

# Hites Heirloom Pumpkins A Family Farm



By Gregory LeFever    Photographs by Cheryl Jones

**M**aybe more than anything else, pumpkins reflect the spirit of the Ohio farm belonging to Greg and Julie Hites. Sure, there's a wonderful historical house and log cabin from the early 1800s, a fascinating collection of outbuildings, some great gardens, more than a hundred acres of crops – all the makings of an exceptional American family farm.

But it's the pumpkin patch where it all seems to come together – where family members from grandparents and parents to young grandchildren work together to grow pumpkins. Thousands and thousands of pumpkins.

"I can't tell you how much all of this means and how I love my family being this close and working together," Julie says. "This small pumpkin patch has grown so much and is such a part of us all. It's crazy how we nurture them, how we love how each pumpkin looks and how we take pride in growing the best pumpkins we can."

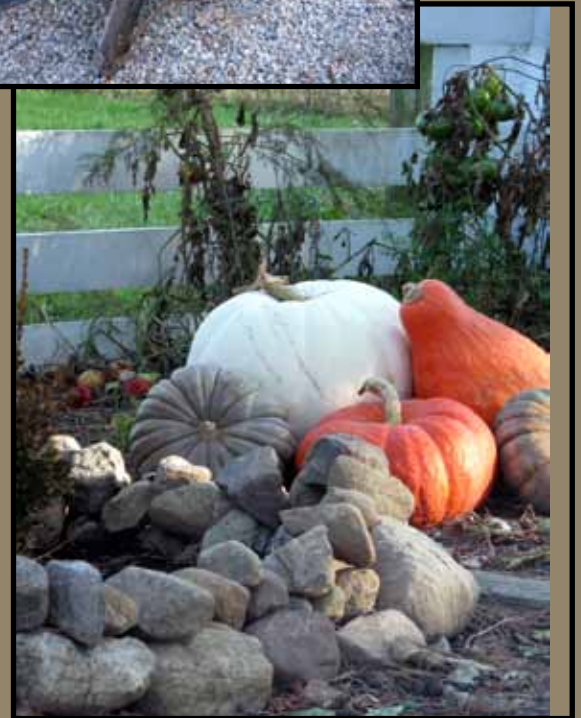
"You ever notice how pumpkins make people smile?" she adds. "Well, they do. There's just something about pumpkins that we all love."

## **Making Ideas Real**

The fact is, pumpkins are just one in a chain of history-related activities the Hites have undertaken over the years on their 133 acres near Kenton, Ohio, about 70 miles northwest of Columbus.

"You notice how Greg and I seem drawn to projects that involve plenty of manual labor?" Julie laughs. If the truth be known, Greg is the unsung hero of the Hites farm, often in the background doing the things that create the type of home Julie has sought.

"It's like I get all of these ideas," she explains. "Let's take the cabin. It was 1987 and I said to him, 'Let's do a cabin – we could tear one down, bring it here and put it back up, and it'd be wonderful.' I was all gung-ho, and he was like, 'Okay.' But when we found the cabin, Greg was right in there doing most of the work. He's that kind of a guy and I can't give him enough credit. You look around this farm and he knows how to do all of this."



*Previous page: An impressive stand of pumpkins rests on the porch of the building called the Play House on the Hites Farm. These pumpkins are all in shades of blue, including Jarrahdals, Queensland Blues, and Triambles, all among the most popular varieties the Hites grow.*

*Top and Above: The antique wooden wheelbarrow was a Christmas gift from Greg to Julie one year. In it, and piled near the garden fence, are several varieties including an orange Cinderella, a large Full Moon, a green Marina di Chioggia pumpkin and a Hubbard squash.*

Both grew up on northwestern Ohio farms raising Hereford cattle. Greg and his dad farmed together until his dad was in his eighties. Growing up, Greg had German farmers as neighbors who, as Julie says, “were very old-school and resourceful – they taught him how to do all kinds of things.” He began driving a tractor when he was about seven years old and can build or fix almost anything.

Meanwhile, Julie was growing up on a farm near Richwood, about thirty miles away. “There was a dilapidated cabin on our farm and I loved it,” she says, “I’ve always been drawn to cabins.” This is something Greg would eventually learn first hand.

