

Historic feeling

Log cabin provides authentic setting for antiques

By Cathleen Collins Lee
special writer

IMAGINE, IF you can, finding a carefully restored example of a pioneer house at a local museum — a log cabin complete with worn floorboards, smoky walls and pots hanging in the fireplace.

Now, go one step further and imagine packing your belongings and living there. Then you'll have some idea of what Don and Brenda Henderson's everyday life is like.

The Hendersons live in an 1830s log cabin that they took apart piece by piece and moved from Kitchener, Ontario, to a 10-acre lot in Oakland County.

From the narrow stone walk lined with lavender out front to the huge, walk-in stone fireplace in the "keeping room," the house faithfully recalls another time and another way of life.

Modern conveniences like electricity, indoor plumbing and central heating have been added, of course — but they're hidden so that nothing mars the historic feeling of the house.

The house is so authentic that it is being used to depict the 19th-century boyhood home of the Rev. Simeon Casey, a Catholic priest being considered for sainthood, in a Channel 2 documentary with Joe Weaver. The house will also be featured in the October issue of Country Living magazine.

THE HENDERSONS, who have collected and

In the dining room, a corner cupboard holds redware (glazed red pottery), a pewter plate and a burwood bowl above a round hutch table with bannister-backed chairs from the late 1700s. A Queen Anne lowboy displays a small hand-made rug with a tole (elaborately decorated tin) coffee pot.



soil antiques for 20 years, love to be surrounded by well-worn and unusual items from the past.

Brendo is an interior designer. Don is a builder who enjoys working on historic houses. Last year, they opened a store in Birmingham called O' Susanna, which specializes in unusual antique items.

The couple spent 10 years looking for a log home because they felt it would be the most authentic setting for their many antique furnishings.

"I have always wanted a log home," Brenda said. "It has a whimsical charm that's hard to duplicate in a new home. A log home has been lived in for hundreds of years."

"The stairs in our house are worn in the center. I often look at them and wonder how many people have walked up and down those steps."

But pioneer houses are small. The couple had a hard time finding one large enough for themselves and their two children, Heidi and Matthew, now 14 and 19. In 1985, they finally found in Kitchener a two-story log house that was larger than average.

BUILT BY German immigrant John Nichols, it was owned at the time by a Mennonite family and hadn't been modernized at all. The Hendersons spent 1 1/2 years taking apart the house, numbering the irregularly shaped pieces and carefully reconstructing the house.

Don has a lot of respect for the work and craftsmanship that went into making the house.

"I like to look at every board, and see how it's aged," he said. "It probably took them 20 years to make it. It was a lot harder for them to build than it was for me."

The house is built of rough-hewn logs with square sides that have weathered to a soft gray. The off-white chinking between them is a mixture of horsehair, lime, straw, plaster and sand that Don developed himself.

Upstairs, the couple installed new drywall on the interior walls but used oil to recreate smoke and water stains. Downstairs, the log walls are exposed, forming a wonderful background for the many well-worn wooden furnishings.

Interestingly shaped lamps and wall sconces throughout the house offer a contrast to the plain lines of the furniture. And simple accessories such as burwood bowls filled with potpourri, pewter plates and redware (glazed pottery made from red clay) are placed in simple, attractive arrangements.

A LONG, whitewashed pine table from the 1880s dominates the keeping room, which runs all along the back of the house. It would have been the center of a pioneer family's activities. Across from the table is the magnificent stone fireplace, stacked high with wood and large enough to walk into.

In the living room, a beige Chippendale sofa with rolled arms and two wing chairs upholstered in old linen sheets provide comfortable seating. A low, drop-leaf Queen Anne table circa 1710 sits on a worn Oriental rug in front of the couch and serves as a coffee table. The mustard-colored interior wall around the fireplace looks as old as the logs themselves — but it is a leather-edged, raised-panel wall built by Don.

Don's handiwork is also seen throughout the house in the form of worn wooden walls and doors that cleverly disguise modern conveniences. One such wall in the kitchen has two doors: one opens up to reveal a refrigerator, the other a cupboard containing the dishwasher, and microwave and toaster ovens.

