

# “It’s Something You Just Love”

ONCE CONTENT WITH HER TRADITIONAL HOME AND FURNISHINGS, MARY FROST WAS SUDDENLY DRAWN TO WELL-WORN, HUMBLER FURNISHINGS, AND SHE’S NEVER LOOKED BACK.

By Gregory LeFever

**M**ary Frost was happy for a decade with the Colonial-style home she and her husband built on the west coast of Florida, filling it with antiques that blended well with the gorgeous Colonial Williamsburg wallpapers that graced nearly every wall.

Then Mary changed in a way even she finds difficult to explain. In the late 1980s she suddenly pulled off the wallpapers and replaced them with plain walls. She stripped the house of several of its formal attributes and sold off her traditional antiques to replace them with simpler, more deeply worn pieces. “Some people don’t even want to touch some of the things I buy,” she laughs.

A more primitive style had beckoned Mary.

“I can’t put it into words,” she admits. “It’s just something I love. I know that it gives me joy and happiness and peace and tranquility – all of those things. But I just can’t explain it. If you love it, you just love it. And you just can’t see anything else.”



Photographed by Jill Peterson

Mary's conversion – and it truly is a conversion quite akin to a spiritual experience – is happening to more people these days who, deep in their heart of hearts, reject the fast-paced commotion of daily life in favor of the downhome tranquility that comes with unadorned, well-worn furnishings and humbler surroundings. And as more people reveal their longing for primitive, it seems more primitive-lovers come out of the woodwork.

They range from people who enjoy a primitive treasure here and there to ground them in an earlier and seemingly saner time, to those who literally surround themselves with a pioneer existence complete with inconvenience as well as tranquility. Like many folks, Mary is somewhere in between. While there still may not be a lot of followers of the primitive look in Florida, she has a committed group of a dozen friends whose common bond is their fondness for primitive. And it's been those friends who've nurtured and supported Mary along the way.



## Changing 'All This'

Raised in Kansas City, Mary recalls her earliest exposure to antiques was as a teen when she would accompany her mother and grandmother on what they called their "junking" trips. "I have to laugh, my mother liked antiques, but my grandmother would walk around and say, 'We threw better than that in the dump – we tried to get rid of it!' She didn't like anything that resembled primitive. My mother and I got a kick out of her."

Mary's first antique purchase was when she was 16, an old flatiron. The three women frequented an eccentric dealer who lived along the Kaw River outside of Kansas City and who'd filled his ramshackle sheds and barns with all sorts of old things. "The locals called it 'Macy's on the River,'



*Previous Page: The Frost home in Bradenton, Florida, is a reproduction Colonial-style home, built by Mary and her husband Wayne during the 1980s.*

*Above: The entry hall features an early 19th century New England chest and candle stand, along with the period portrait of an unknown gentleman.*

*Left: The living room retains a more formal appearance, with early New England tables and a bannister-back chair. The chair in the foreground is an old wing-back covered in linsey-woolsey with some wood exposed.*



*Opposite Page: The family room holds several of Mary's primitive treasures, including her favorite, the make-do chair at hearthside. It has the base of a ladder-back and the back of a Boston rocker and is covered in five layers of fabric from different eras, plus extra patches on its arms. The hearth itself holds an array of fireplace cooking gear, including a crane, tin oven, various skillets and kettles, and a couple of foot-warmers. A line-up of pewter chargers rests atop the mantel.*

*Left: The slant-top desk is an early 1800s Connecticut piece with an assortment of antique books and other paraphernalia Mary has collected through the years. The document box is in its original blue. The period chair in front of the desk is a transitional Chippendale and the one beside the desk is a bannister back, both from Massachusetts. The subject and artist of the woman's portrait both are unknown.*

*Below: All of the items displayed on the slant-top desk are vintage 19th century pieces, although the hourglass may be older. The antique ledger is open to a page dated July 21, 1836.*

which I thought was cute," she says. During those years her mother collected Depression glass, and furniture of oak and mahogany. "Not country things at all, not primitive - but that's what my mother collected, and that's what I started collecting as well."

She'd been buying antiques off and on for about 20 years when she and her late husband Wayne - whom she'd met years earlier while visiting Bradenton, Florida, and who passed away five years ago - built their home there. It was the early 1980s and Mary was influenced by traditional early American décor. Her four-bedroom home has classic Colonial lines with a symmetrical floor plan, six-over-six windows, period-style woodwork and wood floors, two large fireplaces with spacious hearths, crown molding and an occasional exposed-beam ceiling. With its two towering oak trees in the front yard, the house could just as well be in Massachusetts.

"Like a lot of collectors, I'd started out with oak and Victorian antiques," Mary explains. "When we built the house, I had a formal living room and dining room with several pieces of more formal Victorian furniture. The family room and kitchen were less formal and had more oak. And I just had to have every room papered with beautiful Williamsburg wallpapers."

