse with us, but we couldn’t,” Cheri says. “We still always have a little log cabin living somewhere inside of us.”

Making a Home

The Campbells stayed in their farmhouse another nine years, Jim had become a financial advisor, which gave them more options on where to reside, and their two children had grown up. The family had visited Bishop Hill repeatedly over the course of 25 years because of the village’s history and charm, “and we all loved it,” Cheri says. So when the house in Bishop Hill went up for sale in 2004, Jim suggested they check it out.

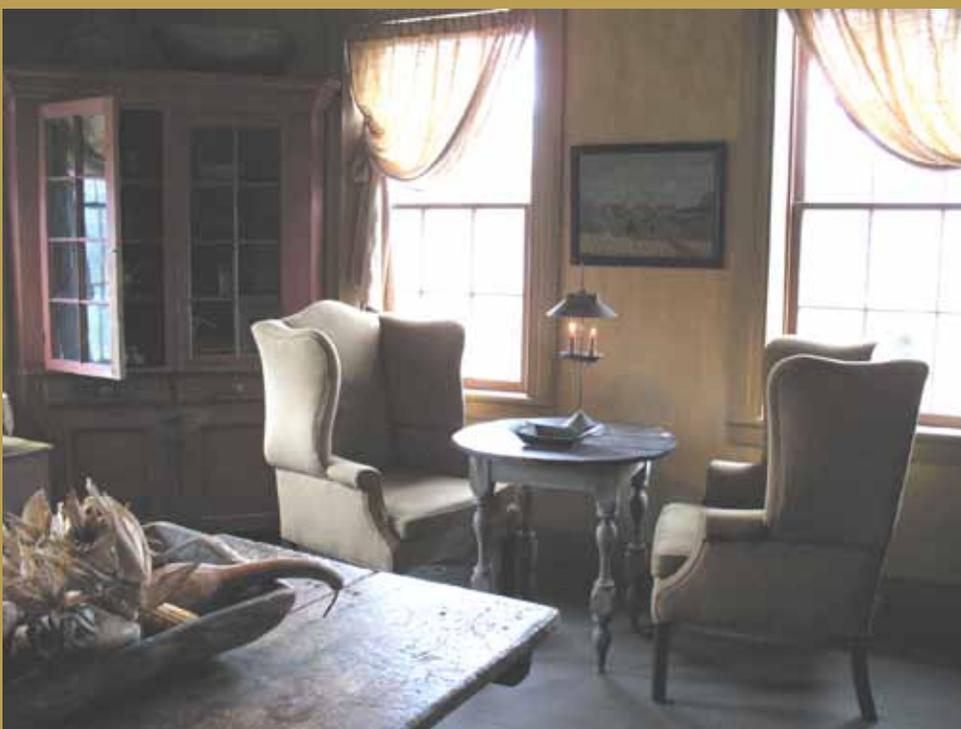
“But I didn’t want to look at it because I was familiar with it and I thought, ‘This can’t ever really be a home and I can’t make it feel like a home because it’s a building, not a home,’” Cheri admits. “I’m more of a log cabin, low ceilings, small rooms person – that’s the atmosphere I love.”

Jim toured the house without Cheri. “He called me afterward and said, ‘I think you’ll want to see this,’ so I came that night and looked at it – it was not in my colors and not in my style – but I could tell immediately that it could be made into a home.”



Above: The single drop-leaf table is an early New England piece still with some of its original red paint. Behind it is a make-do settee fashioned from an old rope bed by an antiques-dealer friend, Rachel Engel, and covered in linen. At the rear is an early cupboard with an unusual folk-design paint treatment. The scene is a section of the Campbells’ living room.

Left: The round table with finely turned legs is believed to be an 18th century New England piece. The stately corner cupboard with old red paint is from Pennsylvania. The two wingback chairs are contemporary pieces.





This rare double-trestle table can be easily broken down and reassembled, which means it likely was brought to the Midwest in a covered wagon from the East. The Campbells purchased it in Iowa, and although the blue-painted bench nearly matches the table, the two pieces are entirely separate. The early mantel in the living room creates another faux fireplace, this one displaying several pieces of Cheri's collection of early hearth-cooking utensils. The hanging cupboard above the fireplace holds some of her treenware collection.



The house has had about a half-dozen owners from the time it provided sleeping rooms for colony trustees until the Campbells bought it. Some owners had installed kitchens and bathrooms, laid carpet in some rooms, done considerable painting and wallpapering, and even made it into two separate apartments, one up and one down.

“But the basic floorplan had not been altered,” Cheri explains. “What’s really unique and fun about the house are these enormous hallways that are eight feet wide, running like a cross through the middle of the building and so wide that they can be treated as rooms themselves.”

Unlike their earlier housing projects, the Campbells have not undertaken any significant structural upgrades or in any way altered the integrity of the original building. Jim replaced a cantilevered balcony on one side of the house to match the original and has restored the porches at the entrances to the home. He also added a large lean-to onto the property’s existing barn, using framing and planks from an old livery stable that had stood nearby on former colony land.

Above: The second-floor master bedroom is the only room in the house with another room directly connected to it. All other rooms are accessible only from the large hallways. Here, the view from the bedroom is into the smaller room, which may have been a bedroom for children of a trustee family.

