

Wanting For Nothing

by REX A. EWING

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Life at 10,000 feet can be extreme. On any given day in September it can be 75, even 80 degrees; the next day the late-season flowers might be buried under 3 feet of snow. By April it seems as if the cold has worked so deep into the earth it will never be warm again, and then spring rolls slowly in, swelling and receding like a cautiously rising tide until, by late May or early June, the ground is blanketed in new growth and the air is again filled with the exuberance of life.

It's a drama Ted and Katie Moews have witnessed every year for a quarter of a century.

Living in a remote log home 2 miles above sea level, the threads that tie the Moews to the rest of the world are few and thin, but this Colorado couple wouldn't have it any other way. According to Ted, "First we decided where we wanted to live, then we figured out a way to make it happen." The couple built their cozy 1,550 square foot home in 1977. They harvested standing dead trees from their own land and skidded them to the building site with horses. During construction they used as many resources as possible from their own 26 acres. The planks for the floor and ceiling were milled from their own logs, and stones gathered from nearby Leopard Creek were used for the fireplace and even the home's foundation.

Although there is a road to the Moews' hand-hewn home in the Sneffels Range of the San Juans, it's impassable by conventional vehicles 6 to 7 months of the year. "The snow can pile up 10 feet deep on

the level," Ted explains. "It's impractical to plow. It just makes no sense to fight Mother Nature." Instead, Ted keeps a truck parked 7 miles down the road, at a mere 8,800 feet altitude, and uses either a snowmobile or cross-country skis to get to it in the winter months. "It's not really so bad these days," Ted says. "We go out every 10 days or so to take care of business and get supplies. But when the kids were growing up we had to ferry them to and from the school bus by snowmobile every day." He then adds, "I know it sounds like a lot of work, but like anything else, it just became a part of life, and the lifestyle benefits for our family made it worthwhile."

What is it about life in a secluded forest at 10,000 feet that the Moews find so compelling? Perhaps it's the feeling of absolute freedom that comes from living in the midst of untouched wilderness. During the winter months the couple enjoys snowmobiling, cross country skiing, and snowshoeing. In the summer there's horseback riding and hiking. With 3.5 million acres of national forest just out their back door, there's never a shortage of new places to visit or new things to see. On any given day Ted and Katie are liable to see black bears, mountain lions, bald eagles, elk, deer, coyotes, foxes, bobcats.....the list goes on. "We've lived here for most of our adult lives," Ted says, "and it's still as exciting as it was on the day we arrived. For every so-called sacrifice we make in lifestyle, nature pays us back double."

To be sure, many would find the Moews' lifestyle austere, even Spartan. For starters, their two-level, 3-bedroom home is heated entirely with wood harvested from their own property. But, as Ted explains, "Heating a home with wood is not nearly as difficult as it may seem." Because of their excellent thermal mass, the log walls radiate heat back into the house at night, and a Trombe wall in the kitchen—an interior concrete wall that absorbs heat radiated through an exterior glass wall—maximizes the solar radiation on the south side of the house. "The deep snow in winter is the icing on the cake," Ted says. "It piles up so high beside the house it's like having an extra-thick layer of insulation."

Propane is used for cooking, water heating and refrigeration. Kerosene provides most of the lighting. Ted used to tow 100-pound bottles of propane from town behind the snowmobile, but, he recalls, "It was too much like dragging a bomb." They've since had a 500-gallon tank installed, more than enough propane to last them an entire year.

The only use they have for electricity is to run the TV, computer and a couple of reading lamps. A single 70-watt solar panel helps to charge their bank of twelve Trojan batteries, and a Trace "U" series modified sine wave inverter provides the AC current needed for their few appliances. A 10-kilowatt Kohler propane-fired generator is on hand for pumping water from their well into a cistern, for running power-hungry shop tools, and for keeping the batteries topped off. Communication with the outside world is provided through a satellite internet service and a microwave radio phone.

"Simple? Yes, and sometimes hard," Ted admits, "but we've got everything we need." Adds Katie,

"This is a world filled with beauty...and sometimes adventure. I can't imagine living any other way."

It's easy enough to believe. As a log home designer and builder, Ted has the skills and the means to build a self-sufficient mansion, if he chose to. "I've designed and built over 40 log homes ranging in size from 600 to 6,000 square feet. About a third of them are off-the-grid and many have very elaborate PV (photovoltaic) systems. It's all well and good for the people who want them, but Katie and I are quite happy with what we have."

In the winter, when the high country sleeps under a blanket of snow, Ted and Katie turn their creative impulses to art. Ted enjoys a worldwide reputation as a painter and sculptor of Old West art, and is an accomplished designer of decorative wrought iron. Katie's a folk singer who also does authentic, beaded, brain-tanned buckskin bags, moccasins and other small articles, as well as dealing with the myriad situations arising from the nature of their lifestyle. "That, in itself, can be a fulltime job," she confides.

It's not the life for everyone; only the very few. But for the Moews, it's been the dream of a lifetime for the past 25 years.

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