

Creating a Showcase

MARTI AND RON DIEDERICH BUILT A NEW SALTBOX TO DISPLAY THEIR REMARKABLE COLLECTION OF MIDWESTERN PRIMITIVES AND GIVE FULL REIGN TO MARTI'S CREATIVITY.



By Gregory LeFever
Photographs by Jill Peterson



A large cupboard that Marti and Ron Diederich call “Nettie H” says much about the country-primitive look they’ve achieved in their home.

First of all, it’s an Illinois piece, as are many of the prized pieces they own. Second, Marti found the mid-1800s cupboard at a local auction, like several of their other pieces. Third, when she bought it, the cupboard was pink, but she figured there could be some earlier, more pleasing paint underneath. It was when Marti stripped off the pink paint that she found a real treasure.

“Underneath was this beautiful original dark blue paint with wonderful areas worn by years of use,” Marti explains. “And, best of all, a girl had carved her name right into the cupboard’s front door – Nettie H. The fact that she carved her name there makes it one of our favorite pieces.”

Left: Sunlight streams into the Diederich kitchen to highlight an array of dry-surface furniture. The well-scrubbed early cupboard at left came from a Wisconsin log cabin, the rare blue step-back at center is from Michigan and has a grain bin as its lower half, while the weathered Indiana blue step-back at the right holds pantry boxes, firkins, and buckets. Marti and Ron discovered the large barrel with its old blue paint at a local barn sale.

Top: The kitchen table has a two-board top and is flanked by half-spindle thumb-back chairs. The bucket bench below the kitchen window is a Pennsylvania piece in its original green paint.



The primitive sink, counter, and cabinets create a congenial atmosphere in the Diederich kitchen, owing much to Marti's design skills. An old workbench from Washington, Illinois, serves as the basis of the kitchen counter, which Marti modified by creating doors and enhancing its drawers. She removed the workbench's upper shelving to create the open shelves now hanging above the countertop, which she and Ron constructed from old barn boards. The hanging cupboard to the right of the sink holds spices.



Their “Nettie H” cupboard is right at home with the many primitive pieces the couple has collected for more than thirty years. They’ve scoured estate sales, farm auctions, and antique markets across Illinois, Wisconsin, and Michigan, with occasional jaunts farther east. “We’ve found that there are a lot of good pieces in the Midwest,” Marti says, “but with so many of the farms now being sold off, it’s getting harder to find good early pieces.”

In her home, Marti over the years has moved from buying and stripping pine furniture, to preferring colorful original-paint pieces, to more recently favoring either attic-surface or pieces in more subdued hues of early paint.



“It makes me feel at peace,” Marti says of the atmosphere throughout her home. “Especially the grays and the bluish grays. And I love the repaired pieces where people just fixed them when they got broken. The make-do pieces make you think about who owned them and how much they cared for their things. It takes me back to a different and more peaceful time. It’s hard to explain.”

Marti doesn’t need to justify any of this to her husband. “Very early on, I surrendered all of the decorating to Marti, and I’ve never looked back,” Ron says of his wife of forty-one years. “I’m really pleased with the result, and now Marti has someplace that can really showcase her collections.”

Top: Marti built the shelving and Ron built the door at the far left that combine to conceal the kitchen’s refrigerator. The island is from an old counter Marti found years ago at a farm auction and it now holds a collection of antique buckets.

Left: A late-1800s crude wall box holds an unusual whisk-broom with a leather strap around the bristles, as well as a pot-scrubber broom and turkey-wing broom.



Both hanging and standing cupboards dominate this end of the dining room. At left, Marti used old-door wood to create the hanging cupboard with its screen door. The cupboard beneath it is an early Illinois piece. The large step-back cupboard in original reddish-brown paint displays some of Marti's basket collection, and a well-worn burlap sack covers the lower shelves to replace the missing doors. The metal lantern likely is an Illinois farm fixture from the 1800s.

