

Blending Old with New

BY GREGORY LEFEVER

PHOTOGRAPHS BY WINFIELD ROSS

VERNON REEVES CREATIVELY COMBINES AN 1840S LOG CABIN AND NEW HOME TO SHOWCASE THE ANTIQUES HE HAS BEEN COLLECTING SINCE AGE TEN.



An antique harvest table serves as the dining room table in Vernon Reeves's house in Missouri. Providing seating on one side are Colonial Revival ladder-back chairs. The large dark cupboard on the right of the doorway leading into the kitchen is one of Vernon's prized pieces, which he found in a St. Louis antiques mall. It has one-board construction on its doors and sides and still bears its pristine original finish. The trestle table along the wall at left is an early piece from Maryland.

Going from room to room in Vernon Reeves's home is like watching the settlement of the nation's Middle West occur before your eyes. Crude artifacts typical of early frontier life sit alongside finer furnishings that later waves of German, Irish, and French immigrants handcrafted for their new homes. Intermixed are the type of heirloom chairs and cupboards well-heeled Easterners hauled to the region's bustling new cities.

The Reeves house itself spans 170 years of eastern Missouri history—a large and attractive contemporary home that integrates logs from an 1840 pioneer cabin. Nestled on a hillside in High Ridge, surrounded by maple, hickory, and dogwood trees, the home's white walls and bare pine floors evoke the serenity of an earlier age.

"A friend of mine lives in an 1857 Federal brick, and when he visits here, he says, 'Man, I don't even feel like I'm in a new house at all. This is like a very old house,'" Vernon said. "And that's the best compliment of all because I've always wanted an old house but never found the right one in the right area."

Unable to find what he wanted, Vernon designed this house, basing its architecture on the lines of other houses he liked while blending in some unusual features—such as large sections of the old cabin and different types of exterior siding—to serve two distinct purposes. It's the home where he lives, and perhaps just as important, it's the backdrop for the furniture and collections he's been gathering since he was ten.

CONFINED COLLECTIONS

Vernon, who works for Ingram-St. Louis Seating in nearby Pacific, Missouri, grew up in St. Clair, an hour west of downtown St. Louis. That's where the antiques bug bit him at an early age. "I've always been collecting," he said. "I started when I was about ten years old, going to yard sales with my grandmother and my mom. I was twelve when I had my own first yard sale."

What attracted him at age ten—"the grungy, the crusty, and the primitive"—still appeals to him today. Like many inveterate collectors turned antiques dealers, he continually upgrades his furnishings, so none of the primitives he bought at age ten remain. They have been replaced over the years by countless other primitive artifacts from the Midwest and East.

Vernon eventually bought a small brick 1890s house in St. Clair. "But I wanted to move to St. Louis," he said. "I searched for an old house there but I couldn't find one because I like New England-style homes. I looked and looked. And I finally spotted a little Cape Cod in the middle of St. Louis in a neighborhood of brick bungalows."

The tiny 1929 single-story Cape in the historic Harlem Heights neighborhood was mostly intact. Vernon freed the hardwood floors from their shag carpet, changed the floor plan for improved livability, installed early-style lighting throughout, and eventually created a tranquil colonial ambiance. The home's one downside was its size—at only about 1,000 square feet, it was cramped quarters for Vernon and his prized belongings.

Vernon had been battling the Cape's space problem for ten years when a friend, Joan Lucas (whose own Jefferson County, Missouri, log home appeared in the April issue of *Early American Life*) tipped him off three years ago about a log cabin that might be available. "A woman she works with asked Joan if she knew of anyone who might be interested in a log house to be torn down and Joan said, 'Well, I just might,'" Vernon recounted.

The circa 1840 cabin stood in Beaufort, about forty miles due west of High Ridge. "We went there and looked at the cabin and they gave it to me," Vernon recalled. "It was on the property of an older lady and it blocked her view of her mailbox and she wanted it gone." The cabin had been erected in a lower field but moved to higher ground in about 1920. Back then the movers who dis-





The 3,700-square-foot home perches on a slope in High Ridge, Missouri, surrounded by maple, oak, hickory, and dogwood trees. Vernon Reeves created the basic design to incorporate parts of an 1840 log cabin. The section of logs visible here is topped by ship-lapped oak, while the rest of the exterior is cedar clapboard. French doors open into a breezeway connecting the house and garage and containing a large breakfast nook.

When reassembling components of the 1840s log cabin as part of the new house, builders incorporated stones from the cabin's chinking into the new chinking. Considerable attention went to energy efficiency in reconstructing the exterior walls where the logs are visible.



mantled the cabin scratched Roman numerals on the logs to identify their placement, then reassembled it at the location that eventually irked the woman.

So in July 2005, Vernon purchased 3.3 acres of wooded hillside in High Ridge, sold the St. Louis house, and began designing a house that would provide more living space and accommodate the dismantled log cabin. During the design and construction, he took up temporary residence with Joan Lucas.

