

Just Enough of Everything

by REX A. EWING

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To hear Carole Brannon tell it, you'd think her life had become a fairytale. With a contagious smile that beams with pride, she begins her story 11 years ago, when she and her husband, Glenn, first set eyes on their remote 3.8 acre parcel of wooded Colorado hillside, just a hoot and holler downstream from the point where Larimer County abandons all attempts to maintain the road from October to April, and five miles upstream from the last utility pole. "I knew in an instant this was the place," Carole will tell you. "There was no logic to it, just a pervasive feeling that *this* was where I had to be."

After 43 years of marriage, Glenn knows better than to question his wife's instincts. With a Tennessee drawl, he quips metaphorically, "You can stroke a dog's hair the wrong way all you want, but it just goes back to the way it was meant to be."

But having the land is a far cry from having a home, and nearly every day of the next 11 years tried Glenn and Carole's resolve. The first five years were spent dreaming, planning, and padding their modest nest egg as best they could. Glenn worked in security for the local Hewlett-Packard plant, and Carole kept up her duties as a nurse and an ICU secretary. By the summer of 1998, they were ready to make the move.

After a lot of research, the couple settled on a rough-hewn, square log home from

Appalachian Log Homes, out of Knoxville, Tennessee. Glenn contracted the foundation work, and Appalachian set the logs and beams. From there, the Brannons were on their own. If their modest 1,200-square-foot, two bedroom, one bath, log home was going to become a reality, it would be because of Glenn and Carole's own labors.

They sold their house in town and moved into a tiny log structure—charitably dubbed a "cabin,"—that arrived unceremoniously on the back of a truck. Though it was barely big enough for a bed and a dresser, Glenn and Carole called it home throughout the construction process.

For two intense years the mountains tested them, as only mountains can. Incompetent subcontractors and an intractable building inspector were the least of the couple's worries, for at the beginning of the project Carole fell from the foundation wall and broke her ankle. Then she was diagnosed with MS.

Not that it slowed her down any.

Carole kept up her chinking duties while Glenn shingled the roof. She did stonework, he did carpentry; she built steps, he installed the solar-electric system. And, by and by, their dream became a home.

Though it's hardly a mansion, it's everything Glenn and Carole hoped it would be. The small solar electric system—powered by a pair of 64-watt UniSolar[®] amorphous silicon roof-mounted panels and two L16 solar batteries—is perfectly adequate to run a small satellite TV system and a few DC lights. For bigger loads, like pumping water from a 300-foot well or running the clothes washer, a Coleman 5,000-watt gasoline-powered generator sits ready for service in the generator shed, a small building north of the house which was originally built to serve as the couple's construction-phase outhouse. A Trace TS-series 800-watt inverter powers the few AC loads not relegated to the Coleman, and a Trace C12 charge controller manages the current from the solar array. A digital voltmeter Glenn received as a gift from a friend a couple of years ago allows him to monitor the batteries from the comfort of his bedroom, sparing him the discomfort of a journey to the home's 5-foot crawl space, where all of the solar-electrical components are located.

A small system by any standards, but is it enough? With customary casualness, Glenn says, "Oh, I may add on to it someday, but I'm in no hurry. It works just fine for what we use it for."

Propane is used to heat water, dry clothes, and cook food on Carole's coveted Heartland gas range, a stylish appliance that is not readily discernable from a 19th-century wood-burning cook stove. A wall-mounted propane heater adds a little extra comfort on those rare days when the Vermont Castings wood stove in the great room isn't quite enough the stove off the chill from the cold north wind that often howls down the canyon.

Communication with the outside world is another matter. With no phone lines for miles, Carol and Glenn must rely on a single, temperamental cell phone. Since the marginal signal they get at 7,500 feet cannot penetrate the trees around the house, Glenn built a "phone booth" on the western edge of the property.

With the aid of the small yagi antenna mounted on top, Carole can make calls and answer messages while gazing out at 10,400-foot White Pine Mountain through the booth's large west-facing window.

It's hardly the life for everyone, but Glenn and Carole appear to thrive on their self-sufficient lifestyle. Carole grows a garden in the summer and cans vegetables in the fall. Glenn takes advantage of the warm months to put up firewood for the long, cold winter. "We had never done this sort of thing," Glenn says with an unmistakable touch of pride. "Before we moved here I knew nothing about carpentry, or roofing, or how to run a chainsaw. And Carole had certainly never chinked a wall or built a stone step."

Adds Carole: "We wanted to experience a totally different type of life. Whatever hardships there may be—and they are few, really—are more than compensated for by the peace and solitude we feel up here. To live in a house we built with our own hands—here in the bosom of nature with the deer, the bears and the coyotes, and the roaming flocks of wild turkeys—is better than life in any suburban trophy house could ever be."

But isn't there anything they miss about a life of abundance?

"Abundance?" Carole laughs. "We have just enough of everything. Anything more would be a waste."

Touché, mountain lady.

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