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David McGrath: I built a family cabin as an investment in America



David McGrath's wife, Marianne, left, and daughter Jackie perch on the family's unfinished cabin during construction in 1986 in northwestern Wisconsin. (Family photo)



By **DAVID MCGRATH**

July 6, 2024 at 5:00 a.m.

On an evening in April many years ago, I sat alone at a corner table in the Lakewood Cafe & Hotel in the northwestern Wisconsin town of Winter (current population: 331). I was an English teacher at Chicago Vocational High School at the time and was taking advantage of spring vacation to begin constructing a cabin on Blue Gill Lake 12 miles north of town.

Famished after clearing trees from the lake lot, I ordered the Thursday night special of beef and gravy, mashed potatoes and red garden beets, to be washed down with a cold bottle of Leinenkugel red ale. But when I reached for the fork, I could not lift my arm.

Panic.

I tried to recollect whether pain in the right or left arm signals an oncoming heart attack (it's usually the left). But I was only 37. Maybe the arm was just asleep.

So I used my left arm to awkwardly lift the fork and feed myself, while worrying whether it was something serious.

By the end of the meal, whether it was from eating food or from resting my elbow on the table, I was able, with concentrated effort, to raise the paralyzed arm before retiring to my rented room upstairs.

My arm remained stiff, and I kept opening and closing my hand to keep it loose. But it turned out that I was basically OK after I learned from a truck driver for Winter Lumber the next day that I was suffering from [HAVS](#), or hand-arm vibration syndrome, a common medical condition that numbs and immobilizes appendages. The affliction is common to loggers and construction workers who use chainsaws and jackhammers for a living.

I was greatly relieved. But I was also oddly proud of the pain. A teacher and pencil pusher by trade, here I was able to play carpenter and lumberjack, wielding a chainsaw to cut down and cut up half a dozen red pine trees to prepare for my family cabin's foundation.

Where else but in America could a man with little experience, and even less money, acquire a waterfront lot in the North Woods, where he could design and build a home by himself?

I thought about that the next day, after my arm had mostly recovered, while I set about digging 24 holes, 4 feet deep, in which to sink the 6-by-6 treated lumber posts that would form the cabin's foundation.

It was the hardest work I had ever done, as anyone who has ever dug post holes in a field of tree roots knows. But I was young and resilient. And my wife, Marianne, and I had availed ourselves of the rights and opportunities afforded in our system of government to borrow money, buy property and single-handedly build our American dream.

Almost 250 years ago, our forefathers fought and many died to forge a nation with a unique Constitution that guarantees every citizen the freedom to pursue happiness in his or her own way.

My dream, after being raised at 54th and Winchester in Chicago, was to have a place in the country where we could nurture in our children a passion for the outdoors, immersed in a paradise of woods and waters.

In other corners of the world, that may be only a pipe dream. But in the United States of America, I was able to get a builder's loan from a bank and stake our claim.

With minimal experience in the building trades, I checked out how-to books from the library and subsequently drew up a plan for an 800-square-foot cottage with two bedrooms and a sleeping loft, set on wooden piers. Lacking a surveyor's transit, I used a magnetic compass, some string and birthday party balloons (visible above the trees) to measure and plot a 20-foot-by-40-foot building site.

With fewer building code restrictions in a rural area, I nailed together a frame house with 18 homemade windows and doors, two bathrooms and 100-amp electrical service. Jump River Electric hung a temporary line on a tree, and I took it from there.

I toiled alone, except when Marianne and our three young children hiked through the woods from a rented house to bring me lunch every day at noon and when I had to hire licensed professionals for the well and septic in accordance with county regulations.

At the end of six weeks, during which time I kept my tools in a tent and my work clothes in a plastic bag saturated with DEET to combat mosquitoes, I completed the outer shell of our “little house on the prairie.” The following summer, we moved in while I finished the inside.



Author

David McGrath's children, from left, Janet, Mike and Jackie, play on a raft made from Coke syrup barrels near the family's cabin in 1988 in northwestern Wisconsin. (Family photo)

Spending every summer there, our kids learned to fish, swim, interpret calls of the loons and wave to neighbors on the way into town. We cooled off under a secret waterfall and used a rope and pulley to hoist our trash can up a tree, safe from black bears. Later, we got a black Labrador puppy who grew into a dog named Biff and whose barks and scent kept bears and other predators away.

Thirty-eight years and two owners later, the house still stands, but with a new roof and a separate garage.

More than just a fishing cottage, it was our investment in the nation, a nest egg that transformed our lives, for which we remain grateful.

And the best way to return the favor is to perpetuate the American dream for future generations by doing all that we can, including wisely exercising our right to vote, in order to restore the earth and preserve democracy, equality and freedom.

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