

Log Cabin Fever

SHELVY AND CLARENCE MCQUEEN FILL THEIR 1838 INDIANA LOG HOME WITH OUTSTANDING PRIMITIVE PIECES, SOME GENUINELY OLD, OTHERS THESE TALENTED CRAFTSPEOPLE HAVE EXPERTLY REPRODUCED.

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For a dozen years, Shelvy McQueen had cabin fever — not the kind that makes you want to get out of one, but a longing to live inside a log cabin and experience the serenity only this simple structure can bring.

No one was more aware of Shelvy's dream than her childhood sweetheart and longtime husband, Clarence. Throughout the 1980s he contended with her unfulfilled plans to get a cabin one way or another — sometimes wanting to move a cabin, other times wanting to move their family — eventually becoming a true partner in her quest. Then, in 1992, it finally happened: Shelvy got her dream.

Since then, the McQueens have poured their energy and creativity into enhancing their two-story log home in central Indiana. They've fixed and improved it in countless ways, searched far and wide for wonderful primitive furnishings and created several impeccable reproductions themselves. Together, Shelvy and Clarence have turned their log home into a showcase.

"I just love it," Shelvy says. "Just being here, it gives you a feeling so warm and peaceful. I can get lost just sitting in my living room and enjoying the peace and quiet. I don't know why that is, but I just love it."

A Home with History

In the 1820s, a steady stream of wagons rolled westward out of Ohio and northward from the banks of the Ohio River toward the new Indiana state capital at Indianapolis, with pioneers stopping along the way to create homesteads on fertile lands once home to the Miami and Lenape tribes. An early settler of Shelby County — about 30 miles southeast of Indianapolis — was Leander Kuhn who, by 1838, had built his family an impressive two-story log cabin on his farm in Union Township.

A hundred years later, the cabin had suffered years of neglect when a high-school teacher figured it might help his students learn a little about history and a lot about building. Morris Trotter taught math, biology, and shop in the small town of Waldron, about nine miles south, where he'd acquired a piece of vacant land where he figured the cabin could sit.

Previous page: Early spring flowers bloom in front of the McQueen cabin in the central Indiana town of Waldron. The 1838 structure was moved to its present location in 1940 and purchased by the McQueens in 1992.

Top: A spring bouquet adorns the cabin's front door that Clarence made to replace a more modern one. He also rebuilt and expanded the front porch to replace a small, rickety one.

Left: The back corner of the cabin where the kitchen is located.





"He and his students took it apart, log by log, and moved those logs with tractors and pick-up trucks to this place, and then they rebuilt it the old-fashioned way," Shelvy explains. Trotter and his students started in 1940 and finished a year later. Along the way, they dug a full basement with picks and shovels and put up a concrete foundation. They also tore down a log barn on the old Kuhn farm and used the logs to build a kitchen, and then used pieces of an old corncrib to build the bathroom onto the rear of the cabin they'd moved. "Some of the logs on this house are 24 inches wide," Shelvy exclaims. "They're really huge and they all had to be chinked. It must have been a lot of work."

Morris Trotter lived many years in the reconstructed cabin — building several pieces of furniture from fine native cherry — until leaving for a nursing home where he passed away at age 93. To this day, gray-haired men who once were Trotter's students stop by the cabin. "They've come from as far away as Colorado and Connecticut and they say, 'I remember working on this house with Mister Trotter,'" Shelvy says. "It gave them a lot of good memories."



Previous page, top: Clarence built this back porch that forms a dogtrot between the home's bathroom and another back room. He built and Shelvy did the surface work on the water-pump cabinet at the right, the sawbuck table, and the settee bench. Only the chairs are antiques, all country pieces dating from the early to mid-1800s.

Previous page, left: A primitive vignette on a corner of the front porch, with a table and benches Clarence built.

Left: The large original fireplace in the cabin's living room. The child's chair on the hearth is an early piece, made from a barrel and with its original seat pad. The children's shoes are from the mid-1800s. Both hanging candle boxes are early 1800s, the left one from Indiana and the one on the right from Ohio. The musket is a working reproduction firearm.

Below: The cupboard left of the fireplace dates from the mid-1800s and has its original blue paint. Clarence built the period-looking cabinet at the right to house a television. The bannister-back chairs are a mix of late 1700s ones from New York State, such as the one at left, and some reproductions, such as the one at right. The cricket table in the center is an early piece, likely late 1700's. Part of Shelvy's 19th-century basket collection hangs from a beam, along with the antique tin chandelier.