Many Homes, Many Styles

That showcase is the reproduction colonial saltbox house Marti and Ron built seven years ago in the countryside near Yorkville, in northeastern Illinois. And they covered a lot of ground, house-wise, to get to that saltbox.

Both were born and raised in Aurora, Illinois, just a dozen miles from Yorkville, though they didn't meet each other until later. Both came from large families, and Marti emphasizes that in her family, "We made-do with what we had, and we created our own entertainment."

Both were attending the local community college when one day Ron first spotted Marti in the student lounge. Immediately smitten, he soon asked her out to lunch. "We went to lunch," Marti recalls, "and that was it. I got a case of the giggles I was so nervous. We were engaged less than three months later."

Most of Ron's professional career was in law enforcement in Yorkville. "It was a good run," he says, retiring after thirty-two years of service. They celebrated their fortieth anniversary last year, are parents to three grown sons, and have two grandsons and a third grandchild on the way.

Marti – who has been an antiques dealer for thirty years – credits Ron with encouraging her connection with antiques and developing her distinctive decorating style. She tells about one day when they were driving along and passed a farm where a sale was being held. “It was the day we got the big blue barrel,” she recalls. “We drove on by and then Ron said, ‘You want to stop?’ So we turned around. I know a lot of husbands who wouldn’t have offered to stop, but I’ve got a real gem. Ron’s always been so supportive.”

There have been many twists and turns as Marti and Ron moved to different homes and acquired different styles of furniture as their family grew. In brief, they first set up house in Aurora, then moved to a house on the wooded property of a Boy Scout camp in Yorkville. Three years later they were back in Aurora, and seven years after that, they were back in the same house at the Yorkville scout camp for another five years.

Around 1990 they bought a mid-1800s storefront in downtown Yorkville with a second-floor apartment that became the Diederich home. Marti, who had begun selling antiques years earlier in a small booth, opened an antiques store on the first floor, inviting six other vendors to participate. “My dad had been an antiques dealer in the 1970s, setting up at a local flea market on Sundays,” she says, “and I know I could’ve learned a lot if I’d just paid more attention to what he was up to.”

She and Ron had been buying antique oak furniture for their home since early in their marriage, but Marti eventually moved toward earlier pine pieces. “It was while we were living in the upstairs apartment that I first started getting into the painted pieces,” she says. “My first piece of painted furniture was a chest that I still have in the bedroom. I brought it home and said, ‘This doesn’t

match anything else,’ because we had all of this stripped pine. That was the turning point for me. I knew I’d never go back.”

Rising From the Ashes

It wasn’t long before Marti needed a change. “I was homesick for an actual house,” she admits. Their upstairs home was cramped, and tending shop tied her down. They bought a two-story house in Yorkville in the mid-1990s and completely redid the interior to match the country style Marti favored. “The outside looked like a regular 1970s style house,” Ron explains, “but on the inside we had plank floors, pine doors, and beams.”

Meanwhile, the couple continued collecting a substantial number of country furniture pieces as well as more than ninety pieces of yellowware, numerous baskets, pantry boxes, firkins, early buckets, crocks and other stoneware – all of the antique

Left: The barrel in the dining room is unusual both in size and for its early red paint. Marti and Ron found it in Michigan. An unwieldy four feet tall, it’s made of thick oak. “We don’t know what it was used for, but it’s just awesome,” Marti says.





domestic items that, at the time, could be found at estate sales, auctions, and shops. The obvious next step was to create a complete environment to reflect the couple's style – a home reflecting an early design, located in the countryside with woods and wildlife aplenty.

The Diederichs bought an acre of land about three miles south of town and began planning their next home. They decided on a saltbox style, hoping to start construction the following spring. But a major house fire in August of 2006 changed all of that.

A faulty power strip ignited the fire, which swept rapidly through the basement, consuming many antique items Marti had collected, Ron's own collection of original GI Joe figures, as well as a son's prized collection of more than a thousand vinyl record albums. The fire was so hot and moved so quickly that it melted the basement smoke alarm.