THE DINING room is a cozy room with a round hutch table — the top flips up so it can be pushed against the wall when not in use — surrounded by black, late-17th-century, bannister-backed chairs. A hooked rug in an abstract red and blue design is draped across the table.

Although they live busy contemporary lives, raising their children, running the store and pursuing a mix of professional activities, the Hendersons find that their unusual house is a welcome refuge.

"It's a nice place to go after school or work," Brenda said. "It has a cozy 'I'm home' feeling. "Anyone can build a new home. But the cracks and crevices and the feeling you get from an early home are wonderful."

O' Susanna

O' Susanna, 570 N. Woodward, Birmingham 11 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. Tuesday to Saturday.

Brenda and Don Henderson's store, O' Susanna, which opened last year, carries a multitude of antique and unusual home items. A furnishings from all over the United States as well as from France and Italy.

Because the items are often one-of-a-kind, the stock varies from day to day.

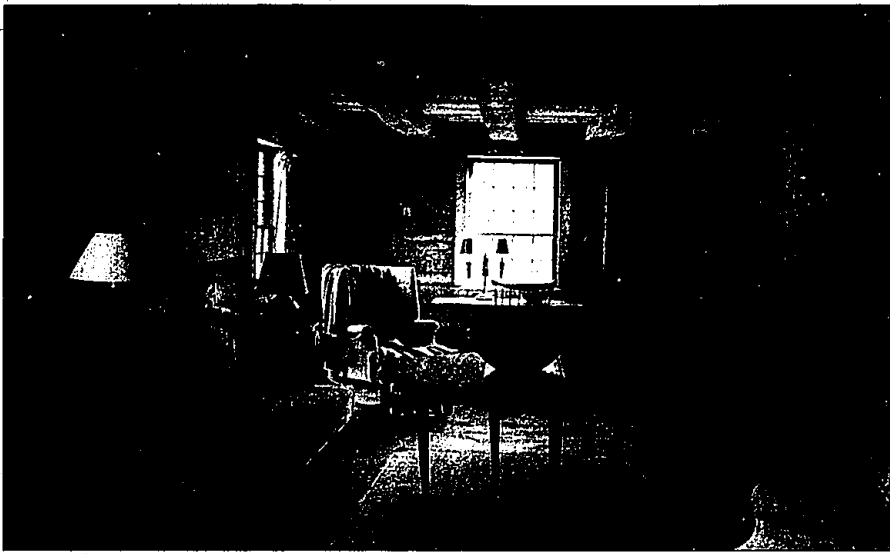
But the couple often has antique outdoor wrought-iron furniture and gates, antique wooden pieces such as armoires and old wire bird cages.

Also spotted there: swags and garlands of dried fruit, gourds and chili peppers; French soaps; beeswax candles; soapstone plates; fruit made of clay; apples made out of twigs; and topiary trees, both dried and fresh.

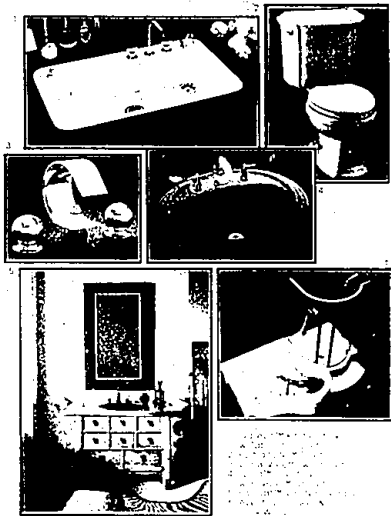
The Hendersons also carry a four-poster, pencil-post bed, which Don makes himself.



Left: A long, whitewashed pine table from the late 1800s runs along one side of the keeping room. The room has many other interesting antiques, such as the pine cupboard in the corner, topped by a wooden bowl filled with dried pineapples. Below: A Hudson River Valley drop-leaf Queen Anne table from 1710-20 is the focal point of the living room and serves as a coffee table. The room also features an early New England Country Hepplewhite table (in front of the window) and a Chippendale sofa with rolled arms.



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