Discovering Log Cabins

Shelvy and Clarence each grew up about 50 miles due east, in Franklin County near the Ohio border, but their journey to Waldron was anything but a straight line. "We were both farm kids, raised in the country," she explains. "We were kind of neighbors. I had twin brothers, and Clarence would come over to play basketball in our barn and I'd peek around the corner and smile at him. That's how we got together."

They married young and bought a house in Shelby County. "It was a pitiful little place and we had to work hard on it out of necessity, just a couple of young kids in the 60s," she says. But they learned how to fix up houses and sell them, over the years nine homes in all.

"When we started out, we had blonde furniture and then I got really smart and bought Danish Modern," she laughs. "Then we went into colonial and then the country look."



Previous top: A mid-19th-century portrait of a woman believed to be Roxellana Abbey (1751-1847) of Connecticut hangs in the living room above an early 1800s blanket chest with its original dry red paint. The antique document boxes are from Indiana, and the lantern and bottle are from Indiana and Florida.

Previous bottom: Another view of the living room. Clarence made the reproduction tavern table. Both bannister-back chairs are late-1700s pieces from New York State. Shelvy purchased the old shipwreck painting in Florida.

Right: This corner of the dining room features an 1800s hanging cupboard with original red-over-green layers of paint. The table is an early piece from Connecticut and it holds part of Shelvy's collection of 18th and 19th century books as well as a period hour-glass she obtained in Florida.

Below: Several extraordinary pieces are in the dining room, including the late-1700s table from North Carolina with a two-board top fastened with original rosehead nails. The stepback cupboard is an early-1800s piece from a log cabin in southern Indiana, with its original mustard and red paints. It holds some of Shelvy's period pewter collection with bride's boxes atop it. The tallcase clock is Swedish, from the late 1700s, and still works. The candle stand next to the clock is an early piece, as is the chandelier. The make-do chair and bannister-backs are reproductions.





In 1979, they moved with their two daughters to Columbus, Indiana, a sizeable city for the area and the world headquarters of Cummins, Inc., the large engine manufacturer where Clarence was a tool-and-die worker.

Shelvy, meanwhile, was creating craft items and soon began taking them a few miles west to Nashville, Indiana, in Brown County, to sell them in the shops there. Brown County had been settled a few years earlier than Shelby County and had held a special appeal for pioneers from Kentucky, Tennessee, and Virginia, because its hilly terrain and dense hardwood forests reminded them of their departed homes. With no industry to speak of, the county remained poor, which meant families spent their lives



Left, top: Clarence and Shelvy converted the cabin's cooking area into a galley kitchen. Here are some of the shelves and a portion of the counter Clarence constructed to better accommodate the cabin's space needs.

Above: A well-worn board covers the kitchen stovetop and provides an opportunity for Shelvy to display an unusual square platter from Florida, an early trencher and some of her collection of crocks.

Left: The kitchen's stepback cupboard is another piece the McQueens built and finished, now holding a variety of items including the early hand-hewn bowl Clarence found at a flea market for \$7.



in its many pioneer log cabins, preserving them for generations.

"They had log cabins like you've never seen in your life down there. They were just everywhere," Shelvy exclaims. "I'd go down there and see those cabins and pull off the road and just sit. I just loved them."

"Go Back, Go Back"

Brown County's back roads not only gave Shelvy her love of log cabins, but she also fell under the spell of the weathered and sometimes crude antiques she found there, many years before the primitive look became popular. "I'd find these wonderful antiques and I'd try to talk Clarence into buying them and he'd say, 'Shelvy, I cannot believe you want me to spend my hard-earned money on this.'"

But Shelvy was not to be discouraged, and Clarence in the early 1980s agreed to a family vacation in New England. They put their girls into the car and took off, staying away from the major highways whenever they



Top: Shelvy found the early 1800s dry sink with its original red and blue paint in Florida. The piece hanging above it is a cobbler's cupboard. On display are some of her treenware and firkin collections.

Left: The red stepback cupboard in the dining room features a bonnet top, from the early 1800s. The hutch table's top is original, and Clarence reconstructed its legs. Sitting on it is a rare Peaseware bowl with its lid intact.

Above: Some of Shelvy's early treasures include treenware, Peaseware bowls, horn cups and pewter spoons. The two-compartment saltbox is very rare, hand-carved from a single piece of wood.

could. "I thought I was going to go out to Maine and find antiques just lying around everywhere for little or nothing," Shelvy recalls. "On the way, we were driving out in the country and we'd pass these log cabins and I'd say, 'Oh, Clarence, turn around, go back, go back, please go back and let me look at that cabin.' And our girls would say, 'No, Daddy, go faster, go faster!' They got so sick of me wanting to turn around and look at every cabin we passed."