Below: A corner of the master bedroom affords a view of the building’s construction, including the brick walls and both the scratch-coat and finish-coat of plaster. Both the Campbells and the previous owner have left the corner intentionally exposed. Below it sits an original Shaker two-drawer chest. The large cupboard right of the window is likely an early 1800s piece with original mustard paint, while the blanket chest at the foot of the bed is an early New England piece in old red paint with black sponge-painting decoration.





Left: The Campbells bought this mid-1800s loom from a man whose grandparents had owned it in Illinois. Jim and Cheri plan to get it working again and learn how to weave, using flax they currently grow. The second-floor loom room houses many items related to textiles. Near the ceiling hangs a vacated hornets' nest, causing Cheri to joke, "I like anything that's a house."

Following Page Top: The tall two-drawer linen press that dominates this section of the loom room is an original Bishop Hill Colony piece and features a grain-painted surface. The multi-drawer cabinet in old yellow paint is from a 19th century Midwestern apothecary.

Following Page Below: The rare, early bathtub is not original to the house. "I bought it and hauled it home for poor Jim to exhibit his plumbing skills," Cheri says, and he admits that installing it was "challenging." The tub itself is copper with a tin coating, and its wooden casement features dovetail construction.

Lure of Old Paint

Dearest to Cheri's heart was creating the atmosphere she treasured in her earlier homes. "There were some wallpapers and borders that needed to come down," she says. "Then it was just a matter of turning it back to our colors, our look."

Throughout the house, she's used her own proven recipe so the plaster walls and ceilings take on an aged appearance. She uses brownish-mustard latex paint, thinned to the consistency of a heavy wash, brushes it on and lets it begin to dry. Before the paint is entirely dry, she wipes the surface with a damp cloth, creating variations in shading and leaving the color a bit darker in corners and around woodwork, imitating natural wear and aging. She relies on mustards and a few darker colors for the woodwork itself.

As far as their furniture, one sentence sums up Cheri's preference: "I love old paint." Through the years she and Jim have collected a number of rare, mostly mid-19th century pieces displaying a full palette of original paint colors and styles – old blues, reds, yellows, mustards, browns and blacks, some grained, some adorned with folk designs and some with just their final, scuffed remnants of color.

The couple also has an affinity for the "farmer-made" furniture that populated America's frontier as it moved ever westward. "Most of the pieces we love tend to be a little crooked," Cheri says. "You can tell they were made by hand, by someone who was probably inexperienced."

Whether it's purchasing furniture for their home or for resale in their antique shop, the Campbells follow a familiar circuit through Illinois and Iowa with a few jaunts to other neighboring states. "We pretty much stick to the Midwest," Cheri says. "We've bought from dealers who go back East because I do have a love for some of the New England pieces. But we're not like a lot of antique dealers because we don't spend a lot of time going far away to find things – we have a few people who know what we like and let us know when they've found something, and we go to a couple of shows a year."



Maintaining a Lifestyle

Cheri and Jim had lived in Bishop Hill a year when they turned their attention to starting the Bishop Hill Bakery & Eatery, along with their son Tom. The village had been without a bakery for about 20 years, so the Campbells decided to create one in a former boarding house dating to 1864. Tom had graduated from baking school after college and had worked a few years for Sara Lee in Wisconsin, so the fit was perfect.

"A lot of our time and effort have gone into the bakery," Jim admits, "and we could have located it somewhere busier than Bishop Hill. But we love Bishop Hill and when we walk out the door at night, we love the atmosphere, the quiet. Some people look at success only as how big you can make something. That's not how we look at success."

Now in its seventh year, the bakery provides a livelihood for Tom and his family, who live nearby. Under his guidance, it produces a daily array of homemade breads, muffins, pastries and Swedish specialties such as rusks, limpa and a sweet-dough cardamom braid, as well as soups and sandwiches. Regular customers come from surrounding towns and more distant cities such as Galesburg and Peoria.

Another aspect of family closeness concerns the Campbells' daughter Katy, who, with her husband, bought from her parents the Port Byron farmhouse of her childhood. She has followed in Jim's footsteps as a financial advisor, and he spends one day a week working with her.



More recently, the Campbells started Sweet Annie Primitives, the antique shop that occupies part of their home's first floor. Cheri runs it in cooperation with a neighbor friend who's dealt for years in antiques. They specialize in pieces featuring old paint and original surface, as well as folk art, textiles, treenware and pottery.

"We wanted to develop a certain lifestyle," says Jim in assessing the Campbells' life in Bishop Hill. "We don't really like sitting and staring at screens – TV screens or computer screens – but prefer to be out accomplishing things. And this is a good place to do it."



Above: The bed in the second-floor guest bedroom originally was a rope bed, which the trundle bed beneath still is. The screen cupboard to the right is an Ohio piece, unusual for its relatively short height, which is original to the mid-1800s piece. On top of the cupboard is a child's horse glider in original condition from the same time period. To the left of the bed is a rare horse tricycle, complete with wooden pedals and a hinged front portion to enable steering. Some of the Amish and Shaker clothing pieces Cheri collects hang from the peg shelf above the table.

Right: Varying shades of original blue paint adorn these furnishings in the guest bedroom. At right is an exceptional blue step-back cupboard alongside the blue cradle. This scene looks from the bedroom, across the hallway and into the living room.



SWEET ANNIE PRIMITIVES

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