

January 2003

Billy and I were very productive in 2002. We introduced some newly designed pieces and created lots of beautiful pottery. We participated in five new shows. One of those was in St. Louis, MO., bringing the number of states we currently show in up to six. We did not, however, build a house.

We have been reading through a stack of 20 year old *Fine Homebuilding* magazines. Almost every issue features an article about a couple designing and building their own home. Some of the stories are written to be humorous, with descriptions of heroic perseverance through unforeseen disaster after disaster. Other tales are more informative, with a 'this is how we did it and you can, too' slant. All of these accounts helped to solidify the realization that if we continue on a learn as we go-pay as we go course, this little 620 sq. ft. straw bale nest is going to take us a long time to build. At this point it has taken us two-and-a-half years to get the footing dug and filled with gravel, and pour the foundation. We realize we've got to pick up the pace a bit because, although living in the greenhouse is a wondrous delight most of the year, it is not a permanent housing solution.

So, here we are in the middle of another winter, sleeping in an unheated, plastic-covered structure. I lay under a lifesaving pile of quilts, goose down comforters, and an electric blanket, watch the cloud of vapor my breath forms above me and fantasize, not only about a cozy little house, but also about a studio right here on our place. Wanting a studio of my own certainly does not mean that I am anything but very grateful for my current studio. I believe having that space available played a major role in making it financially feasible for Billy to join me as a full time partner in Livingston Pottery. The studio truly was a gift. The first time I saw it, however, I viewed it as only as an impossible mess.

When my neighbors, Butch and Brenda Fancher, heard that I wanted to rent a studio space, they offered to let me use a free-standing two-car garage that had once been partnered with a house long ago destroyed by fire. The garage was only a five minute drive from my place and I was very excited about the idea of having a studio so close. As Brenda and I drove through a pasture and up a steep hill, she explained that I would have to do some cleaning and probably some minor repairs. Butch had a big log splitter stored in the building but he would pull that out and the rest I could just throw away.

The burnt remains of the house were completely grown over by now, and the garage sat by itself in a small clearing in the shade of two large oak trees. The surrounding woods, combined with the panoramic view of the valley below, created a very picturesque setting. The roof of the building was finished with green asphalt shingles and the exterior was a concrete stucco painted a creamy tan. Overall, the garage looked promising . . . from the outside.

After we stepped inside, I walked around and chatted about the potential use of this shelf or that corner only out of a sense of politeness for this dear person making such a generous offer, for I simply could not imagine creating a workable space out of what was in front of me. I doubt the original owners had completely cleaned out the building and it appeared that each subsequent user had simply left behind whatever they didn't want to deal with. A dead freezer, washing machine, and refrigerator stood along the back wall. The mice had destroyed an old piano and its remains stood in one corner in a two feet deep pile of wood rat droppings. Everywhere else were piles and boxes of discarded things; a hard-hat, an old pair of leather work boots, used chain saw chains, belts for tractors.

Even if it was clean, the building itself would be a challenge. The inside walls were just roughed out with 2x4's. There was no insulation in the walls or ceiling, no bathroom, no running water, no built in lights, and no heat. The workbench along the south wall was deeply saturated with motor oil, and the odor it gave off made the idea of working in the building all day long unthinkable. I thanked Butch and Brenda profusely for their generous offer, but I declined it, explaining that I felt the project of turning the garage into a studio was too much for me.

Later, I realized that a large part of my reluctance was due to my emotional state. I was recently widowed and even routine daily tasks often seemed insurmountable, much less a major cleaning and repair project.

Six months later Billy and I were together, having rekindled our high school romance. I still didn't have a studio, so I took him to look at the garage and we decided that together we could get the job done. It took us three months. Billy was working in town, and could be at the garage only after work and on weekends. I would do chores at home in the morning then head up to the garage for the rest of the day.

It was tempting to simply haul pickup-loads of junk to the dump, but I knew if I took the time to sort through everything I would find stuff that Billy and I could use. By sorting recyclables as well, I would vastly reduce the amount of rubbish I had to pay to dispose of. The drawers in the work bench revealed items that a Wyoming farm girl simply could not resist; nuts, bolts, washers, conduit connectors, and lawn mower spark plugs. I also discovered that with a hose repair, the washing machine worked wonderfully. We used it for three years before it conked out for good.