Back in Columbus, Shelvy was now convinced she could find plenty of antiques she loved in Indiana, Ohio, and Kentucky. And as for a log cabin, she was more determined than ever. She and Clarence eventually bought one with the intention of using its logs to build an addition onto their Columbus home. "But the contractor we hired scared Clarence to death, saying, 'You don't want to do that—you'll ruin your home!' So he talked Clarence out of it and we sold the logs." They then bought another log cabin, but found it of no use and sold it where it sat.

Shelvy's next plan was to go to the origin of her love of cabins and perhaps buy one in Brown County. "I was begging Clarence to buy one there, but the road he'd have to drive between Brown County and Columbus where he worked was a two-lane highway with traffic you would not believe. And he said, 'There is no way I'm going to travel that road back and forth every day.'"

"So when Clarence saw this one," she says of their home in Waldron, "he was ready to give in."

"I Couldn't Wait"

Clearly, anyone who knew Shelvy very well was aware of her quest for a log cabin. The



Above: The McQueens added the large cooking hearth at one end of their kitchen.

Right: A corner of the kitchen near the hearth provides space for displaying powder horns and ammunition bags necessary to rural life in the early 1800s. The bannister-back chair is a late-1700s piece.

McQueens were still living in Columbus in January of 1992 when opportunity knocked.

"A friend I worked with at the time knew I was absolutely crazy about log cabins," Shelvy recalls. "She was out on a Wednesday and when she came back in on Thursday she said, 'Shelvy, you've got to see this cabin I found. You've got to see it and it's for sale!'" That afternoon, Shelvy and her friend drove 35 miles north to Waldron where they met with the realtor in front of a cabin shrouded in trees. They toured it and Shelvy was excited. But the property was being sold



Above: The McQueens enhanced the cabin's buttery by adding the log wall above the dry sink and putting up the wood ceiling. The dry sink itself is five feet long and came from an early house in southern Indiana.

Top right: The lantern is just one of many onion-style fixtures Shelvy has placed throughout the cabin. The wooden boxes all are early, most with original paint. Shelvy was taught by Clarence's mother many years ago how to string "shucky beans."



Right: The cupboard in the buttery holds several of Shelvy's early pantry boxes and firkins. The little ladder-back chair is from the 1700s and still has its hickory woven seat and old red paint.

through closed bid and the realtor was leaving town immediately and wouldn't be back until after the bids were opened.

"I told the realtor, 'Clarence has got to see this house, he's just got to see it,'" she adds. The realtor handed Shelvy the key to the cabin and gave her an envelope with paperwork for making a bid. "I'm going to trust you with this," the realtor told Shelvy. That was Thursday, and Shelvy brought Clarence to the cabin on Friday evening. "We didn't know what we were going to do with it, but we loved it!" Shelvy says. Seeing the amount of work the cabin required, they drew up a relatively low bid and slipped the envelope through the realtor's mail slot.

"The realtor called the next Tuesday and said, 'Well, you've got yourself a log cabin.'"

The McQueens' plan was to work on the cabin but not move in until 2000, when Clarence would retire. "But I talked him into moving in by May of 1993," she says. Their younger daughter was graduating from high school that year and decided to remain in Columbus with her grandmother, and the older daughter was sure the cabin must be haunted.

"But I couldn't wait," Shelvy exclaims. "I absolutely could not wait!"

Improving the Dream

Stepping into the McQueens' log house is like stepping into the 1850s, though they've done extensive work on nearly every room. Some of the projects have been necessary for quality of life, such as installing a gas furnace for central heat. A number of others – such as the attractive porch that spans the front of the cabin – have been birthday presents to Shelvy from Clarence.

The original upstairs was one large and drafty room, but the McQueens divided it into two bedrooms and a



Above: Shelvy's friend Brenda Williams made the concrete portion of the reproduction heavy sink, while Clarence made its base.

Below: The deep cuts in the top of this early 1800s table indicate it may have been used for meat cutting.





Top left: A photo of Clarence's grandfather surveys the McQueen bedroom, where Clarence has made most of the furniture. He builds the pieces and Shelvy finishes them, including this bed.

Top Right: The top two drawers of the reproduction blanket chest are faux, another of the McQueens' creations based on an early piece.

Above: When Shelvy bought this desk in Ohio, it was painted white. She painted and aged it and replaced the drawer pulls to create a piece suitable to join the rest of her period furnishings. The table is from Kentucky, early 1800s, about the same vintage as the chair with sausage turnings. The sampler is a gift to Shelvy from Germany.



