

SPECIAL ISSUE: CELEBRATING THE ADIRONDACK STYLE

# ADIRONDACK LIFE

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## AT HOME *in* the ADIRONDACKS 2016

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# BEN'S CABIN

REIMAGINING A  
HANDMADE HOME  
IN PARADOX

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BY SALLY FRIEDMAN  
PHOTOGRAPHS BY DAESHA HARRIS





The woodland cabin originally built by Ben Cohen, of Ben & Jerry's Ice Cream, in the 1970s.



**THOUGH IT'S MY PLACE NOW,**

Ben's cabin will never be known by another name. It was built by Ben Cohen, of Ben & Jerry's, who in the 1970s taught crafts at a school for troubled adolescents in Paradox. He lived in his one-room home until he went off to Burlington, Vermont, to make ice cream. After the school closed, in 1977, the owner used the cabin as a summer rental until the property was split up and sold off.

Since I bought my house in 1983, also once part of the school, I have been enchanted by Ben's cabin, just across a field and through the woods from me. Ben had an eye for light and design: The back porch is perched over a waterfall and has a birch tree growing through it. The windows are salvaged and mismatched. Because the cabin sits on a rock outcropping with the ground falling away steeply on both sides, it feels like a tree house.

Long ago I decided that if Ben's cabin were ever for sale, I would buy it. I wanted to regain my tranquility after years of noisy renters, and I love having a project. As an unintended consequence, I found how delightful it is to have a guesthouse at a slight remove.

When the cabin finally went on the market in 2011, I hadn't been inside it in years. I trudged through snow for a look and found it gloomier than I remembered, the walls clad in diagonal boards that had darkened with age. It was a study in brown, one of my least favorite colors. But the place was still magical and I couldn't resist.

The closing was after Labor Day so the owner would get one last season of rental income. That summer the ten-



**The author transformed the simple brown interior, above, into a bright, open space that features her eclectic taste and her skills as a scenic artist.**





Clockwise from left: **The author's head-board, made from salvaged scraps of chestnut, crowned by animal portraits by her friend Beth Mobilia. Ben Cohen's walls of windows lend a tree-house vibe. Pottery sink thrown by Cohen when he lived here and taught arts and crafts at a school for troubled kids.**



ants let me in to look around. The mouse stench was overwhelming. I'd have to gut the cabin to get rid of the rodents and, coincidentally, the brownness of it all.

My plan was to leave the cabin as it was for a while, to make a few cosmetic changes until I could convince Ethan, the wonderful contractor down the road, to take on the project. But life, and death, interfered. My dear friend Betsy is a skilled carpenter and the hardest worker you will ever meet. Over the years we've helped each other with numerous endeavors, from building and painting to cycling and swimming. That June, Betsy's partner of 20 years died suddenly. Betsy found that she couldn't bear to be idle, or alone.

The day after I closed on the property, Betsy arrived; she had asked if she could come up for the month of September. I will always feel a little guilty that I took advantage of her in a vulnerable time. She, on the other hand, has thanked me with tears in her eyes for letting her stay and work on the cabin. More than once during that month we laughed until we cried. And our friendship is solid even after a trip to the hospital—and stitches.

On weekends my boyfriend, Chuck, helped us rip out the wood paneling. What we found was too disgusting to describe so I won't. The cabin had a sleeping loft reached by way of pull-down attic stairs (see reference to stitches, above). It was not very nice up there—all plywood, impos-

sible to stand except at the top of the stairs because of the slope of the roof, a space that was clearly loved by the bats who called it home. The only way to sleep there was to crawl onto a mattress on the floor. Betsy had the brilliant idea to remove the loft space, letting in light, air and height. We also replaced a few awkward windows with old mullioned ones. Ben had built walls of windows—a symphony of glass, most of which was wavy, distorting the trees and clouds into impressionist paintings.