### “It’s Just In You”

In the early 1980s, Julie was working in Accounting at Rockwell Automotive in Kenton. That’s where she met Greg, who was a machinery inspector at the plant. Romance ensued, and they married and moved to the farm outside of town that Greg had bought in 1969 – the farm they still call home.



*The 1830-era log cabin sits peacefully on the Hites Farm after being moved and reassembled there in the 1980s. It was originally located about 80 miles away. It displays the inverted style of dovetailing on the corners of the logs. Julie saw a photo of the unusual style of porch posts – using crooked tree trunks – and Greg replicated the posts using trees from their own woodlot. The rocker on the porch is vintage twig furniture, and the settee is from Florida and made of Cypress.*



*Above left: Greg built the early-style wooden planter that sits alongside the cabin wall. Samples of pumpkins in several colors fill the planter and rest on and around the cabin porch.*

*Above right: Julie made the scarecrow that hangs on a wall just inside the Pump House.*

*Below: Sunlight fills the fields behind the Hiteses' cabin. Here is the back of the cabin, with its porch and several benches, which at one time offered comfortable seating to guests who came here for Julie's fireside-cooked meals. Lavender, southernwood, mints and other herbs form a border alongside the gravel path.*





*The atmosphere inside the Hiteses' log cabin is primitive and comfortable and was well suited to the hundreds of guests who dined there on Julie and Greg's fireside-cooked meals. This hearth is larger than the cabin's original fireplace and was designed to accommodate the several-course meals the Hiteses prepared.*

*All of the pots, kettles, and pans are antique utensils except the very large skillet at the right of the fireplace, which was for frying fish. Both of the fireplace's cranes are antique. Decorations around the hearth include a rack for drying Indian corn and pod corn, as well as the long garland of dried gourds that Greg wove together.*

*The antique rocking chair was a Mother's Day gift from Julie's son Adam. The sawbuck table and benches display their original blue paint, while Greg built the step-back corner cupboard.*



After several adventurous years of working together with Greg on the farm, Julie rejoined the manufacturing work force about a dozen years ago, going to M-Tek Incorporated in Upper Sandusky where she orders parts for machines that produce auto trim.

“When you farm, it’s in your thoughts continuously,” she explains. “You know, Greg worked at Rockwell for thirty years and I still work outside the home. You come home from work and you change your clothes and you start farming. Whether it’s crops or whether it’s livestock, farming is something that’s just in you. You love the land and want to take care of the land. You want to do the right things for it.”

Greg and Julie have sown that sentiment in their sons, Adam and Jeff, who both have nearby farms. Adam works fulltime in agriculture and has two farms of his own, yet is a steadfast linchpin at his parents’ farm. “He loves the land as much as we do and he keeps us all focused and on our toes,” Julie says. She adds that Adam’s partner, Amanda, is “a great asset to our family – no matter what the situation, she pitches in.”

And the love of farming is already apparent in the grandchildren. At six, Adam and Amanda’s daughter Halie stables her pony with Grandma and Grandpa, and she and her four-year-old sister Riley are already familiar with work in the pumpkin patch. Jeff’s son Grant also helps out at shows when he’s available.

“We go out into the pumpkin patch and those kids are right there with us,” Julie says.

## Being Authentic

The homestead that originally included the Hites farm was among the earliest in the area. The land was originally platted in 1836 and the farmhouse dates back to about 1840, Julie says.

“The house is the best antique we have,” Julie says of their three-bedroom farmhouse. It has the distinctive Federal lines familiar to many Ohio houses of the period. For years, however, it had a portico over the front entrance, with pillars resembling those of a Greek Revival house – until a windstorm a few years ago tore off the portico, returning the house to its original style, which is how it appears today.

Much of the interior of the house retains its original layout, floors, and woodwork. All of the many six-over-six windows are original. An unusual feature is a board that runs at door-top level through most of the rooms, much like a picture rail. Several of the rooms also have a chair rail running hip-high along the walls. Julie has used a subdued palette of mustards, browns, soft greens and grays for the woodwork. “It’s very peaceful and calming in here,” she says.