That's the way it was for about 10 years. Then, as she continued searching for antiques, she became friends with women





who were exploring quite a different décor. "I'd been to my friends' homes and one day I thought, 'I'm going to change all this.' I came back home and started pulling the wallpaper off the walls - all of that wallpaper I just had to have."

## The Transformation

If any one thing contributed to the change, Mary believes it was that she fell in with a group of Florida women who loved the primitive look. They'd run into each other at shows and antique shops, openly admitting to an appreciation for the cracked and the patched, the weathered and the worn furniture and other items that could fill a country household.

"I think it started when I visited my friend Jude Eilers," Mary says. "She lives in Tampa and has collected primitive for a long time. Eventually there was a group of us and I was going to these other women's homes and just seeing that primitive look. Either you love it or you don't. And if you love it, you get a really special place in your heart for it."



*Above: Mary acquired the 1850s desk in the family room from Mackay & Field Antiques in Connecticut in its original red paint. The artist and subject of the early New England portrait remain unknown. Below it are two early boxes, one black and the other a red-and-black combination.*



*Left: Another section of the family room features an early 1800s tavern table and a mid-1800s bucket bench in its original blue. The chair in the foreground is a step-down Windsor side chair and the country ladder-back has a rush seat, both early to mid 19th century pieces.*

*Opposite: Mary remodeled aspects of her kitchen to suit her more primitive pieces. She retained the original kitchen cabinets but replaced the countertop. The large hanging cupboard is a 19th century country piece from Ohio, and the rack displays a number of Mary's colorful collection of period wooden bowls. The sawbuck table in the foreground is an 1800s New England piece. The little ladder-back chair in the foreground shows a makeshift repair, with a heavy wire extending across the top slat to hold together the two side posts. "I love things with old repairs on them," Mary says.*





*"This table was one of my first purchases when I was going from oak to primitive in the kitchen," Mary recalls. "I figured it would do until I could upgrade it, but I've never found one I liked better that I could afford." It came from a dealer in Florida and is surrounded by a set of yoke-back Queen Anne chairs. The rustic kitchen, with its exposed-beam ceiling, displays household items Mary has collected over the years.*

Mary systematically began redecorating the interior of her home and replacing her furnishings with primitive pieces. She took the rooms back to bare walls and painted them off-white. She replaced both of the large mantels with earlier styles of hearths. "The house had good woodwork and wood floors, so we didn't have to do much there," she explains.

So what about her husband? "Wayne went along with it fine," she relates. "He loved to play golf every day and if I was happy, he was happy." She admits that at first, he was skeptical, but was won over when visitors to the home admired her new primitive touches. "Wayne was a great guy, and ended up doing all of the staining and the painting for me."

"Of course when I redid my house," Mary chuckled, "my mother was convinced that I'd just ruined it. But I'm very happy with it and still love it."

## Finding Her Look

With the changes she made to the house, Mary accomplished something that usually is difficult to achieve. She created a flexible setting that can harmoniously accommodate a range of different

furniture styles and nothing appears out of place. While the house is a faithful reproduction of a more formal Colonial style, several parts of the house now reflect the plainer atmosphere well suited to primitive furniture. Yet Mary avoided artificially distressing floors or woodwork so that – as a backdrop to her collection of country furniture pieces – the house doesn't call unnecessary attention to itself.

“Even now, the house itself is not all that primitive,” she explains. “You could say it's more Colonial, but I don't have colonial-period furniture, so I hesitate to call it that. It's an awfully broad term – Colonial – and a lot of people get quite picky about it.”

She applies that same sentiment to individual pieces of furniture as well. Several tables, chairs and cupboards she has acquired from reputable dealers appear to be mid to late-1700s pieces, but unless she can prove their provenance, Mary prefers to say they are early to mid 1800s. “I personally think a lot of them may be earlier pieces, but I'm reluctant to say that because I'm not an authority. I'd rather date them later and not mislead people.”

For the past 20 years, Mary has scoured shows and shops for her well-worn treasures. At the moment, her favorite piece is a rare make-do chair that sits next to the hearth in the family room. Its base is an early ladder-back chair and its back is from a Boston rocker, which creates a wingback effect. But most



*Top: The large mid-1800s New England cupboard that dominates one wall of the kitchen came from antiques dealer Joanne Boardman and still has its original blue paint.*

*Above: The comfortable settee along a kitchen wall is a reproduction piece, while next to it is an early 1800s candle stand.*