"I had just left the basement and gone outside when I heard Marti scream," Ron recalls. "Flames were shooting out of the basement right where I'd just been. It was the freakiest thing I've ever seen, and that includes all my years of police work."

"It was devastating," Marti says. "If we'd already been in bed, we could've died in that fire. We began to look at our lives as 'before the fire' and 'after the fire.'"





Previous, top: Here the dining room looks into the adjacent living room. The large sawbuck dining table is eight feet long and is from Wisconsin, as is the nearby cupboard holding a collection of crocks and other stoneware.

Previous, bottom: This vignette features a stoneware jug and a vintage bottle from the Fry & Company Liquor of Aurora, Illinois, along with two early decanters.

Left: A late-1800s cupboard from Minnesota may be missing its bottom door but it's filled with antique leather-bound books, stoneware jugs, baskets and pails.

Below: The Diederich living room features a parlor-size fireplace. Furniture includes the Minnesota cupboard at left, and a mid-1800s chair table with a feedbag-style sack on which Marti has stenciled her great-grandfather's name and birth date. She sewed the two cloth dolls sitting on the primitive ladder-back chair. The large bench in the foreground is a Canadian style where the seat lifts up and the bottom pulls out like a day bed. In the room's center is a well-worn, single-board scrub-top table in its original dark red paint.





Somehow, the plans for the saltbox were spared. “They were sitting on a dry sink near the door to the basement,” Ron says, “and the flames came right up into the kitchen and burned out the cabinets. But the blueprints were unscathed. I turned to Marti and said it must be kismet. I told her, ‘We’d better build this house – and now.’”

Remaining True to the Look

Among lovers of old homes, you hear stories of people buying expensive plans for reproducing colonial houses, hiring builders and then hitting problems when the builders struggle to understand the plans, to meet local building codes, or simply don’t appreciate the 18th-century design elements contained in the plans.

Top: The living room wall opposite the fireplace features two large cupboards. The dark blue one is a Diederich favorite because of the name “Nettie H.” carved into one of the front doors. The gray cupboard at the right is one Marti herself made to house the family television. One of their most unusual antiques is the model barn sitting on top of the blue cupboard. It is concrete with stones embedded in the walls to resemble the stone barns in Door County, Wisconsin, where it was created.

The Diederichs, however, were fortunate in hiring the Yorkville general contracting firm of Willman & Groesch, working directly with Frank Willman and Tom Smith. “We wanted to showcase Marti’s antiques in a house that looked early, both inside and out,” Ron explains. “But the house layout we considered had little rooms everywhere and we needed the space arranged differently. Tom was able to take it to what we have today, which is much more to our liking.”



The guest bedroom on the main floor has a 19th-century rope bed where the head and footboards came from an estate sale and Marti created the side rails. A pair of child's boots sits on the trundle bed that still has its original red paint.

Below left: The cupboard at left is likely early 1800s and holds a collection of antique toy log cabins and two trunks covered in cowhide. The chair is one of Marti's first primitive-style purchases, coming from Missouri. She bought the dry sink by the window at a local auction. The robin's-egg-blue pie safe has an unusual bird pattern on the punched-tin panels.

Below right: Marti creates various styles of primitive Christmas trees, often using antique artifacts such as this vintage bucket. The toy Santa is from the 1800s, while the little dog of the same vintage is from Germany.





Top left: The upstairs master bedroom's six-board chest at the foot of the bed is the first piece of painted furniture Marti bought, years ago in Illinois. The walking wheel in the background is from Vermont, and Marti found the antique blanket rack at a local auction.

Top right: The bedroom's tapered-leg pie safe has its original green paint. Marti purchased the unusually large cupboard at a local auction and stripped off its orange and gold paint to discover its original blue-gray paint, making it one of her favorite pieces.