To respect the historical vintage of the house, Julie says she’s “trying to be more authentic than decorative.” This means pruning the number of furnishings throughout the house. “I’m making it more



*Left: Here is the full array of hearth cooking utensils Julie relied on for preparing the several-course fireside meals she served to guests for several years. At left is the tin kitchen for roasting, while the two antique fireplace cranes supported a number of kettles and pots. Julie regularly used pans, skillets and Dutch ovens to prepare different courses.*

*Below: The door behind the rocking chair leads to the log cabin's upstairs. The stairway itself makes a sharp turn right at the door, just as when the cabin stood in its original location.*

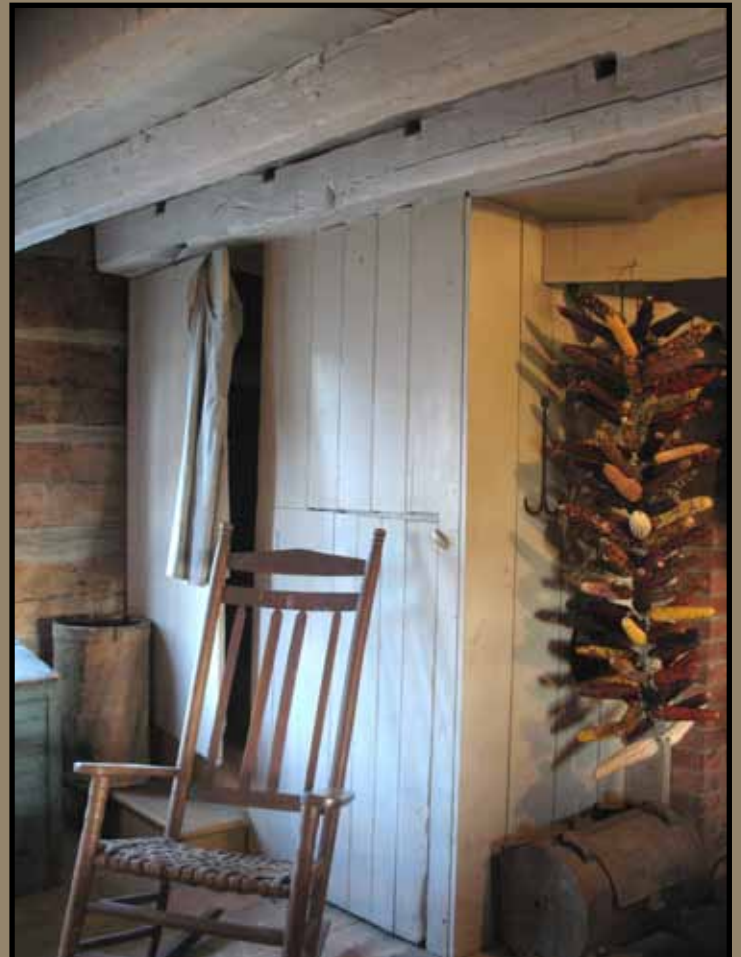
authentic to the way it would've been in the 1840s," she adds. "It's much more sparse than I've had it before. And I like it this way."

The kitchen is a good example. "I collect wooden bowls and I love pantry boxes and cutting boards. I've had quite a few of them in the past, but now I've pared way down because a pioneer woman in 1840 didn't have fifty-five cutting boards," she laughs.

"Having fewer things lets the house talk," Julie explains. "You see more of the original woodwork. You see more of the chair rail and you see that board that runs through all the rooms. You see more of the house itself instead of seeing just the things you put into the house."

## Hearthside Feasts

Much work and excitement is wrapped up in the 1830s log cabin that sits near the farmhouse. Julie decided in 1985 that she'd like a cabin on the property. In the back of her mind, she thought it'd be a great place to cook hearthside meals to serve to paying guests.





*Left: Here are a couple of the several outbuildings the Hiteses have moved to their farm. The white building may have been a very small schoolhouse, but now is called the Play House and is a favorite spot for granddaughters Halie and Riley to play. It was originally located on a farm about four miles away and Julie obtained it just before it was to be burned down. The smaller building was a four-seat outhouse the Hites purchased at an auction in Kenton, now serving as a shed for the Hiteses' many gardening tools.*



*Below left: The pumpkins and squash the Hiteses grow display several rich shades of orange, blue, yellows and multiple-colored skins. This group of pumpkins, squash and corn is on the porch of the Play House.*

