

RETRO COTTAGE

in the Northwoods

by Lucie B. Amundsen



A tip of the hat to history

Carol McErlean has been going to the northern woods of Wisconsin all of her life. Her grandfather bought a property on the smaller of two connecting lakes in 1926 and built a cottage there. With Carol's father being the youngest of seven boys, it's a safe guess that this vacation spot harbored many good times.

So one would think it would have been an emotional decision for Carol and her husband, Mike Levin, to tear the historic cottage down and build new. It wasn't.

"My husband remarked I was rather unsentimental about it," says Carol. "But going there you just never knew what fresh disaster awaited you." Problems at the seasonal cottage included a crumbling foundation, wetness in the walls and notable skirmishes with flying squirrels and bats. Mike remembers, "At the old place, you'd open the door and wonder what beasts might be running around."



photos courtesy North Twin Builders. © Kitzy Sookochoff.

Less Stuff, More Fun

By the time the contractor came to knock down the old structure (which Carol says, “didn’t take much of a push”), the couple had a firm plan of what was going up in its place. “We were very excited about what we were going to do,” says Carol who took inspiration from old photos of the cabin, magazines, and the “Not So Big House” movement (from the book of the same name).

Carol and Mike wanted to keep the lake place feeling like a cottage and resisted the temptation to build it into a large, second home. They achieved this by really thinking through how they wanted to spend their vacation time. The builder who eventually brought their vision to life was North Twin Builders of Phelps, Wis. (www.northtwinbuilders.com).

“We kept the bedrooms small,” says Carol, who felt one doesn’t come up to the lake to spend it inside a room. And following this line of reasoning, the McErlean Levins decided they’d rather host guests than store items. “There are no closets; instead, we have a lot of pegs.” In addition to discouraging folks from leaving things, this saved loads of square footage – an important consideration for a couple with five children between them. “With the apartment over the garage, we can have 14 to 15 people in what is a relatively small space,” confirms Carol.

Throw Back

Despite building an entirely new structure, there are many tips of the hat to the old place – from architectural design to the muted, historic colors on the painted bedroom walls.

“We didn’t want soaring windows, we wanted it to feel homey,” says Carol. “That’s why the porch isn’t floor-to-ceiling screen.” The room has a decidedly retro look with a traditional knee wall and blocks of windows separated with wide trim and an open-rafter hipped roof.

“The small, old porch was always the place where everyone huddled all the time, and we didn’t want to lose that sheltered feeling,” Carol explains. Knowing that this would be the gathering spot, the couple allotted significantly more square footage to the new porch. It easily accommodates a vintage table with seating for 10, the cottage’s original wicker furniture and many framed old photos of relatives enjoying the lake escape. ➔

Above right: The loft provides additional sleeping inside the cottage, while the garage (right) contains a separate apartment with a private bath that accommodates four guests.

Facing page top: When Carol and Mike rebuilt the family cottage, they made it a year-round retreat.

Facing page bottom: The kitchen includes an antique hutch to display the old bowls and cooking implements from the original cottage.

Right: The bedroom features colors selected from a historic palette (Farrow & Ball, UK) to reflect the muted tones of the 1920s.





Above: This bathroom has a cozy cottage style with warm yellow pastel clapboard walls, a white bead board ceiling and antique-style plumbing fixtures.

Middle: The great room connects to the porch through double-slider French doors so the fun times with family and guests can flow freely through the two spaces.

Bottom: Creative options for sleeping large groups include this built-in bed.

Separated from the great room with large, double-slider French doors, the space easily doubles in size. This is important so everyone can have a good seat for the sunset over the lake or enjoy the built-in game table on rainy days. “We do a lot of puzzles,” says Carol. “There’s no TV here, just like when I was growing up.”

The porch is also only a stone’s throw away from the sheltered barbecue area where Mike grills family dinners. After some prodding, he sheepishly admitted to possessing a “fabulous recipe” for baby back ribs. He only uses charcoal, which he claims is best for indirect cooking.

The other favorite cooking spot is the fire pit by the lake. “We have a fire most every night that we have kids with us,” says Mike. By placing a flat piece of slate in the fire, the family has enjoyed open-air breakfast with fried eggs and potatoes wrapped in foil laid directly in the flames. “But the predominant use of the fire pit is to make s’mores,” Carol admits.

When not cooking alfresco, the couple enjoys preparing meals in their retro kitchen. It includes beadboard walls and cabinets, a farm-style sink and an antique hutch to display the bowls and cooking implements from the original cottage.

Running with Deer

Although Mike said the lake has a reputation for “world-class musky fishing” with fish “that would happily eat your arm off,” the family enjoys their sandy bottom lake mostly by kayak and canoe. “Though we just got a ski boat that we’re still learning how to drive,” admits Carol.

More often, Carol can be found training for triathlons on the hilly 18-mile loop around the lakes. “Here’s a graphic image for you,” says Mike. “She has had deer lope along beside her as she biked.”

Now that the cottage is a year-round place, the family has tried snowshoeing the frozen lake last year amid the ice fishing houses.

But mostly they enjoy what has always drawn people up to the lake – walking the dogs to the water, sharing great meals with loved ones and simply living the cottage life. ~

Lucie Amundsen lives in a not so big house on the shores of Lake Superior.