I thought I was too old to learn how to Sheetrock, but I was wrong. While installing the ceiling with Betsy, we found ourselves lying on the floor of the sleeping loft under a piece of Sheetrock, laughing helplessly. We later joked about marketing Sheetrock duvets.

I painted the floors and walls several times as I struggled to get the colors right. Chuck rebuilt old cabinets for the kitchen, preserving the gorgeous pottery sink that Ben had thrown. I left for the winter thinking the place was in great shape.

Unfortunately, after all our blood, sweat, and tears of laughter, the mice loved what we had done. They moved back in with a vengeance. Or more likely, they had never left. A year after the renovation I noticed wet circular areas on the wall. It was mouse pee—a cringeworthy discovery. By then, Ethan—contractor and carpenter extraordinaire—was available. He re-Sheetrocked the worst wall, tore down the siding, re-insulated and agreed to re-side and re-roof the entire cabin. I was beyond thrilled to have him on board.

Meanwhile, I started decorating. I wish sometimes—OK, often—that I could do things the easy way: paint walls white, choose siding from the local lumber yard, be happy with how something looks at the first glance. But that's just not who I am.

I built a bed surround using scraps of chestnut I found on Craigslist. The man sold it to me for practically nothing—he only cared that it not be used for firewood. Ethan planed the lumber. I sliced it into end-grain squares, dried it out, laid out the pattern, added some marble tiles and adhered it all to the wall. I built the bed and decorated the frame to match. My goal was to get rid of all the brown, then bring back wood in a more controlled fashion. Gordie, the Sheetrock taper, stripped some salvaged doors for me, revealing pretty wood grain. Lorraine, the postmistress, gave me a homemade rustic desk that fit in perfectly.

I paint scenery for theater and we ignore what the audience can't see. I found bark shingles online, made in Spruce Pine, North Carolina. The bark costs more than traditional siding so I only used it on the front and back of the cabin, where the deck and the balcony are. The bark shingles reinforce the tree-house feeling. I want it to be difficult to see the cabin through the trees, to be caught by surprise, to approach it with a sense of wonder.

I love Italy and I've often thought the national motto should be "No surface left unembellished." I fear that has become my credo as well. And it's possi- *(Continued on page 81)*



## BEN'S CABIN

Continued from page 35

ble that I've gone too far in exorcising the brown. There is a cedar tree post that supports the cabin's ceiling beam. It was dark brown. I came up with the idea of turning it into a birch tree. So, after peeling bark from a tree cut down on my property and buying a can of spray adhesive, that post in the middle of the room is transformed.

Ethan replaced the foundation posts with cedars that he cut and peeled, and now the underside of the cabin is so gorgeous I could live there. Ethan's uncle Dan, who works with him, offered me old butternut for trim. Today it's hard to find a healthy butternut tree in New York. That's why I bought the Craigslist chestnut scraps: it's said that chestnut trees were once so common a squirrel could travel from Florida to Maine on them. I like having butternut and chestnut in the cabin because the wood is beautiful and rare, and because I am attracted to the sorrow of things that no longer are.

I look around the cabin and realize there is a story attached to almost everything inside of it: The found tree bits that look like animals brought by a colleague and friend; the fabulous animal paintings by Beth Mobilia and the wonderful animal prints and cutout leaves from Hilary Lorenz—both good friends who have stayed here. Then there's the moulding salvaged from a church in Montreal, the peace signs that are intentionally reminiscent of the hippie roots Ben and I share—and really, why can't we give peace a chance?—Chuck's turtle corner shelf, and all of Ethan, Dan, Betsy and Gordie's hard work—to say nothing of Ben's even harder work, as well as his vision that created this special place.

Like my house, the work on Ben's cabin will never be finished. Photographs can freeze this moment in time, but the front and back decks need to be rebuilt, a new roof installed and the siding finished. People will come and go and leave bits of themselves behind in a note, a memory, a work of art. I believe a house is a living, changing entity. It is so much more than shelter from the storm. 🌿



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