*Below Right: Old Order Amish girls who live in the Kenton vicinity made this scarecrow, which has a gourd for a head. They used patched pants, a shirt and mittens from traditional Amish clothing.*

**Within a couple of years, she'd found her dilapidated cabin a hundred miles away in Washington Court House, Ohio. "It was falling down and we brought everything back with us – the bricks, window frames, everything," she recalls. "We brought it home in five trips."**

**It took about nine months to put it all back together. Julie and Greg hired some young Amish men who lived nearby. "They wanted to put up a cabin, and they'd come in the morning with their horse and buggy, put the horse into the barn, and they'd go to work," she says. "At the end of the day, they'd hitch up their horse again and head for home."**

**Greg did a lot of the work on the cabin, including the difficult task of chinking, and building the porch. The only major structural departure was the size of the cabin's hearth. "The original cabin fireplace was much smaller, but I wanted this larger one for my fireside cooking," Julie says. "That's what I had in mind for the cabin from the start."**



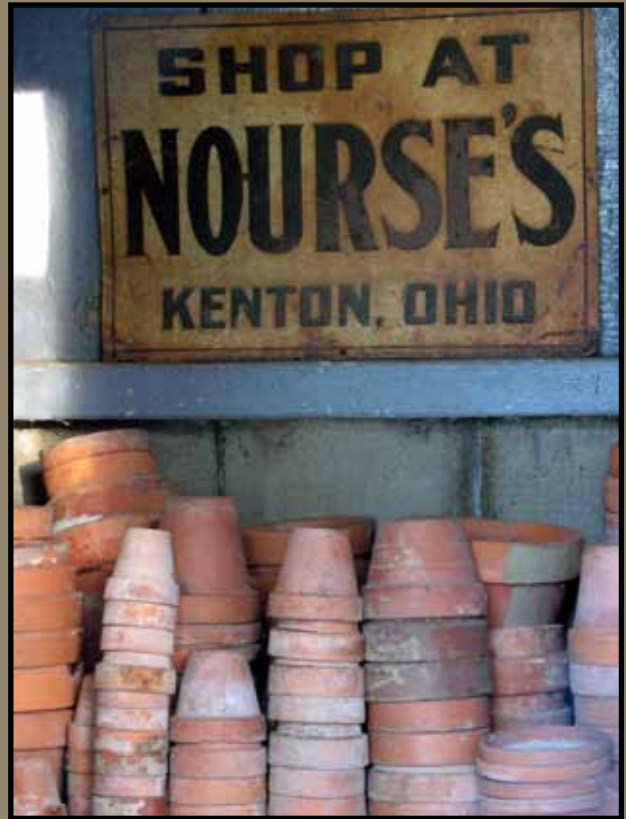
*The Granary building was originally on a farm about three miles from the Hites farm, and Greg was able to haul it home on a tractor-drawn wagon. Formerly used for storing oats, the Hiteses acquired it for use as a restroom for guests who were eating hearth-cooked meals in the nearby log cabin. The herb garden along the path includes peppermint, chives, lavender, and southernwood. The red wagon near the Granary porch was purchased at Renninger's in Mount Dora, Florida, and has its original red paint.*

**“My mother told me this was the worst idea I’d ever had,” she laughs. “She said nobody would come out to the country to eat in a log cabin on a farm. She couldn’t believe it.”**

**Julie and Greg prepared and served the meals to several hundred guests over the next eighteen years. “People would come and it’d be candlelight. I was basically their cook and their entertainment.” She and Greg were in period garb and cooked the entire meal in the hearth, using mostly antique pots, pans, kettles, skillets, and a tin kitchen.**

**They cooked chicken breasts, prime rib, pork loin and fish, plus potatoes, vegetables, soup, salad and dessert. Minimum seating was four people and the largest group they served was thirty-four people. “It was a lot of fun and we met plenty of interesting people,” she says. “They came in limos, in buses, and we even had people ride bicycles out here.”**

**The hearthside cooking stopped about ten years ago, due mostly to Julie returning to work outside the farm. “It was a lot of hard work and a lot of fun, and I still have people ask if we’re cooking those dinners.”**

