



# A Passion for Primitive

BY GREGORY LEFFER

PHOTOGRAPHS BY WINFIELD ROSS

When early settlers from New England adorned their Midwestern cabins for Christmas, they did it the way Ginny Curry embellishes her own home—logs and beams draped with evergreen boughs and grapevines, the air resplendent with the scents of spices and herb bouquets, and the glow of candlelight fending off winter's darkness.



**W**hen it comes to decorating your home, primitive is the hardest look to do,” Ginny says. “There are no instructions. Most paintings and drawings from the 1700s and earlier depict surroundings so sparse you couldn’t live in them today. So it’s a look that’s filled with compromise and concessions. And that’s what takes ingenuity.”

If that’s the case, Ginny Curry is one ingenious woman.

Her style is emphatically primitive, recalling a time when early pioneers spent winters huddled before blazing fireplaces, their dim shadows falling on chinked log walls and rough plank floors, the cabin air suffused with the smoky aroma of open-fire cooking. Yet she has accomplished all of this in a house that’s twelve years old.

Christmas is a special time in Ginny’s world. She decorates her home in a naturalistic style as fit for hardy pioneers as for today’s visitors, complementing evergreen boughs and sprigs, fresh fruit and berries, and yards upon yards of grapevine with ample bouquets of homegrown holly, yarrow, and artemisia.

“I decorate everywhere,” she says, “even the bathrooms.”

While Ginny adheres to a

decorating style reminiscent of what pioneers might have done, there are no repeat performances. Each year she decorates according to how each room is currently furnished, which antiques and folk art she wants to display, and what seasonal greenery the woodlands surrounding her home are yielding. Some rooms tend toward the stark and others toward the magical. She constantly experiments with everything from lighting to scents.

“Each year is a brand new adventure when we begin the actual decorating,” she says. “That’s the only thing that’s been constant for the past twenty years.”

With help from others who work at her business, Ginny even creates her own Christmas lights. “The lights are very labor-intensive,” she explains, “because we dip each little bulb in mustard to give it the yellowed look of a real candle flame, then we dip some of the bulbs in clove oil to produce that great holiday scent.”

It’s been this way with Ginny since she was a child growing up in nearby Columbus, Ohio.

“My mother was absolutely avid about big Christmases,” she recalls. “She’d crochet afghans and pot-holders and then sell them to buy presents for us kids. It was always the most festive time of the year



The Currys reconstruct and sell early log cabins. The walls, flooring, windows, and roof are original, with the logs re-notched to form this 8'-square potting shed with its 4' cantilevered porch. Telltale tracks indicate deer have been nibbling on the fresh pineapple and apples in the shed's window box.

for us, with many happy memories. And that’s exactly the holiday spirit I want to keep.”

### OLD INSIDE THE NEW

The home of Bill and Ginny Curry sits amid the hilly Ohio farmlands near Lancaster in an area rich in beef, dairy, and swine farms. Colonel Ebenezer Zane explored the area in the 1790s, then went on to develop the Northwest Territory’s first important road, called Zane’s Trace, which opened the area for settlement.

On the outside, the house is conservatively contemporary, cedar and stone overlooking a sea of drifting snow in the winter and lush flower and herb gardens in the warm months. But four circa 1820 log cabins—two near the road, two closer to the main house—hint that the Currys have immersed themselves in an earlier America.

Even those old cabins cannot prepare visitors for the time warp of the home’s interior. “I wanted the look of an old log cabin,” Curry says, “and that’s what we have.”



The Currys’ 15-room house is on a hilltop overlooking the rolling farmlands and woods of Fairfield County. The contemporary stone-and-cedar exterior gives no hint of the home’s primitive interior.





The kitchen area of the gathering room is a study in concealment. The modern stove is hidden by pieces of homespun across its front and an old dough board over the burners. An early lap desk holds kitchen utensils, while the primitive cupboard hanging above the stove contains a microwave oven. The refrigerator, sink, and dishwasher are similarly hidden. But proudly displayed is the 18th-century pewter cupboard in its original red, holding new pewter the Currys use daily. Resting on the cupboard are an early trencher with red apples, a late-1700s candleholder, and an early box covered in brown wallpaper. The walls in this part of the house are from an 1820 log cabin.

