

February 2010

“Sweetheart?” “Hmm?” Billy murmurs, concentrating on the weather page on his laptop. “Billy, I need you to hear me.” “Okay, I’m listening.”

“I’m going to the studio this morning to clean for a few hours. The load of laundry I did last night is frozen in the washer. It should be thawed by ten. Would you please hang it on the line and, if the washing machine pump is thawed, please run a load of jeans?” “Sure, it’s going to be sunny today so I think I’ll do the dishes, too.”

“Really, the high is supposed to be only 34 degrees.” “I know, but if I’m standing in sunshine with my hands in hot dishwater, it’s not bad. Do you want to shower this afternoon?” “I could.” “I’ll turn on the big hot water heater in the greenhouse. After I do dishes there’ll be enough water left we can each get a shower.” “Okay, you should check that the hoses for the shower aren’t frozen. Last time I just pulled them out from under the tub so they were in the sunshine and they opened up pretty fast.”

I often feel living in the greenhouse provides the same type of mental stimulus that my (still sharp) 71 year old dad believes he gets from working crossword puzzles. “Exercises your brain” Dad claims. “Keeps your mind sharp. Makes you think.” Every new word or letter potentially affects many other words. We are constantly re-evaluating, juggling, considering possibilities. Will we have sunshine or clouds, temperature above or below freezing, how far below freezing for how long?

We finished the bathroom in the house just after the first of the year. As we were applying grout sealer in the shower I looked up at the carefully laid rows of gleaming new tile and thought ‘is this going to be bad for us?’. It will be so easy, just walk into the shower and turn on the water, with little forethought or planning; the same with dishes, just fill the sink with hot water and wash the dishes, any time of the day. I expressed my concern to Billy. “You know dear” he said, “in the real world, showers don’t take hours.”

We’ve always had a water heater but, for the sake of efficiency, we light it only when we plan on using the entire 40 gallons. A big bunch of dishes and two showers is perfect. When we are living in the house, the hot water heater will always be on and the plumbing will never freeze. Oh no, will we become soft, slow witted and (do you remember as a kid complaining about a difficult chore and your parents would say “Builds character”?) characterless?

I noticed a place in the floor of the camper trailer that appeared to always have water on it. It was near the water dish for the pets and I thought they were responsible but further investigation led me to a small leak in the water pump. It wasn’t much, but the continuous moisture was rotting the floor under the water storage tank. When I attempted to tighten the fitting that was the source of the leak, I broke it and the ten drops a minute trickle became a flood.

I shut the pump off, mopped up the mess and removed the broken piece. Billy was working in the house. I took the part down to show him and see if he knew where I could find a replacement. He shook his head and said "I don't think we have anything like this but if we do it is in the plumbing stuff in the greenhouse."

It was very cold outside, so it was very cold inside the unheated greenhouse and I did not want to hang out in there digging around for a fitting. I did, however, want water in the trailer, so I bundled up and went to the greenhouse. By hunting through both the plumbing and gas fittings, I assembled something very close to what I needed. I liberally applied the business end of a propane torch to a plastic fitting and voilà...I had it! I went back up to the trailer, installed my new part, and turned the pump on. It leaked, but just a tiny bit. I carefully tightened the fitting and the dripping stopped. For the next two days we checked for leakage but it appeared my makeshift piece was going to suffice.

That was kind of fun; another challenge presented because of our unconventional living situation. I was smart. I was resourceful. I pitted my wits against a water pump and I won. At the same time it was a bit depressing. I had spent hours dealing with a situation that would never have occurred if we were living in the house.

We have done more work on the house, not quite yet enough, but more. Our Wyoming summer shows are among our best, but the time required to build an inventory for and travel to those shows is substantial. We decided not to go to Wyoming so we had all of July and part of August to work on the house. Our primary goal was to finish applying mud on the interior walls. Sifting dirt and mixing and moving mud during hot weather is not very pleasant, but it is not nearly as miserable as working with mud when it is cold. We used metal hydrator drawers from an old refrigerator to move the mud from the mixing site, near the back door, to the inside of the house. A hydrator drawer full of mud weighs 50 pounds (the same weight as a box of clay). We used more than two tons of mud to get the second layer of mud on the west wall and the first and second layer on the south wall.

We finished the kitchen walls with a mixture of mud and lime putty. The finish is a beautiful, pale, red sandstone color with the trowel marks reminiscent of Italian plaster. We built the glass block wall that is the division between the toilet and the walk-in shower. And we finally installed the toilet - resplendent with brushed nickel hardware. We went back to work at the studio in early August. Building pottery and doing shows meant we had little time to work on the house again until early December.

Now, all of the walls are finished with a coat of finely screened mud or lime-mud mixture, and sealed with an organic wall glaze. The next big project is the construction of the kitchen cabinets. Billy believes he will do all of the sawing for the cabinets in the greenhouse. I know how easy it would be to move the miter saw back into the house, handy to the work, and that would mean sawdust again.

The scaffolding is finally out of the house so there is now room to set a bed up, but I do not want to deal with bedding and sawdust. Besides, there is not that much of the winter left and we have a fantastic new electric blanket that gets really hot. So...maybe this fall we'll get a bed in there.

Jan 24, 2010

"Did you see we are going to have freezing rain changing to snow tomorrow night?" "I know" said Billy. "That's wild. Another ice storm almost a year to the day from the last one." "Well, I hope all of the branches and trees that could fall on the power lines and knock out the electricity did it last year but, just in case, I want to catch up on the laundry. The washing machine pump is frozen. Will you please help me tilt the washer back so I can get a space heater close to the pump?" "I will, but I think the better idea is to put the washer on the hand truck and move it into the house. The pump should thaw pretty quickly, sitting on the heated floor, then we can move it back to the greenhouse." "That is a great idea. I'll get the hand truck"

I've updated the pictures in the HOUSE section of our web site. The SHOWS section is current through October and letters dating back to 2000 are available in NEWSLETTERS. We always enjoy hearing from you and look forward to seeing you at a show this year.

Sincerely,

Rebecca Livingston and Bill Minter