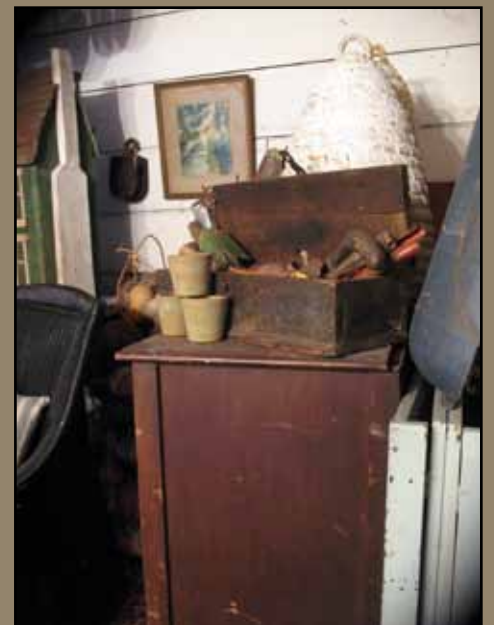


*Top left: The workbench is in a small outbuilding that was brought to the Hites farm from a nearby farm. A number of pumpkins, squash and ears of corn are resting there. The sign behind the workbench is for Registered Hereford Hogs, which the Hiteses raised and Adam showed at the Ohio State Fair in the 1990s.*

*Top right: The former four-seat outhouse now holds a number of the Hiteses' gardening tools and plenty of clay pots. The rusted metal sign advertises a store that operated in Kenton in the 1940s.*

*Below left and center: Dozens of hard-shell gourds are drying in the Pump House. Picked green, they can weigh from 20 to 50 pounds, but after drying through the winter, they turn brown and are so light they can be picked up with a finger. Some dry ones are shown hanging from the ceiling, at left.*

*Below right: A section of the Granary now holds gardening-related tools and planting pots. A bee skep shares the cupboard top with the toolbox.*