Above: The spinning wheel is one of Shelvy's earliest purchases, an early 1800s model from Kentucky. The flax comb is from Florida and the flax hatchel from Indiana. The ladder-back chair is from Indiana and still has its hickory woven seat.

Top right: Shelvy calls this the "Little Kids' Bedroom." It's has a number of old stuffed bears, some period dolls, and children's clothing around the 19th century bed.

Right: Clarence made and Shelvy did the surface work on the tall red cupboard. The early 1800s high-chair from Tennessee is one of Shelvy's favorite pieces, "the most wonderful high chair I've ever seen," with deeply worn seat and foot-rests.

built-in closet, plus lowered and insulated the ceiling. They laid another layer of flooring to stop the interminable squeaking, using floorboards from an old barn to retain the early look.

Originally, the kitchen was fully exposed to the entire downstairs. Clarence constructed a dividing wall to create a galley kitchen separate from the rest of the house, built cabinets, shelving and a period-looking counter. He also built a large cooking hearth in the kitchen, which adds to the home's warmth, both in temperature and appearance. Moving the washer and dryer out of the kitchen, he created a utility area and also refurbished the buttery with improved flooring, wooden ceiling, and a log partition wall.

Outside the home, Clarence replaced windows, built a covered deck at the rear of the house, built Shelvy a large potting shed, and converted a carport into a garage. "One of the first things we did was remove eight trees from the front yard," Shelvy says. "When we bought it, you couldn't even see the front of the house." Today the yard is a patchwork of gardens so colorful that people drive by just to check them out during the growing season.



Above: Clarence built this large potting shed for Shelvy behind the cabin. It contains much of her early and contemporary gardening paraphenalia and is a regular meeting place for Shelvy's garden club.

Below: The outside of the potting shed, with a glimpse at some of Shelvy's gardens, still dormant in the spring.



The Look of Necessity

When the McQueens first moved into the house in 1993, Shelvy had not yet acquired her outstanding collection of primitive furnishings. "I had some country pieces and some oak pieces," she says. Both of their daughters were in school and money was tight, but Shelvy had a pretty good idea of what she wanted for her cabin.

"I said to Clarence one day, 'I want stuff in the house that looks like my grandpa would've lived here and he had to make it out of necessity,'" she explains. "And Clarence said, 'How about if we have stuff that my mother had because she liked it, and it was made of oak?' And I said, 'No, Clarence, you don't understand—I love the stuff some old man has made out of necessity for his wife.' Well, he finally got the picture."

One of the more amazing things about Shelvy and Clarence is that they've not only found a number of exceptional primitive pieces, but also have made many of their own pieces, achieving a quality that blends perfectly with the vintage furniture. Clarence creates cupboards, tables, benches, beds and other pieces based on what he's seen in shops, at shows, and in photos. And Shelvy has become adept at painting and aging their finishes—which is usually the make-or-break aspect of a reproduction piece and where many craftspeople fall short. Many of her finishes are near museum-quality.



Above: The "Pot Man" in Shelvy's garden was one of many that an elderly man made and sold to buy medicine for his wife. Shelvy was moved by his story and purchased it.

Below left: The building is an old outhouse that had been on the property. Clarence moved it to a new location near Shelvy's "farmer's garden."

Below: Clarence built the garden cart to resemble the many such carts that were common on 19th century farms.



For her authentic period pieces, Shelvy confines herself mostly to Indiana and Ohio – only occasionally going farther afield – and to a select group of shows and dealers in the region. She has praise for the annual Heartland Antique Show in Richmond, Indiana, and some newer regional shows. And she loves to haunt stores where she has become fast friends with the owners, such as Bill and Terri Baxter of Blue Ridge Hollow Antiques near Blue Ridge, Indiana, and Bea Sparrow at Olde Glory Antiques in Waynesville, Ohio, as examples.



Hearing Shelvy talk about her home, furniture, and collections of early items is to share in her joy. There's the late-1700s table in the dining room with its old rosehead nails and beautiful patina: "I just love it!" There's the large, red step-back cupboard from the early 1800s: "It's just so simple – I love it!" There's a remarkable little saltbox carved entirely from a single chunk

of wood: "It's early and wonderful – if wood is worn down really nice, I just love it!"



And, not unexpectedly, she has a special feeling for the many items her husband has made since she finally found her cabin. "I just love all the things Clarence has made, each and every one of them!"

Above: This large workshop on the property was used by Morris Trotter, the high school teacher who moved the cabin to Waldron, to build furniture for the house. Now it's Clarence's workshop, where he has built furniture and many other items for the McQueen cabin.

Below: A portion of one of Shelvy's gardens. This one borders the home's kitchen, with new foxglove blooms signaling the beginning of the flower season.

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