FINDING THE 'GOOD THINGS'

The area around High Ridge—about fifteen miles south of St. Louis and the same distance due west of the Mississippi River—had been populated by eight Indian cultures going back 10,000 years. The French originally explored the territory, but Spain gained control of it in 1762 under the Treaty of Fontainebleau, then ceded it back to France in 1800. Napoleon sold it to the new United States in 1803 as part of the Louisiana Purchase.

European settlement of what is now Jefferson County began when Frenchman John Hildebrand built a homestead in 1774 on the banks of the Saline River. Moses Austin, from Connecticut, obtained a Spanish land grant in 1798 and began mining and smelting lead near what is now the town of Herculaneum, about twenty-five miles southeast of High Ridge. Legend has it that Austin so named his settlement because he thought its eroded limestone strata resembled the ancient amphitheater in the Italian city of the same name.

In every decade from 1830 to 1860, Missouri's population doubled. New residents poured in from neighboring states and the South, where they rubbed shoulders with successive waves of German and Irish immigrants fleeing Europe's famines and revolutions.

Today 4,000-plus people live in High Ridge amid the wooded hills or on small farms. "A lot of people from St. Louis moved out to this area in the late 1800s and early 1900s for the farmland," Vernon said. "People

say Missouri has a lot of the different 'feels' of other parts of the country, and this area reminds me very much of parts of Pennsylvania, just the way the hills and valleys are."

Vernon's extensive collection of antique furniture and household items closely tracks the region's settlement patterns.

"I stay pretty much in Missouri and Illinois," he explained. He does venture close to the Iowa border on occasion and is sure to scour the countryside for treasures when he vacations in places such as Massachusetts, Ohio, and Pennsylvania. It's clear as he lists his acquisitions that he's on intimate terms with nearly every antiques shop and mall within a day's drive of High Ridge.

"You have to like to dig," he said. "You have to travel a lot and dig through a lot of rat holes to find

the good things."

Vernon has found plenty of pieces that would make any collector proud—a tall case clock, several chairs, and a shelf all dating from the 1700s, for example. He also has amassed a fascinating assortment of crude items reflecting the hard pioneer experience. He has a primitive candle stand hacked from a chunk of wood heavy enough to support the bent candle arm and another primitive light fixture fashioned from a tree limb with a tin candle holder tacked to its top. Make-dos include a primitive strainer made from a punched-tin pie plate and an old rope bed converted to a sofa in the 1800s. In his dining room sits a huge mortar and pestle an early Indiana farmer hewed from a tree trunk for grinding corn.

In between the fashionable and

the crude are a number of utilitarian tables, chairs, cupboards, cabinets, and shelves found in the typical early-19th-Century home in Missouri and points eastward. Their vintage paint may be cracked, but their construction remains sturdy and their surfaces glow with honest aging.

Vernon's collections are grouped everywhere you turn in every room of the house. Pewter dishes and pewter shakers. Wallpaper blocks from the early 1800s, stone bed-warmers, and numerous whisk brooms. Hide-covered document boxes from the late 1700s and stacks of 19th-Century hat boxes. Treen dishes and utensils flanked by rows of yellow ware and stacks of redware. Sewing tools going back a century and little wooly *putz* sheep. Antler-handled knives and countless hand-woven

The breezeway's spacious breakfast nook holds ample antiques from Vernon's many years of collecting. The 1830s corner cupboard from Illinois holds his set of Alfred Meakin ironstone. The smaller sawbuck table dates from about 1900, while the larger one in the center of the room is from the mid-1800s. Two of the early-19th-Century ladder-back chairs are from New York State and two are from Pennsylvania. The woven baskets came from "all over the place."





In the living room, a c. 1840 Federal-style mantel from a doctor's house in Salem, Missouri, tops the functioning fireplace. The early hutch to the left of the fireplace has its original coat of dry-red calcimine paint. One of the three early-1700s Queen Anne splat-back chairs around the sawbuck table is from Cape Cod, the other two from Alton, Illinois. The round table holds a treen bowl with stone fruit. The chair is Colonial Revival. Below, the tall clock bears a label saying it was made in 1760 in Silchester, England, by Thomas Dicker. The Chippendale-style sofa is from Angel House Designs.



baskets in various hues.

He even owns numerous pig-shaped cutting boards, of which he said, chuckling, "I have a friend with a pig cutting board collection three times as large as mine. Now if we go shopping and spot a pig board, it has to be something really special for either of us to buy it. We're way beyond just the common pig."

When Vernon starts to run out of space, he culls his items, selling some to make room for new purchases. The little Cape had kept a tight rein on his inventory, a condition he knew he could remedy in a larger house.

BLENDING EARLY WITH MODERN

Once the pieces of the log cabin had been carefully stored on land owned by his contractor, Vernon set about determining how to integrate them into a completely new structure. With the help of the contractor and an architect, he devised a unique floor plan that would capitalize on the charm of the old logs but still meet local building codes and energy efficiencies. Construction began in December 2005 and Vernon moved in six months later.

"When the contractor put the logs back together, it was not exactly as a log cabin," Vernon explained.

"They built the new parts of the house and then back-fitted the logs. They cut them all the same width, almost like a veneer, and then did the chinking and mortar." They had transported a number of chinking stones from the original site and used them as part of the new chinking between the logs.