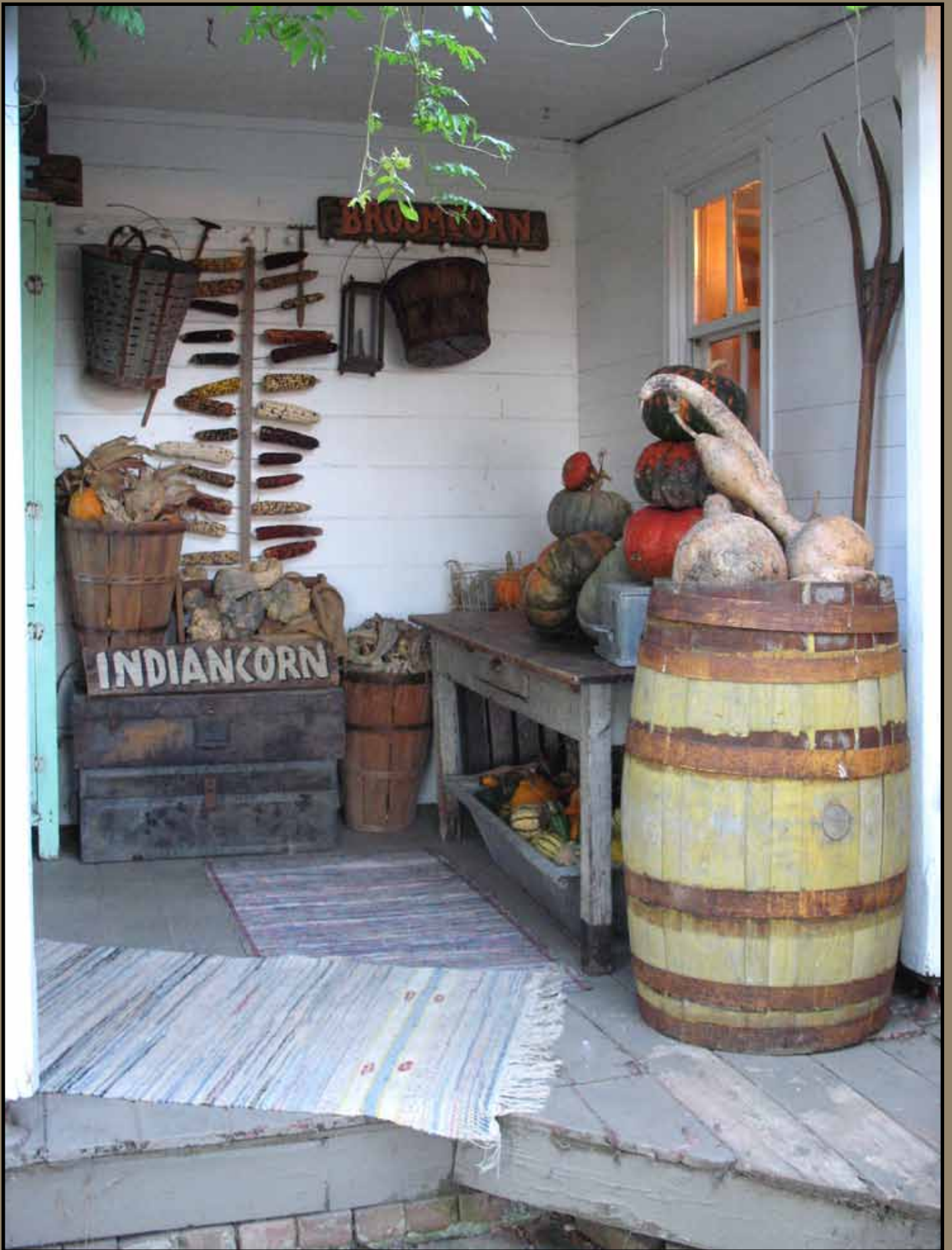


*Top: The front of the Hites house has the simple lines of the Federal-style houses common to Ohio in the early 1800s. All of the windows are still original. For a period of time, the front entrance had a portico covering it, supported by pillars. It was blown down in a windstorm several years ago and the Hiteses have kept the original house design.*

*Above left: A weathered picket fence surrounds the side porch of the Hites house. The porch door goes into the home's kitchen. An array of brightly colored pumpkins adorns the porch railing.*

*Above right: The back porch of the house has a door in the floor – shown here beneath the red rocker – leading to the home's root cellar.*

*Following Page: A section of the back porch, displaying produce, containers, and other items related to the farm's harvest. The barrel displays a rare original mustard paint, and the two boxes beneath the Indian corn sign also retain their original paint. An olive bucket hangs next to a rack of colorful ears of corn. Pumpkins squash and corn are stacked everywhere. The early farm rake leaning against the wall was one of Julie's earliest antique purchases.*





### **“Nothing Like the Country”**

**Besides the log cabin, the Hiteses have brought in several other outbuildings, nearly all from nearby farms.**

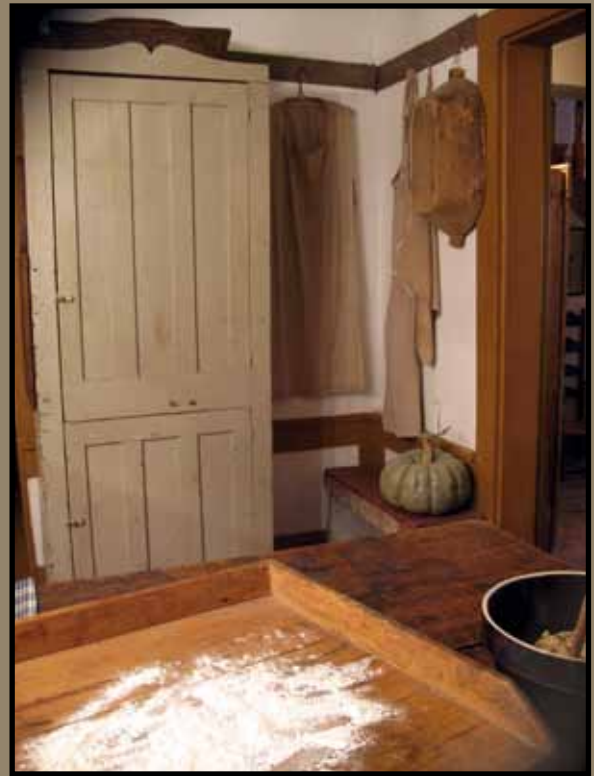
**A small former schoolhouse caught Julie’s eye a few years ago on a farm four miles away, but the owners didn’t want to part with it. Eventually someone else bought the farm. “I called the gentleman and asked about the building and he said he was just getting ready to torch it,” she says. “He said if I wanted it, I’d better get right over and get it.”**