*Left: The antique jar holds nutmeg and a nutmeg grater.*







*Opposite: Mary's dining room features a panoramic mural in the style of early 1800s muralist Rufus Porter. Mary's friend and fellow lover of all things primitive, Jude Eilers of Tampa, painted it for her in 1993. The large trestle table and chest are both early 19th century New England pieces. Surrounding the table are some of Mary's extraordinary collection of early Windsor chairs that she bought from different dealers at different times. The two bannister-back chairs are from the same period.*

*Left: Part of Mary's extensive collection of pewter kettles, pots, chargers, cups and smaller dishes. She built up her collection with a keen eye over the years.*

*Below: The large cupboard in the dining room is an early 1800s piece from Massachusetts.*





*Left: Mary's buttery displays her extensive collection of firkins, crockery, and baskets, including the unusual, large 1850s feather basket standing beside the shelving.*

*Below: Early crocks and vintage wooden mortars and pestles add charm to the buttery.*

*Opposite page: Two photos of the buttery, showing a number of Mary's domestic collections, such as baskets, crockery, bowls and firkins. Mary's daughter-in-law built all of the buttery shelving, "And she did a great job!" Mary says.*

distinctive is that a slit in one side reveals that, over its 150-or-so years of existence, the chair has had five separate coverings and even some additional patches on its arms.

Mary also has an impressive collection of period Windsor, bannister-back, and ladder-back chairs, early tables large and small, and assorted cupboards with their original painted finishes. While she claims, "I don't collect any certain thing,"

her home has an abundance of pewter, wooden bowls, document boxes, and fine early 19th century portraits by anonymous artists.

"To me it's very touching that these early craftsmen and just ordinary people went out and cut a tree down and made a piece of furniture from it," she exclaims. "And the fact that it's still around today and still in use is remarkable, whereas manufactured furniture today doesn't even last 10 years."

## Birds of a Feather

Mary lives much of the year at her Bradenton home and spends her summer months at her second home in North Carolina, a hefty home-maintenance load for a widow. But the two locations do tend to broaden her search for antiques.





**"The problem is, North Carolina's is pretty picked too," Mary says as she discusses the plight of antique hunters in recent decades - the growing scarcity of "good finds" and the dwindling number of dealers, which also has a direct impact on the antique shows. "Oh, it's been a very big change over the years," she continues. "Even in our area, we've lost so many dealers and shops for one reason or another. Even little things that aren't even antiques but that go well in an antique home - the candle lights and the traditional crafts pieces - they're getting harder to find, too."**

**But if anything still keeps the thrill in the search going, it's Mary's group of like-minded friends.**

**"There are 12 of us from all over the state and we all love primitive and early country," Mary explains. "We've been friends for years and we get together twice a year. We have a Christmas luncheon and exchange gifts, and we also get together in the spring. We always meet at one of our homes and it's one of our favorite days because we get to see the homes and how they've changed and the new things that have been added, and we just love it."**





*Top left: An antique pencil-post bed with vintage red linsey-woolsey coverlet adds coziness to the guest bedroom, which also features a late 1800s side table and bench with a dollhouse of the same period. All of the clothing hanging on pegboards throughout Mary's home is vintage, most from the mid to late 1800s.*

*Above: The master bedroom's dresser in its original old red paint is from New England. The wig sitting on it is theatrical. Of the two boxes, one is covered in wallpaper while the other has its original blue paint. An antique Chippendale mirror hangs above the dresser.*

*Left: A sturdy 1800s blanket chest from North Carolina stands in the upstairs hallway, with a leather-covered document box sitting atop it. The portrait of the unknown man is from New England, by an unknown artist.*



*Right: Another guest bedroom contains an unusual bannister-back chair in early bright blue-over-red paint. The child's mid-1800s ladder-back chair hanging from the peg rail is worn down from children using it to support themselves while they learned how to walk. The large blanket chest along the wall supports a wallpaper-covered antique band box.*



**“The gift-giving is special because we only give presents to each other that can be used in a primitive home,” she goes on. “And those are often our favorite gifts. I mean we all have our families that we enjoy during the holidays, but those primitive gifts can be the highlight of the Christmas season for us.”**

**These days Mary continues seeking early furniture and household items at popular antique shows such as those in New England and Nashville and through notable dealers all along the eastern seaboard. When asked if she has any advice for someone just beginning antiques, she doesn't even hesitate:**

**“Buy the things you love. That would be my best advice. You hear people say, ‘Buy the best that you can afford.’ But if I find something and even if it's not the best, I don't care. If you like it, then buy it and enjoy it.”**



*Above: The back porch of Mary's home overlooks a large neighborhood pond. The large country rocker is covered in woven rush.*

*Right: Mary rescued Smokey in North Carolina where he'd been dropped at a restaurant and was trying to survive on customers' food handouts. A cat lover all of her life, she'd decided to not have any more pets, but her animal-loving friend Pam Smith insisted they not leave Smokey to fend for himself, and Mary couldn't resist him.*



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