The resulting layout has sections of logs visible on the exterior front and back of the house. Inside, logs form two walls of the dining room, one wall of the kitchen, and one wall of the living room. The other two dining room walls, both exterior, are framed without logs to accommodate the insulation required by local building codes. A heating and cooling system in the basement handles that area and the first floor. A second system in the attic serves the second floor via forced downdraft.

The home now has about 3,700 square feet of living space, nearly four times that of the Cape. The main floor contains the kitchen, dining room, and living room as well as a half bath and a sizeable breakfast nook in a breezeway connecting the kitchen to the garage. The second



The mid-1700s Windsor wall shelf in the dining room displays old pincushions and other sewing paraphernalia, while pewter chargers and basins grace the top of the wainscoting. The tabletop holds a primitive make-do candle holder from Farmington, Missouri, an early red tray with pewter shakers of varying sizes, and a 19th-Century red-painted compote with stone grapes. The painting of cows, undated, is from Springfield, Illinois.

In the far corner of the dining room is a rare blue cupboard from the late 1700s Vernon acquired at an auction along with a long red lift-top desk next to the window. The 18th-Century ladder-back chair, a Cape Cod piece, has sausage turnings. Beneath the window, the mortar and pestle made from a tree trunk were used for grinding corn.





One of the walls constructed from logs salvaged from the cabin divides the kitchen from the dining room. Another log wall can be seen on the far side of the dining room. Hanging next to the doorway is a primitive tabletop ironing board. The dark-grained cupboard to the right is one Vernon has owned for years, and the large attic-surfaced pine cupboard on the left is from Farmington, Missouri. The unusual crock resting on top of the cupboard, from Illinois, has a prominent "#2" painted at the top. The worn red hanging cupboard, below, holds old whisk brooms. It is suspended from a red cabinet that conceals the refrigerator.



floor has two large bedrooms, a full bath, and a large central hallway. The full basement is currently unfinished.

In his new house, Vernon employed a design tactic that worked well in his St. Louis Cape—he painted the walls a soft white and all the woodwork the same shade of taupe. These neutral tones and soft lighting display his antique furnishings to their best advantage. The rooms are cheerful on a sunny day, have ample light on a cloudy one, and emit a pleasing radiance after dark. The floors throughout the house are pine planks Vernon stained dark walnut for a suitably aged character.

While the log walls help avoid monotony in the design, the layout also benefits from three early built-

in pieces, all acquired in the Cherokee Street antiques district of St. Louis. The stairway banister accessing the second-floor hallway from the kitchen is a late-1700s piece. An early-1800s Federal mantel surrounds the living room's functioning fireplace, and a large closet from the same period holds coats and other items in the breezeway's breakfast nook.

Because of its hillside orientation, the house has a tall daylight basement of poured concrete for strength. Vernon had imprints stamped into the concrete to create faux stones, which he then stained in putty, brown, and limestone yellow to create the appearance of a tall, laid stone foundation.

To create additional visual interest as the house ages, he employed

This corner of the kitchen displays two c. 1820 hanging cupboards, while some of Vernon's many collectibles sit on the countertop, including pig-shaped cutting boards. Items on the kitchen's worktable include a hog-scraper candlestick, antler-handled food chopper, and early butcher knife with lead-inlaid handle, all of which date to the early 1800s.





An old rope bed was converted into this make-do sofa during the 1800s. Vernon purchased it at the 1807 Farmhouse in Caledonia, Missouri. The 1840s mourning portrait is of an unknown woman. The 1860s stool is from St. Louis, and a make-do lighting fixture from an old tree limb stands on the far side of the sofa. The floors throughout the house are pine planks Vernon stained to a dark walnut.

different woods and siding techniques. Most of the house is sheathed with Dutch-lapped cedar siding, which will age to a pleasing gray. Along the front above the exposed logs, a section of rough-cut, ship-lapped oak boards will age to a deep silvery-black to complement the logs below it.

"I don't like to paint houses," Vernon said with a laugh. "I wanted something maintenance-free and I sure didn't want vinyl."★

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The master bedroom contains a 19th-Century rope bed Vernon found at Quintessentials antiques shop in St. Louis. The sack-back Windsor chair near the window dates from the early 1700s. Perched on the trestle table are stacks of hide-covered document boxes and small trunks dating from 1790 to 1812. The highboy is a 1920s Colonial Revival piece.

The room's large linen press, right, has a dark "old attic" finish. Vernon found it in Illinois. The fancy Sheraton chair next to it is from the early 1800s, from the shop of one of Vernon's friends, John Trudeau of Tin Roof Antiques in St. Louis.

OPPOSITE In the second upstairs bedroom are two rope beds, the one in the foreground with a trundle. The hanging shelf on the rear wall holds wooly putz sheep. Vernon bought the hanging cupboard and dry sink, both from about the 1870s, at the Gypsy Caravan, one of the Midwest's largest antiques shows and flea markets. He found the little log cabin at an estate sale in St. Louis.