When everything was out of the garage, we swept and vacuumed several times, then borrowed a pressure washer and washed and scrubbed the concrete floor. Billy had dismantled and removed the workbench. That, along with the floor cleaning, had eliminated the overwhelming odor of motor oil. The space was beginning to look and smell like one I could spend a workday in. We put insulation in the ceiling and walls and used a stack of salvaged paneling to cover the insulation. A bit unorthodox, it's true, but it saved us buying and hanging drywall. We painted the ceiling, garage door, and two walls white leaving one wall unpainted paneling to "add warmth," and hung a few more shop lights. We were making progress. Now to address heat and water issues.

Due to the cost, electric heat was out of the question. We eyed an ancient, beaten up, rusted Sears propane heater salvaged from the garage cleanup, and decided to give it a try. Between the mice and mud dauber wasps, every orifice and channel was full of some type of nesting material. Billy spent a day pulling the heater apart, cleaning it, and hammering it back into shape. I held a flashlight and mirror so Billy could see into areas he couldn't access and clean them with a piece of wire. By that time a propane tank had been set and a line plumbed into the studio. We hooked the heater up, attached a vent pipe, and it worked great!

Getting water was going to take more effort. We knew we could haul water from our place, but having water flow to the studio would be preferable. One eighth of a mile from the studio was an above ground, spring-fed cistern that had been set for the original house. The cistern currently supplied the water to both Butch's house and his sister and brother-in-law's house, but we were welcome to the overflow. Billy and I assumed the water line to the old house was buried and with no idea of where to look for the receiving end we thought we would just have to run a new line. During one of our hikes up to the cistern, however, we stumbled across a stretch of black plastic pipe. It was a line that at some point had been used to run water to the house.

The line ran through a heavily wooded area and it took us some time to excavate it from underneath years of debris. Billy was very skeptical that the line could be salvaged. The expansion and contraction during hot and cold cycles had caused several sections to pull apart, much worse was the damage the wood rats had inflicted. The rodents had chewed holes up and down the entire length, chewing the pipe completely apart in several areas. Two dozen hose connectors (saved from the garage), two rolls of electrical tape, and some lengths of black plastic pipe were used to make the line whole again. We then attached it to a screen-covered five gallon bucket situated under the cistern overflow. Two 55 gallon barrels were set behind the studio as a collection system. We completed the project by running a garden hose from the barrels through the back wall of the studio and into a big stainless steel sink. We had water in the studio.

The building was now ready to move into. I had everything from my studio in Colorado, including five-gallon buckets of prepared glazes. We reassembled a propane fueled, metal framed, ceramic fiber insulated kiln, and situated it just outside the garage door. We brought in potters' wheels, work tables, shelves, tools, electric kilns, and 2000 lbs. of clay. Butch and Brenda did not want me to pay rent but I insisted on paying something. They finally accepted \$100 a month and then credited our labor and all the materials we had purchased against the first seven months rent. I had a studio.

That was four years ago this February. We continue to deal with the unique difficulties of the building and it's location. The garage was built with no perimeter drainage in a cut against a steep hillside, so about four times a year, during heavy prolonged rainfall, we are guaranteed three to four inches of standing water in one corner. Thank goodness the floor isn't level. The rats still love to chew the water line, but due to the proliferation of ticks, chiggers, poison ivy, and thorny brush in the summer, we can't repair the line until fall. In the meantime we collect rain water in five-gallon buckets. The road to the studio is so rough that Billy suggested we refer to it as a dry creek bed. Instead of thinking 'boy, this road is rough' while we are bouncing along, we think 'aren't we lucky this dry creek bed goes right to the studio'. All of these issues are more than countered by the proximity, affordability, and artistically inspiring location of the space.

Still, I want to have a studio on our place. Just think, all the time we spend driving back and forth to the studio we could spend building the house, instead. True, it takes only 20 minutes of driving a day, and that includes coming home for lunch, but if those minutes are multiplied by the six or seven years it's going to take to build the house, the time becomes significant.

So we will continue to design new pieces, make beautiful, lightweight pottery, and participate in new shows. And in our spare time (we always laugh when we mention our spare time), we'll work on our house and make plans for the studio. Right now we are gearing up for our spring shows and looking forward with great anticipation to seeing you again.

HAPPY NEW YEAR!

Rebecca and Billy