**Today, the Hites call it the Play House, which is the function it serves for their granddaughters. Right next to it is a four-seat outhouse they moved to the farm from Kenton that now is a garden shed. An old pump house from about thirty miles away now provides additional storage space for farm produce. And when they needed bathroom facilities for their fireside-cooking guests, they moved a large granary building from a farm three miles away.**



*Top: The parlor shows Julie’s desire to “authenticate rather than decorate.” She has reduced the room’s furnishings to be what a pioneer farm family would have had in the 1840s. The reproduction make-do wing-back is from Ohio dealer Olde Glory Antiques in Waynesville, and the early black table is from dealer Matt Ehresman of Wadsworth, Ohio.*

*Above: The upstairs hallway features a reproduction make-do rope-bottom settee, with a painted blanket chest in front of it, dating to the mid 1800s.*



*Above left: An early cutting board covers the kitchen sink while an early wall box hangs above the counter. A homespun curtain covers the shelves of an early 1800s cupboard for cheeses and other storable items. A portion of chair rail is visible by the cupboard.*

*Above right: An unusual paneled-doors cupboard that Greg bought at a farm auction sits in the kitchen. It's an original Hardin County, Ohio, piece, which is where the Hites farm is located.*



*Above: This section of the pantry features two apothecary-style sets of drawers, the red one in original paint from Florida, and the blue one from Ohio dealer Linda Miller. A spongeware collection sits on the shelves along with some kitchen bowls. Other pantry boxes, cutting boards, a bucket and an early blue bowl are among the antique kitchen items Julie has collected.*

*Right: The buttery's cantback shelves hold several wooden bowls, pantry boxes, tin ware and cutting boards, while the homespun curtain conceals Julie's collection of antique cookbooks.*



*Top left: The tall four-poster bed sitting high off the floor in the master bedroom is from Curry Antiques in Lancaster, Ohio. Below it are a trundle bed and a small step for climbing into bed. The two blanket chests and smaller box stacked in the foreground have their original paint. They are in front of a two-raised-panel section of wall from an early home.*

*Top right: This early 1800s cupboard has its original white paint. "I love the color," Julie says. With its paneled door, it was a built-in in a home but now is free standing in the master bedroom.*

**Just listing the outbuildings doesn't come close to describing the work each relocation has involved. Most of the buildings had to be jacked up, lifted onto a large trailer, and slowly towed home by Greg at the wheel of his tractor, then lowered onto their new location and partially rebuilt to accommodate their new home.**

**Then there's still the 130-plus acres to work. "We grow soybeans, corn, wheat, some hay and of course the pumpkins," Julie relates. "We're in that pumpkin patch all the time." In all, the Hiteses grow 140 varieties of pumpkins and squash, along with ornamental gourds, Indian corn, pod corn, broomcorn, and sunflowers.**

**Pumpkins became a major effort at the farm following an unexpected success several years ago selling their pumpkins at the first Country Living Faire held in Ohio. "Every night we were driving two hours home and loading up the trailer with more pumpkins," Julie says. "We sold more than 1,500 by the end of the weekend."**

**"People enjoy all the different varieties, the colors and textures," she adds. "It's very rewarding introducing these to customers."**

**The Hiteses still sell at the annual Country Living show in Ohio, as well as a number of other shows in surrounding states. Each year they load up their son Adam's semi-trailer with pumpkins, squash, gourds, corn shocks, Indian corn and Sweet Annie and head out to Renninger's**



Antique Center's Fall in the Field Show in Mount Dora, Florida, where they usually sell out.

"This is definitely a working farm and we all work together as a family, trying to be good stewards of the land," Julie says. "There's nothing like living in the country. I love it here and I can't imagine living anywhere else."

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*Top left: Halie, age 6, is one of Julie and Greg's granddaughters and is a frequent visitor at the farm where she stables her pony named Frankie. Halie and her younger sister Riley, 4, both help in the pumpkin patch and with other farm chores, Julie says. The girls are the daughters of the Hiteses' son Adam and his partner Amanda and live on a nearby farm.*

*Top right: Darwin is one of the dogs who enjoy living at the Hites farm.*

*Above: Oscar, at left, is the oldest of the five rescue dogs who live at the farm. With him is Farley, the dog the Hites adopted most recently.*

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