Above: The child's bed from Wisconsin has original gray paint.

Following Page: The bottom trunk from the 1800s has sponge-painted decoration. Ron found the top trunk stored in his mother's basement and learned it had belonged to his sister-in-law's grandfather, who had used it while in the Navy and who painted the ship inside the lid. The piece is destined to stay in the family.



It took a year to build the 2,200-square-foot saltbox. Ron and Marti did some of the framing themselves, with their home eventually having a first-floor kitchen, dining room, living room, bathroom, and guest bedroom. The smaller second-floor has two bedrooms, a sewing room, and a bath. From the start, the saltbox has displayed the more minimal embellishments of an earlier era. Walls are white, pine-plank flooring runs throughout, woodwork is plain with subdued tones, and the downstairs ceilings have exposed beams.

With the courage of an artist, Marti has remained true to her love of the look we call “country” and “primitive.” Burlap and worn feedsacks serve as curtains on some windows, vintage clothing hangs from nails driven into hewn boards, and the telltale signs of years and years of wear and tear are apparent on furniture throughout the home.

Making Make-do Furnishings

While Marti and Ron have managed to acquire an impressive selection of country furniture, much of the primitive “feel” of the home comes from the make-do style of furnishings Marti herself has created. “I used to sew a lot when I was little and then I graduated to using a sewing machine,” she explains. “Years ago I decided to buy a bandsaw because, to me, it’s like a sewing machine that cuts wood.”

Marti has ingeniously created furniture that’s tough to tell from something found at the farm auctions she loves. For example, the kitchen counter was once an old turquoise-painted workbench she bought in Washington, Illinois. She used the wood from the top of the bench to make doors for the piece and then joined pieces of barn wood together to create the

Making a Primitive Christmas Tree



I make both the tall and short primitive Christmas trees from branches and pieces of logs from the nearby woods. Then I go to thrift shops to find realistic-looking Christmas trees, take them home and cut off the branches with bolt cutters. If I’m making a tall tree, I cut off the smaller branches near the top of the tree and glue them into a branch I found in the woods, using holes I’ve already drilled into the branch. I then put it into an old wood Christmas tree stand. For the smaller trees, I use a large bottom branch and stand it upright and bend the branches straight out to look like a primitive tree. Then I drill a hole in a 3-inch or so diameter piece of a log and glue the small tree upright in it.



Above: Marti found the bathroom's sink on the ground at a local auction, purchased it, and then built the sturdy cabinet to make the sink operational.

Below: Located about three miles from Yorkville, the Diederich reproduction saltbox home has about 2,200 square feet. "We love it out here," Marti says. "We have a little over an acre, and we're in the country with a nice view." Ron adds, "It's the best of both worlds."

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counter top. She repaired drawers, making primitive little knobs using the heads from wooden clothespins. She removed the workbench's upper shelves to create open shelves hanging above the countertop.

Marti and Ron also paired up to conceal their kitchen refrigerator, she building tall shelves that hide the side and he building a plank door that covers the refrigerator door. She created the first floor bathroom sink by building a bench-like cabinet to hold an antique sink. Plus, she built a period-style step-back cupboard to hold the living room television, and she made side rails to replace missing ones to make a rope bed again functional in the guest bedroom.

Aside from furniture, Marti also makes a variety of decorations, from primitive Christmas trees to strings of dried beans and gourds, to candles and hand-sewn things.

Meanwhile, Marti also continues selling primitive antiques along with her own creations. She sells primarily through Olde Timers Antique Centre in nearby Sandwich, Illinois, and she and Ron set up at a couple of shows a month.

Marti and Ron agree that their saltbox in the country has proven to be a fine home. "We love it out here," Marti says. "We have the house we want and we're in the country with a nice view."

For his part, Ron mentions his occasional trips to the woods across the road to gather firewood. "I'll go over there to harvest firewood and sometimes I turn to look back at the house and just smile. It's really beautiful."