**OPPOSITE** Three fresh Frazier Fir trees adorned with dried pineapple, fresh bittersweet, and amber lights create the holiday mood in the keeping room. The c. 1730 H-hinged pewter cupboard in original red is from Massachusetts and displays part of Ginny's prized collection of early treen. The early 1800s tavern table, also in red, is decorated with an old penny rug. Above it hangs a rare 18th-century chandelier with its original paint.

Pears and cranberries add a festive note to the gathering room.

They succeeded because both understand cabins and early furnishings, are hard working, and know how to build a house. A dozen years ago they found the ten-acre tract of land near Lancaster that suited them both, meeting Ginny's requirements for beauty and Bill's for hills.

"My husband is from West Virginia and, coming from those steep hills and valleys, he can't stand flat land," she explains. He was one of ten children who grew up on a farm where cultivation was still by horse, not machine. "Growing up so self-sufficient, he can do almost anything—carpentry, electricity, plumbing, plowing, car repair, you name it—so I tell people he can fix anything from a broken heart to a hole in the sky."

An amiable fellow who logged nearly forty years with AT&T, Bill Curry had a clear idea of how he wanted the exterior of the six-bedroom house to look, favoring the mix of stone masonry and cedar siding.

"He said that if he could design the outside, I could do whatever I wanted to the inside," Ginny says. By most people's standards, what she wanted was radically primitive.

So, if Bill Curry preferred the exterior to be contemporary, how does he feel about the interior? "It grew on me," he says. "The more work I did on the inside, the more I enjoyed the look. Now I wonder











Festive wreaths and boughs of fresh greenery drape the blue-over-red mantel the Currys rescued from an early Ohio log cabin. The keeping room also features an early Massachusetts cupboard with a mortar and pestle and document box on it. The large, one-board 1740 sawbuck table still has its original red paint. One of the Currys' pets—Buttermilk the cat—enjoys the Jacob chair, one of the reproduction furniture items made and sold by Curry's Antiques.



Bill Curry built the buttery from pieces of early Ohio barns and old New England plank flooring. It is Ginny's favorite room and holds her extensive collections of early pantry boxes and firkins. For the holidays she adorns an old corn dryer with red apples, and weaves ample fresh greenery and blue juniper berries along the buttery's shelves.

Linen artist Sandy Moore produced the aged flax linen bedcovers on the early rope and trundle beds in one of the home's six bedrooms. The hanging one-door cupboard is c. 1820 in original red. Below it is an 18th-century blanket chest. The late-1700s portrait is by an unknown artist.





why we didn't do this years ago."

Ginny elaborates. "You have to understand that we both love antiques, and Bill is excellent at working with them. And, after all, we've been together a good many years, so he knew what to expect."

With the skill of seasoned renovators, they bought and dismantled an early-nineteenth-century log cabin in Junction City, Ohio, using its logs and beams to construct their home's kitchen, essentially building a cabin inside the house. For other rooms they purchased wood from colonial buildings. Rare, folk-art-painted flooring from a 1760 Massachusetts home now graces a hallway. Genuine mustard-painted wood from an early Connecticut buttery forms a wall in the master bedroom. A rare fireplace mantel from another pioneer-era Ohio

cabin sets the tone for the keeping room.

"People underestimate how much work is involved in working with these old cabins," Ginny says. "I remember when we were building this kitchen and it was ten below zero and I was outside, power-washing the logs so we could use them. I was covered with ice and frozen stiff. But, you know, you do what you have to do."

Despite the immense work and attention to detail, the Currys managed to complete most of their home in a remarkable five months.

### KEEPING UP APPEARANCES

The finished product—a home with an interior that accurately replicates an early settler's domicile—is not for everyone.

"Most people who come



Folk art by Paula King adorns the tree in one of the upstairs bedrooms. An early rope tightener rests on the period rope bed.



Walking through this first-floor bedroom is reminiscent of being in the nearby forests. Replacing the furnishings are a 15' Frazier fir, limbs and twigs from nearly 30 deciduous trees, an abundance of crumpled leaves, and long lengths of grapevine. Ginny uses five types of faux snow to create the ambience and keeps the room unheated for the holidays. A taxidermist friend provided the rare white deer.





In the tavern room is an early, nearly 8'-long settle with original mustard finish and a c. 1760 shoe-foot hutch table in its original paint. In the foreground is an 18th-century shoe-foot hutch table. The rare 1740 ratchet, X-base candleholder comes from noted American antiques dealer and collector Roger Bacon. It sits beside a ladder-back chair in original red from the mid-1700s.





Even the bathrooms are gaily decorated for the holidays. This first-floor half-bath has walls and ceiling of old barn siding, and a blue cupboard refitted with a sink. The bathroom is decorated with fresh greenery and its own tree. Folk artist Paula King created the delicately aged snowman and the spice-laden candle ornaments. The hanging row of linen and homespun aprons and bonnets are new.

through the house have an expectation of what they're going to see, and they understand it," Ginny says. "Then there are others who are completely caught off guard. 'Is it always so dark in here?' they'll ask. Or my favorite: 'Do you really live like this?'"

But the house is full of clever deceptions, especially in the kitchen area (which the Currys call the gathering room). It's windowless with chinked logs, a plank floor, and wooden ceiling. A walk-in cooking fireplace—for which the Currys laid every brick—and a working bee-

hive oven dominate one wall. The sawbuck table, chairs, and decorative utensils are late eighteenth century. The room has an aromatic scent of wood smoke, dried herbs, and spices. But concealed behind old cupboard doors, wooden planks, and ancient cutting boards is an array of current kitchen conveniences including the refrigerator, sink, dishwasher, and microwave oven. For the holidays, Ginny adds two Christmas trees to the mix, welcoming visitors no matter which door they enter.

Adjacent to the gathering room

is Ginny's favorite room, the but-tery. Bill based it on period designs, incorporating an early New England plank floor and old barn siding for the shelving and walls. Ginny displays her extensive collection of early pantry boxes and firkins there. A small table in the center holds a holiday tableau.

Bunches of aromatic herbs and flowers hang from the ceiling of the adjacent herb-drying room, which capitalizes on breezes from the nearby porch. Also on the first floor are three bedrooms, including the master bedroom with the



mustard wall from Connecticut. The Currys furnished the home's three bathrooms with early furniture and plumbed their sinks into vintage cupboards.

The second story of the Curry home has a replica birthing room, a small library, spinning room, two small bedrooms, and a hidden-away room for Ginny's computer.

### SAGE ANTIQUES ADVICE

For more than twenty-five years, Ginny has been selling antique furniture as well as folk art and textiles. In fact, the Curry home not only satisfies the couple's devotion to an earlier era, but also it showcases their business, Curry's Antiques.

"I have good, old pieces throughout the house, and they aren't normally for sale," Ginny explains. "But quite often someone will come through here and spot something they decide they can't live

without, so I'll end up selling it to them."

Sometimes replacing that particular piece leads to changing an entire room, as when Ginny transformed a first-floor child's bedroom into the herb-drying room. The holidays, too, can bring big changes. Last year Ginny brought the outdoors inside by transforming a guest bedroom into a snowy forest complete with a deer and raccoon standing guard over the peaceful night.

Regardless of a room's particular theme, it's certain to contain exceptional, early, primitive furnishings. "When it comes to furniture, my thing is surface," Ginny says. "Each piece has to have its original surface, preferably in the wonderful old paints." She has a fondness for New England dry sinks but freely admits, "sawbuck tables are my real weakness."

Ginny is proud of the early pieces she has collected over the

years, nearly every one of which has the patina and true distressing that comes from two centuries of everyday use. "About ninety percent of what you see here is from New England and is dated between 1750 and 1820," she says.

"The best advice I ever got about antiques came from a wise old woman from Licking County, named Edna Featty. I think of her a lot," Ginny says. "She told me to upgrade, upgrade, upgrade. She said if you have the chance to buy one good piece or three mediocre pieces for the same price, always buy the one good one. She said you'll never regret it. I've found that to be so true."

Whether it's acquiring early primitive furniture, constantly evolving their unique home, expanding the scope of their successful antique business, or hauling pieces of old cabins to new locations, Ginny and Bill Curry don't dally.

"I tell you, we don't sit around," Ginny says. "We're both workaholics and you can't hold us back. We wake up each morning raring to go. I'd say I've got about five million ideas in my head at any one time."

And it shows. ✧

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### SOURCE

**Curry's Antiques**  
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An early barn lantern and the Currys' hand-dipped Christmas lights fill the herb-drying room with a comforting glow. Seasonal fresh greenery, dried artemisia, and strings of dried beans are essentials of Ginny's holiday decorating.

